“Everybody needs someone. That’s what you said, right?” Pepper meets his eyes and he’s struck by the way she’s almost pleading. “We both lost. We can help each other.”

Her hand, palm up and open, stretches into the space between them.

Peter hesitates.

Then he takes it.

or: the one where tony was dusted instead of peter, so he and pepper try to figure out the whole ‘family’ thing together.

(oh, and it turns out that the man who died in peter’s arms on an alien planet is his biological father. who knew, right?)
I'M SO EXCITED SKHDJDC ENJOY

See the end of the work for more notes.
It’s the hunger that aches the most.

In the waning hours of what he figures must be morning, if his fried internal clock is anything to go by, Peter wakes without fail.

After day 14, he starts to wish that weren’t true.

Sitting up is a struggle. His bones grind together. When he stretches, he can hear them pop. The human body is comprised of eleven key elements; calcium takes up 1.5% of his makeup, and it is the most tangible and obvious of them all.

His bones. His hunger.

He’d used the term *starved* before, wandering out of his room at three in the afternoon on a Saturday, bemoaning that there was nothing edible in the fridge.

He’d gone to bed hungry a fair few times; mostly in those beginning days, when he’d still felt guilty for being such a burden to May and Ben—May and Ben who didn’t want kids, who always assured everyone that they were *just fine* on their own and *really, a baby would just be a huge imposition on our lifestyle*.

Peter hadn’t eaten. It was his stupid way of saving them money. Not infringing.

They didn’t want a kid. Maybe if he stopped eating altogether he could waste away and just let the wind turn him into…

But in the end his hunger had won out. Before even May had realised what was going on, he’d caved and snagged an apple from the fruit bowl on the table. They always went bad before being eaten without fail anyway, so really it couldn’t be any harm.
Peter had thought he’d understood what *hunger* was in the forty hour long sporadic gaps between eating. He knew rumbling stomachs and a vague dizziness when he stood up too quickly.

He hadn’t been ready for the *pain*.

It’s like someone is stabbing him in the abdomen every time he breathes. He continuously tries curling into himself, something that seems like it will relieve the sharp sensation but it only serves to exacerbate it.

The hunger makes his wrists shrink into smaller, dantier things. It makes his cheekbones jut out, something he can feel when he risks a touch. It makes every one of his ribs countable.

It’s his enhanced metabolism, he knows. If his DNA weren’t conditioned for seven whole ass meals a day plus dessert, he would probably only be about half as worse off as he is now.

As it is, Nebula always offers him the extra food. She’s half a robot or something, so she doesn’t seem to need as much. For three days in a row she lives off of a single alien fruit he had found with the rest of the stored food in the back of the Benatar, at the bottom of a crate gathering fuzz. Nebula had taken a long look at it.

“This can’t be real,” Peter had said.

“It is very real,” Nebula had replied. “It is from the Garden.”

Peter was clueless as to what or where the garden was. The fruit looked okay enough, but it wasn’t like anything he’d ever seen; some sort of gigantic strawberry-pineapple hybrid thing.

“Do you want it?”

Nebula had taken a step away from him. She didn’t stumble, of course; every one of her movements was calibrated even when she was startled; every word and thought was calculated regardless of the emotions beneath the surface. She operated like a well-oiled machine, but Peter was beginning to glimpse what her father might have deemed ‘malfunctions’—small smiles, unnecessary movements, opinionated arguments.
He always made a point to encourage them.

“I do not want it,” she had said firmly.

“Are you sure?” Peter had inspected its surface. “What’s the Garden, anyway?”

“A bad place.”

“And that’s why you don’t want the fruit?”

“Yes.”

Peter bit his lip. “You know, good things can come from bad places, just like good people can come from bad ones.” He held out the food. “The fruit isn’t the place. It’s just a fruit.”

Nebula considered that. “The fruit is not the place.”

After that, things between them roll a little smoother.

One other thing the hunger brings, an almost blissful mercy, is delirium. He thinks without it he’d have already gone completely crazy.

They’re stuck out in space. They’d managed to reverse the ion charges on the fuel cells and bought a meagre two days worth of flight time, and now they’re dead in the water.

He’s going to die in space, in a sea of swirling stars and sparks.

At first it had almost been enough to distract Peter from the gritty feeling on his palms, like Tony’s remains were still stuck to his skin (for two days he hadn’t washed his hands because he just… couldn’t).
The stars they see from Earth are all long dead, just echoes of what they once were.

The stars they drift past in space are alive, burning, and blindingly bright.

He doesn’t know where they are, exactly. How many parsecs, lightyears, from Earth. It’s not like in Star Trek where everything is mapped out to the last quadrant and the only scary thing is exploring the final frontier.

They’re in the final frontier. Peter is going to waste away in the middle of the cosmos and no one is ever going to find him.

He doesn’t know how long it will take for Nebula. He doesn’t know if she’ll be living with his corpse long enough for him to turn into a skeleton.

Peter tries not to think about it too much. He drowns out the screaming in his brain by blasting the Awesome Mixtape that must have belonged to Quill. There’s a whole horde of 70s songs on there and Peter can only listen to them so many times without his ears bleeding.

He imagines this must be what it’s like to work part time in a fast food joint; the same corporate approved today’s top hits, over and over again.

Still, it’s better than the silence.

Peter has never existed in quiet this thick; the kind that wraps around his body like a blanket and threatens to suffocate him. Even at four in the morning in Queens, there are car alarms and distant siren wails and blaring radios from the cars that drive past the apartment complex, sixty feet below.

He misses knowing other people are alive. He misses the comfort he hadn’t even realised he relied on; radio talk show hosts, the tenant above him and May that always had to go to the bathroom at precisely two in the morning, so his toilet would flush right above Peter’s bed. Millions of people crowded together in one city, breathing, beating hearts, laughs and screams and the monotonous hum of a hundred voices in his ears.

Space has no sound. It is hollow. It is empty. It is cold.
Again, Peter tries not to think about it. He also avoids looking at the windows.

Today is a bad day. Today the pain is at a nine, but when Nebula asks he’ll say it’s a seven. He knows she worries, even when she tries so hard not to show it. Something about her face gets softer when he does things like drop screwdrivers because of his weakened grip, or wake up mid-scream because again, he’d seen it, felt it, been there as Tony Stark crumbled in his arms.

Peter is starting to think the word ‘human’ is no longer exclusively applicable to those born on planet Earth.

He sucks in a grunt as he slowly slides down into a sitting position. Tony’s helmet sits in front of him, the eye slits dark and dead. With a shaking hand, Peter reaches out and switches on the record button. He’d discovered it by accident, during one of his compulsive ‘how about I clean Iron Man’s helmet again even though he’s not alive to use it’ sessions.


He leans his head against the back of the co-pilot seat and closes his eyes, just for a second, just to gather his strength.

He pictures the apartment: yellow light streaming through the windows in the morning, the smell of burnt toast and bacon, May’s cardigan thrown haphazardly over the back of the couch, wilting flowers on the fire escape.

“All right.” He sits up a little. “Ms Potts. Pepper. I think we’re probably past formalities at this point and anyway, I’ll be long gone by the time you get this—if you ever get this—so you know. You can skin me alive when I’m dead.”

Peter sighs. “All my jokes are falling flat. I don’t have a good audience here. I’m starting to wonder if I was ever funny at all. I don’t even… I can’t even remember the last time I laughed.”

His nose wrinkles up. “But hey. That’s the sort of existential stuff you wonder about in the middle of space, I guess.”

“I told you about the ion charges in the last message? Probably. Well, updates: there are none. We’re
still… floating. I keep asking the magic 8-ball for input but I’m only getting outlook not so good.”

He pauses. “That wasn’t a joke, by the way. There’s an actual 8-ball on this ship. I have no idea where it came from, but I tried explaining how it works to Nebula and now I think she thinks it possesses the spirit of some ancient deity from the Cenozoic Era.”

Peter doubles over to cough. “Anyway. I had a point, I think. Oh yeah, um…” he takes a deep breath, and with the cutting feeling in his chest comes clarity. “Mr Stark… Tony… I want you to know that he—he died bravely. He wasn’t afraid. He was just… strong. And I’m sorry. I’m—I’m so, so sorry I couldn’t save him. I tried but… it just happened so quickly. There was nothing I could—”

Peter stops and forces himself to breathe again, because his chest is so tight it feels like someone’s wrapped a belt around it. He rubs at his heart and feels the weak, dwindling pulse against his palm.

“Anyway, I think… I don’t think I have much longer. Magic 8-Ball said to concentrate and ask again.” He smiles weakly. “If you could—I mean, I know we only talked a few times at the lab, but if you could tell May that I-I love her? And I’m sorry about this too. About leaving her all alone. I’d stay forever if I could. She’s lost everyone and… if you could just watch out for her, that would be great. She’s strong as hell, but everybody needs someone, you know? And the more I think about it, the more I’m sure you guys could… help each other. Maybe.”

His voice drifts off. His eyes stare blankly at the wall. Then all at once he falls back inside of his body. “I guess that’s it. Kirk out, or whatever.”

The recording stops.

Carol Danvers appears thirty-two minutes later.

Pepper doesn’t know what she’s expecting when the ramp of the actual, real-life spaceship slowly lowers. It’s excruciating, standing there on the damp blacktop with her shaking hands clasped, hair whipped from the force of the landing.

When she sees an emaciated Peter Parker (slumped over and leaning heavily on a woman with blue skin) descending the ramp, Pepper finally realises this is not what she had been expecting at all.
She hadn’t let herself imagine anything else. She’d forced herself into the mindset that Tony would come back to her alive, that he would be okay, because anything less was and always had been unacceptable.

Even as her heart shatters, she isn’t surprised.

It’s Rhodey who grabs Peter, steadying him before he can face-plant onto the ground. Steve hovers nearby and eyes the mouth of the ship coldly like he’s silently bartering with it to just spit up Tony (Tony, the man he’d left, betrayed, beaten up bloody in a Siberian bunker; Pepper wonders if she will ever forgive him for that and decides, she can’t, not when she doesn’t even know if Tony had).

“Hey,” Rhodey says softly, “lean on me, okay? I got you.”

Peter nods dazedly and yet still tries to stand straighter.

His composure crumbles the second he catches her gaze.

She can see it; a reflection of her own disparity, mirrored by a sixteen-year old soul. He’d lost. They’d all lost.

“I’m so sorry,” Peter whispers, in a voice so small it’s almost swallowed up. He’s crying. “God, I’m so sorry.”

Pepper nods. Breathe. She blinks when she realises her vision is swimming and then ducks her head, wiping the tears from her eyes before they can sear her burning cheeks. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

After a few seconds Pepper manages to look up. Meeting his gaze is something that hurts and aches, and she imagines it’s the same for him, if the heavy guilt that clouds his face is anything to go by.

They both force themselves to do it.
“It’s okay,” Pepper says, trying for a smile because inside she’s screaming but he’s just a kid. “It’s not your fault.”

Peter’s jaw locks. He doesn’t agree. There is no grand weight removed from his shoulders at the words because he is already so weighed down by his own certainty that it should have been him.

Then he passes out in Rhodey’s arms.

Pepper storms into a vacant office. She doesn’t know who it belongs to, but it doesn’t matter.

She grabs things—glass figurines, abandoned coffee cups, stacks of paper—and she breaks, and shreds, and shatters, and screams.

Then she sinks to the floor and sobs until she passes out too.

Four in the morning finds Pepper leaning over the sink with a glass of water to soothe her sore throat and quell the inevitable rise of nausea. It’s still dark. She had slept for maybe two hours, slumped against the cold, hard wall, and dreamt.

Only for the first time in her life Pepper Potts dreamt in feelings rather than sights.

The aching, the fissures in her heart that were stretching, reaching toward each other with branched fingers. The cold. The misery in the eternal, abyssal darkness that rolled on for infinity and a half.

Somewhere in it, she thinks Tony had been there, a startlingly warm presence that had hovered nearby, like a sunrise she couldn’t see.

You know who I am, she had heard, and then she’d woken up to wet cheeks and aching joints.
Pepper sets the glass aside. She grabs a cardigan from where it hangs precariously over the counter-side stool and pulls it over her shirt.

It smells like springtime and floral breeze and nothing like Tony.

Her feet carry her and her mind floats up and away. Pepper doesn’t have the strength to reel it back in. She hopes, actually, that it will wander so far she won’t ever have to think about anything ever again.

Before she realises it, she ends up in the MedBay.

It’s mostly dark, aside from the one lit room on the right side of the hall. Pepper wanders toward it and through the windows sees Peter Parker, lying frail and small in his recovery bed; hooked up to countless monitors, an IV taped to his arm, eyes closed.

Beside the bed is Rhodey, slumped over in utter defeat.

Pepper steps inside.

She’s hit with the overwhelmingly sterile scent of the room: antiseptic, so sharp she finds herself jump-started back into her own body, rebooted like a glitching computer.

“He always came back,” Rhodey whispers to her after a small lapse. “He always… every time. After Afghanistan, just when I was starting to think maybe, maybe I should stop, maybe he’s really gone, he came back. And then, with the Mandarin… a part of me just knew, you know? Like, if he was really gone, I’d feel it. That black hole feeling, right in the centre of your chest, because you just know. In your bones, in your heart.”

He lays his eyes on her. They’re red-rimmed, teary, shattered. “I can feel it now.”

Pepper lays her hand on Rhody’s shoulder. For a split second he’s just stiff, and then it all comes down on him. He crumbles. “Pep…”

She can’t think of anything to do but stand there, touching him so the current of grief is a shared
thing rather than isolated. Pepper tries for a smile but it falters. “How ‘bout you get some sleep and I sit with the kid, okay?”

Rhodey looks so much like he wants to argue, she can tell it’s physical restraint that keeps him from doing it; a jerked jaw muscle and a bite of his tongue.

“You shouldn’t be alone.”

“I’m okay,” Pepper whispers. “I’m…”

*I’m strong; I’m tired; I’m scared; I’m pregnant.*

“It’s okay if you’re not. No one expects you to be.”

His hand reaches up to close around her own, worn and calloused and so familiar. Pepper squeezes. “Please?”

Rhodey sighs. He looks at the kid again, all wilted and skeletal. “Yeah. Okay. We-we gotta look out for him, you know? It’s what Tony would’ve wanted. God, I still can’t believe Spider-Man is a *sixteen year old kid.*”

Pepper thinks, of all the things not to believe, that one is the strangest.

“We’ll look out for him.”

“You’re not asleep.”

Peter cracks an eye. It’s true, he’s not, but damn if he doesn’t feel called out.

He doesn’t say that though because the voice belongs to none other than Pepper Potts. She’s sitting
on one of those uncomfortable plastic chairs and really—this is an Avengers facility, can’t they afford better digs?

Okay.

Deep breath.

“I’m—”

“Don’t apologise.”

“But I—”

“Really, Mr Parker, if you keep it up I might have to lecture you, and neither of us want that. Trust me.”

Peter blinks. “Ms Potts,” he croaks, “is there water?”

Pepper’s eyes widen. “Well now I feel like a jackass,” she mutters, and wastes no time pouring him some from a pink, plastic pitcher. It’s warm and stale but Peter downs it gratefully and without complaint.

Pepper’s hand hovers on his shoulder, helping him to stay upright. She fiddles with his saline drip while Peter waits for his head to stop spinning and tries not to vomit.

Deep breath, he thinks, in a voice that sounds like Ben’s. *Come on, deep breaths for me, Peter. That’s it. See? You got it.*

He does not, in fact, *got it.*

Pepper startles him by running a hand down his back, sensing his distress. “Just take it easy, okay?”
Her voice is soft. It reminds him of pale sunshine on weekend mornings, gentle and bright and promising serenity.

Peter forces himself to recline back against the pillows. Pepper continues to fuss, brushing his hair back from his forehead to feel for his temperature even though it’s no doubt displayed on the monitors.

“Ms Potts—”

“It’s Pepper,” she cuts in softly. “Just Pepper, okay?”

Peter eyes her. Nods slowly. Stares down at the water in his half-empty cup and tries to think of some way to apologise she might actually accept.

But she doesn’t seem to want that, so would he be apologising for Tony, or for himself?

“You look like you have a lot on your mind.”

Peter hums noncommittally.

“My aunt isn’t here.”

It’s not what he means to say, but it’s all he can really think about. May isn’t here. She should be here by now, right?

He finally forces himself to look at Pepper.

She’s not looking at him, and that says all that he needs to know.

“I’m sorry,” Pepper says after a minute of heavy, horrible silence. “I tried calling her, and when she didn’t pick up I checked the database. She’s…”
“Gone,” Peter says, because there’s really no other word for it. She didn’t die, necessarily. She just… faded away. Ceased to exist.

Left him all alone.

Peter curls into himself without really thinking about it. Like the hunger pains, it strikes him sharply, but this time in the heart. He presses the heels of his palms into his eyes but it does nothing to stop the tears. They come anyway, burning and unbidden.

The bed dips a little. Then Pepper’s hand is on his back again, rubbing up and down soothingly, and for a horrible second Peter lets himself pretend it’s May.

(May, who’s gone; he probably won’t ever see her again, won’t ever come home to an apartment that smells like burnt tuna casserole again, won’t ever help her zip up her sundresses again, won’t ever fall asleep on her shoulder watching cheesy flicks from the fifties again)

“Peter?”

He lifts his head, aware that his cheeks are streaked with red and tears, not caring one iota.

“I—” Peter swallows. “I’m still a minor. I don’t know where—”

“Hey, relax,” Pepper takes his hand and squeezes, like she wants him to remember where he is, who he’s with; but he doesn’t need to remember because he never forgot.

He’s Peter Parker, half-dead in the Avengers compound, an orphan twice-over.

“We’ll take care of all of that later. Right now you need to rest. You need to get better, okay? Just focus on that, nothing else.”

She’s asking the impossible.

But he’ll do it. For her. Because he let her fiancé die on his watch. Because he failed her.
“I’m sorry,” they say, at the same time.

Pepper laughs a little, but it’s wet and hollow. “Well, we’re quite a pair, aren’t we?”

Peter tries for a smile, but it’s weak and painful.

The compound is quiet.

Most of the Avengers are gone. They’d all taken off on some impromptu mission to get the stones back from Thanos, but Peter hasn’t allowed himself to hope much.

He just waits. Wanders the empty halls with his IV stand trailing behind him, clad in pajamas he suspects belong to Colonel Rhodes, if the Air Force emblem emblazoned on his chest is anything to go by.

Peter had wanted to go. He’d wanted to be there, to help assure that victory for himself, to know what was happening instead of staying behind, left to wonder and agonise over every possible outcome.

Peter trails past a wall that’s mostly just window. Outside it’s dark. The sky is splattered with silver stars that Peter suddenly doesn’t find so fascinating anymore. In fact they make him feel a little sick, so he keeps his eyes on the ground as he rounds a corner.

That’s where he finds Pepper Potts; curled up on the ground with her knees pulled to her chest.

She doesn’t look up when he approaches, because they’re like, the only two people here.

Peter is hesitant about sitting beside her. She doesn’t argue or flinch away, though, so he figures it’s okay.
Neither of them speak for a long few moments. Peter pulls at a loose fabric in his sweatpants.

“Is it as hard as they say it is? Coming back from being in outer space?”

Peter startles at the question. “I—there’s an equilibrium regulator in the ship that produces artificial gravity, so you’re not… weightless.”

“Oh.”

“But… you know that feeling you get when you’re on a rollercoaster and it drops?” He catches Pepper’s nod. “If I thought about it too hard, I’d feel like that. There’s no… bottom. No end. I used to think that was cool, how the universe just stretched like that, but it’s different when you’re out there. Drifting.”

He swallows. “In space everything is… scattered. Thousands of particles and stars are just everywhere. It’s like you’re in a real life abstract painting.”

Pepper hums. She closes her eyes and rests her head against the wall, like maybe she’s trying to picture it.

Peter, beside her, tries to forget.

“I watched the recordings.”

“What?”

“The ones you made while you were…” Pepper sighs. Rakes a hand through her hair. “Nat brought me the helmet and I… god, I tried to see. How it had happened, you know? What his last words were. But there were all of these newer entries on the log and…”

Peter scans her, facing forward, eyes shut tight, hands clasped between her knees.

“I’m so sorry you had to go through that alone.”
“I wasn’t alone. I had Nebula.”

Pepper throws him a side-long look. Peter cracks a small smile.

“You’re not going to be alone anymore.”

He frowns. “Look, I know they’ve done impossible things before, but I just… I don’t wanna get my hopes up. That it’ll work, I mean.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. I mean if it doesn’t.”

Peter’s pulse skips. “I don’t—”

“Everybody needs someone. That’s what you said, right?” Pepper meets his eyes and he’s struck by the way she’s almost *pleading*. “We both lost. We can help each other.”

Her hand, palm up and open, stretches into the space between them.

Peter hesitates.

Then he takes it.

Pepper urges him a little closer without words and he allows it, sliding across the tile so they’re shoulder to shoulder. She rests their clasped hands on her kneecaps.

Again, silence, but it’s not the same brand as that of outer space.

There are dull hums from the machinery wired through the compound; crickets chirping outside, a light breeze rustling the leaves around the grounds.
“I’m pregnant.”

For a minute, Peter whites out. There’s nothing but static between his ears for five whole seconds as he whips around to look at her, vision flashing black.

“Tony’s?”

She gives him a *duh* look.

“Yeah. Okay. Stupid question, sorry.”

Pepper shakes her head. Her mouth pulls up into a small smile.

“It’s the last thing we ever talked about. Having a kid, I mean. He told me he’d had a dream. Said that it felt *real.*”

“Well… were you? Then?”

She nods. “I just didn’t know. I only found out a week ago.”

Peter absorbs that.

Pepper Potts is pregnant with Tony Stark’s child. Tony Stark is dead. Pepper Potts is holding his hand and promising to be there for him, in spite of the fact that she’s pregnant with Tony Stark’s child and the world is falling to ruin.

Peter takes a deep breath.

He squeezes her hand.

“We’ll figure it out.”
The Avengers come back.

The stones don’t.

For three weeks he and Pepper had stay at the compound while he recovers. Peter slowly transitions from fluids to solids. Having a baked potato is a big day for him, but the excitement is pretty short lived; it all catches up to him at the end of the day without fail. The darkness seeps out to the forefront of his mind and haunts him, gives him nightmares.

He knows it won’t be easy to move on. In fact, a part of him doesn’t think he ever will.

After a month, he and Pepper drive into the city. For miles and miles there’s nothing, but as they get closer, the carnage unfolds.

Abandoned cars stacked up on streetsides turn into totalled ones; the remains of an entire plane’s fuselage are scattered across Brooklyn; the sky grows progressively darker, like a storm is fast approaching, but Peter knows it’s more than that.

It’s ash.

It’s human remains.

Even with the car’s filtration system, Peter doesn’t want to breathe. He can smell it, maybe because of his enhanced senses; it’s like burnt hair, the same sort of smell that would rise when he’d empty the canister for the vacuum cleaner.

“You should wear the mask.”

“You should wear your mask.”
“Pepper.”

“Peter.”

“Pepper, please, it can’t be good for the baby—”

“Oh my god, fine. Give.”

The city is a wreck. There are abandoned vehicles everywhere, but most have been moved off of the road. Pepper still drives slowly anyway.

Shops are closed. The streets are just… empty. It’s quieter than Peter has ever known it to be.

Four million lives. He’s breathing in the remains of four million people, seeing what that kind of loss does to a city that isn’t supposed to sleep.

New York is practically comatose.

They stop in Queens first. Peter’s apartment has already been re-claimed by the landlord, Alvin (who miraculously hadn’t been dusted and doesn’t look too happy about it); and given to new tenants.

Peter gets that. It’s the end of the world. You take what you can. Alvin had probably assumed Peter had been dusted along with May.

Still he’d kept their things. Packed them up and put them in the basement, “So those state-ees couldn’t take ‘em,” he mutters to Peter conspiratorially, leading him down the rickety steps to the lower levels of the complex.

Three boxes labelled P.P., another four for May’s valuables (none seem to be missing, that he can tell, except her wedding ring—but she would’ve been wearing that). Three more for all the rest.
“Thanks, Alvin,” Peter says.

Alvin shrugs. “What can I say? You’ve done a lot for the city. Plus, I figured if anyone would be able to come back from the dead, it’s you, Spider-Man.”

Peter’s eyes widen. “You… you know?”

“Some kid sneaks out his window every night dressed in a leotard, walking on walls, and you think I don’t know about it? In my own building?” Alvin snorts. “Get outta here, kid.”

Peter feels incredibly stupid, suddenly.

“Oh.”

“Relax,” Alvin waves it off like it’s no big deal. “I won’t tell. Secret identities and all that.”

Peter nods slowly. He picks up the first box, and then figures there’s no reason to put on the whole ‘I’m a gimpy teenager’ facade, so he adds a second to his load.

“Um. Thanks again.”

Alvin taps his nose with a grin. “Don’t worry about it. And hey, Parker—bring him back, would you? Stark? Bring… bring ’em all back.”

Peter blinks, dumbfounded. But Alvin doesn’t say anything more than that. He just walks up the stairs, trusting Peter—Spider Man—enough not to root through other people’s things or take more than what belongs to him.

*Bring him back.*

Peter sighs. “I wish.”
He readjusts the boxes in his grip, and that’s when something falls out: a letter, so old and faded Peter can’t even see who it’s addressed to until he picks it up.

_for Peter - do not open before the age of 18_

Peter stares. It doesn’t look like May’s handwriting, which had been slanted and looping and light; the words are pressed hard into the thick cream envelope—which had probably, at some point, been white.

It’s his mother’s writing. It’s the same block lettered scrawl on the inside of a mere four birthday cards he’s kept over the years.

He flips the letter over. It’s still sealed. One of the corners is darkened like someone might have spilled coffee on it at some point, but other than that, it’s entirely untampered with.

He’s not eighteen, but he doubts it’s anything serious. Maybe a trust fund that won’t activate for another two years, which would be nice, he supposes.

Shrugging, Peter tears it open.

_I’m serious_, are the first words written at the very top of a piece of lined paper, one of a few. _If you’re not an adult yet, I’m begging you to put this down._

_I’m giving you five seconds._

_Okay. Here goes._

_I didn’t have any plans to write this letter, but something happens to a person when they finally settle down for the first time in their life. The bad things start to catch up to you, and then one day, they’re all you can think about._

_I have dreams about the horrible things I’ve done. I wake up in the dark and I look to my left and there is Richard. He’s a heavy sleeper. He never wakes up with me, or if he does, he pretends not to. He’s good like that, knows when to let me breathe and when to smother me._
I’ve done a lot of bad things. I’ve made a lot of mistakes, taken a lot of wrong turns. I’d rather not write them all down, in part because it would take too long, and also, I just really hope there’s never a reason to share that part of my life with you. And if I do, I’d rather tell you myself.

Even this feels cheap.

But this is something that, whether I live or die, you have the right to know.

I’m gonna share my biggest, latest mistake with you, Peanut Butter Pants, and I wanna make one thing clear before I do: my actions were the mistake. The result of them was not.

Is not.

Fuck it, I was never great with grammar.

I probably shouldn’t say fuck, huh? Eh. You’re an adult, you can handle it. Odds are you’ll never even see this, right? I’ll sit you down on a park bench someday and we can feed ducks and I can tell you how I lied to you your entire life. Big fight, lots of crying, but then there’ll be a dramatic make up in the rain, and you’ll realize I only did this because the most important—the Most Important—thing to me is your happiness.

And Richard makes you happy.

But baby, I gotta tell you, he’s not your dad.

Peter stops reading. He wipes his eyes clear of tears and squints down at the words, scans them over and over, just to make sure he got them right.

But there they are. They don’t change no matter how many times he reads them.

I know, the next line reads, in a shakier hand, it’s not what you were expecting me to say, right?
I’ll explain.

I had a… rough upbringing. Went from place to place, halfway house to halfway house, and I was always… running. I couldn’t settle to find home much less a family.

So staying kaput was a big thing for me. Richard, too, but he never wanted to admit it. I think in the beginning I scared him a little. I was a tough nut to crack, you know?

I wasn’t used to the concept of finding someone and staying with them.

It was more: keep your life contained in a suitcase, be ready to move constantly, never let your guard down.

But Richard wasn’t like anybody I’d met before. I wanna stress this: I love him. He loves me. What I said before, about being content? I meant that. I feel… safe.

He’s awkward. He’s an idiot. He has no idea what the fuck he’s doing, but hey, neither do I. Neither does anyone.

The chaos loving him has provided me with is a welcome one. Wouldn’t trade it for anything. Domesticity is better than crack cocaine, you know what I mean? Maybe not. It’s probably boring for you, the idea of coming home at six o’clock and finding the same thing every night; a dorky dude with wire-frame glasses leaning over your budget book, but that’s the only line I’m snorting.

All the same, I fucked up.

We fought. It was like, two weeks after he asked me to marry him, I got cold feet, we said horrible things to each other and I threw the ring back in his face. In that moment it wasn’t glitzy or pretty or worth the price he’d paid, it was just a ball and chain to me.

I was scared.

So anyway, I was moping around about it, and one of my friends says to me: Hey, there’s this really cool dress-to-the-nines party in Manhattan I’m going to, wanna come?
And I say: no.

And she says: famous people will be there.

And I say: no.

And she says: scientists will be there.

And I say: okay.

Sue me. I’m a scientist. The idea of socialising with my own kind is tantalising because we’re all so fucking introverted we don’t actually talk at events, we just get drunk.

And that’s what happened. I got really, really drunk. So drunk there are pieces of the night just... missing.

But I remember the important bits.

I remember Tony Stark.

Peter, again, pauses. He stares down at the name for a long moment, cold freezing the blood in his veins.

He was wearing this three-piece Tom Ford suit that cost more than the ring I’d just chucked at Richard five days prior. He smelled good, he was funny, and somehow we ended up hiding behind the bar as the party wound down, seeing how many tequila shots we could do before we literally dropped dead.

What was I thinking? Nothing. I was wasted, I was sad, it sounds like a load of excuses but it’s really just the truth. I hope you never get so upset that the whole world goes away and it’s just you and the dark, I really do. I hope you never know what I’m talking about.
But that’s what it felt like. And here was this guy, this surprisingly awkward guy who spilled his Chardonnay on my dress and ended up taking me home. The media tears him to shreds, and sure, his line of work isn’t really a big pro, but… I just wanted to hold onto something I could let go of.

I’ll spare you the minor details.

I’m pretty sure you can infer the rest, but I’ll spell it out for you just in case:

Tony Stark is your biological father —

“Peter?”

The middle step on the stairwell creaks. Pepper is leaning down, eyes narrowed to spy him in the dim basement.

Peter’s heart is lodged in his throat. He does his best to choke it down.

“You okay, sweetie?”

“I—yeah,” Peter stuffs the letter in his back pocket and forces a pathetic excuse for a smile. “I-I’m good. Sorry.”

Pepper’s returning smile is soft with understanding, because she doesn’t know that apparently, he is the result of a one night stand with her dead fiancé and his dead mother. “That’s okay, hon.”

It’s not.

Peter picks up the box.

He and Pepper buy an apartment in Manhattan, which is without a doubt the cleanest place in the
city. It’s close to Central Park and it’s by far the nicest place he’s ever lived.

Pepper doesn’t have the same interior design inclinations as Tony, it turns out. Their place isn’t hospital but like, homely; it’s more 90s Meg Ryan movie. Cream couches, sheer white curtains, poetry books, old accounting texts, copper pots and pans, knit throws and candles.

May used incense, but Peter doesn’t mind the change.

They adjust. Adapt. Pull away some days and then snap back like rubber bands.

Pepper is constantly busy. She starts relief projects and charities and scholarships for the displaced, homeless, orphaned. Tony had left her everything in his will, which they read together with two lawyers in the sterling conference room of some high-end practise.

He had left Peter a trust fund, a recommendation letter to MIT, full access to his labs and tech, and all of the bots.

The hardest thing is telling DUM-E what happened.

Pepper organises the chaos. Peter works up the courage to go out patrolling.

Once he starts, he can’t stop.

Manhattan is busier than the other boroughs, but no less fractured. He stops petty criminals and does his best to keep New York from going full anarchist society, but there are so many douchebags trying to take advantage of the ruin the world has turned into.

But there are also people who are just lost, and confused, and scared. Teenagers who rob banks and convenience stores because they’ve run clean out of cash and don’t have anywhere to go.

Peter always directs them to the buildings Pepper bought out as displacement centres. “Social services comes by and helps out kids like you,” he informs them, “they’ll find you a home, but until then, you’re free to stay as long as you need.”
It goes on like that. A few weeks in the city turns into a month, then two.

And the letter stays, unread beyond the point of ruin, hidden in his back pocket.

He thinks about telling Pepper, thinks about finishing it, thinks about tearing it up and throwing it away. It makes him angry when he remembers it, remembers what it says.

But he can’t bring himself to do anything with it other than stow it away each morning and tuck it under his pillow each night.

“What do you think about lavender?”

“Too pretentious.”

“Pink.”

“Basic.”

“Green?”

Peter wrinkles his nose, glancing up from the parenting book he’d been skimming. There’s no how-to guide for like, surrogate brother figures or secret half brothers or whatever, so he figures this’ll have to do.

Pepper snorts at the face he’s making. She’s reclined on the couch while he’s on the floor. She’s flipping through paint colour schemes.

“What about blue?”

Peter nods. “Fuck gender stereotypes.”
That earns a rare, bright laugh.

And so they paint the nursery a pale, ice blue. At first they both try to be as meticulous as possible, but after four straight hours of painting, they end up with blue clothes and faces and hands.

They lie on their backs on the tarp covered floor.

“That was exhausting.”

Peter nods. “Looks good, though.”

He’d even perched on the ceiling to get the areas neither of them could reach naturally.

Pepper places a hand on her stomach. He knows it bothers her, the fact that she only wears an engagement ring, the fact that the father of her baby is gone forever, just lost to the wind.

(The fact that his father is gone forever)

It’s the most unjust, anticlimactic, undeserving way for Tony Stark to have died.

The more Peter thinks about it, the more it pisses him off.

The more all of it pisses him off.

So he shoots to his feet. “You want ice cream? I’m getting you ice cream. You want mint?” again, he doesn’t wait for a reply, “I’m getting you mint.”

Pepper snorts, waves him off with a light thank you, and then Peter leaves.
He needs air.

He ends up swinging to Queens.

Peter doesn’t know why. It just feels like the place he needs to be.

The sun is setting on the horizon, bright and blazing and orange, painting the sky with fire. It’s one thing that hasn’t changed; the sun always sets, and so the moon always rises.

Peter goes to Delmar’s.

The lights are on, so he figures it must be open. The bell chimes as he slips inside. Murph the cat raises his head and trills at Peter, eyes blown.

Peter grins. “Hey, Murph,” he says, striding over to scratch him behind the ears. Murph purrs. “How you doin’, buddy?”

The cat trills a meow again.

“Peter?”

The voice comes from behind him. Peter whirls.

“MJ.”

She’s standing in between two aisles, holding a bag of chips and a can of Arizona green tea, both of which she almost loses a grip on and Peter immediately stumbles forward to help, but MJ has it.

They both still.
“I thought you’d… died.”

Peter swallows. He clears his throat. “Uh, no. I’ve been… I’ve been staying in Manhattan, with a friend—”

“So May didn’t…?”

He shakes his head, stomach sinking. “No.”

MJ’s hand twitches like maybe she wants to touch him consolingly, but then she remembers she’s holding the chips and the movement ceases. “I’m sorry. That sucks.”

“Yeah, it-it does.” He falters. “I tried calling you and Ned, but there was nothing, so I figured you’d both…”

“Fuck,” MJ sighs. Then she sets her haul down on the nearest shelf and surprises him by pulling him into a hug. “I’m so sorry. My phone got disconnected and I still haven’t gotten a new one.”

“But Ned?”

He feels her stiffen and then slowly nod. “His mom, too. And Flash, Betty… everyone on the decathlon team except us.”

Ned. His best friend. The only person who’d stuck around for more than a year, who believed in him and trusted him and tried to help wherever he could.

Peter had suspected, but to know, to have his hopes dashed, hurts more than anything.

MJ pulls back. “I thought I was the only one left.”

Peter feels an overwhelming surge of guilt. “I’m sorry. I should’ve tried coming down here sooner.”
“You don’t need to feel sorry. I get it. There’s a lot of shit going on and you lost…”

*You lost the only person you had.*

Peter looks down at his shoes. “What about you?”

“It’s, uh,” MJ shifts, “it’s just me and my step-dad. He’s not like, around a whole lot, so… I don’t know. I’m just hoping school actually *starts* in September. Like, they closed after the MOMA field trip and made it into a relief centre, but now I think they’re shutting that down, so maybe?”

Peter absorbs all that silently, playing with his keys. “That would be good.”

School. A routine. Being able to follow a set structure instead of floating aimlessly like he’s been doing all summer.

Sometimes it feels like he never re-entered the atmosphere. Like he’s still up there, waiting to be found, waiting for everything to just go back to the way it was before.

“So who are you staying with?”

“Hmm? Oh. Uh, you probably wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Why? Oh, what, does it have to do with your double life as an Avenger?”

She’s just teasing, he thinks, but he can hear the undercurrent of suspicion in her tone. His stomach drops at the idea that she might *know*.

“Uh, something like that.”

MJ follows him as he wanders over to the refrigerators, plucking two cartons of mint ice cream out, forcing himself not to look over at the Ben & Jerry’s section with the *Stark Raving Hazelnuts.* He
Peter closes his eyes. Like an idiot, he brings one of the ice cream cartons to his forehead to abate the sudden heat he feels there. “Are there security cameras here?”

“Yeah, but they don’t record sound.”

“How do you know that?”

MJ shrugs. “Don’t worry about it.”

Peter sighs. Pinches his brow. Puts the ice cream back and exchanges it for two fresh ones, just to
have something to do.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked about Thanos.”

“No, it’s…it’s fine.” He turns around. “I was, yeah. There. When he Snapped.”

MJ stares. “Did you, like, fight him?”

“More like he kicked our asses and threw entire fucking moons at us—”

“Wait, moons?”

“Oh, yeah, we were on another planet—”

“What?”

Peter smiles a little. “And here I was thinking you were taking this, like, weirdly well.”

MJ gapes at him with a new reverence. Then her eyes narrow. “Okay. You’re telling me literally everything.”

“Oh?”

“I’ll buy your ice cream for you.”

“Deal, but I’ll have to fill you in on the way because I’ve got a pregnant lady waiting at home for me—”

“I’m sorry, what?”
Peter doesn’t tell her everything. He doesn’t tell her about being adrift with Nebula for over three weeks, doesn’t tell her about how it felt to have Tony Stark, crumble in his arms, doesn’t tell her about what it felt like to know the loss was irreversible.

But he tells her about the spider bite, and his fake internship with Tony that had sort of spiralled into weekends holed up in his lab and pizza nights at the penthouse and almost blowing up his bots multiple times. He explains about Pepper and how they’re sort of…

Taking care of each other.

By the time they make it back, the ice cream is half melted and Pepper is curled up in her reading chair, looking half asleep until he walks through the door.

They watch movies. They catch up. MJ stares at Pepper like she’s god herself.

And as it turns out, her step-dad is out of town, so Pepper lets her spend the night on the couch.

She warns that it’s a one time thing, only because it’s so late at night, but it happens three more times within the next two weeks.

Uppercut.

Right cross.

Left hook.

Leg sweep.

Peter hits the mat with a loud thump. He groans, arching his back to relieve some of the pain, and lets
out a gargled scream just to make Natasha laugh.

“You almost had me, little spider.”

“Don’t lie to me,” Peter begs exaggeratedly. “Just tell me I suck.”

Natasha offers a hand and hauls him up when he takes it. “You don’t suck. Promise.”

Peter tightens the straps of his gloves. “Yeah?”

She’s being sincere now, eyeing him dead on. “Yeah. Your instincts are improving, your timing is quicker, and your aim is a whole lot better.”

“But I’m not, like, Black Widow levels of badass yet, huh?”

Natasha offers him one of her signature, sly smirks. “Nope. And you never will be, if I have anything to say about it.”

They go back at it again. A flurry of cross cuts and hooks and short breaths, until one of them drops. It’s almost always Peter (okay, it’s literally always Peter) but like she said, he’s getting better.

Together they beat out all of their what ifs, every just in case he comes back, just in case there’s a new threat, just in case we come that close to losing again.

It gives them both something to do.

Peter thinks that’s why Pepper had put them up to it in the first place.

(And okay, it might also have something to do with the stab wound he’d come home with last Tuesday, which had freaked her out more than he’d expected from Pepper, who was normally so level-headed and calm)
He doesn’t mind, and he doesn’t ask, because either way it’s fun.

“I think this goes here.”

Pepper looks up from the assembly guide she’d been scanning. There’s only one page with English instructions; the other twelve pages are devoted to as many foreign languages.

Oddly enough, she finds the Chinese ones the easiest to understand.

“No,” she says, “B-C goes to E-9.”

“How does that make any possible sense,” Peter deadpans.

He’s standing in the middle of the half-finished crib, inserting every bar with a dreadful care, because he wants her baby to be safe.

Pepper watches him fumble with the plastic bag of screws, eventually resorting to tearing it open with his teeth. In the half light of the early morning, he looks painfully like Tony.

Sometimes Peter reminds her so much of him it just aches. It’s like her heart is screaming and the only way to quiet the sound is by concentrating on something else.

So she’s thrown herself into baby prep. She’s only four months along, but the nursery is already half done because Pepper Potts is nothing if not prepared. She’s rented and read at least a dozen baby books already, purchased way too many onesies she knows are only going to fit for like, two months tops, and now they’re putting together the crib.

Peter leans over the frame of the crib he’s standing inside. It looks a little ridiculous, but he’s so absorbed in his work he doesn’t notice her hand in his hair until her lips are there too, pressing against his brow.

Peter looks up. “Pep?”
He’s been calling her that more and more. The first time he’d done it, it had been in an offhand way; he’d been tucked under the kitchen sink fixing the broken garbage disposal and asked, *Hand me that socket wrench, please, Pep?* and she’d dropped the tablet she’d been holding.

But they’ve moved past it, the awkwardness, the fumbling around trying to create space for each other in their hearts.


They both know she could’ve done it on her own, but Peter Parker is nothing if not chivalrous and pain-stakingly considerate. He knows she still gets nauseous in the mornings, he knows her carpal tunnel has been acting up lately, he knows she doesn’t care to tell the difference between every type of screwdriver and so she would’ve no doubt resorted to using the cheap tool that comes with the assembly kit.

But he just shrugs like it’s no big deal, lips pulling up at the corners nonetheless. He ducks his head and gets back to work.

“So you signed up for all your classes, yet?”

Peter looks up. MJ is sitting across from him, legs folded and a book open in her lap. They’re tucked away in the back of the library, one of the only places that still seems *normal*. There are only a few people there with them, so the only sounds are whispered conversations and the gentle rustle of turning pages.

It’s the good kind of quiet.

“Yeah. You?”

It’s a dismal conversation, but they hadn’t come here to talk. Actually, Peter isn’t really sure *what* they’d come here to do; MJ had texted him out of the blue with the StarkPhone Pepper had bought for her, asking him to come.
MJ shrugs. “Mostly. I was just… do you wanna do AcaDec? Because, like, I don’t know if they’re gonna let me retain my position as team captain, and Mr Harrington is gone, so…”

Peter considers that. “I think we should ask about it. I mean, people still need to go to college, you know?”

She rolls her eyes. “College is for losers.”

“Right,” Peter says with a smirk, because he’s starting to pick up on the subtleties of MJ’s weird language. “So which ones are you gonna apply for?”

It feels wrong to be talking about something like this without Ned there. Peter’s chest constantly constricts when he remembers that he’ll be doing it all alone; graduating high school, going to college.

Ned won’t get to do any of that.

He’s leaving his best friend in the dirt.

Or maybe it’s the other way around. Peter can’t really tell anymore.

MJ scoots over to sit by him because she can tell he’s in his own head again. She’s getting better at that, too: catching him before he drifts off or flips out. The first time it had happened though, she hadn’t been so successful.

Peter had probably scared the shit out of her with the suddenness of his panic attack, but MJ had pulled him into the public bathroom at the pizza place they’d been volunteering at together (because they were offering free pies to the displaced), and she’d talked him down despite the way her forehead creased and her hands shook.

It still worries him, the way she’d known exactly what to do and say.
Like she’d done it before or something.

“Hey.”

Peter hums, suddenly unable to meet her eye. He stares down at the open pages in his lap without reading the words. Something about nuclear decay, radioisotopes…

MJ nudges his side. “Peter.”

He closes his eyes because they’re stinging, suddenly. Peter hears when the first tear lands on the page. He abruptly closes the physics book and wipes his cheeks.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” MJ assures him, like it’s so obvious, of course it’s okay he’s crying like a baby in the back of a public library. Of course.

Peter sniffs. “I just… miss them.”

“Me too. Shit sucks.”

He can’t help laughing, just a little.

He doesn’t expect it when MJ reaches out and takes his hand. From what he can tell, she’s not a very touchy person, unless those touches are based in mild aggression. It’s surprising, but it doesn’t feel… wrong.

“We’re in this together, right?”

Peter finally looks up. He realises that she’s crying; it’s the first time he’s ever seen it, and all he wants is for it to stop.
So he squeezes her hand. Promises himself he’ll be strong for her, too. He’ll be strong for them all. He’s done grief before, he knows how to pack it in when there’s someone else relying on him.

“Together.”

When he gets back to the apartment, it’s almost ten at night.

Most of the lights are out except for the one by the bookshelf. A warm golden glow cascades across the living room, but it doesn’t quite reach the kitchen.

Which is where Peter finds her, fast asleep on the table with her head resting on her arms. In front of her is a frosted cupcake, and he can’t tell if it’s homemade or bought from some expensive bakery, because it’s Pepper and everything she makes is perfect.

Peter sets his backpack down. He gently shakes her shoulder.

“Pep.”

Pepper awakes with a small jerk. She squints up at him. “You’re home late.”

“It’s only ten,” he corrects, because they’d agreed on midnight for a curfew. “You fell asleep.”

Pepper makes a face. “If I find out you set my watch back, I’ll… do things. Evil, horrible things.”

Peter grins. He sits across from her. “So. A cupcake.”

Her expression softens. “It’s your birthday.”

He nods, swallowing when his throat feels thick, because she’s right. It’s only been four months since the Snap, but seventeen is a whole different number than sixteen; an entirely different age. It
means rated R movies and twelve months from legal adulthood, and May isn’t here to see any of it.

“I didn’t think you knew.”

“Of course I knew,” Pepper says, and it makes him wonder why he ever doubted her at all.

“You didn’t have to…”

“I wanted to. We promised… we promised we would be there for each other, right? That we would make it work.”

Peter nods. That was what they had said, yes, but living was a whole different ball game from just surviving together.

“Peter.” He knows she’s urging him to look at her, so he does. “I don’t know where I’d be without you. Honestly. You’ve helped me so much, you know? I’d probably be going out of my mind if I didn’t have you to lean on.”

“That’s not true,” Peter says. “You’re the strongest person I know.”

“Funny, I was gonna say the same thing about you.”

“Was?”

“Well, then you screamed when we watched The Fly—”

“I did not scream, I just jumped—”

“You screamed,” Pepper insists. “Like a little girl.”

Peter rolls his eyes. “If you say so.”
She hums. Then she scoops up the lighter and holds it to the wick of the cupcake’s candle. “Make a wish?”

Peter bites his lip. Thinks. Watches the flame flicker, casting an orange, radiant glow over the table. For the first time he sees her clearly, sees that there are drying tears on her cheeks.

Everyone is crying today.

It just seems like the day for it.

Peter leans forward and blows out the candle.

*Bring him back.*

School starts and his life settles into something routine, almost mundane. He attends his classes and for the first time, like, *ever*, he isn’t actively teased or belittled; it seems like most of the people who even know who he is are just gone, and the other half are too drained to care.

The associated student body tries to raise funds for dances and field trips, but no one really takes it to heart. Everyone is just trying to get through the day, sit through all of their periods, turn in their homework on time.

The teachers are a lot more lenient. There are a few new professors to replace the ones they’d lost, but they’re young and easily susceptible to the subtle manipulations of their students, who hint at being too tired or too sad to do too much at all.

Every test is graded on the curve. Hand outs stop, pop quizzes cease to even exist, lectures are monotonous and the labs are too easy.

Peter knows it’s all temporary, of course. The school barely had time to get into gear and he doubts the teachers actually have lesson plans. Most are probably just winging it as they go along. By next
year, or maybe even next semester, he’s sure things will return to their usual rigorous, competitive state.

AcaDec is a bust, though. Their competing schools have a scarce student body and no one is interested in signing up to revamp the team, anyway.

He and MJ still study together. They make flash cards and hole themselves up in empty classrooms, trying to escape the approaching winter chill and dreary rainfalls. They cling to each other like leeches, but no one looks at them funny for it or even asks them why they only hang out with each other.

They get it; that they’re trying so hard to hold onto how things were before, trying to reconcile a past life with the way things are now.

Still, once or twice people assume they’re dating and though they both vehemently deny it, Peter starts to wonder if it would really be so bad.

By winter break, Peter is finally sick of stability. He wants to relax, and he wishes Ned were there. They could bury themselves under blankets in his room, taking apart old gaming consoles and fixing them, rewatching Star Trek episodes and quoting every line because they knew most of them by heart.

Ned isn’t here though. It’s just him and Pepper and MJ—who, even worse, is being dragged off to the Midwest by her step-dad to visit people she’s not even blood related to, because family is more important than ever.

It sucks. It means he doesn’t get to give her the gift he’d bought for her until after New Year’s.

Still he and Pepper are determined to make the most of it.

They fill the glaring gaps in their conversations with old Christmas songs from the 40s and 50s: Johnny Mathis, Paul Anka, Bing Crosby. Pepper schedules things for them to do together, like visiting soup kitchens and handing out second hand clothes at churches.

He’d be more than glad to do it all with her, only she’s really, super pregnant.
“Feet up.”

Peter pulls his feet back. Pepper runs the vacuum through the gap between the couch and coffee table. “Please stop cleaning,” he begs.

“No. It’s good productivity and my OBGYN says I need to be active.”

“But aren’t you, like, loaded?”

Pepper unplugs the vacuum. “Your point being?”

“Can’t you hire someone to do your housekeeping? Or like, make me do it? I’ll gladly do it. I’ll do it right now if you’d just please sit down.”

“I can’t just laze around all day waiting for this thing to pop!” Pepper says shrilly, gesturing at her swollen belly.

“It’s a baby, Pep, not a zit.”

“Could’ve fooled me. I’m five days overdue. This is ridiculous.” She scowls down at her abdomen. “Get out!”

Peter laughs. “I don’t think that’ll work. You could try lancing it.”

Pepper shoots him a dirty look. “You think this is so funny, don’t you? Little Peter Parker who isn’t pregnant and doesn’t have to deal with someone tucking their whole head under your rib cage at three in the morning—”

“I would gladly have your baby for you,” Peter tells her. “But I’m afraid that’s anatomically impossible—”
“Peter—”

“No, I’m serious. Add it to the long list of things God, Pepper Potts, and Happy Hogan won’t let me do—”

“Peter!”

He looks up from his book. She’s standing, white faced, with one hand braced against the wall.

“Oh my god,” Peter says. “Is it—is it go time?”

“Yes!” She bursts, grimacing through a contraction. “Get the bag please! And make sure my toothbrush is in there, I don’t think I put it back after I used it this morning!”

Peter flips over the back of the couch and makes a mad dash for her bedroom.

It’s time to have a baby.

“Call Rhodey.”

“Calling Rhodey.”

“And call Happy, too,” Pepper advises, curling her arm around her belly and wincing slightly.

“Calling Happy.”

“Both? At once?”
“I have two phones,” Peter points out, and holds both hers and his up to his ears like an idiot. “I’ll just yell it at them at the same time.”

Pepper rolls her eyes and then curls into herself with the next contraction. That makes it… seven minutes, she thinks, since the last one. Or maybe eight.

“Seven minutes and thirty seconds,” Peter reports, glancing up from his watch.

“You’re timing them?”

“Who do you think you’re talking to? Of course I’m timing them. I’m freaking out, Pepper. There’s nothing else for me to do but time your contractions and pretend I’m just conducting a really weird science experiment—yes, hello, Mr Colonel Rhodes, Sir?”

Pepper is close enough to hear the reply, a grumbled, No, it’s Happy.

“Oh, shit, sorry, wrong phone—wait, what am I doing?”

“You’re acting as my personal secretary for the day,” Pepper jokes.

Peter snorts. “Really? Can that be an official thing, or…?” His voice dies with the withering glare she sends him. “Right. So Pepper is like, in labour right now—”

“What?! Where are you?! How long has she been—”

“Pepper? What’s up?”

“Oh my god,” Peter blurts. “Okay, hi, Mr Rhodes, sir—”

“Peter! Answer my damn question!”
“Peter? Why are you calling from Pepper’s phone? Is something wrong, or—is she having the baby?”

“She is,” Peter says. “Happy, I didn’t catch that—”

“Am I on a conference call?”

Pepper finally catches her breath, her chest tight from laughing silently and breathing through general, annoying labour pains. She snatches the nearest phone from Peter.

“Happy? It’s Pepper.”

“Oh, Jesus, thank god. Hey, Pep. How’s it goin’? You doin’ okay?”

“I’m fine,” she says. “Listen, we’re in the back of a cab—”

“Uber,” Peter corrects offhandedly, before ducking back into his conversation with Rhodey.

“Uber, on our way to the hospital.”

She relays the name of the hospital and the room number she’d booked a month ago; Happy promises to be there as soon as possible, with a car seat installed, and a few backup security details.

Pepper thanks him and hangs up.

“Yeah, yes, okay,” Peter is saying. “Yeah, I’ll tell her. Bye, Mr Rhodes.”

Pepper gasps with another sharp pain, and Peter’s hand immediately grabs her own. “Well?” she asks.

“He’s in DC, but he’s taking the first available flight out,” Peter reports. “Said he should be here by
Pepper nods. She grits her teeth through the pain.

“What’s that make it, then?”

“Six minutes.”

Pepper is like, evil when she’s in labour.

It’s really a slow, spiralling progression. She’s fine as they check her into the hospital and smiles breezily through the initial examination, but as the hours tick by and she’s only three inches dilated (which Peter doesn’t even want to think about), she gets more and more frustrated.

“Get out of me!” Pepper yells, for the third time in the last hour.

The baby, of course, doesn’t listen. She flops back against her pillows and glares at him. “This is your fault.”

“Isn’t that something you’re supposed to say to the husband?” Peter asks, and immediately regrets it—but Pepper just folds into another contraction and doesn’t even seem to notice.

Peter still holds her hand. He perches on the side of the bed, facing her and the wall. “It’ll be okay,” he promises, as she complains and pants and, at around ten at night, starts to cry.

He gets her ice chips. He wipes her tears. He wraps his arm around her when, at one in the morning, the doctor suggests they walk through the halls a little to try and further the labour along. So that’s what they do, her in a fluffy, pink, atrocious nightmare of a robe and him right next to her, making sure she doesn’t slip and fall.

It doesn’t do much.
That’s when Peter decides this baby is *all* Tony Stark.

“You know something? I don’t think it’s human.”

Peter laughs, even while she’s squeezing his hand through the pain. It’s growing increasingly more frequent and long-lasting, but she can break every bone in his hand and he still won’t mind.

Finally at four AM, the OB announces that Pepper is ten inches dilated and ready to deliver. Peter’s stomach flips and his blood cools, but he steps away to let them wheel her past.

“I’ll be in the waiting room, I guess.”

Pepper looks stricken. Terrified, even. “You’re not coming with?”

And—oh. He hadn’t even considered she’d actually *want* him in the room; him, a seventeen year old kid who’d barely been able to help her the last ten hours and currently has no idea what he’s doing.

“I mean—if you want me there?”

“If you don’t mind,” Pepper replies, equally as hesitant.

It’s quietest she’s been through this whole process. She sounds smaller than he’s ever known her to be. In his experience, Pepper Potts is a force of nature. She screams at executives over the phone until she’s blue in the face, barely bats an eye anymore when he comes home battered and bruised (and always makes sure to have the first aid kit fully stocked and waiting on the nights she has to go to bed early), and she’d taken him in when he had no place else to go, when they’d both realised how horribly, completely alone they were.

Peter nods. He takes her hand again.

*Everybody needs someone. We’ll help each other.*
One more push and Morgan Potts is born into the world, seven pounds and four ounces, ten fingers and ten toes, a tuft of dark hair on the top of her head.

She’s Tony. With her eyes, the ones that crack open only a few minutes after she’s born, big and brown and wide. She’s Tony in a thousand more ways he can just feel.

And she’s his, too. His little sister. Half his and he can see it in her nose, in the shape of her eyes; he can see Tony in himself the way he sees him in her, and it terrifies Peter.

The nurse puts her in Pepper’s arms first, just for a few minutes, and Peter doesn’t think he’s ever seen her face so soft, light, open.

That’s love, in its purest and simplest form.

“Does big brother want to hold her?”

Peter’s lungs constrict and all he can think to do is nod, perfectly dumbfounded. The thing that strikes him most though is that Pepper doesn’t even bother to correct the nurse.

She just slowly and carefully transitions Morgan into Peter’s arms. “Hold her head,” she reminds him, but Peter is already adjusting her. “Look at that, you’re a natural.”

Peter can’t even speak a reply. He stares down at Morgan, with her flushed pink cheeks and confused gaze. “She’s so small.”

Morgan’s little hand breaks free of her blankets. She paws at his sweater, but can’t seem to really grasp it.

That’s normal. He’d read about that.

Peter grins. “I think she likes me.”
“Yeah, but she definitely likes _me_ more, so give her back,” Pepper demands playfully, but Peter still obliges. Morgan lets out a tiny, adorable squawk at being jostled, but settles down with a few whines when Pepper starts to rock her.

They stay like that for a few minutes, just the three of them.

Pepper looks at him, and he looks at her, and he knows they’re thinking the same thing: he should be here. It should be four.

Pepper is discharged on Christmas Day. Happy drives them all home from the hospital, not going a hair over twenty miles an hour, and by the time they make it back it’s started to snow.

They don’t really celebrate the holiday, too preoccupied with Morgan to really care all that much. But slowly as the days go by, and Rhodey and Happy retreat back to their respective homes, the charm starts to wear off.

It’s 2 AM and Morgan is crying.

It’s 2 AM and Morgan is crying and tomorrow is Peter’s first day back at school.

It’s 2 AM and Morgan is crying and Pepper has already gotten up three times in a row to deal with her, so Peter rolls out of bed and wanders down the hall.

He’s never, like, comforted a baby before. He’s held them and bounced them and made faces at them, but he’s never actually had to like, stop them from crying. He’s also only ever changed one diaper (yesterday) and it was a total disaster.

So it figures Morgan is crying because she’s pooped herself.

“Damn, Morgie,” Peter says, picking her up and trying to inhale as little as possible. “To think someone as cute as you can make something that smells as _god awful_ as that.”
Peter lays her down on the changing table. Removes her onesie, grabs a load of wipes, and sets to work. It’s an awful, terrible business, but Morgan quiets as he goes, pleased to once again be clean.

Peter actually manages to put the new diaper on right. Or at least, it looks right.

“Seems I’m not so inept after all,” he remarks, picking her up. Peter lets her fall against his chest. “I bet you’re just as tired of this as we are, huh? Probably sucks waking up in your own poop. I wouldn’t know, though. I was the perfect child, everyone says so. I don’t think I’ve ever pooped. Like ever. Not once.”

Morgan coos, fisting at the collar of his faded 2001: A Space Odyssey t-shirt. Normally it’s not something he would wear, because, like, space; but the image is so worn, it doesn’t really bother him.

The baby drool helps too.

“Do you know something? I really wish your… I wish dad were here.” Peter rests his cheek against the top of her head. “He would love you, kiddo. And I know he was always saying things like how he wasn’t cut out to be a father, but I really think you woulda broken him down. You just have that effect, you know? Like, Happy cried when he met you. You’re worse than Meep from Phineas and Ferb.”

He looks down. Morgan is fast asleep on his shoulder, eyelashes dark against rosy cheeks.

Peter presses a kiss to her forehead. “G’night, pollywog.”

“You look like hell, Parker.”

Peter grunts. He falls forward and rests his head on MJ’s shoulder, partially because he’s exhausted out of his mind and partially because she just smells really good.
Like peaches. Or mangoes. Whatever, he’s not good with scents.

“Being a big brother’s really taking a lot out of you, huh?”

Again, he grunts. Verbal responses are so far beyond the realm of possibility right now. His eyes burn even when they’re closed.

“I’ll make you a deal: we sit in the back of the class and you can sleep on me, and I’ll even take notes for you to study later—but, you have to let me meet the little hellion after school’s out.”

Peter hums, pretending to consider it, and then nods. Five minutes later and he’s fast asleep.

Every weekend he and Pepper drive upstate to the compound; for Peter, it’s a morning of rigorous training with Nat, followed by eight to twelve hours in the lab; then it’s another morning of the same, and another night of the same. For Pepper, it’s a professional, open space where she can handle business and take meetings with shareholders.

This is the first time that Peter’s making the drive alone. Ever.

He had tried begging off going to help Pepper with Morgan, but Pepper had insisted. She’d insisted so hard, actually, that she’d packed his bag for him while assuring him she would be just fine, she could handle one little baby for two days, it wasn’t a big deal.

He knows she’s right. She’s Pepper Potts, she could do this all on her own if she had to, but it still makes him nervous.

Pulling into the compound drive makes all of that fade away, though. It’ll never not be impressive.

Nat is waiting for him in her office space, slouched behind the desk wearing a pair of Ray Bans with her feet propped up.

“What is this, Weekend at Bernie’s?”
Nat leans forward and lowers her sunglasses, proving that she’s not, in fact, dead. Her eyes are rimmed with red, though.

“Okay, you’re either hungover or trying to hide the fact that you cried.”

Nat purses her lips.

“Hungover it is.”

He’s gotten a lot better at reading her, but he can probably chalk that up to her willingly letting him pick up the breadcrumbs she drops; the subtle nuances between an impressed raise of the eyebrow and an unimpressed one; a teasing smile and one of malicious intent.

“You ready, Shelob?”

“Ah, so you did look at that list of movie recommendations.”

Nat snorts and stands, not even swaying a little. “Consider this day a lesson.”

“Everyday is a lesson with you, Nattie.”

*This* smile is newer in tone; it’s one of affection, fondness—and maybe a little exasperation, too. He’s totally growing on her, like an annoying little fungus.

“Just remember that when I kick your ass and I’m still a little bit drunk on tequila.”

Tequila, aka the drink that had been responsible for his very existence. Must be powerful stuff. Peter tries not to think about it, much. He says, “I thought vodka was what Russians liked to drink.”

“Don’t stereotype me, little spider. I’ll just kick your ass harder.”
Impossible.”

The bots wave and beep happily when Peter enters the lab. DUM-E rolls over to greet him properly and Peter, like usual, pats his claw. “Hey, buddy. Did you miss me?”

DUM-E beeps, like he really did. Peter grins and gets himself settled at the workbench, pulling up the same holographics from last time with his saved progress. From his backpack, he procures his torn suit.

He can fix little rips like this in a heartbeat now, but the first time it had been so daunting. Peter had barely known his way around the workshop and he’d been terrified of breaking the equipment, but it was more resilient in light of his mistakes than he’d assumed it would be.

He pulls up the code for Karen’s latest prospective update, complete with pop culture references and non-restrictive access to the internet. Without his guy in the chair, learning code had become something of a necessity, and Peter finds he enjoys the way he can get so mindlessly absorbed in writing it.

He works for a few hours, switching between this and that, sketching a few designs for new suits and jotting down notes as random ideas come to him.

“DUM-E, pass the Phillips, please.”

An hour later: “DUM-E, could you grab me a Red Bull from the fridge?”

Thirty minutes after that: “Hey, Tony—”

Peter stops. He’d never really understood the expression of getting sucker punched in the gut until now, when the wind is knocked right out of him and he sits so rigid and still, waiting for the world to laugh at his mistake, cheeks burning, eyes wide.
He’d had a question about a model configuration.

No one is there to answer.

Peter swallows. He grips the edge of the table and takes a deep breath.

*Tony Stark is your biological father.*

Tony Stark is his *father*, and Tony Stark is *dead*.

The sob comes, tearing harshly out of his mouth without mercy, folding him in half.

Peter cries. He cries all alone, harder than he has in almost a year, because the walls of the apartment are so thin and he already knows Pepper cries herself to sleep at least once a week. She doesn’t need the weight of his grief added to hers.

*What grief?* A voice hisses from the back of his mind. *You mean all that bad you bottled up and refused to feel?*

It sounds like Tony. Mad, bitter, resentful. Like the Tony from his dreams whose face is half crumbled, asking him why, *why* hasn’t Peter brought him back yet? *Why* isn’t it *him* with his wife and daughter? Why is it *Peter?*

He tries to hide from it. Curls up under the table and buries his head in his arms as everything, *everything* just falls out of him. There’s no place for the love to go, for the sorry, for the hurt. It’s a brand he carries with him on his heart now and it’ll never go away.

“*Tony,”* he whimpers. That’s what he wants. He wants his dad. He wants *Tony*, who like MJ, always knew what to do when Peter broke down.

At first it had been awkward, stiff. But then the fingers that carded through his hair were natural; the arms that wrapped around his body, that pulled him in, were easy and confident.
Like Peter just belonged there. Like it was only natural Tony would hold him until he stopped crying.

*I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m so sorry it’s all my fault—*

Something brushes against his shoulder.

Peter opens his eyes, wiping his damp, sticky lashes.

It’s DUM-E. He’s holding a tissue in his claw.

“Thank you,” Peter whispers, taking it gratefully.

DUM-E’s answering beep is almost mournful. He nudges Peter’s cheek gently like he’s trying to give him a reassuring stroke, the way May used to do.

“Hey FRIDAY?”

“Yes, Peter?”

Like DUM-E, she sounds sad. But weirdly enough it doesn’t embarrass Peter that they saw.

“Can you… can you like, play some of Tony’s favorite songs?”

Anything to fill the chasmic, dead silence in this lab.

“Sure thing, Peter.”

*Back in black, I hit the sack, been gone so long I’m glad to be back...*
“Did you know that the smell of newborn babies triggers the same reward centres in the brain that drugs do?”

“I guess that means I can cancel my coke order,” Pepper says, looking up from where she has Morgan on her back, wriggling around on a play mat.

Peter snorts a laugh. “Apparently it involves some kind of biological manipulation that triggers maternal bonding.”

Pepper isn’t even paying attention anymore, which is understandable. Morgan is a scientifically proven drug and they’re both addicts. He slides down from the couch and joins them on the floor.

Morgan is only four months. She can roll from her back to her belly and just barely sit up on her own, which she’s clearly trying to do right now. Peter makes to help her, but Pepper stops him.

“What happens when you help a butterfly out of its cocoon?”

“It… flies?”

“It dies,” Pepper corrects. “Natural selection. You help the butterfly out and because it never had to claw through all the silk, it dies because it’s not strong enough to survive in the outside world.”

“You’re comparing me trying to pick your kid up to a dead butterfly?”

Pepper purses her lips. “Yes.”

“Yeah. Okay. You want to know what I think?”

“What?”
“I think you just want her all to yourself,” Peter teases. “You’re desperate for another hit but you don’t want me catching you snorting her baby pheromones.”

Pepper laughs. It’s a good sound, like sunshine after a rainstorm. He will always associate her with salvation; she’s his oasis, found when he’s on his last legs in the middle of a desert; she’s a life preserver thrown out to sea in the middle of a monsoon, keeping him from drowning in the salt of sorrow.

“Fine. You’re right. I’m a Morgaholic.”

Peter grins. “I’m picking her up.”

“*Peter—*”

“I need a *bump,*” he laments, pulling Morgan in his arms. She lets out that ear-piercingly shrill scream of pure unadulterated happiness and snuggles right against him. Peter kisses the top of her head, relishing in the soft and strange scent. “That’s good shit. Want some?”

He holds Morgan out.

Pepper shakes her head as she takes her baby. “We need to start a *Morgaholics Anonymous* circle.”

He doesn’t know why he was expecting the trip to go well.

It just sort of seemed like, all things considering, maybe he deserved a win? At least this once?

But of course the four day European tour that the school *barely scraped together the money for* goes to complete shit.

At first, just getting on the plane seems daunting. He’s afraid it’ll remind him too much of outer space; being encased in metal, surrounded by pressure, nothing but sky and clouds—and worse, when the sun goes down, thousands and thousands of stars—to keep him company.
But it doesn’t go like that, because MJ sticks by him.

It had taken a lot to convince her to come. He knows it’s something she and Mr Harrington had been planning together as a sort of celebration of the team’s last victory at nationals, but there’s no team to go with now. Instead the principal extends the invitation to the entire school.

Only a handful of students care enough to show up.

“I don’t like the idea of going on some trip just to see how all this fuckery has affected the rest of the world,” she tells him when he brings it up (for the third time). “The whole concept of tourism is bullshit anyways.”

Peter wrinkles his nose up at her. They’re hidden away in the band room this time and at some point during their three hour study session, his head had ended up in her lap.

“So what, art is dead because everyone else is too?”

MJ raises her eyebrows so he can just see them above the edge of her novel. “Morbid. I should get that a tattoo of that.”

“MJ,” Peter reaches up, bold enough to take her book away, “that’s not what this trip is about.”

“Well, neither is art,” she retorts. “I mean, do you see any museums on the itinerary?”

“Architecture is art.”

“Buildings are buildings.”

“MJ, you’re an art major.”

“Peter,” she flicks his forehead, “I’m not going to college. Give me my book back.”
Peter does. “I’m going.”

MJ doesn’t react. She opens her book back up.

“On the trip, I mean.”

She freezes. Then sniffs. “Good. We’re too codependent, anyways.”

“So you’re saying you want space?”

MJ sighs and looks down at him. Like, really looks, blinking stupidly as if she’s only just now realising how close they are: literally, figuratively, close.

“Please come?”

“Fine. But only because of the Eiffel Tower. I hear aliens built it as an antenna that makes us all turn into brain dead zombies with a single energy pulse.”

Peter grins. “Cool.”

Figures they both almost die.

But she stays with him the whole flight, and when the plane is hit by turbulence their hands somehow end up clasped.

They don’t talk about it.

Peter keeps his dumb little plan to himself. He slips off in Venice to buy her a blown glass black dahlia necklace, follows her along the pier while she tells him about her new favourite word, and then pulls her away from the river as it starts to swirl and rise.
“What—what the hell?”

Peter swallows. “Go back to the group.”

“What?! And what are you gonna do?!”

“Uh… Spider-Man stuff.”

“Peter, this isn’t some back alley mugger, okay? It’s not safe and there’s no way you can take him out on your own, so just come with.”

“Thanks for having faith in me.”

“Peter!”

It’s getting closer, taking out the tops of buildings with a single swing of its fist. “Just please get back to Mr Dell, okay?!”

“But—”

“I’ll be fine.”

By the end of it, he’s decidedly not fine—soaked with river water and sporting a definite concussion, but it seems like there’s a new superhero on the block and, more importantly, the necklace is still okay.

Peter lets himself relax. He calls Pepper from the hotel and promises her he’s okay. Peter smiles when he hears Morgan crying in the background.

“What’s her problem?”
“Nap time,” Pepper says breathlessly. “She won’t go down.”

“You wanna know my secret trick?”

It’s well known that between the two of them, Peter has the better luck in getting Morgan to settle back to sleep; he teases Pepper about his various genius methods, and he can practically see her face light up at the prospect of him sharing his ways.

He’d love to lord it over her a little while longer, but the idea of her home alone with a fussy baby and no one to help her is just unacceptable.

“Yes. Please. I was considering downplaying it but Peter, it’s been three hours.”

Peter grins. He leans against the wall. “Okay. Promise not to question me on this.”

“Yes. Absolutely, I promise.”

“Right. Take her into the bathroom—”

“What? The bathroom?”

“Pepper.”

“Okay! Fine! Bathroom. Why the bathroom?”

“It has great acoustics. Anyway, you take her in there, you close the door, and you turn the hairdryer on.”

Pepper is silent for five whole seconds. Then, “The hairdryer?”
“You heard me.”

“I don’t even—I don’t even want to know how you discovered that. Okay. Alright. Why?”

Peter laughs. “I think it’s just… calming. Drowns out all the other sounds with something normal instead of like, a sound machine she associates with sleep and night time, you know?”


“Good luck.”

“Yeah, you too—and remember, if things get worse, you call me okay? Or if you can’t get ahold of me, call Happy, or Nat—”

“Yeah, no, I just—I think it’s really okay, so—”

“Just don’t die, okay? That’s the last thing anyone needs—oh, shit, she just threw up. Alright, I gotta go. Love you!”

The line goes dead.

Peter stands there, holding the silent phone against his ear with wide eyes as his heart skips and shatters at once.

“Love you too,” he whispers to the floor.

Everything isn’t okay.

Nick Fury gives him a pair of sunglasses, hijacks his summer vacation, and Beck is the bad guy.
It’s really, really not okay.

(Tony; standing right in front of Peter, stumbling, collapsing into his arms—

maybe if you were good enough, he would still be alive

He crumbles to dust in Peter’s arms, mouth open and about to say something, but Peter will never know what.

you think you have what it takes, Peter? Come on, kid. Don’t make me laugh.)

“Who else did you tell?!” Nick Fury is demanding, and then Nick Fury isn’t Nick Fury, he’s Beck, advancing toward Peter with a sick smile on his face, shaking his head.

“You are so gullible.”

The train plummets into his side before he can even register the fact that it’s coming.

It’s dark in the train car. Peter claws at the empty seats with shaking, broken fingers and collapses into one of them. His back arches with pain and his vision whites out.

It burns everywhere. His skin feels like it’s on fire and everything underneath is boiling; fiery blood and jostled organs slowly shredding apart, insides completely wrecked.
But none of that is as bad as the shame.

It’s heavy. It weighs him down into the seat and brings tears to his eyes. Peter curls into himself and sobs, clutching his aching abdomen. “I’m sorry,” he whimpers, wishing they were able to hear him (Tony, May, Ned, Ben, his mother, his… Richard).

Peter presses his forehead against the window’s cool glass as the world passes by in streaks of colour and light. His vision blurs, stretching the reds and greens out for infinity, searing their impressions onto his eyes so he sees it even when he closes them.

“Please,” he begs. “Please come back.”

No one does.

“I just really miss him.”

It’s the first time he’s ever actually said the words out loud. He and Pepper talk about Tony sometimes, sure, but always in the vaguest terms so as not to trip over any wires. They’re careful around each other, careful not to say too much or too little.

But Happy nods because he understands. “Tony was my best friend,” he says, “and he was a mess. He second guessed a lot of things, but the one thing he didn’t second guess was picking you.”

Peter looks up. Happy is staring at him with a sort of serenity, the kind that can only come at the end of grief; he has accepted Tony as someone who is gone, who is never coming back.

And Peter realises right then, with a jump start to his heart, that he can’t do the same thing.

“He made you an Avenger,” Happy says, oblivious to the way Peter is reeling. “He believed in you, kid. That kind of trust… you didn’t earn that easy, when it came to him. That was something… that was special.”
Peter nods slowly.

“So what are you gonna do?”

A jumping pulse, the faintest strings of a plan, a new brand of determination.

“I’m gonna kick his ass.”

*I’m gonna bring him back.*

The bridge is burning.

Peter’s suit is a wreck. The idea of going to the compound to fix it is a strangely calming one. He might even make a new Mark, like an improved version of the stealth suit.

His knees weaken at the thought of walking into the lab and hearing the welcoming trills of the bots. He wants it so badly he aches; wants to be anywhere but here, in the middle of the carnage and the flames and the hollow feeling in his chest like someone carved his heart out with a rusted knife.

“Peter!”

MJ is running toward him. Peter hardly has time register the actual *mace* she’s holding before she throws it aside and grabs him.

Peter pulls her close and holds her. Instead of closing his eyes, he keeps them open; keeps them on her.

He doesn’t need another person falling apart in his arms.
Her questions are breathless and he struggles to answer them. He doesn’t quite settle back inside of himself until she pulls out the broken dahlia necklace, and as he stumbles through what he’d meant to do, explains his whole plan in a rambling, trembling voice, MJ cuts him off.

“It’s okay. I like it better broken.”

She’s not looking at the necklace.

“Oh.”

The kiss sends an electric current through his body. A flickering, red-hot flame comes from inside and settles over his skin. It wakes him up, in a way. For the first time, he feels solid, knows he’s standing on his own two feet.

His weight is all his own.

Pepper hugs him when he walks out of the airport. It’s the same kind of hug May used to give him, tight and full of relief. The similarity eats away at him even after she pulls away.

“You’re okay? You’re good?”

“Yeah, I’m—I’m good.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

(spider man’s real name… is peter parker.)
can i be honest? can i be sincere for one gosh darn second?
i LOVE you all thank you SO MUCH for being so kind and wonderful and supportive
of the first chapter WOW
and without further ado, here’s no. 2!

“I think we should go to the compound.”

Peter’s been making faces at Morgan for the last thirty minutes while Pepper loses her voice yelling at various lawyers and journalists over the phone. He looks up now, and finds that she’s standing in the doorway to the living room looking utterly worn.

Guilt gnaws at him.

“We?”

“Yes.” Pepper nods. She firms her stance. “It would just be for the rest of the summer, until things settle down and we can figure all of this out.”

“You mean, until everyone stops trying to murder me?”

Pepper’s shoulders fall. She walks over, but instead of taking Morgan like he expects, she kneels in front of them both and places a supporting hand against the back of Morgan’s neck.

“That isn’t the way the majority thinks.”

Peter raises an eyebrow. When he does, his forehead aches. It’s still bruised and bleeding underneath
the bandage from when someone had chucked their stiletto at him.

“I’m serious,” Pepper says. “There are already people protesting Beck in the streets, Peter. You think your work in New York has gone unnoticed? They’re rallying behind you. The crowd earlier… they were just confused and scared.”

Peter purses his lips. He turns his attention back to Morgan because he doesn’t like the heavy conviction written across Pepper’s features. Morgan just blinks and smiles. It’s simpler.

“You shouldn’t swear around the baby.”

“I was in the other room.”

“She has ears, Pep.”
Pepper huffs. They both look at Morgan, who’s glancing between the two of them with wide brown eyes, mouthing silent sounds. When she realises they’re staring, she giggles—honest to god, pure and bubbly and sweet.

Peter can’t help but pull her close and kiss the top of her head.

“Her first word is gonna be soap-worthy,” Pepper says, exasperated and fond at the same time. She strokes Morgan’s belly. “Did you call MJ?”

“Just texted. She’s still at home.”

He’d swung her there, ignoring her frightened screaming because the angry, murderous yells of the actual ass lynch mob (minus the pitch forks) were still echoing between his ears.

“Is she okay?”

Peter bites his lip. Shrugs. “I don’t know. I think the whole thing kinda freaked her out.”

“And you don’t think that’s the sort of thing you should talk to her about?”

Peter sighs. It’s the tired kind. “I don’t know. I think it should be in person. Do you think it would be okay if she came up to the compound? Maybe then I could like, show her that even if it’s super terrifying from the outside it’s just… normal for me? Sort of?”

Pepper gives him a look. “Nothing about this is normal. And believe me, it’s worse than terrifying from the outside.”

It’s the sort of statement that hangs even though she means for it to be final.

“What’s it like then?” Peter asks anyway.

Pepper frowns. “It’s… frustrating. Not being able to do anything. Not being able to help even though you… just—never mind.”
“But—”

“Look Peter, I’m not your mother, right? But if I were your mother, I would tell you to call your girlfriend and invite her to your summer home.”

This time she really does pluck Morgan from his arms and then leaves him alone, hiding behind the loveseat, glaring at the wall.

“So are you ever gonna tell me about Budapest?”

They’re lying on their backs in the training room, both out of breath from over ten rounds, each nursing new galaxies of bruises and staring at the far away ceiling.

Nat chuckles. “Never.”

“Not even if I like, got you drunk?”

“You couldn’t.”

“Drugged you?”

“Again: impossible.”

Peter doesn’t doubt that. He also like, never would. Still his lips contort into a frown. He’s never exactly been sure where he and Nat stand. After the first month of disbelief and constant freak outs because wow he got to train how to be a professional badass with Black Widow had worn off, they’d settled into something… strange. Sniping insults, humor drier than a straight martini, and way too much sarcasm to ever take the other too seriously.

He’s not sure if they’re friends or if, worst case scenario, she just puts up with him because she’s
bored.

“\You can hear you thinking.”

“So you do have super powers.”

Nat glances at him. She leans up, rolls over him, and plants a wet kiss on his forehead. “Take a shower, Petya,” she orders, “you reek.”

Okay, so maybe friends.

One afternoon has Peter alone in the medbay, bandaging up a particularly rough scrape that isn’t even from training. He’d just been looking at his phone while walking down the stairs and, like an idiot, tripped.

It’s why he’s twisting himself to reach the awkward angle. The last thing he wants is to explain why he’s bleeding pretty profusely from his backside.

Why are the stairs so sharp, anyway?

“You should disinfect it, first,” FRIDAY suggests from above.

Peter has finally gotten used to the way she randomly butts in, so he doesn’t start. “It’ll heal in like, two hours flat.”

“Still, it’s safer to disinfect.”

“You know what’s safest? Stairs without razor sharp edges. I mean, honestly, there’s a baby living here.”
“Morgan only stays in Pepper’s line of sight—”

“Yeah, now, while she can’t walk. But be honest with me, FRI: with her genetics, does it seem likely she’ll have any sense of self-preservation?”

“No,” FRIDAY replies glumly. “The two of you have that in common.”

Peter stiffens. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Nothing.

“FRIDAY?”

“I was just curious,” FRIDAY starts, sounding more like a child desperate to explain rather than an AI.

“About?”

“The letter you read every night,” FRIDAY elaborates, and his hands start to shake, “the one you never finish. I saw—”

“So you know.”

“Well I, unlike you apparently, had my doubts about Mrs. Parker’s claims.”

“What did you…?”

“I ran your DNA against a sample of Boss’.”

Peter grips the edge of the gurney. He breathes in once, holds, and lets it all out: the anger, the betrayal, the shame. “How do you even have that?”
“Who do you think you’re talking to?”


“It’s a match.”

Peter nods. It’s not really a confirmation he’d needed. The only necessary proof was holding Morgan for the first time, and really, doubts had never come. Peter had just accepted it, or ignored it, rather. He’s been largely successful so far. Most days he manages to not even think about it until he crawls into bed, and then the bad dreams come and it doesn’t seem so important anymore.

“So he’s my father,” Peter says. “So what? It’s not like he’s here, right? So what good does it do to know that, huh? What am I supposed to do with that?!”

A metal tray of surgical instruments goes flying. It sings against the wall and clatters to the ground.

Okay, so maybe he hadn’t let go of all of the anger.

“Peter,” FRIDAY says, softly, “you should calm down—”

“Calm down?!” He shakes his head. “My whole life is a fucking lie, okay? Do you get that? No, of course you don’t. You’re a program. You don’t have feelings, FRIDAY, so how can you possibly understand what it feels like to learn that the man you thought was your father isn’t and the man you wished was is and they’re both dead!”

“You’re right,” FRIDAY says. “I don’t know. I’m glad I don’t. It sounds awful.”

Peter stares at the scattered mess of surgical tools. He runs a hand through his hair and bends down to clean them up. “Yeah, well. It is.”

“Is there anything I can do?”
You can help me try to figure out how to turn back time.

“Just… don’t tell anyone. Please?”

“Of course, Peter.”

“I’m sorry for yelling at you and saying you don’t have feelings.”

“That’s alright. It’s true.”

“Maybe, but it… it’s nice to think otherwise sometimes.”

“I can understand that.” She’s silent for a minute. There’s only the sound of metal on metal and Peter’s dull footsteps, his racing heart. “Peter?”

“Yeah, FRI?”

“I miss him too. In all the ways that I am capable.”

Peter’s eyes burn. His fists curl around the countertop. “I bet that’s a lot.”

“Not half as many as a son grieving his father.”

Peter sobs.

Two weeks after they’ve moved into the compound, Happy drives MJ up. Peter and Nat are in the gym again, because they’ve been training every day since he got here. She hasn’t been taking it easy on him, either; after the whole fiasco with Beck, she’s insisted that he be ready for anything.
That means hand to hand combat lessons, practice in the target range, and full simulations that she designs and runs for him at least once a week.

Peter likes those less. They remind him too much of the drone technology. He keeps waiting for a deteriorating Tony Stark to jump out at him, but of course, he never comes.

It’s just faceless bad guys he has to pin down, kill, gently talk out of blowing up buildings (along with themselves); and other situations that had been previously unimaginable to him but that he admits, with his line of work, are entirely plausible.

On the day MJ comes, though, they’re just doing their usual kick names, take ass routine.

Nat moves around him with practice and poise. She used to be a dancer. He hadn’t asked, but he knows. She holds herself with the same grace he remembers from his middle school ballet instructors. It’s the first and only thing, aside from their spider insignias, he knows for certain that they have in common.

She aims a roundhouse for his chest, but Peter senses it coming. If there’s one thing that’s improved since he came back from Europe, it’s his spidey senses. They’d been off for a while. When he’d told Nat, she’d nodded grimly and theorized that he must’ve been so strung up after Titan that he’d forgotten what a real threat was; everything seemed like one, so his instincts were fried and haywire.

It makes sense.

Peter flips over her, lands behind her, and grabs her arm as she spins around. Nat still ends up kicking his ass, of course, but it feels almost like a fair fight these days.

“Uh,” says Happy.

Peter whirls around, which of course Nat takes advantage of. She brings him to his knees and yanks his arm up behind his head.

“Ow! What the hell, Nat?!”
“Never drop your guard,” she warns, letting go.

“Yeah, okay, but we were done.”

“We’re never done.”

Peter scowls and rolls his shoulder. “Life lessons with triple A,” he mutters.

“Triple A?”

“Abusive, alcoholic aunt.” Peter flashes her a smile.

“Awww.”

Happy clears his throat. Peter hadn’t forgotten they were there, but his shoulder hurts like a bitch now and that means he’ll have to take a midday nap like an old man just to sleep off the pain.

Happy is standing by the doors with MJ, who stares with wide eyes. Her face is completely open and displaying her unfiltered awe, which is pretty rare for her.

“You’re the Black Widow.”

Nat smirks because she loves the attention. “I am. And you are?”

“Like you don’t already know,” Peter mumbles. She swipes his arm.


“MJ it is then.”
They shake hands. Peter exchanges a look with Happy, bewilderment mirrored.

“Can you…” MJ shifts awkwardly. “Can you like, teach me how to do that?”

Nat tilts her head and studies MJ. Her scrutiny isn’t meant to intimidate. Peter knows she’s just curious. “I mean, yeah, sure, I never turn down a new student. But can I ask why you want to learn?”

It’s the same question he has.

“I just… I don’t know. After London, I-I just don’t want to feel like that again. Like I can’t fight for myself or the people I…”

Her voice dies.

Peter thinks she might’ve been about to say ‘love’.

He pretends his heart doesn’t skip a beat.

“I mean, your mace was pretty badass,” Peter tells her, to smooth out the awkward silence.

Nat quirks a brow. “Mace?”

“She took out a drone,” he and Happy supply together.


MJ blinks. “Like, now?”

“No time like the present.”
So that’s how Peter ends up shoved out of the gym, on a day he was supposed to spend with his girlfriend, probably apologising more than anything else.

Instead he goes to the lab. He has more than one project in the works and with school out, a ridiculous abundance of time.

He knows Pepper doesn’t like it.

He knows it reminds her of Tony.

Still, Peter doesn’t stop. Like father, like son, or whatever. He works on the specs for his suits. Mark VI: *Teenage Mutant Ninja Spider* is coming along nicely. It’s all black, does not feature fingerless gloves, and actually has the correct measurements.

He’s also working on a flame retardant formula because the idea of catching on fire again is a definite no.

At some point the sky darkens and the artificial lighting in the workshop grows brighter, but Peter’s eyes adjust. He’s fiddling with a few rogue nanites, trying to see if he can fix their glitches manually under a microscope.

He’s so absorbed in struggling with the stubbornest of the lot, the one he’s dubbed *Nanoo*, that he doesn’t notice when the door slides open with a hiss and the music cuts out.

“Hey, Loser.”

Peter turns his head so quickly he gets whiplash. MJ is walking up to him wearing a faded shirt and running shorts. Her hair is slicked back, damp from either a shower or sweat.

“Uh, hey.”
MJ sits down on the stool beside him without prevail. She scans the holographics around him; tech specs, suit designs, old typed notes of Tony’s with handwritten annotations that still make his heart plummet when he reads them.

“So how did it go with Nat?”

“She kicked my ass. It was amazing.”

“Right?”

MJ smirks, but it doesn’t last long. She reaches out and wraps her hand around his forearm. “Peter.”

“Yeah?”

“I know… I know this shit is hard for you, and it’s not some glamorous lifestyle or whatever, but I… I want to help. Like, be there for you, and stuff.”

“MJ…” Peter trails off. He glances down at her hand and decides, without much preamble, to take it in his own. “The last thing I want is for you to get caught up in this. I mean, it’s not what you signed up for—”

“Dude, I’ve known you’re Spider-Man for over a year and I still decided to date your dumbass. It is what I signed up for, so don’t even think about giving me the whole ‘have an out’ speech.”

Peter’s lip quirks up. “Okay. Valid. But… just, if it ever gets too much, let me know? Please? I mean, I know you’re super scary and hardcore yourself, but like, it can be a lot. For anyone, I mean, so—”

MJ cuts him off. “You think I’m scary?”

His cheeks flush. “I mean, uh, yeah? Sort of? But like, in a good way—”

MJ kisses him. It’s warm and soft and Peter finds himself melting into it, finding it far too short for
his liking. “That’s the sweetest thing anyone has ever said about me in my whole life, ever.”

“Um… you’re welcome?”

“Whatever, Spider-Boy. Now what are you working on, and why is that robot staring at us?”

Peter follows her gaze and finds DUM-E. He whirs and boops, rolling over like an excitable dog. “MJ, meet DUM-E, DUM-E, meet MJ. Don’t let his name fool you, he’s actually a lot smarter than he lets on.”

Babbling has become Morgan’s absolute favorite past time. When Peter returns one night to the family unit in the compound—built for the Bartons, but they’re no longer around to use it—she’s sitting up in her pack and play, drooling and talking nonsense.

“Hey, buttercup,” Peter greets, leaning down to pick her up. “Did you miss me?”

Morgan grabs at his nose, something that always makes him smile. “So where’s mommy at?”

He finds Pepper at the kitchen table surrounded by a sea of papers, slumped over and fast asleep.

Peter stares at her for a moment. It’s not often he sees her like this. She’s the picture of effortless composure, standing tall and equanimitous in the wake of the worst tragedies. It’s jarring to see her be so human, so vulnerable.

He bounces Morgan a little and carries her quietly into her room. The nursery isn’t as comfortable as the one in their apartment, but they’re making do. He still feels like shit for uprooting them like this, forcing them to drag their lives upstate because people still believe he’s a psychopathic murderer.

Morgan coos as he lays her down in the crib. She stares up at him with sad eyes, like she knows exactly what this means, and starts to cry a little.

“Hey,” Peter whispers, “it’s okay, I promise. I just need to put mommy to bed too, but I’ll come back
and stay with you until you fall asleep, alright?”

Morgan whimpers. It fracture’s Peter’s heart, weakens his resolve. “Baby, come on. It’s only gonna be a few minutes—”

“Da-da…”

Peter stills. “Oh. Oh, baby, no.”

Her first word. Her first word and Pepper is asleep. Her first word and she’s calling him dad, because she doesn’t understand; how could she?

She’s picked up on the word. He talks about Tony to her all the time. She’s heard Dad slip past his lips a hundred times or more, but he’d never in a million years thought it would lead to this.

Something tickle’s Peter’s nose. He realises, belatedly, that it’s a tear. He fails to wipe it away before it falls.

“Morgan.”

Peter picks her back up before he can stop himself, cradling her against his chest and burying his nose into her soft tufts of strawberry-smelling brown hair. He cries with her, sobs that border on silent, tears awash in moonlight.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispers. “I can’t be that for you. God, I’m so sorry, Morgan.”

She cries so much she soaks his shirt, but Peter doesn’t mind. He’s relieved, really, when she finally gets so tired out her eyes start to droop.

Peter kisses her temple. “He should be here. I know he should be. I… I’m doing my best, Morgie, I promise.”

The only answer he gets is a low, sleepy whine, so Peter lays her back down in the crib. This time
she falls fast asleep. Peter hovers for a minute, hand splayed over her warm tummy. “I’ll bring him back. I swear to god. Whatever it takes, I’ll do it.”

When he returns to the kitchen Pepper is still slouched over the table. Peter carefully pries her phone from her grip and sets it aside, dead. He gently shakes her shoulder.

“Mmm? What?”

Peter leans down. “It’s eleven. You passed out a bit ago.”

“Oh.” Pepper sits up, rubbing her cheek and frowning. “I can’t believe that. God, I had so much left to do—”

“Pepper.”

“I was on the phone with your principal and I had a thousand other calls left to make—”

“Pepper.”

“And—what?”

Peter opens his mouth. Closes it. Debates whether or not to tell her and decides on the latter, praying that Morgan will never make the same mistake again.

“Peter? Is everything okay?”

He shakes his head and squeezes his eyes shut. “No. Can you do me a favour?”

“Yeah, of course, anything.”

“Can you, like, go to sleep? For a solid eight hours? And stop worrying so much? Because it’s
giving me second-hand anxiety and I think your ulcers might be contagious—”

Pepper socks his arm. “Don’t do that. God, you freaked me out.”

“Hey, I’m serious.” Peter tries for a smile. “All this stuff you’re doing for me is amazing and I appreciate more than you could ever know, but I swear to god if you run yourself into the ground because you’re trying to sort out my shit for me? I’ll scream. I’m not even kidding. I’ll climb onto the roof of the compound and banshee-screech into the night for at least forty minutes straight—”

Pepper laughs, bright and open. She rests her forehead on his shoulder and he wraps his arm around her.

“Hey, um, remember that thing you said when I called you from Italy? Was that just like, an accident? ‘Cuz if it was, we don’t have to talk about it, we can just pretend it didn’t happen—”

“You’re gonna have to be more specific, hon, because right now I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about—”

“I mean, you’re my someone and I’m always here for you no matter what, so it’s okay if you like, didn’t mean it—”

“Oh,” Pepper cuts in. “Oh. Peter.”

“I’m serious, it’s not a big deal—”

“Peter, of course I love you.”

He stops short. “I—yeah?”

“Yeah.” Her smile is indulgent, light. “You’re my… I mean, I adopted you, Peter. You’re my kid. God, I know I’m not your mom, and I’d never try to replace her or May, but sometimes I feel like…”

She flounders.
Peter squeezes her hand. “I, uh, I get it. Like, vice-versa. I feel that way, too.”

Pepper brushes a curl from his forehead. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

This isn’t a conversation he’d ever thought they’d end up having. He hadn’t even meant to ask, but Morgan had strung him up so much and it’s been bothering him for weeks, whether Pepper meant it or not.

Peter kisses the crown of her head, just like May would do for him, just like he does for Morgan. It’s a silent thank you, an assurance that he cares more than he can say.

In the next room, Morgan starts to cry again. Pepper twitches.

“Nope,” Peter says, “I’ll deal with that.”

“But—”

“Go to bed or I’ll take out your battery pack.”

Three days later, Morgan speaks again.

For all of Pepper’s knowledge, it’s the only time it’s ever happened, and it so happens that Morgan’s first word is shit.

“Christmas is in a week.”
Peter doesn’t start at the sound of Nat’s voice. He’d heard her steadily approaching footfalls, monitored the lazy, relaxed thud of her heart, and turns with a raised eyebrow.

She’s leaning against the doorframe of the conference room he’d commandeered to do his homework. His things are everywhere, open books and broken pencils and loose leaf papers with half solved physics questions.

Going back to school had been completely nerve wracking. Pepper had assured him a thousand times over that Principal Mortia would have a handle on it; he’d make sure no one bullied Peter or stalked him or worse, which so far had proved true.

Still, there’s a new undercurrent of energy that runs through the halls of Midtown tech these days. He’s starting to realise it’s because of him, because of Spider-Man.

New York had woken up to rally to his defense and after they were satisfied that Beck’s claims had been proven false, they’d stayed awake.

There’s a new AcaDec team. Nearly twenty students had tried to write their names down when they’d seen Peter’s just below MJ’s on the sign up sheet. Suddenly it was cool, but no one outright admitted it was because of Peter.

He gets a lot of stares. Love notes in his locker that MJ pretends don’t bother her—even though he’d seen her burning a few behind the school one day—and way too many follows on his Instagram (which he’d fixed by going private).

It’s been four months of relative calm. Just busting low level criminals that now have a harder time taking him seriously until they end up webbed to a back alley wall, training more vigorously than ever, and sporadic dates with MJ. His eighteenth birthday is a quiet affair, just him and Pepper and Morgan and a pillow fort in the living room; a cupcake with one candle at midnight; a wish he means to grant for himself.

It’s normal. Mundane, even.

So he’s not at all concerned with Nat’s observation. He just hums, turning back to his Calculus book. “Are you getting me something?”
Nat snorts. “Never.”

“But you want me to get you something?”

“Well, naturally.”

She’s smirking. He can hear it in her voice. Nat circles the table and perches on the spot with the least amount of clutter. She taps his forehead.

“Pepper invited me to your place for Christmas dinner.”

Peter nods. He’d overheard them talking on the phone. “It’ll just be people you know,” he assures her. “Rhodey and Happy and the Tasmanian Devil.”

“And my plus one.”

That finally grabs his attention. “If you’re about to invite me to my own home for Christmas—”

Nat laughs. “No. I, uh, I actually already had another request. From someone else, I mean, to spend the holidays with.”

She sounds nervous, which is both new and frightening.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. But I… I suggested maybe, if you’re okay with it, we all get together here instead. That way your space isn’t invaded by someone you’re not comfortable with.”

“Nat, are you, like, dating?”
She rolls her eyes. “No.”

“So…?”

“It’s Steve.”

Peter’s grip on the pen he’s holding tightens so much it bends. “Oh?”

“I take it you’re not okay with that?”

“Okay with it? I’m great with it. I mean, it’s your place more than it is mine, so y’know, invite who you want and all. Don’t let me stop you.”

Nat takes his hand. “Hey.”

He meets her eyes. Finds them, for the first time, wide open. She’s willing to listen, willing to understand. He’s been vague about his dislike for Steve in the past, and she hasn’t pressed. They have their personal opinions and it doesn’t mean they have to get into a disagreement about them.

“I remember the airport. You were excited to meet him, Peter.”

“Yeah, and then he dropped a jet rail on me.”

Nat purses her lips. “That—while irresponsible—wasn’t something he would’ve done if he’d known who you were. In fact, he called me in a panic when he found out you were in high school.”

Peter sighs. He writes the derivative he’s had in his head for the last ten minutes down on the worksheet. Shifts.

“I just—I just don’t understand how you can still be friends with him after what he did to Tony in Siberia!”
Nat leans back as he explodes. “You know what happened in Siberia?”

“I…” Peter’s face falls into his hands and he massages his aching head; the consequences of reading in a low light room for hours like an idiot. “I didn’t, for a while. I mean, I knew it was bad. Tony came back all beat up and just… I mean, I didn’t know him well enough at the time to realise, but he was so hurt, Nat.”

“Will you tell me what happened?”

(snow; cold; dark; the footage on the body cam had been grainy, but Peter had seen. Alone in the lab, he’d come across it in the archived files Tony had asked him to organise and he’d seen. Every punch, kick, yell, and the final blow: Steve ramming his shield into the place where Tony’s arc reactor had been, which could’ve killed him if he hadn’t gotten rid of it. Even still, Steve had left him for dead in that bunker.

Peter hadn’t ever brought it up. But he’ll never forget.)

“It’s not my place,” he mutters. “Why don’t you ask your buddy Steve? See if he fesses up to what he did or not.”

Nat doesn’t even flinch. “Peter, you have to understand—”

“I don’t have to understand anything.”

“No.” She nods. “No, you’re right. You don’t. But I won’t pick sides here, okay?”

“You already did,” Peter points out, not really meaning for it to cut, more just to state a fact. “You chose Steve. You went with him and the other Rogues.”

Her shoulders fall. “It was more complicated than that.”

He mulls that over for a moment and then nods, because he believes her. He knows she hadn’t had anything against Tony, he knows she cares about the Avengers like a family. They all mean the world to her.
She’d just been trying to keep them all from falling apart.

“Okay.”

“Okay, what?”

“Invite Steve.”

Her face lights up. “Are you sure?” she asks. “I could always work something else out—”

“Nat. It’s Christmas. Consider it my present.”

Nat laughs. Then she presses a kiss to his cheek. “I’ll take it,” she says, sliding off the table. “Oh and for the record: this is your place too, *Petya*. Tony built it. You’re his kid. And you’re an Avenger, just like me.”

Then she’s gone.

*You’re his kid.*

The pen snaps in half. Ink splatters all across his hands and papers.

“Shit.”

It’s really not as bad as he thinks it’s going to be.

He and Pepper and Morgan mostly stick to one side of the table, while Happy and Rhodey act as mediators. They make idle conversation with Steve and Nat.
Peter texts MJ under the table. She’s in Illinois again, with her step dad’s Chicagoan relatives. He ends up with meme after meme of screaming tv show characters and mile long rants about “Aunt” Melissa’s dry as fuck turkey and why the hell are we eating turkey again. Isn’t it supposed to be goose. Also: why the fuck would anyone eat a goose ever. Also: get me out of here.

Peter does his best to reply while juggling a conversation with Rhodey. When the topic of college comes up though, Peter hesitates.

“I was thinking Columbia. Or maybe Fordham.”

Rhodey nods. Peter doesn’t miss the way Pepper stiffens across from him.

It goes on like that. Peter flinches every time Steve laughs, loud and booming, from the end of the table. He doesn’t eat much even though the food is pretty good. Rhodey made most of it, Happy bought the pies, and he and Pepper brought a dish of canned cranberry sauce.

Steve compliments it.

More than once.

Peter doesn’t even bother to try it.

After, the adults drift off to the commons area to lounge on the couches and complain about how full they are. Pepper doesn’t go with them. He assumes she’s slinking off to make phone calls for SI, and he doesn’t blame her at all for leaving.

Peter makes the kitchen his home base. He works through all of the dishes slowly, hands reddening from the heat of the water, praying Pepper will use one of their made up excuses soon so they can go home.

Nat wanders in.
“Hey.”

“Hi.”

She sets down her glass of brandy and perches on the counter nearest him, swinging her legs like a little kid. “Thank you.”

“I don’t recall doing anything worthy of thanks,” Peter says, forcibly light.

Nat stretches out to kick him. “This means a lot to me. Having everyone in one place, I mean. Well, all the people we can get ahold of, anyway.”

He hates to ask, but… “Clint?”

Nat’s face darkens. She shakes her head, silently answering his inquiry. No one has heard from him in almost two years, ever since the Snap. Nat’s tried tracking him down various times to no avail. He knows it hurts her. Peter hadn’t been around in the days where they were always together, but Tony had mentioned once or twice that they were two peas in a pod.

He knows it hurts her.

“I’m sorry, Nat.”

Natasha shrugs. “That’s okay. I got today, which was all I wanted. And I got it because of you.”

“I’m pretty sure it was you who orchestrated this whole thing, actually.”

“Yeah, but you agreed. You don’t know how much that means to me.”

He glances over at her, sees that she’s smiling at him with her head tilted, all you’re a sweet kid, you know that? and the expression is so heart achingly familiar he drops a knife.
“What is it?”

May.

“Nothing. I just realised something horrifying.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“You’re… you’re kind of my best friend right now.”

Nat throws back her head and laughs. It’s the loud kind, which means she really thinks it’s funny and he caught her off guard.

But it’s true. Ned will always and forever be his first, best, friend. He had been the only person to sit next to Peter on the first day of high school and had been unflinchingly loyal until the day he died. He had supported Peter, encouraged him, rolled with every punch. He’d been good.

Thinking about him makes his chest sore. He imagines that must be the way Nat feels, thinking about Clint.

“You’re kind of mine,” Nat admits. She tosses him a dish towel and slips down from the counter. Peter wipes his hands dry.

“You don’t have to thank me for letting Steve Rogers breathe the same air as Pepper Potts.”

“Ah, so you’re being protective?” When he doesn’t answer, she hums. “He’d never hurt her. Or you. Or the baby.”

“I’ll have you know that Morgan is precisely a year old as of Tuesday.”

“That’s still a baby.”
“She’d beg to differ, but I’ll beg on her behalf.”

“Did she have a good birthday?”

“She devoured a cupcake and stained the tablecloth with blue handprints, so obviously.”

Nat’s lips quirk up at the corners. There’s an almost reminiscent, broken expression on her face, like a fissure for the leftover love to seep through. When she looks up, her eyes are red rimmed and teary. “I bought her a present.”

“You did?” He doesn’t remember seeing one in the small, pink-wrapped pile.

“I just… didn’t know. If I could…”

Then Peter remembers: the Bartons. It wasn’t just Clint she lost, it was his family too, his kids.

“How about, you give it to me and I pass it along to Mo?”

Nat wipes her cheek with a shaking hand. She nods. Smiles at him. Peter can tell it’s just a try at one, and inside she’s breaking. It’s scary, the way he can almost read her now. He doesn’t know if it’s because she’s let him, or because he’s just learned.

Maybe it’s a bit of both.

“That sounds… yeah. Sounds good.”

Peter does the impossible by catching her off guard when he kisses her cheek. “Merry Christmas, Nat.”

“Merry Christmas, little spider.”
“I promised myself I wouldn’t butt my nose into your business.”

Peter stops on his way to his room. Turns, slowly, with great caution.

Because Pepper sounds mad.

He’d actually suspected something was off with her, but he figured it had to do with being so close to Steve. To find her anger directed at him is both surprising and unnerving.

“Y-You’re allowed. To butt your nose.”

Pepper folds her arms across her chest. “Columbia?”

Oh.

“You can’t go to Columbia, Peter.”

“But—why not? I mean, it’s a great school, and it’s close by so I could stay with you and Morgan and help you—”

“See, that’s the problem. I don’t want you basing gigantic life decisions like this around what I want or what I need.”

“So you just, what, what me to leave? For like, nine whole months of the year?”

“It’s not about what I want, I just said that!” Pepper shakes her head. “You’ve had your sights on MIT since you were fifteen, Peter. Tony wrote you a letter of recommendation, and you’re guaranteed to get in with or without it—”

“Oh, so it’s about what Tony wants.”
They both freeze. Breathe. Peter’s fists are curled so he unfurls them and flexes his hands.

“What about what I want?”

Pepper leans against the arm of the couch. “That’s all that matters, sweetie. That’s all I’m saying.”

“I don’t… I don’t want to be away from you. Or Morgan, or MJ. I…”

I’m scared of that.

“Okay,” Pepper whispers. She moves toward him and runs her hands up and down his arms. The next thing he knows, he’s hugging her. “Okay, baby, I’m sorry.”

Peter finds himself crying. It’s funny how it comes like that, waves of grief that ebb and recede. He breathes through his sobs. “Please don’t make me leave you, Pepper.”

“I won’t. God, never. I need you too, remember? Don’t ever think otherwise.”

“I want to be strong,” he whispers weakly, “but I don’t wanna be all alone.”

She holds him tighter. “I understand. I’m so sorry I yelled.”

Peter pulls back a little. He stares down at his feet while the tears fall freely, staining the hem of his sweater and hers. “I know I should go to MIT, but it’s so far away from all of you, and long distance relationships never last—at least, that’s what everyone says—”

“Peter, honey, breathe.”

Peter does as she asks. There’s nothing he wouldn’t do for her. “You… you wouldn’t be ashamed of me? If I stayed here instead?”
“Ashamed? God, no. I love you no matter what college you go to or whether you go or not, Peter.”

She wipes his cheeks dry with the pads of her thumbs. Peter still can’t quite look at her. “What about Tony?”

His voice is small and he can see the way the impacts her, breaks down her walls, makes her shoulders sag. “Tony?” Pepper shakes her head. “He would be so, so proud of you, Peter. I wish he were here to see you now. You’re so grown up and you’re so strong.”

Peter rests his forehead against hers, drained and drowning. He holds both of her hands. “I’ll think about it.”

I wish, she’d said.

There’s nothing he wouldn’t do for her.

Peter Parker’s List of Things They Didn’t Get to See:

- My seventeenth birthday
- Getting my driver’s license
- Morgan’s birth
- My eighteenth birthday
- Morgan’s first word
- Morgan’s first steps
- Morgan’s first birthday
- Me kicking Nat’s ass for the first time
- My high school graduation
Morgan is walking by the time she’s one. Number seven happens on a dreary November afternoon. He and Pepper are on the living room floor, encouraging Morgan to stand up and stumble over to them. Peter is filming on a beat up camcorder he’d found in a dumpster on patrol one day, fixed up, and subsequently be-dazzled.

He doesn’t tell her the tape is labelled *For Dad*, and thankfully she doesn’t ever ask to see it.

Pepper’s arms are wide open. She’s trying every trick in the book and just when Peter is about to give up and stop filming, Morgan stands up and takes a tentative, wobbly step forward.

“Oh my god.” Pepper’s voice is wavering. “Did you see that? She just—she just *did it.*”

“I know. Holy shit. She’s the smartest baby of all of the babies.”

Pepper is oblivious, eyes on Morgan, patting her knees and calling her over with sweet tones and the promise of a big hug.

“I’m right here, Morgie. Can you come to mommy?”

Morgan flaps her arms excitedly and promptly falls on her belly. It happens a lot, so neither of them are too concerned, and of course she gets right back up without a single tear.

It doesn’t even *occur* to her to feel bad about failing.

She just keeps trying.

“Come to mommy, sweetie,” Pepper urges. “I’m so close. It’s just a few more steps.”

Morgan straightens out. Her wispy dark curls are standing with static energy. Her eyes land on Peter and she screeches with delight.
“Hi, shortcake,” Peter says. “You wanna try again? Go to mommy, okay?”

Morgan giggles.

“That’s fucking cute,” Peter mutters. Pepper catches it and she laughs.

“Baby, look at me. Come on.”

Morgan stares at the rug, and then at Pepper. She weighs her options. Takes another tiny step and this time, doesn’t lose her balance.

“Oh my god, that’s so good, honey!” Pepper praises. “Just a little further, okay?”

Another three steps and Morgan is in Pepper’s arms, and Pepper is crying and laughing and Peter tapes the whole thing. The recording ends with Morgan stumbling over to him with the world’s biggest smile on her chubby face.

Number eight happens so quickly he almost misses it.

A sweeping kick aimed for his legs, a calf he catches in his hands, a complicated twisting manoeuvre where he pulls her and rolls underneath her moving body at the same time.

Then she’s flat on her back and he’s the one left on his feet.

“Holy shit! I just—I think I just won?!”

“No you didn’t,” Nat says, far too quickly. “I let you win.”

“No. I always know when you’re doing that and this was not a mercy win.”
Nat contorts her lips into a fake pout. “I think you hit your head too hard earlier, Petya.”

“I did not hit my head too hard and you did not let me win,” Peter insists, still grinning. “I think you might be losing your edge, Nattie.”

Nat scowls. She thrusts her hand up and Peter takes it, meaning to haul her up, but then of course her grip turns into a yank.

The next thing he knows, he’s on his back (and still an idiot) and she’s leaning over him. “How’s that for winning, little spider?”

Peter groans. “S’good. S’real good.”

Number nine is a more subdued affair.

The graduating class is only half the size that it should be, and thus, so is the crowd. Pepper attends with Morgan in her lap and Rhodey on the seat next to them. He spots Happy in the last row pretending not to wipe away a tear, and at the back of the auditorium, a shadowy figure slips out the minute the hats are tossed skyward.

When he gets home there’s a tiny box on his bed. Inside is an old Blackberry cell phone with exactly one number listed in the contacts, a miniature copy of the *Little Red Russian Guide*, and a sticky note that reads: *Congrats, маленький паук. I’ll call you.*

She does, indeed, call.

The timing is really inconvenient.

Patrol starts out like it usually does. He scopes out the boroughs with a police scanner, no longer
confined to just Queens or Manhattan. He also doesn’t have a curfew anymore, being a legal adult and all, which means he’s free to bust as many bad guys as he wants.

Or, bust until he’s stabbed in the side.

He doesn’t see it coming.

Well, he does, but he’s too preoccupied to stop it.

There are three guys about to jump one woman. It’s nothing reported, just something he happens to swing past and then backtrack to stop.

They don’t notice him slowly crawling down the brick wall behind them, but the woman does. Her eyes widen, going from terrified to relieved in just seconds.

It will never not scare him, the way their faith is so blind and complete.

But he yanks the first two off of her and knocks them out with ease. The third one puts up a pretty good fight, though, obviously trained in some form of martial arts. Peter thinks it might be taekwondo, which he’s not all that well-versed in, so he just dodges until he can web him up.

His mistake is not accounting for the fourth guy.

He must’ve been a look out or something. The only silver lining Peter can find is that he goes for him rather than the woman, who is slouched against the floor and watching, pale and shaky, as he tries to subdue her attackers.

“Peter, behind you!” Karen shouts.

Too late.

(It’s sort of her fault, but whatever.)
The knife goes in. Slides out.

Peter hisses. Whirls. Punches the guy in the throat and then again in the side of the head as he’s tripping backward.

“Lights out!” he announces.

Like he’s not like, actively bleeding out, or anything.

By the time Peter webs up the last guy, his vision is beginning to blur around the edges.

Peter helps the woman up. “I’m gonna call you a cab and pay for your fare, okay? Karen, do me a favour and get the cops down here?”

“Already on it.”

He does exactly what he says he will: waves her down a taxi and helps her inside, hands her a wad of bloodstained cash and reminds her to follow up with the police as soon as possible. She nods, all shaken up, and thanks him.

“No problem,” he says. “Be safe.”

The taxi peels away.

“Karen, biometric stats, please.”

“You’ve lost 1000 milileters of blood and your pulse is 110. I recommend seeing a doctor.”

There was a time when she would’ve recommended Tony, instead, and the loss of that option leaves him feeling hollow like always. He misses the days when he would wake up, dazed, in the compound medbay to find an anxious Tony hovering over his bed and fiddling with his IV bags.
“Doctor, schmockter,” Peter says, flicking his wrist. A web solidifies over his wound, which will at least stop the blood loss for now. “Give me the quickest route home.”

“Home is twenty five minutes away. I recommend somewhere closer.”

“Okay… uh, what’s close?”

“Michelle Jones’ apartment is only two blocks from here. Would you like directions?”

Peter stills. He looks around, trying to get his bearings, and realises he knows where he is; the street with the coffee shop he and MJ would frequent to study; there’s a little bookstore on top of it they fell asleep in once and the owner didn’t even get mad at them for it.

“No, no, that’s okay. I know my way from here. Thanks, Karen.”

“Anytime, Peter.”

It only takes a couple of minutes to get there. Peter climbs quietly from the top of the complex to the fire escape he knows to be hers, if only because of the cracked window and the sound of Bikini Kill blaring from her computer speakers.

Peter knocks on the glass.

MJ jumps. When she sees him, she rolls her eyes, slips off her bed, and opens the window all the way.

“You’d better be dying.”

“It just so happens that I am,” Peter says, and lifts his hand from the crimson staining his side just to prove it.
MJ’s annoyance fades away in a heartbeat. She practically drags him inside, which only makes the wound throb painfully and she immediately lets go with the sound of his pained hiss.

“On the bed.”

Peter sits.

“Suit off.”

He presses the spider in the centre of his chest and slips out of the loose garment. He tries to look as dignified as possible while bleeding out in his boxers.

MJ doesn’t even seem to notice or care. She rifles through the underneath of her bed and pulls out an emergency first aid kit.

“Does it have a needle and thread? I’m gonna need stitches.”

MJ hums. She plucks out the things she needs; gauze, bandages, the aforementioned needle and thread, and neosporin. “Let me get some water and alcohol.”

Peter waits. He pulls her bedspread back so he’s only staining the sheets and lays back, feeling increasingly drowsy.

Yeah, definitely dying.

MJ is back in a flash though. She has a bowl of warm water and a rag, which she uses to clean out his wound. Peter tries not to wince too much.

“Okay,” MJ pulls the needle from its sterile packaging. “Try not to move.”

He nods. He’s done this before a thousand times, but she never has. He figures one of them has to be calm, at least, and…
Well, it should probably be her.

But her hands are shaking.

“MJ,” he says, before she can start. “It’s okay.”

“Yeah,” she nods. “Right.”

“No, really. I’m not… I’m fine.”

“You’re bleeding all over my bed.”

“But I look good doing it, huh?”

MJ finally sends him a dry glare. “You just lost like, fifty whole boyfriend points.”


“Stay still.”

“Anything for m’lady.”

MJ snorts. “Minus ten, Parker.”

The stitches end up okay, if a little crooked, but he’s not looking for anything more than a quick fix. They should be ready to take out by morning, anyway.

MJ slides off of him and goes to wash her hands.
Peter stares down at the blood speckling her duvet, despite his best efforts, and swallows the thick feeling in his throat.

If he goes to MIT, the distance between them is gonna be a whole lot more than ten feet or two blocks. It’ll be states. They’re both entering that phase of their life where everyone pressures them to *experiment* and *go wild* and *forget high school*.

Sure, the world has changed after the Snap, but has college?

“Peter?”

He sees her in his peripheral vision. Peter sniffs and wipes his cheeks, but that only draws her closer. “Hey,” she whispers softly, kneeling in front of him, “Peter, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m sorry, I’m just… being stupid.”

“You’re always being stupid,” MJ says.

He tries to smile, but it dies, contorts into a mirroring frown. “I’m scared.”

“Of what?”

He doesn’t want to say. He doesn’t want to pressure her, to be selfish enough to ask her to stay with him forever. It’s what he wants, but that doesn’t mean it’s the same as what *she* wants.

“Peter.” MJ places her hands on either side of his face. “Look at me.”

When he does, he can’t look away. Honey brown eyes, home to him, warm like summer days in Central Park with her head in his lap as she sketches strangers—hasty charcoal markings that line the walls of her bedroom now and dot her windows; she has dreams, she has ambitions, she is *not* his and despite this, whatever she gives him he will take and keep for always.
“I love you,” he tells her, before he can bite the words back, bloody and black in his throat. “I love you so much, and I’m terrified of losing you, MJ.”

(I’ve already lost everyone else.)

She blinks. “Oh.”

Oh.

His phone rings.

“You look like someone killed your puppy.”

“I don’t have a puppy,” Peter gripes. It’s a great point of contention with him.

Nat kicks off the wall she’s leaning against with a sly smirk. She’s dressed all in black and he knows immediately what that means.

“Should I ask?”

“Maybe not. I don’t know.”

Nat studies him for another few seconds, amusement masking a deeper concern, and then reaches into her duffel. She pulls out a silver wrist band. “I grabbed your stealth suit from the compound.”

“I knew you were looking through my things.”

He’d had a brief flash of panic the first time he suspected his files had been tampered with and only calmed himself when he remembered all of the important things weren’t even stored there.
“Hey, I had to at least try to limit your access to porn.”

“I don’t watch—”

“I’ve met Happy Hogan.”

He scowls. Takes the wrist band. “Whatever.”

“God, you really are in a mood, huh?”

“No. You just happen to have the worst timing, like, ever.”

“Oh?” She watches the suit form around him with a vague interest, before comprehension dawns across her features like a sunrise. “You were with MJ.”

“I was.”

“And you were gonna…?”

“No.”

“Well then what?”

“Can we like, not have this conversation now? Or like, ever?”

“Not likely.”

“Oh my god.” He grabs the duffel she’d clearly packed for him and throws it over his shoulder. “Just brief me, or whatever. What are we doing? Where are we going?”
“Catching bad guys,” she replies breezily, leading him out of the alley and toward her car. “In Cairo.”

“What—Egypt?”

“Yeah, dummy, Egypt.”

“But—Pepper—”

“Relax, I already called and told her you were gonna stay with me for the week and do a refresher course.”

Peter sighs. “Oh, goody.”

“Your mid-battle quips are drastically improving,” Nat remarks over the comms.

“Thank you,” Peter says dryly, “that makes all of this just so much better.”

All of this happens to be the coating of (probably, hopefully) fake blood coating his clothes and slowly baking onto his skin under the hot Cairo sun.

That’s what they get for attacking an Egyptian mobster who owns a theatre company. Peter had been creeping along in what he’d thought was a covert fashion. The hair on his arms had risen and he’d looked up just in time to see gallons of red falling from the sky.

Why they had that situated there was beyond him.

Still, he is sort of glad she got a kick out of his Carrie joke.
“Do you have eyes on him, at least?”

“No, but I got Ahmad in my sights,” she reports. “Ten o’clock. In pursuit.”

“Copy that.” Peter turns a corner, wincing when his boots squeak against the black tile floor. He creeps along, staying close to the walls. The gun in his hands feels unfamiliar and heavy, but he knows how to use it thanks to Nat.

It’s not his weapon of choice, but Nat was strictly against leaving web-trails wherever they went, so she’d raided the arsenal and packed enough firepower for a small army instead.

For the millionth time, Peter spares a second to check the safety.

*Off.*

That second almost costs him his life.

Peter jumps out of the way just in time, his sixth sense urging him to duck. Bullets burrow into the wall right where his head had been a heartbeat before.

“*Shit!*”

Omar, Ahmad’s brother, is standing at the end of a darkened hallway. He turns and flees the second Peter lays eyes on him.

“I have sights on Omar,” Peter reports. “Twelve o’clock, in pursuit.”


*Lights out.* That means she’s knocked him out, detained him, and is currently on her way to hand him over to the authorities.
Which is what she expects him to do with Omar.

And he definitely deserves it, being a sex-trafficking, gambling, drug smuggling rapist, but the problem is actually catching him.

Peter tries not to think about it as he runs. Omar is thin and spry despite his forty-five years, and his linen clothes mean he’s not nearly as hot as Peter.

But Peter is enhanced and has two years of training, so naturally the gap between them closes rapidly.

Omar rounds a corner and ducks into an alley. Peter follows. There’s a stairwell leading into a bazaar. He turns a few degrees and starts to creep, slowly, up the steps. Caution means no collateral, or so Nat says.

There’s a grunt and a sickening splicing sound from the second floor. Peter sucks in a sharp breath and throws circumspection out the window. He takes the stairs two at a time.

It’s not Omar.

It can’t be, because Omar is bleeding out on the floor.

His abdomen has been sliced open cleanly. There’s a pool of scarlet around his rapidly paling body, staining the tiles.

There are five other bodies in the room, all unmoving. Slit throats, kill-shot bullet holes, knives impaled in their hearts buried to the hilt.

Omar had been heading back to his base, or the base of one of his lower level drug dealers. There are bags of heroin on the floor, probably scattered when the table had been tipped over.

It’s been completely cleaved in half.
It’s his sixth sense that pulls him out of his daze; Peter throws himself to the ground just as something whizzes past his ear and embeds itself into the wall behind him.

“What the—”

Peter rounds and just manages to catch a glimpse of his attacker: combat boots and the blood soaked edge of a black coat. The figure jumps out the window.

“Nat,” Peter breathes, “get down here. You gotta see this.”

“You get Omar?”

“No, but someone else did.”

There’s a pause. Then Nat’s voice comes through, shaking and urgent. “Did you see him?”

“See who?”

“Shit. Just stay there, okay? I’m tracking your location.”

“Nat. See who?”

A part of him doesn’t even want the answer, because if the arrow protruding from the cracked drywall behind him is any hint, he already has it.

“You dragged me here to try and find Barton.”

Nat won’t look at him. She’s angry. Pissed off, actually. Worse than he’s ever seen her.
“Nat. Stop walking.”

“Walk faster,” she retorts.

Peter grabs her arm. Big mistake. She’s on edge, strung up, and rams him into a wall. He can’t even be angry because he’s so freaked out and worried about her.

“Nat,” he grits out, “you seriously need to take a second to breathe.”

She blinks. Realises what she’s doing and immediately lets go. “Shit,” she whispers, voice trembling, “Peter, I’m sorry—”

“It’s okay, I’m not even hurt,” he assures, more focused on getting her to calm down than getting her to apologise. “Please, just take a minute. For me.”

Nat struggles. She actually holds her breath, face twisted up and eyes full of tears, and then gasps a sob. She rakes a hand through her red-blonde hair. “He’s here,” she whispers. “He’s close.”

“I know.” Peter nods. “But Nat, you saw what he did back there—”

“He’s just confused—”

“That’s not confusion. That’s… that’s hate, Nat. Hate for people he doesn’t even know.”

Nat shakes her head. She’s really going to cry, and it’s gonna break him to see it. “I can’t. I can’t give up on him. If it was me, doing these things… he wouldn’t. He wouldn’t stop until he found me.”

“But it’s not you.”

She sucks in a sharp breath. “Please. Just let me do this, okay? Let me try. You… you go back to the hotel and I’ll take care of the rest. You did good. Go wash up.”
Peter hesitates. He knows she’s not really asking for permission, more begging him not to slow her down by coming along.

So he nods. “Yeah. Okay.”

Peter curls up in the shower and lets the steam envelope him. He scrubs his skin until it’s raw and red, until that sticky feeling abates.

He’s seen carnage before, but the worst of it had been on another planet. It’s all so far away it seems like another person’s life, or a strange dream from his childhood. The fact that he’d been fighting alongside aliens in outer space somehow makes it easier to believe it just wasn’t real at all.

But there is something so disgustingly human about what he’d seen in that room; it is something animal, primitive, something carnal. Blood splattered on the walls and floor, so dark it was black; eyes wide open and full of fear, faces strangely insouciant, almost relieved. He wonders, did they deserve it? Were all of them bad enough to meet their end today, or were some of them just poor kids looking for money who didn’t quite realise what they were getting into?

Peter presses the heels of his palms into his eyes. He breathes. Turns off the shower, dries off, dresses, and returns to his room.

Nat is sitting on the bed, staring vacantly out the window through which the Cairo city lights gleam and glitter, a spattering of gold against an indigo sky.

“Nat?”

She blinks and looks up at him. “I’m sorry you had to see that,” she whispers. “It wasn’t… it wasn’t supposed to go that way.”

“It’s okay. It wasn’t your fault.”
Nat shakes her head. She looks down at her lap. “It isn’t okay.”

Peter sets his towel aside. “Did you…?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

There’s a terrifying lull that rips wide open between them. Peter twitches as she raises her hand to wipe a tear from her cheek.

“Do you wanna see if we can find any Egyptian reality TV?”

Like he’d hoped, she cracks a smile. “Sure. Why not.”

Peter comes home exhausted.

Pepper can see it in the way he moves, slow and sore. He puts on a show for Morgan though, even though she won’t notice the difference; Peter picks her up and spins her around and kisses her face like he hasn’t seen her in a thousand years.

He puts on a show for Pepper, too. It’s easy smiles and sarcastic jokes and quick movements. If he sees her coming, he stops staring into space and jumps to attention; rips his hands away from his temples; pretends to be asleep whenever he can get away with it just to avoid conversation.

Once or twice he actually does fall asleep in the middle of pretending, so she lets that one carry on a while.

They’re at the compound today, just the three of them. Morgan is running through the halls dressed in a unicorn onesie that Pepper knows will make her too hot—but she’d started bawling every time Pepper tried to take it off, so Pepper figures she’ll wait until Morgan tires herself out and then take it off while she naps.
She’s elbow deep in contract renewals and quarterly expense reports when FRIDAY relays a message from Peter.

“Ms Potts, Mr Parker is requesting that you come down to the workshop.”

Pepper pauses. “He’s… what?”

“Would you like me to repeat the message?”

“I-no. No, that’s fine, thank you, FRIDAY.”

So she stands. Closes her folders and chases down Morgan because no one is around to watch her, so she’ll have to come with.

Minutes later Pepper punches the code in and steps into the workshop. It’s much cooler in here, and Morgan lets out a contented sigh at the temperature change.

Peter looks up and god, he’s Tony; he’s Tony with his messy brown hair that’s sticking up from how many times he’s run his hands through it, Tony with the tools in his hands and the bots whirring around him, Tony with his sharp half-smile and soft eyes for Morgan.

“You brought the Mongoose?”

“Well I couldn’t leave her all alone.”

Peter nods. “Sorry. Slipped my mind. Hey, DUM-E, could you watch Morgan for a few minutes?”

The oldest bot beeps and flashes a few green lights. Pepper hesitantly sets Morgan down, silently vowing to keep an eye on her anyway because she’s heard all about DUM-E’s love for fire extinguishers and blenders.
Morgan squeals in delight when the bot’s claw pokes her cheek. They retreat to a corner of the shop with a couch and a mini-fridge.

“So, what’s up?”

“A few things,” Peter says. “I, um… Tony gave you the nanite shot a while ago, right?”

Pepper frowns. “Yeah,” she says slowly.

Peter nods. “Can you hold out your right index finger for me, please?”

With a little hesitancy, she does as he asks. Peter pulls out something that looks like a cross between a hot glue gun and a Christmas light zapper, only there’s a three inch needle on the end of it.

“Peter, what—?”

“Trust me? Please?”

“I-yeah. Okay. Prick me.”

He smiles and inserts the needle. There’s a sharp but perfectly bearable pain and underneath her skin, a red light glows.

“What are you doing?”

He’s turned back to his computer and busies himself with punching in various buttons. “Updating their technology and re-configuring their genesis patterns.”

Pepper nods, even though she has absolutely no idea what that means.

He stops. “Okay. I haven’t actually done anything yet, so I’m gonna show you what I have in mind
and if you’d like me to go through with it, just let me know. If not, I’ll give you a little band-aid and you can go back to work like nothing happened at all—”

“Peter.”

“Right. Okay.” He types in a few commands and then pulls up a holographic.

It’s of a suit.

The design is sleek and form-fitting, cobalt in colour with golden trim, and clearly designed for a woman. For her.

“This is RESCUE,” Peter says. “It’s, um. It’s yours.”

Pepper steps closer despite herself. “You made this?”

“Well, it’s Tony’s design, really. I’m just like, breathing life into it, I guess. Anyway, he knew what I know, which is that you’re way too strong to be standing on the sidelines like a housewife from the forties.”

Pepper shakes her head. It’s Tony’s design. Of course it is. Of course he would’ve made this for her. There’s one thing I can’t live without, and that’s you.

Her heart rents.

He didn’t listen. He didn’t come back. Now she has to go on living without him and it’s so hard. It’s hard to breathe, to think, to make it from one moment to the next when every second feels eternal.

Peter turns to her. His face softens. “You can fight. That’s what you wanted to say when I asked what it felt like, right?”

Her breath hitches. It’s true, but it’s not something she’d ever thought she’d need a reason to admit out loud.
Until now.

“Peter…”

“You can say no,” he reminds her. “And if you say yes, all I’ll be doing is adjusting what’s already a part of you. You don’t have to use it if you don’t want, Pep, but I want you to have the option.”

Pepper purses her lips. She pulls out the stool beside Peter’s and sits.

_I can fight._

“Yeah. Okay. Do it.”

Peter grins. He punches in a key. “Re-configuring now.”

There’s another sharp pain and a smarting throb, and then Peter is retracting the syringe-like device.

He watches her closely. “How do you feel?”

Pepper shrugs. “Normal.”

“Not like you have ants inside you or anything?”

“No,” she rolls her eyes. “Wait—is that something that could’ve happened?”

He laughs. “I don’t think so. I just felt cold when I did it.”

“You did it?”
“Well, yeah. I had to test the tech before I used it on you. Anyway, that’s RESCUE. She’s all yours, all you have to do is psychologically summon her using the usual command words.”

He claps his hands together with a small smile.

Pepper flexes her fingers. “Thank you, Peter.”

He shrugs. “No problem. I’m just doing what Tony wanted, anyways.”

She’s sure that’s true, but Pepper still catches the underlying message: he wants her to have a way to protect herself while he’s off at college, wants her to be safe.

It means…

“You’re going to MIT, aren’t you?”

He stills. “I—yeah. I-I think so.”

Pepper nods. She takes a deep breath because she does not want him to see her cry about this (even though she will, most definitely; but hopefully not until he’s long gone and well out of earshot).

Peter takes her hand. “There’s Christmas. And sporadic weekends when my dirty laundry hamper gets too full. And summer break.”

It’s clearly what he’s been telling himself since he made up his mind. It’s what she’ll tell herself too, repeat it like a mantra in her head: Christmas, laundry day, summer.

It’s still not enough.

“God,” Pepper wipes her eyes when she feels tears starting to form against her will. “I’m sorry. I’m happy for you, really, but…”
His grip firms. “I know.”

Pepper sniffs. Appraises him with a smile. The first time she’d ever seen him, he’d been running through the halls in a too-big jacket, asking her where the bathroom was.

Now he’s eighteen and hers and *leaving.*

“You’re gonna *love* college,” she says, scooting closer to wrap her arms around him. “There’s parties and hall pranks and girls—”

Peter snorts. “Yeah. Definitely sounds like my scene.” He rests his cheek against the top of her head. “Besides, I’m not available. At least, I think I’m not. I haven’t actually talked to MJ since I told her I’m in love with her and then basically ran away.”

Pepper freezes. “You did what?”

“I know. It was a disaster.”

She finds herself laughing, even though it’s the least funny thing imaginable. He laughs with her though. “Peter. You need to *call her.*”

“I know, I know. I’m just… working up the courage.”

“Try working up the courage a little quicker,” Pepper advises. “You have to tell her about college, too, remember.”

He swallows. “Yeah, that’s… I’m not looking forward to that part at all.”

Pepper opens her mouth to assure him that it’ll be okay, there are tons of ways to make long distance work, all it takes is a bit of work and determination—when something explodes behind her.
They whip around as one and find Morgan, DUM-E, and numerous cans of soda frothing all over the floor.

“Fuck,” Peter breathes out. “I think I just had my first real stroke.”

Morgan laughs. “I love Dummy!”

new messages: (1)

“Hey Loser, it’s MJ. Call me.”

They meet in the park.

MJ gets there first and Peter finds her sitting on a concrete bench, nursing a travel cup with a tea bag string dangling from the side. She has her sketchbook with her but it’s not open, just set to the side.

Peter sits down next to her. When she doesn’t react, he clears his throat.

MJ starts. “Oh, shit, hey.”

“Hi.” He tries for a small smile, but it wavers. Things feel awkward and he’s not sure what that means. Should they feel awkward?

But MJ is a master at cutting through bullshit—and his particular brand has never been anything enough to give her pause. She straddles the bench and faces him.

“Where did you go?”
“Oh, uh,” he shrugs, “Cairo.”

He hasn’t told anyone else that. Not even Pepper.

MJ snorts. “Funny. So where’d you actually go?”

“Um. Cairo.”

Her demeanour changes a little. A little half moon develops between her eyebrows, something he’s always found cute. “You went to—why?! What did you do?”

“Busted some sex traffickers, mostly,” he says. “It was Nat’s idea of a fun getaway.”

“Oh. That’s hot.”

Peter is unable to keep the grin from forming on his face. “Yeah, I guess.”

What really happened isn’t worthy of a smile; Barton, the level-headed marksman, Barton the family man, Barton, Nat’s best friend and brother. Barton slaughtered those men in that room, and he thinks he might’ve broken Nat’s heart, too.

“We should talk,” MJ says.

Peter’s stomach swoops. He nods. “That’s probably a good idea.”

“I don’t… Peter, I don’t want to lose you either. I’m scared, too. Like, all of the time. I’m scared of screwing up or being too awkward or weird—I mean, it was a lot worse in the beginning, but it’s just like, ingrained with me. I’m not used to… this.”

She gestures between them. Lets her words hang.
Not used to this. Them. Being loved. Being accepted in spite every conspiracy theory rant and granola bar book place marker and abrasive comment; in spite of, because of.

Peter takes her hands. He runs his thumb across her knuckles.

“I will admit, you’re very awkward and weird—”

“Peter—”

“I mean, who else has a scrapbook of ticket stubs for every horror movie they’ve ever seen, and knows every word of every episode of Buzzfeed Unsolved by heart, and eats peanut butter toast with cream cheese—”

“It’s good,” she defends, smiling with him, cheeks streaked with red.

“No one else does that stuff. It’s why I love you.”

MJ ducks her head. She stares down at their hands. Peter leans forward and kisses her crown softly.

“You don’t have to say it back if you don’t want to.”

Like everything with MJ, it surprises him when she kisses him, takes his breath away. He continuously finds that something which should have, by now, become so familiar—maybe even ordinary—still makes galaxies explode beneath his eyelids, bright and blinding and wonderful.

She makes the cosmos seem dull. The fire inside of her is brighter than any star or sun. She is her own universe and he’ll gladly stay in her orbit for as long as possible.

From the outside, it’s all just a heartbeat kiss.

MJ leans back. “It’s not that I don’t want to say it. It’s not even that I can’t say it, I just…”

“I understand.”
“No.” She shakes her head. “No, you really don’t.”

“So tell me.”

He wants to understand. He knows there are things about her life she hasn’t told him. She’s selective with the pieces of herself she decides to share and some part of him has always been aware there must be reasons for that, reasons as to why she finds it so hard to trust and love and be loved.

“I… I mean, all my life, I’ve just been… isolated. Like my dad died when I was two—at least that’s what my mom told me, but I always thought maybe he just skipped down and she didn’t want me to know, but it’s whatever—and then like, it was just me and my mom until she met my step-dad. They got married and had their little perfect family, and I wasn’t part of that. I just kind of existed in the background.”

He’s heard the story before, but never quite this way. Before, they’d been lying on their backs in his bedroom, staring at the glow in the dark stars he’d crawled up there to place, and her voice had been flat. Detached. She was just stating facts, telling him straight up the way things were like at the end of the day, they didn’t really matter.

Her dad left her.

Her mom is gone.

Her little sister is gone.

She has existed as a peripheral shadow from the time she was, what, five? Six?

Everybody leaves her.

Peter is about to tell her he’s going to leave her too.

I just don’t have the best luck with getting close to people.
Peter can’t bring himself to look at her because it just _burns_. He scans the park instead. It’s desolate in a way that is unnatural. There aren’t enough birds, enough trees, enough people. Everything has been reduced by half, split down the middle, broken.

“Peter?”

He can’t lie to her. He can’t just put it off and pretend it’s not happening, no matter how much he wants to.

“I’m going to MIT in the fall, MJ.”

For the space of three seconds she’s still. Then her hand slowly pulls out of his. “I thought you were going to Columbia?”

“I… I changed my mind.”

“Why? When?”

“I think—” he frowns. “I think I never really wanted to go to Colombia. I was just trying to make things stay the same.”

“But you don’t want that?”

The question is asked slowly and drips with suspicion to mask the hurt underneath.

“I want _some_ things to stay the same,” he says, “but I need to… I need to breathe. I need to get out of this city for a while, be somewhere else. I have to know I can do things on my own—”

“That’s bullshit,” MJ says. “You don’t have to be alone. You shouldn’t ever have to rely on just yourself.”
“I should be able to.”

“Peter.”

Then MJ stops. She shakes her head, face all scrunched up. “God, what the fuck am I saying? I should be happy for you. I shouldn’t be—be acting like this and telling you this shit. No, it’s… it’s good.”

He knows not all of her means that, but it means a lot that she’s trying.

“The drive from here to Massachusetts is four hours,” he starts saying. “I’d be staying in the dorms, which is definitely gonna suck but it just means I have more reason to come back here when I get sick of my roommate—not that you aren’t reason enough, but—”

“Peter, dude,” MJ puts her hand on his mouth to shut him up. “Gimme a minute to absorb this.”

He nods. She lowers her hand. Glares at nothing in particular. Drums her fingers on the rim of her coffee cup. Nods too.

“Okay. So we break up.”

“I—what? No, no, that’s not what I’m saying—”

“No, hear me out.” She places her hands on his shoulders. “Okay, so, we both care about each other a lot, right? And we agreed that no matter what, we’d be friends first. So instead of like, dealing with the whole horrible breakup midway through the semester, we just end it now. But on a good note. And when we’re together, we’re together. And if, when it’s all over, we still wanna date, we just pick up where we left off.”

Peter hums. “Cool plan. I hate it.”

“Peter.”
“I don’t wanna break up with you, MJ!” He shakes his head, slightly disbelieving that this is even happening. “I want to try and make it work. God, did you know that when Tony was alive, Pepper would be gone for like four months out of the year and they still ended up engaged? It’s hard, but it’s not impossible, and I can’t—I can’t go through my life worrying one day you won’t be in it, you know?”

“I’m just saying, I’m gonna be at NYU and—”

“NYU? Since when are you going to NYU?”

MJ waves this off. “Since like, a month ago—”

“I thought you didn’t want to go to college?!”

“I changed my mind!”

“Oh my god.” Peter falls onto his back and winces with pain. “Okay. This is too much for me to handle on three hours of sleep.”

MJ leans over him. “Why did you only get three hours?”

“That is so not what’s important right now.”

“Incorrect: it’s very important. I guess it’s lost on you, the fact that the consequences of your unhealthy habits aren’t exclusive to just you.”

Peter rubs at his eyes. He moans. “If I take a nap, right here and right now, will you stop trying to break up with me?”

“I’m not trying to break up with you. I’m just trying to find a way to make it work long term.”

“Okay.” Peter pulls his hands away from his eyes. “How about we both agree to just focus on school while we’re in school and go from there?”
MJ grabs his arms and pulls him up. “But what does that make us?”

“Amorphous.”


“Are those all different things?”

“Peter.”

“Okay, okay. What if we just try the first semester to keep things how they are now? And if we’re struggling too much we can pick the conversation back up and go from there.”

MJ nods slowly. “Alright. I’ll take it.”

He figures, all things considered, it’s about the best he can hope for.

The night before Peter leaves for college, he and Morgan build a fort in the living room. He puts on a sci fi—not Star Wars, because he really can’t watch that anymore without thinking of Ned—and prays that the rest of the world will just go and stay away.

He doesn’t want to leave in the morning. Happy will be here at six AM to drive him up. Pepper has a meeting with the shareholders at eight that she couldn’t get out of, so they’re saying their goodbyes tonight by not saying goodbye at all.


Peter smiles softly. He takes the fish and kisses its plush cheek, which makes her giggle. “I love Tooty, too.”
Morgan squirms closer. She’s been climbing all over him for hours, no doubt speckling him with bruises, but Peter doesn’t complain once. He lets her lift his arms and sit on his legs and randomly pet his hair to her heart’s content.

“Mr Squickles,” Morgan announces, producing a bear. She makes it kiss his cheek this time.
“They’re married.”

“Are they?”

“Mmhmm.” She sets the bear and the fish next to each other and nods like it’s the most logical thing in the world. “They’re gonna have a fish baby like on Sponges.”

Peter’s face scrunches up as he tries to decipher her meaning. “You mean the sea bear? On Sponge Bob?”

“S’what I said,” she tells him. “Seeber.”

Peter grins so much his cheeks hurt. He scoops her up, mindless of her squeals, and blows raspberries against her tummy to get her to giggle maniacally. He thinks it might be his favourite sound in the world.

“You’re one crazy kiddo, you know that?”

Morgan blinks up at him, cheeks flushed. “Love you, Petey.”

He kisses her forehead, feels his heart sputter and collapse like a dying star. “I love you too, Mongoose. I’m gonna miss you so much.”

Morgan grabs at his nose the same way she always did as a baby, and that just makes it hurt more, because there was all of this time he had with her and he feels like he wasted it. He can remember the first time he held her, and that first night in the hospital after Pepper went to sleep, when he’d picked her up after she’d started to cry and promised her that he’d always be there for her no matter what.
“Petey cryin’?”

Peter sniffs. He pulls her closer and cradles her to his chest. “I’m okay, Morgie,” he whispers; and Morgan is just one of those kids who always gets quiet when other people are upset, who just wants to help and comfort.

She wraps her arms around his neck and buries her nose against his pulse point.

Pepper finds them like that a few minutes later. He’d been so out of it he hadn’t even heard the front door opening.

Her face falls when she sees them—sees him, with tears on his cheeks and what must be an utterly crestfallen look. In an instant she’s kicking off her heels and crawling in to lie beside him.

Peter tries to hold them both at the same time. He’s so scared. He doesn’t think he’s ever felt like this before; felt like this decision is the first domino laid down and everything after it will either result in a well-constructed trail or a toppling disaster. He’s come to a crux: stay, help Pepper with Morgan, make sure they’re safe.

Or leave. Live a little. Get a more STEM focused education with peers that will push him to be better. Honour Tony’s memory.

(Follow in his father’s footsteps.)

One path means bartering, the other acceptance.

Pepper’s fingers brush his cheeks, touches gentle and soothing. “You’re gonna do so good,” she whispers.

*I’m scared*, he thinks. *I’m tired. I’m leaving.*

Pepper kisses his forehead, and then Morgan’s. They stay like that until they all fall asleep.
“Which one is it again?”

“Burton Conner,” Peter says dully, eyes trained on his phone rather than on Happy. They’ve been driving around the campus for at least thirty minutes and rather than insult Happy’s pride by suggesting they use a map, he’s decided to ride it out as long as possible.

Getting out of the car is inevitable.

He’d still rather vomit.

For some reason he’s scrolling through Ned’s old Instagram photos. Peter isn’t sure why. Maybe it’s because they were supposed to come here together, be roommates, experience it all at the same time.

Instead Peter is all on his own.

“Ah, there it is. Big brown building.”

Peter forces himself to raise his head.

It really is just a big brown building; simple brickwork, grey trim. Nothing scary. It looks like a thousand other unremarkable apartment complexes from Brooklyn.

Peter’s stomach flips as Happy parks the car. He takes a deep breath as the older man gets out and rounds to the back where all of Peter’s stuff is.

“What, are you just gonna sit there, or are you gonna help me? C’mon, kid.”

Peter does as Happy asks, simply to have something to do other than worry. He carries as much as he can without garnering funny looks, which means about two boxes and his backpack. Happy shoulders his duffel and grabs a crate of scrap materials Peter had brought to work with in his down time.
The hardest part of all of this is going to be sneaking all of his high quality tech around his roommate. So far since Beck revealed his identity, he’s been living in a relative bubble; school (where everyone had mostly gotten over his superhero persona after a few months), the compound, and home.

Peter has close to no idea what the rest of the world thinks about him. Is his roommate gonna be weird about it? Ask for an autograph? Steal his socks?

Happy leads the way. They walk through halls crowded with new students. There are so many people talking and laughing and breathing and existing at once and all of the sound they make narrows to a monotonous roaring in his ears.

The dorm is on the third floor, around the first right corner. Peter fumbles for the keys they’d mailed to him, but when Happy tries the door, it’s already unlocked.

“Um.”

Peter leans inside. He knows it’s sort of Happy’s job to clear rooms for him, but his senses haven’t been triggered by anything so he figures it must mean his roommate has already arrived.

Only, he doesn’t see some regular looking teenager in the dorm.

“Rhodey?!”

Rhodey turns around with a wide smile. He’d been inspecting something left on one of the desks, but he drops it for now and just focuses on Peter, who sets his load down by the door and hugs the older man.

Over the past few years they’ve gotten a lot closer. Holiday visits, random dinners with Pepper and Morgan, and Rhodey’s occasional drop in at the compound mean they’re in each other’s orbits a lot. Sometimes Rhodey even trains with him, or brings him meatball subs when he thinks Peter’s been in the workshop too long without eating.

Morgan considers him an uncle, and though Peter is loathe to admit it out loud, he sort of does too.
Rhodey claps his back. “Hey, kiddo. Thought I’d stop by and check out your new digs, but there really isn’t much to learn about a place I lived in for four years.”

Peter blinks. “You mean…?”

Rhodey nods. “This was my dorm. Mine and Tony’s.”

Tony had lived here. He tries to picture it: a smaller Rhodey and another boy who in Peter’s head, looks sort of like him; a baby DUM-E and clothes strewn around the room and sunlight pouring through the windows. His uncle. His father. Their robot child.

“Okay, this place just went from boring to like, mildly cool.”

Rhodey laughs. “We had double twins instead of a bunk bed,” he remarks, scanning the room. There is indeed a bunk bed nestled in the left hand corner. One of the mattresses is bare and the other is covered in…

Spider-Man sheets.

“Oh my god.”

Rhodey hums. “You might want to set some ground rules with this, uh,” he grabs the notebook he’d been looking at when Peter came in, checks the name in the back, “Keener, Harley.”

“Do you think I should request a transfer?”

“I don’t know,” Rhodey shrugs, “Tony survived here for years without getting axed in his sleep, so I figure your odds are okay.”

Happy suddenly snorts. “Right,” he says, “this is all your stuff, kid, so I figure, uh…”

He glances at the door.
Peter’s heart sinks.

“Right,” he says. “Okay.”

Happy nods. His hands flex awkwardly at his sides and then, before Peter can even register what’s happening, he’s being pulled into a gruff embrace.

“Put ‘er there, kid.”

Peter pats Happy’s back.

He glimpses Rhodey grinning out of the corner of his eye.

Happy pulls back. Nods and sniffs. “You’ll be okay, right? And you’ll call if you need anything?”

“‘Course,” Peter says. “And you’ll actually pick up, right?”

“Ha ha.”

“I’m serious.”

(He’s not.)

Happy shakes his head. “God, you know, when I met you, you were like this tall,” he gestures vaguely at his waist, “just a tiny little tyke trailing after Tony…”

“Happy, are you gonna cry?”

He genuinely can’t tell if Happy’s really emotional or just mocking him, or maybe both, but Rhodey
saves him from having to endure any more. He pats Happy on the shoulder. “Alright, Mother Goose, it’s time to get a move on.”

Happy laughs, but it sounds more like a sob. He pulls out a handkerchief and dabs at his eyes. “Shit, I promised myself I wouldn’t.”

“I’ll be okay, Happy,” he assures the older man—who, like Rhodey, has grown on him. Sun-side facing, warm and familiar. Peter isn’t ready to let either of them go.

But he has to do this.

Happy nods. He steps closer to the door, looks back, and then seems to steel himself. “Be good. Don’t blow anything up.”

“I won’t.”

“And call Pepper!” He orders on his way out. “Let her know you got in safe!”

Rhodey chuckles. “He’s gone soft.”

“Yeah, well so have you,” Peter says. “Don’t think I didn’t see you crying when Morgan said your name for the first time.”

Rhodey scoffs. “Doesn’t sound like me.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

Rhodey grins. He tilts his head to appraise Peter. “I should probably get going too, kiddo. You got everything you need?”

Peter nods. He suddenly doesn’t feel like speaking, isn’t able to speak for how thick his throat feels and how tight his chest is.
“You sure you’re gonna be okay?”

It’s asked with such care, like Rhodey really will do everything in his power to make it okay if it’s not; like he’ll fly Peter out of here in a heartbeat if he asks, or march down to the Dean’s office to request a new room because Peter’s dorm mate is apparently Spider-Man obsessed. He is unquestionably, unwaveringly loyal, and not just to Peter but to Tony.

Peter hugs him.

“Look after them?”

Rhodey doesn’t hesitate. “Of course, Pete.”

He nods, chin trembling, eyes burning. “Thank you for coming, Rhodey.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” Rhodey leans back and smiles. “I’m here whenever you need, I promise. Nothing is too stupid or too beneath me, okay? I… we’re family, Pete.”

Family. Six letters. A heavy feeling in his stomach. A tear streaking down his cheek that cools rapidly in the air conditioned room.

He had thought, for a little while, that he’d never know what that was like again.

After the Snap, drifting aimlessly in a sea of stars, he’d thought he’d just get swallowed up into the oblivion and there would be no one left to even remember his name.

Rhodey chucks his chin. His expression is fond, caring. “Don’t be a stranger, little man.”

“Bye, Rhodey.”
It takes him about an hour to get all of his things situated. He almost starts crying again when he finds that inside his duffel bag, Morgan had somehow managed to stash both Tooty and Mr Squircles.

Peter carefully avoids touching any of his roommate’s belongings, but it seems like everything has been divided up fairly; half the dresser and closet are empty, only one poster has been put up—again, Spider-Man themed—and his desk has been left alone.

So Peter reclines on the chair in front of it and dials home.

“Hi, you’ve reached the Parker-Potts residence, I’m afraid we’re unavailable at the moment, but if you leave us a message we’ll get back to you as soon as possible.”

He thinks about hanging up and just calling her cell phone, but he’s always tried to avoid that when possible for fear of interrupting important meetings.

“Hi, it’s me. I’m um, settled in and stuff. Haven’t met my roommate yet, but I already have so many questions for him. I’ll keep you updated. I miss you guys already. Tell the Mongoose to stay out of trouble. Bye.”

Peter sets his phone down. Stands up and paces the length of the room. Classes don’t start until the day after tomorrow and he doesn’t know his way around Cambridge at all. He could try going out on patrol anyway, but something about the idea makes his stomach roll.

Besides, Pepper had said to try and lay off of Spider Man while he was in college. Not only did she want his grades to avoid suffering, but she didn’t want people figuring out where he was attending college and then giving him a hard time.

Peter figures the latter is sort of inevitable anyway, now, what with the MIT Mystery Man being such a big fan and all.

He drifts over to the desk and flips open the notebook, unable to suppress his curiosity. He’s only looking for the name, because it’s slipped his mind already; but the countless pages and pages of complex equations and theorems catch his eye.
They look…

They look remarkably like what he’s been working on.

Peter’s blood freezes as he reads the notes in the margins.

This is his research. Well, not his, exactly, but more or less what he’s been toying around with for a good year and a half. Some of the formulas are more advanced, while others are behind what Peter has come up with.

“Harley Keener,” he reads softly, squinting down at the chicken-scratch handwriting on the page.

“I’m your Huckleberry.”

Peter rounds at the sound of a new voice. In the doorway of the dorm room, a boy is leaning against the jamb. He’s tall—at least six feet—ruffled, and reedy. His hands are tucked into his pockets and there’s a grin on his face that could be construed as either dangerous or lazy, depending on the angle. He’s wearing a t-shirt bearing a graphic of Iron Man’s face plate, but it’s so worn out, faded, and full of holes, Peter can barely tell what he’s looking at.

“So you’re Tony’s other kid.”

“I—what?”
Harley Keener might just be the best thing that’s ever happened to him.

Okay, maybe not the best, but he definitely scores in the top ten.

It turns out he’s not actually a creepy fanboy, nor another secret long lost son of Tony Stark. He’d bought all the Spider-Man merchandise on discount at a K-Mart the day before just to fuck with Peter—and naturally, he’d hacked into MIT’s servers and switched out his assigned roommate, Yin Su, for Peter.

Peter doesn’t know what to be more offended by: the hacking or the fact that his (apparently existent) merchandise is being sold half price.

Harley laughs a lot. That’s the first thing Peter really learns about him. It’s not a quiet sort of laugh, either; it’s loud and borderline maniacal, a full-body experience with knee slaps and everything.

After five minutes in his company, Peter wonders if someone slipped acid into his soda.

Harley moves around the room as he speaks. One second he’s on the edge of the desk, the next spinning in the chair, then climbing onto Peter’s bunk to inspect the pictures on the wall while he rambles.

Harley tells him about the Mandarin. About how Tony Stark broke into his garage and demanded a tuna sandwich, about how they both almost died together and all the ways that Harley helped him. He’s not bragging. In fact, he sounds broken beneath his smile, like he knows no matter what he did it didn’t matter in the end because, is Tony here now?

Peter barely gets a word in edgewise. He just listens, not even realising he’s grinning until his cheeks start to hurt a little.
“So anyway,” Harley slides off the bed, “wanna check out the city with me? I’m feeling pizza. No, cheeseburgers. Fuck, I don’t know. How bout you?”

Peter blinks. “Uh, pizza I guess?”

Harley may be chaotic in all other forms, but he eats like a gentleman. It’s a weird contrast. Peter figures it must be one of those weird Southern folk rules: you can talk as much trash if you want so long as you don’t look like you’re shoveling it in when you eat.

They sit in the back corner of a greasy deep-dish pizza joint that doesn’t compare to anything New York has to offer (it’s actually really good, but his I’m a Queens Boy! coding prevents any other output response).

“So what about you?” Harley asks. “I mean, I know a little, I guess—mostly just what everyone else does.”

“Yeah?”

“Straight A student,” Harley lists off, “lost your parents to a plane crash—they were geneticists, right? What a fuckin’ shame—then you went all Arachne Rules and started fightin’ crime.”

Peter grins. “Sort of.”

“You were in Germany, right? When shit hit the fan with Tony and Uncle Sam?”

“Uh, yeah. It wasn’t like, an epic fight or anything though.”

“No?”

He shrugs. “I always figured it could’ve been a lot worse if everyone hadn’t been holding back so
much. But Rhodey—Colonel Rhodes—he took a really bad hit. That was after Tony tapped me out.”

Harley shakes his head. “I burned like, every Captain America comic I had after that shit.”

“That’s petty as fuck.”

Harley laughs. “I didn’t want that war criminal propaganda around my sister.”

“You have a sister?”

He nods. “Ariel. She’s twelve. What about you? Any family?”

“I… yeah. I mean, I lost a lot of them before the Snap, and then after there was just… no one. It was just me. But Pepper Potts took me in and—”

“Hold up,” Harley shakes his head as if to clear it, “you’re telling me you live with the Pepper Potts? As in, the CEO of the world’s largest tech conglomerate? As in Tony Stark’s fiancé?”

Peter nods. “She’s really nice.”

“You… oh my god. I was seriously unprepared for how whack your life would be.”

“It’s not that weird,” Peter laughs. “Besides, I’m going to college. That’s normal, right?”

“With your line of work? Absolutely not.”

Peter grins. They keep talking, about anything and everything: what it was like to intern with Tony, how the world has changed since the Snap, who they lost.

Harley, it turns out, had been orphaned by Thanos. He’d only had his mom left and he’d run to the
diner where she worked to find a pile of dust behind the counter. “There’s this old lady on Maple, lets me and Ariel stay with her if we plow her fields once a week,” he tells Peter, when he asks about how they get by.

“You should’ve come to us,” Peter finds himself saying as they walk side by side through the city. It’s strange, finally meeting someone who he could’ve known a long time ago, who could’ve become family by now if different decisions were made. “Pepper would’ve been happy to look after you and Ariel too.”

“I thought about it, actually, but I wasn’t really sure where to go or how to get there. Plus I was worried she wouldn’t believe me.”

Peter hums.

“You believe me, right?”

“What? Of course. There’s absolutely no doubt in my mind that you’re not just a stalker with a really good story—"

Harley laughs again, the toss back his head kind. “Shut up, man.”

The next day passes by like that. They get to know each other, walk around the campus to scout out private study spots, and talk about Tony like he’s not dead.

For a little while, Peter is so distracted he forgets to be sad. He forgets to miss home.

The first couple of months fly by. Peter goes from class to class, taking notes on thermonuclear physics and differential calculus and everything in-between. In the evenings, he and Harley either stay in or go out, but rarely split to do their own thing. Peter knows they’re both sort of clinging to each other. It’s the same thing he and MJ had done after the Snap; held on to the one thing they could rely on, the most solid and tangible person around.

Pepper calls, of course, and asks him about how things are going. He always answers fine, even on
bad days; the ones where he doesn’t want to get out of bed because his chest is all heavy like sometime during the night the grief just decided to sit there and stay.

It’s better when she puts Morgan on the phone, though. Peter will curl up and listen to her blabber on about things that only make a little sense, like how she tried an apple’s best friend—a pear, Pepper explains when he asks—and had to put Mrs Fluffy in time out after she sat on Popper the Blue Bear. He feels like he’s getting the secondhand scoop on a gossip column.

Here and there, Happy makes the drive up. They grab coffee from one of the campus vendors and talk about things without real substance.

MJ is the hardest part, but a part he’s not willing to give up on.

They call each other. Not every day, but as many times a week as they can fit. It’s sporadic rather than scheduled because he’d read that can make people feel like a burden, or subconsciously make them push more urgent matters aside for the sake of their significant other.

So he’ll dial her number when it feels right. Lying on his back on the quad, leaves of grass pressing against his spine.

“I just watched someone throw a rat out of a window,” he tells her, before she can even say hi.

And he’s met with a laugh, which is exactly what he’s hoping for. “Dead or alive?”

“Dead, but I think it got resurrected halfway down because I swear to god I saw it running away. Or maybe that was just its spirit leaving its body.”

MJ snorts. “What are you doing?”

“Missing you. Horribly. I ache.”

“Woe for you.”
He smiles. “What about you?”

“Studying how to utilise my creative capacities to service people with emotional and mental disabilities,” she replies breezily.

It’s so her. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. I’m switching my major from art to psych. I think. I’ll like, minor in art or whatever. But the shit I’m reading about… I wanna do it. Help people.”

“I think you’ll be amazing at it.”

There’s a small silence, but it’s soft, not abrupt. “It’s funny,” she says, “I never realise how much I miss you until I’m talking to you.”

Peter closes his eyes. He tries to imagine being with her, holed up in the back of a library, filtering out the sounds of the city and pencil on paper and turning pages.

“I love you.”

“I know,” she says, smiling in tone.

“I’m not even upset you didn’t say it back. That’s actually the superior response. Fuck ‘I love you, too’, only quote Star Wars to me.”

“Nerfherder.”

Peter grins. “Who’s scruffy lookin’?”

MJ laughs. He wishes he could really hear it, be in the same room as her so he could feel it too, filling up all the empty space around them, sewing the open seams of his heart back together.
“I should probably go,” she tells him. “Send me a meme before bedtime.”

“Dank or deep fried?”

“Both.”

On Halloween, Harley convinces Peter to go to a party.

They’ve never been his scene, but he figures he went to college to try and step outside his comfort zone, so the least he can do is pop in for a few minutes.

Harley goes as Iron Man. The most suspicious thing about it is the realism of the suit. It’s not pieces of clunky red and gold plastic strapped on with Velcro, it’s… form fitting. Almost functional looking.

Harley notices him squinting as they approach the house where the party is being held. It’s way off of campus, but Peter doesn’t plan on staying very long anyway, so he’s not all that worried about getting back.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re staring.”

“No I’m not.”

“You are.”

“No I’m not. Hey, random question, totally unrelated, but did you make your costume yourself?”
Harley is blushing. It’s dark, so it’s hard to tell, but Peter can see the way his cheeks flush. “Maybe.”

And that, somehow, ends the discussion.

The minute Peter walks inside the house he regrets it. Not only is it just loud, with blaring music that rattles the walls and actually somehow makes him nauseous, but it smells overwhelmingly of smoke and spilt beer and weed.

“Nope,” Peter says, and makes to turn around.

Harley laughs. “Dude, come on. You don’t have to drink or whatever, but we’re here to stretch our limits, right?”

Peter scowls. “Right.”

“Your costume is dope—”

“It’s not a costume, it’s an actual suit, and it was your dumbass idea—”

“There’s girls—”

“I’m already dating someone, you know this—”

“and we can dip out as soon as we mingle a little, okay? Just stick with me while we establish ourselves as like, cool people.”

“This is college Harley, not high school. No one actually cares if you’re a hermit or a socialite.”

It turns out, they actually do; or at least, they do where Spider Man is concerned. Peter doesn’t know how, but at some point he’s established as the life of the party without actually doing much at all. At another point, Harley is swallowed up by a sea of bodies and Peter starts to panic.
Someone notices. Thrusts a drink in his hand.

Peter, like an idiot, drinks it.

Then everyone is handing him drinks. It turns into a game of how many beers does it take to get Spider Man drunk and how long can Peter Parker do a keg stand for and can you still do backflips while wasted?!

He doesn’t know why he goes along with it. Maybe he’s just scared, or feeling particularly reckless and stupid, but he surrenders himself to the flow of the party, lets the mood act as a momentum. He does two keg stands for ten minutes straight, twelve back flips before he trips over the coffee table and shatters a bottle of wine, and he can’t find Harley anywhere, all of the bodies have been multiplied by two, the world is fuzzy and spinning and he has to throw up.

Peter ends up on his knees in the bathroom, vision whitening out as his stomach lurches and he vomits into the toilet bowl.

The alcohol burns as much as it did going down, coming back up again. Peter groans and sags against the cool porcelain surface, not caring how gross it is because he already feels so much worse. He’s pretty sure he’s sweating straight vodka.

His thoughts are stringy, thin. He feels cold and hot at the same time. Throwing up again offers very little clarity or relief.

Peter falls back against the wall. It’s covered in floral wall paper and peeling at the corners. He picks at it. There’s nothing but dark, rotted wood beneath the paper.

Something tickles his jaw.

Peter wipes the tear away dazedly, face scrunched up in confusion. And then like an avalanche it all just comes pouring out of him. He doubles over, clutching his churning stomach and retching and falling, falling, falling into the darkness.

He doesn’t remember fishing his phone out of his pocket, doesn’t even know what number he’s
dialing until Rhodey picks up the phone.

“Peter? Is something wrong?”

_You can call me for anything. We’re family._

“I… I’m…” he sniffs. Sucks in a shaky breath. “I don’t… I’m really drunk, Rhodey.” He sobs. “I can’t find Harley and I don’t know how to get back home and there’s just—there’s just _bad stuff_ underneath the wallpaper, Rhodey. It’s all rotted and bad and I keep trying to hide it but I _can’t anymore._”

“Oh, Pete.” Rhodey’s voice is soft and sad on the other line. “Okay. Can you do me a favour and sit tight for me? I can be there in like, thirty minutes with the suit, you just gotta hang on.”

“Okay,” Peter agrees weakly. He wipes his face with both hands, wonders why he can’t hear Rhodey anymore, and then realises he’d dropped his phone into his lap. “Rhodey?”

“Yeah, kiddo?”

“I’m really, really _sorry._”

“That’s okay, Pete,” Rhodey says, even though it’s not. “I’m gonna be right there, I promise.”

Thirty minutes feels like forever, Peter decides. He stays, though, and aside from a few knocks on the door no one bothers him.

Peter crawls into the bathtub. He pulls the curtain and rests his cheek against the cold tile wall, drawing patterns in the leftover droplets of water from the last time the shower was used.

A knock makes Peter jump. Just like the other times, he doesn’t answer. They always go away when he doesn’t answer.
“Peter? It’s Rhodey.”

Peter lifts his head. The distance between him and the door is a thousand miles. He flicks his wrist, shoots a web. It misses, so he tries again, and yanks the doorknob right off from the bathtub.

He probably shouldn’t have done that. Oh well.

Rhodey doesn’t even seem to notice it. He just rushes inside and the minute Peter sees him, a familiar face, a person who means home, he starts to cry again.

Rhodey kneels beside the tub. “Kid,” he whispers, sounding just the way Peter feels, “hey, it’s me.”

Peter knows. He knows that. He grabs Rhodey and wraps his arms around him, clinging for dear life. “I’m not okay, Rhodey,” he sobs. “I’m not okay.”

Rhodey holds him. He’s warm and solid and real, and Peter isn’t drifting anymore at least, isn’t orbiting without equilibrium. His heart is wide open and gaping and the black sadness is seeping out with every beat, flooding his veins, but he’s here.

“Alright,” Rhodey says. “We’re gonna get you home.”

At some point, Harley is just there.

He’s not even drunk and all that comes out of his mouth are apologies when he sees Peter’s state, intoxicated out of his mind and leaning on Rhodey just to walk, but Rhodey shushes them both and takes them back to the dorm.

Peter somehow ends up in his bed. The suit is taken off, and he has vague memories of struggling to press in the spider emblem until Rhodey does it for him. He helps him into a ratty old Star Wars shirt that Peter keeps in the back of his drawers but never wears—his first ever gift from Ned.
It makes Peter start crying again, and drunkenly he claws at it, shaking his head and blubbering about how he can’t wear it, he doesn’t deserve to, it makes him too sad.

Rhodey doesn’t understand what he’s saying. He doesn’t understand how the fabric sears his skin and all the memories just come flooding back: building Legos in the empty band room and buying an extra sub for the homeless guy outside and *Ned, Ned*, it should be Ned, it should be him, it should be —

Tony.

It should be Tony here, Tony rubbing soothing circles into his back while he vomits into a trash can, Tony promising him that everything is gonna be okay, Tony pushing his hair from his eyes and calming him with gentle touches.

*(Dad, it should be Dad.)*

It falls out of him: that earnest, gut-wrenching thought, it should be Tony; *I want Tony*, he sobs into the crook of Rhodey’s neck, while Harley hovers in the doorway and doesn’t even exist to Peter because all he can feel is the burning, the fire he always stamps out when he’s aware, awake. Being drunk is like being asleep: the bad things have caught up to him now and their vicious grip draws forth all of the clotted grief, cutting and slicing and reducing him to a being without structure, a nebulous collection of atoms with no real shape.

Dust.

Reducing him to *dust*.

Peter vomits.

In the morning, Peter wakes to the sound of his ringtone.

He groans, low and long, and stretches his hand out for his phone. He finally finds it resting against the bedside table—which means he’s on the bottom bunk rather than the top, in Harley’s bed.
Peter doesn’t give himself the time to question that. He answers his phone without even looking to see who it is.

“’Ello?”

The first thing he hears is a sigh.

“Oh, hey, Pep.”

“You went to a party last night.”

He remembers that. Peter pinches his brow while his head throbs painfully, coupled with sharp stabbing pains between his eyes. “Yeah.”

“You got drunk.”

“Mnhmm.” He breathes out through his nose. Everything aches. As he moves, his bones scrape together. His muscles feel dead, his insides congealed goop.

“There are videos.”

Oh. Oh, of course.

“Fuck.”

“There it is.”

“Shit, Pepper, I—”
“I’ll be honest with you, I expected something like this to happen at some point, but I thought: hey, maybe he’ll at least have the sense to not wear the suit, you know? Maybe that way it would be easier to deny that yes, that’s my idiot son doing a keg stand at a college rave, who also happens to double time as a damn Avenger—I mean, god, would you want someone like that saving the world for you? Do you really expect people to take you seriously when you pull stunts like this? Hello? Peter?”

He has a hard time answering or forming any coherent thoughts at all; his migraine throbs to the beat of my idiot son, my idiot son, my idiot son.

“Uh.”

“Is that all you have to say?”

“Um, no, but—” he grunts as he sits up in bed. “Shit, Pep, I’m really sorry. Like, seriously. I wasn’t thinking and I know it was stupid and I just… I just wanted to forget for a while but all it did was make me remember more.”

Pepper falls silent. He closes his eyes to the sound of her breathing.

“Rhodey told me.”

Peter frowns. “Rhodey was here?”

“You don’t remember? You called him from the party and he came and picked you up.”

A surge of guilt rents his chest. “Oh.”

“He said you were… pretty upset.”

“I guess I must’ve been.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”
All of the anger is gone from her voice now. She just sounds run down and sorry. “No,” he says, because he doesn’t; what he wants is to be with her, curled up on the couch, safe and at home. “No, I’m... I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay.”

“I mean for all of it. For being an idiot.”


“Not you.”

“Yes, me.”


“You’re trying to flatter me.”

“Yes. Is it working?”

Pepper laughs. “You’re lucky you’re funny, or you’d be in for a world of hurt.”

“Believe me, I hurt.”

“Did you take Tylenol?”

“No, I only just woke up when you called me.”

“Oh, shit, I’m sorry, kiddo,” Pepper says. “You should try to sleep a little more.”
“No, that’s okay, I have—god, what time is it?”

“Noon.”

“Ah. I missed my classes, then.”

“You’re definitely making a good case in your defense, here.”

Peter’s lips quirk up. He rolls over because it feels easier to exist that way. “Is it bad? Am I all over the news? Is the media tearing me apart?”

“Mostly, but I’m working on damage control—and before you say it, no, I won’t stop, because it’s my job to protect you so don’t hit me with some martyr speech about how you should suffer the consequences of your actions in silence—”

“Pepper—”

“You happen to be very important to a lot of people—”

“Pepper—”

“And—what?”

“I really, really miss you.”

Pepper sighs again, but it isn’t meant to cut. “I would say come home, but it’s Monday.”

“Maybe I’ll come home anyway. I mean, really, who needs college? I’ll just drop out and live with you until I’m thirty.”
“Then you’ll be staying in the basement.”

“We don’t have a basement.”

“Actually we do, seeing as I own the building we live in.”

“You mean I could have that entire basement to myself?”

Pepper laughs. “Okay, I have a thousand other calls to make before the sun goes down. Do me a favour and take a nap, alright? And call me if you need anything else.”

“I do need something else,” Peter says. “I need a hug from Morgan. I’m in withdrawal, Pepper, it’s really bad—”

“Do you know, I didn’t want to tell you because I didn’t want you to feel guilty, but god Peter, she misses you so much.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. She was throwing tantrums for weeks, asking where you were, when you’d be back, why she couldn’t see you. I think she has some withdrawal of her own.”

Peter closes his eyes, but a tear still seeps through the cracks anyway. “It’s separation anxiety,” he tells her. “I read about it in the baby books. Toddlers her age can have it really bad.”

“Should I tell her you say hi?”

“Yes, please. And also tell her Tooty is pregnant and she can expect a Sea Bear by Christmas.”

“Am I supposed to know what that means?”
The door to the dorm opens just then. “I sincerely hope not,” Peter says, “I gotta go, Harley is back. Love you.”

Pepper calls a quick goodbye before he hangs up the phone. Harley shuffles around the corner carrying a brown paper bag and his notebook. “You’re up,” he observes, with a satisfied nod. “Good.”

Peter immediately stiffens at his curt tone. “My head begs to differ,” he says, hoping Harley isn’t like, pissed he passed out in his bed or something.

But no. Harley is all business. He dumps out the contents of his bag and tosses Peter a bottle of generic pain reliever, some sort of protein bar, and an orange juice. “Rhodes said to get that stuff for you. He had to leave early this morning for some emergency conference in DC.”

Peter nods slowly.

Harley grabs the desk chair, flips it around, and perches by Peter’s bedside.

“You said something last night that I can’t get out of my head.”

“Oh, dude, I was drunk. Like, if I said something rude or pissed you off or—”

“No, no,” Harley waves him off, “it was nothing like that. I… when Rhodes was trying to help you, you said… you said you wanted Tony.”

Peter’s face heats up. “Oh.” He picks at the sheets. “I, um—”

“I get it. Like, I really do. Which is why I think it’s time we cut the bullshit.”

Peter stills. He raises his eyes, slowly. “Bullshit?”

He attempts for a confused, nonchalant tone, but his voice comes out flat.
Harley nods. “You saw what was in here on the first day of term. You know what I’ve been working on. And I—I know about that flash drive you keep in your pocket.”

“You looked through it?”

“Only by accident,” Harley scrambles to explain. “You left it sitting out one time and I thought it was mine, and I needed somewhere to store my essay for Psych, so I… anyway, I saw. Yeah.”

Peter purses his lips. “How much?”

“Too much.”

Too much to forget. Too much to let it go.

Peter knows the feeling. Some of Harley’s diagrams have been branded on the back of his mind for months.

“So what are you saying?”

“I’m saying,” Harley tosses him the notebook, “we get to work.”

Peter takes the stairs instead of the elevator just to give himself more time to think. He’s been doing that a lot more lately; thinking, zoning out in class, because now his ideas actually have a place to go. Now they’re worth something.

He’d taken an early flight back from Massachusetts and hailed a taxi to the apartment complex. He’s not supposed to get home until tomorrow night as far as Pepper knows, so he takes his time.

Only, when he gets to their hall on the seventh floor, he finds Natasha Romanoff waiting by the door.
She’s dressed all in black and shouldering a duffel. There’s a gun holster around her waist.

“Oh no.”

Nat glances over and raises her eyebrow above the frames of her sunglasses. “You’re late.”

“I’m early,” Peter corrects. “Extremely early. And I don’t see you.”

“Really? I thought I was being very visible.”

Peter sighs. He can’t help hugging her, because it’s been months and he missed her like crazy. But god, he doesn’t want to go on some mission. He just wants to walk into the apartment and surprise Pepper, hug Morgan, bake cookies and watch old holiday movies.

“Go inside. Get your gear, we’ve got places to be.”

“But it’s Christmas,” Peter whines. “Besides, if Pepper sees me she’s gonna want me to stay—”

“Pepper isn’t home. She’s at the tower.”

“The tower?”

“She didn’t tell you? She re-purchased it last month. She’s busy with restorations right now.”

“Mongoose is with her?”

Nat smiles softly. “I know you miss them. I’m sorry, Peter, but this is important.”

“People could die, important?”
“A lot of people.”

Peter sighs. That trumps an extra night home and they both know it. “Okay,” he agrees, fishing his keys out of his pocket. “Okay, fine. But this is my present to you, got it?”

Nat smirks and follows him inside. He’s not sure if she’s ever been here before. He knows she’s never been invited, at least not by him, but he wouldn’t be surprised if she’s snooped around a bit anyway. She at least had to have climbed into his room through the fire escape to give him his graduation present.

Peter’s emergency duffel is under his bed. He pulls it out, rifling through it quickly to transfer a few things from his backpack and make sure he has everything.

“You good?”

“Yeah, I think so. Just how dangerous is this gonna be, exactly?”

“Very.”

She grins while she says it, which is never a good sign.

Sixteen hours later, Peter decides he absolutely hates Barcelona.

He’s sure that, given different circumstances, he wouldn’t quite feel that way—but after getting shot at in a moving car, stabbed in the shoulder, and getting roundhoused in the ribs so hard he’d heard it crack, he decides it’s definitely the worst city in the world.

He doesn’t even have time to appreciate the view.

Casa Batlló, on the other hand, he gets to know intimately well.
It’s one of the strangest buildings he’s ever been inside of; colourful tile mosaics pressed into the walls, stained glass windows and polished wooden floors, all rounded edges and skeletal in structure. The place feels alive.

But it won’t be if the Molina family succeeds in blowing it to bits.

According to Nat, they’re mafia. The head of the rival Torres family had somehow managed to rent out the building for a party to celebrate his retirement and *every single one* of their bloodline is in attendance. Supposedly there’s a bomb somewhere in the building, along with over two hundred people and really, *really* tasty hors d’oeuvres.

So he’d put on the perfectly tailored suit she’d given him, ignored his demands on how she’d managed to get his measurements, and now he’s creeping down a narrow white hallway to a closed off space, trailing after the only dude at the party who’d managed to seriously trigger his spidey senses—though almost everyone had given him a weird feeling, which is sort of disturbing actually.

Nat’s voice comes through the comms. “Peter.”

“Yes?” He replies, voice low.

“We have a problem.”

He leans his head around a corner and watches the man he’s following slip into a room. “What’s that?”

“Company.”

He’s barely paying attention to what she’s saying, pulling his gun from where he’d hidden it behind his suit jacket and rolling up his sleeves to expose his web shooters, just in case.

“What kind of company?”
“A hit man.”

Peter freezes. “A what.”

“Well, woman,” Nat corrects. “Where are you, anyway?”

“Oh, following a lead,” he says awkwardly. “Basement. I’ll cover this, you do the hit man. Or woman. Or whatever.”

“Oh it.”

He doesn’t even process the fact that he just gave Nat an order, like he has any right to do that at all. It doesn’t compute, but Peter is too preoccupied to dwell on it.

He tries the door, gently, quietly, and finds it locked.

Peter leans against it to listen. He hears nothing until the familiar sound of a cocking gun causes his ears to perk.

He barely jumps out of the way in time to avoid the bullet. Peter ducks, stays low, and rams his uninjured shoulder into the thin, brown door.

It gives.

Inside it’s not nearly as awe-inspiring as the rest of the place; just a plain looking room that houses the ventilation systems, which is obviously a new addition given the age of the building.

Peter side steps to avoid another gunshot and then flips, landing on the ceiling. The bad guy obviously doesn’t expect him to start crawling toward him from above. His jaw drops. “El Diablo!”

Figures.
Peter swoops down and kicks him in the face as he arcs. The gun goes flying and so does the guy.

He’s bleeding from his broken nose and he grins up at Peter deliriously. “*llegas muy tarde,*” he mutters. “*Gustavo arderá en el infierno por lo que le hizo a mi padre.*”

“Cute story,” Peter says dryly, dropping down next to the gun. He shoots a web at the guy to keep him pinned to the wall.

And then he freezes.

*Too late.*

*Burn in Hell.*

*Ventilation room.*

*Explosive device.*

“Oh, shit.” He taps his ear piece. “Nat, we got a problem.”

“Oh, yeah,” she replies, out of breath, “we have more than one, clearly.”

“I think the bomb has already been planted.”

“Yeah? Where?”

“The vents.”

Nat is silent for a moment. When she speaks next, her voice is strained. “Any particular reason why?”
He tells her, and he knows the logic is sound. The Molina son had clearly been here to guard the room until the building went up, and he’s so delusional he’d clearly been willing to go up with it.

“I’m going in.”

“Peter, no. If you’re in the vents when it goes off, there’s no way you’ll survive.”

“There is if I turn off the air conditioning,” Peter says. “That’ll help contain the explosion, too. Then I can find the bomb and dismantle it—”

“You don’t even know how to do that—”

“I can look it up!” Peter argues. “I have to do this.”

“You don’t—”

For the first time ever, Peter turns off his comms. There’s a lever on the wall that reads, in Spanish, for emergency shut downs. Peter pulls that.

He crawls back onto the ceiling, yanking the grate away and hauling himself into the tight, three-by-three metallic crawl space. “Possible fiery explosion and death? Sounds fun! Here I come.”

Natasha Romanoff can’t remember the last time she was this furious. First, she’d actually managed to get disarmed (if only momentarily) by the hit-woman; second, she’d ripped her Givenchy dress; and third, her idiot partner had turned off his comms.

The cool night air whips around her as she moves. Nat ducks, rolls, and wraps her legs around her attacker’s neck as she twists her body and shifts their momentum downward.

They fall in a heap on the rooftop. Nat presses her knee into the woman’s back to hold her down.
“Who are you here for?”

A grunt. A twitch. And then a surprisingly strong upward thrust. Nat is thrown into the skylight windows. Below her, at the bottom of the atrium, there are people mingling in expensive formal wear and sipping champagne. *Looks fun,* Nat thinks wistfully, and rolls out of the way just in time to avoid getting shot.

The glass shatters. Below, people scream.

“You just had to ruin the party,” Nat says.

Two punches, to the jaw, to the chin. A kick between the legs. A tackle, resistance, defeat.

Nat stands up, admiring her work with the zip-tie.

She aims her gun at the hit woman’s head. “Who are you?”

“No me conoces? Eso es gracioso. Te conozco, Natasha Romanoff.”

“De qué hablas?”

“Te Olvidaste tan pronto? Tu viejo amigo? Estoy aquí por él. Ya viene.”

The marrow in her bones freezes. Barton. *Clint.* He’s coming, just like a part of her had hoped all along. And this woman is here to kill him.

Why? What the hell has he been getting himself into?

Nat doesn’t even consider it. *Red on my ledger,* she thinks, as she pulls the trigger.

*I still got your back. You got mine?*
She doesn’t have time to dwell on it. Nat steps away from the body. In the distance, sirens are wailing. Someone must have called the police. Nat leans over the edge and sees that people are evacuating, flooding from the building in a sea of velvet and satin and tulle. That’s good.

Her comm buzzes. “So, update on the bomb.”

“Peter Parker I swear to god if you ever cut me off like that again, I will do horrible things to you.”

“Yeah, I know. Believe me, I’m never gonna sleep soundly after this is over. Anyway, I found it. Did you know that air ducts have like, rooms? I seriously wasn’t expecting that and I got so excited when I found the first one—”

“Peter.”

“Right. Emergency. So we have five minutes until we all blow up.”

Nat feels herself start to sweat. She marches over to the stairwell. “What are you doing about that?”

“I’m watching a YouTube video on how to dismantle bombs and no doubt getting myself flagged by the FBI.”

Nat takes a deep breath. Then another. She grips the rail and pulls her dress up as she hurries down the stairwell. “How long is the video?”

“...Seven minutes.”

“Your math isn’t exactly adding up here, Petya.”

“I’m skimming.”

“Did you check for an off button?”
“Uh, no, because this is real life and not a Jason Bourne movie.”

“What kind of explosives are we looking at?”

“Like, serval things of C-4. A substantial amount, actually.”

A substantial amount, near her kid. It’s unacceptable. Nat moves as fast as she can, ignoring the shrill, panicked screams that ring out around her, pushing her way through the crowd.

“Any progress?”

“No.” Peter takes a deep breath. “Hey Nat, do me a favour and get out of here?”

“Peter—”

“Get out and tell Pepper and Morgan that I love them and that I’m sorry—”

“Peter, I’m coming, just hold on—”

But she knows she won’t get there in time. They’re down to two minutes now and it’ll take her that long just to reach the basement.

“Hey, random question, totally unrelated: what’s the Spanish word for ‘off’?”


“Ah. So. Fun fact: I was right, the bomb has an off switch—”

“Peter.” Nat just falls. She lands roughly on a stair, hand braced against the wall, trying to regain
control of her breathing. That’s not something she should be having so much trouble with but fuck if this kid hasn’t done a number on her. “I’m gonna kill you.”

“And just when I was sure I’d live through tonight.”

His airy sarcasm can’t hide the way his voice shakes.

“Meet me outside.”

For whatever reason, they wind up at a bar.

“Scotch on the rocks and a beer for my lady friend,” Nat tells the guy behind the counter. She hasn’t actually said a word to Peter since he found her in an alley across the street.

“I’m only nineteen, Nat.”

“It’s Barcelona, baby. Legal drinking age here is sixteen, and we almost died tonight, so mazel tov.”

“I’d still rather not, I mean—”

He’s about to say, _May will kill me_, but the words die on his tongue. Nat doesn’t notice him flounder, or if she does she doesn’t comment on it.

“It’s one beer, it won’t hurt you, Princess. Hell, I doubt it’ll even affect you with the metabolism you’ve got.”

It won’t. He knows that, because he’d just performed this experiment like two months ago. But his eyes narrow. “You don’t know that. I’ve never even had a drink before.”

“Well that’s just sad.”
“This feels a lot like peer pressure.”

“That would be true if I were your peer, but I’m not.”

“Ahh, so it’s adult pressure.”

“Mother wit.”

“Excuse me?”

Nat waves him off and accepts the drinks from the bartender. She raises her eyebrows at him challengingly.

He takes the beer, because he’s already been laid down with lady friend, baby, and princess in the space of two minutes flat.

“So what happened?” He asks, after a small beat pause. “With the hit woman, I mean.”

Nat stiffens. Her eyes glaze over and turn faraway. “I was hoping you wouldn’t ask about that.”

“It didn’t go well, then.”

“It went about as bad as bad goes.”

Peter nods. He sips his drink because he has nothing better to do. “Why?”

“She said she knew Clint. Said she was after him.”

“Really?”
“Yeah. But she was lying.”

Peter glances at her. “How can you be so sure?”

“Years of training?” Nat sighs bitterly. “I’m almost certain.”

“But you killed her anyway?”

“I did say almost.”

He looks away. Realises he’s been slowly thumbing the label off of his bottle. Shifts awkwardly and then takes another sip.

“Give me that.” Nat grabs his beer abruptly, so he responds by taking her whiskey and downing the rest of it with only a little bit of wincing.

“I thought you said you’d never drunk before.”

“Oh? Did you believe me?” Peter raises an eyebrow and smiles. “Guess that means I’m getting better at fooling you.”

Nat snorts. "Or it’s just easy to believe.”

“You’re supposed to be a human lie detector. I’m so disappointed.”

She laughs and leans over to rest her head on his shoulder. Peter leans against her, too. “I’m sorry. For freaking you out earlier, I mean. And for trying to go solo.”

“Good, you should be. I’ll kick your ass if you ever pull that shit again, you hear?”
“Yeah.”

After that, the one beer turns into three, and then five, and then two of Nat’s drinks he only downs because she lets him. By the end of the night, they’re standing on top of the bar and the karaoke machine is blasting Spanish covers of Christmas songs they don’t know, but they sing along anyways.

They’re still singing as they stumble onto the street, leaving the raucous bar in their wake. Nat pulls him along, or maybe he pulls her. He’s too drunk to tell.

They pass a squat little shop with a glass storefront and Peter halts in his tracks. “Oh my god, I know what I wanna do.”

“No,” Nat says firmly. “No way.”

“C’mon,” he whines, “we need to commemorate our crazy night. I’m just wasted enough to do this. If I don’t now I never will.”

Nat shakes her head. “There’s absolutely—” she hiccups a little, “no way I’m letting this happen.”

“Not even,” he wanders over to the shop window and draws a symbol against the frosted pane, “if I get this?”

Her face softens. “Petya.”

He wants to do it, because he’s kicked and saved his ass too many times for it to go unnoticed, and if Morgan is his little sister, then she is his elder one. He’s stronger because of her, tougher because of her. He wants to remember where all of that came from, who taught him everything he’s learned these past three years.

Nat is blinking back tears and he’s pretty sure he just said all that out loud.

“You’re an idiot,” she informs him, and then proceeds to drag him inside.
“My arm hurts.”

“Well, that’s what happens when you get tattoos.”

“No, my other arm,” Peter says. “The one that crazy dude in the airport stabbed.”

Nat shakes her head, amused. It’ll heal by morning, she’s sure, along with all the other nicks and scrapes he’d acquired today. She’s grateful for that, but still feels guilty every time he gets hurt.

He’s a good fighter. A great one, actually. But there’s a part of her—one that grows larger every day—that doesn’t want him in the line of fire.

Doesn’t change the fact that she needs him. They’re basically the only ones left at this point.

Nat finally reaches his room. Hers is just across from it and she’s dying to go inside and soak all her aches and pains away in the bathtub.

She opens his door for him. “C’mon, get in.”

Peter halts in the doorway and gives her a funny look, smirking. “So is Barcelona our Budapest, or what?”

She knows he wouldn’t ask if he weren’t still tipsy and lax from the alcohol, and Nat tries to ignore the connotations behind the question. She hasn’t replaced Clint. She knows Peter isn’t Clint, and their bond isn’t remotely the same.

A part of her worries, sometimes, about how attached she’s let herself get this time. The Avengers had become her family and most of them are gone now. She’d poured all of her grief for them into looking after the drunk idiot kid in front of her, and it keeps her up at night, wondering where the hell she’d be without him.
She gives him a little push. “Bed, baby spider.”

Peter grunts. He falls face-first onto the mattress. Nat rolls her eyes and helps him with his boots. Once he’s free of the weight of them, he crawls farther up onto the bed and curls up in a ball.

He’s still so young. Too young for this shit, but here they are anyway. If he hadn’t followed his instincts tonight, they’d probably both be dead.

“What’s this?”

Her eyes fall to a discarded, folded up piece of paper on the floor. Nat promptly scoops up. Peter doesn’t reply, face pressed into his pillow. He grunts dismally.

She unfolds the paper.

She reads the words, reads all of them, and just when she’s getting to the last lines (please forgive me, Peter. I love you so much - Mom) it’s promptly snatched out of her hands.

Peter’s eyes are wide.

Nat’s hands are still holding the ghost of the letter. She blinks, stunned, and suddenly understands. “Petya.”

“Don’t.”

“Peter, hey, it’s okay—”

“It’s—what? Okay? Bull, Nat.” He folds the letter clumsily and stuffs it away. “You weren’t… no one was supposed to see that.”

“So Pepper doesn’t—?”
“No. No, and you can’t tell her.”

“Why not? Don’t you think this is something she deserves to know?”

“What, that I’m the result of tequila shots and a one night stand between her dead fiancé and some woman she never met? Yeah, I’m sure that’ll help her sleep at night. No. No way. She already has enough shit to deal with, enough of my problems, okay? I won’t add this to her plate. It’s my thing, it’s my personal—my personal private business, okay? He’s my—he’s my dead dad, and—”

Three years into their friendship and she’s never seen him cry until now. For a minute Nat just stares, unsure what the hell to do.

Follow your instincts.

“Peter?”

“I’m sorry.” He shakes his head. “It’s just… they all die. I had three dads and they all—” he starts to laugh, “they all died! What are the odds, you know?”

“Peter,” Nat says softly, “take a deep breath—”

“I am taking breaths!” He says, but it sounds more like a disjointed sob. “I’m taking all of the breaths and they’re not! He died in my arms, Nat, okay?! They both—and I had to—”

All at once he folds into himself. “I didn’t know,” he whispers. “Why didn’t I know until it was too late?”

He’s a mess. Nat doesn’t know why the hell it took her this long to see it. She’s supposed to be some top-grade spy and she hadn’t even realised that under all of the witty remarks and sarcastic quips—things that had reminded her of someone, someone she couldn’t quite place until now—there’s just a broken shell.

Like her.
“I don’t know,” she answers, but Peter already seems to have forgotten he’d asked a question at all. He wipes his cheeks and stares at his wet fingers with confusion, like he can’t even remember why he’s crying, or just doesn’t see this as something to get so upset over.

But it is. The son of her dead friend is slumped on the edge of a hotel room bed crying, and there’s next to nothing either of them can do with the information besides wallow in it.

“Relax, Petya,” Nat pushes his hair from his eyes and subsequently urges him back onto the mattress. “I can keep a secret just fine.”

There is a small silence, severed only by his sniff.

“It never really goes away, does it?” Peter asks sleepily, all maudlin and blinking back drunken tears.

Nat sighs. She sets his boots on the ground and then, after a split-second debate, climbs onto the bed with him. “No, it doesn’t. But you know what else doesn’t go away?”

“What?”

“Me.”

Peter’s face scrunches up as he smiles. Nat matches it. She tilts his chin down to kiss the crown of his head easier.

“Go to sleep, little spider.”

“Okay, mama-паук,” he mumbles, drowsy, into his pillow and into her heart.

Peter can’t remember the last time he felt this exhausted. He has to practically drag himself back
home from the airport, numb to the core with the frigid, icy winds blowing in from the east, teeth chattering.

But he walks fast because he’s almost home. He’s so close, he can practically smell the jasmine and fresh baked sugar cookies.

His phone rings.

Peter doesn’t answer it. He figures it’s probably Harley calling to annoy him about something or the other, so he dismisses it.

Then it rings again.

Peter sighs out a plume of steam and fishes the device out of his pocket. To his surprise, the caller ID is MJ’s.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“P- Peter…”

He stops dead.

“MJ? What’s wrong?”

Her voice is shaking and her breathing is ragged and something is wrong, she’s not okay, what the fuck happened—

“Peter, I need you to… I need you to come n’ get me…”

“Okay,” he pinches his brow and turns in a circle like maybe he’ll see her on the street somewhere, even when he knows he won’t. “Okay. Tell me where you are?”
“M’not… I really fucked up—”

“Are you drunk?”

“M’not drunk,” MJ says. “Not home. I’m at… I’m… the apartment where that old lady lives? With the cats? You always sneeze when you walk past—”

“Yeah, yeah, I remember. I’m on my way, okay?”

She sobs, and it’s heartbreaking, because he’s not there right this instant, holding her, helping her. God, what the fuck happened? Why isn’t she home?

“Hurry,” MJ says, and then the line goes dead.

It takes five minutes to get there.

That’s five whole minutes of him panicking and going over every possible worst case scenario in his head, but even what his imagination supplies doesn’t come close to reality.

Reality is opening the door of Mrs. Houseman’s bathroom and finding MJ leaning against the sink, covered in bruises and blood.

For a minute neither of them move, or speak, or even breathe.

And then:

“MJ.”

Her face crumbles. She curls into herself, gripping the counter for support. Peter shuts the door and locks it as he hurries inside. He moves toward her slowly though, and he’s relieved that she doesn’t
flinch when he gently reaches out to grab her face.

He wipes away the tears like the bruises aren’t even there, but he does it as softly as possible, because they are. A black eye, a split lip, a swelling cheek.

He doesn’t ask what happened even though he wants to. It’s all he wants to know, but his voice just won’t work.

He grabs the tissue paper she’d been using to blot the blood from her lip and does it so she doesn’t have to.

The cut on her cheekbone is going to need stitches.

“Is there a needle and thread?”

His voice slices through the silence like a knife. It comes out hollow and rasping, from the lack of sleep and from his terror.

MJ nods.

Fingers fumbling with the kit on the counter, body trembling, breathing sharp—

Peter stops her by placing his hands over her own. “I got it. Can you sit?”

Again, she nods, wiping her lip with the back of her hand like the crimson iron smeared there doesn’t matter, like her blood isn’t ichor, like it is a third-rate thing without value.

She sits. Peter finds what he needs and situates himself across from her, perched on the porcelain rim of the bathtub.

After about four minutes, she moves, lifting her hands to drape her palms over his neck because his veins have been pulsing against his skin like his blood vessels are about to burst. “You’re cold.”
Peter shakes his head.

That’s not why he’s shaking.

(who did this to you why wasn’t I there what the fuck happened will it happen again how many times has it happened before why wasn’t I there why didn’t I pick up the first time you called are you okay —)

“He was drunk.”

Peter doesn’t let himself falter. He pretends that his heart doesn’t skip with the sound of her voice, start to palpitate with her words. “Sam?”

A tiny jerk of her chin. “I didn’t… He’s never done anything like this before.”

Peter’s hands finally fall. “So that’s why you asked Nat to teach you self defense?”

“I didn’t ask her to teach me self defense. I asked her to teach me how to fight. And I—I did. Tonight, I fought, and I… I fucked him up real bad.”

“Good.”

“No.” MJ shakes her head and then sobs, folding into herself. “No, it’s not good, it’s really bad because I don’t have anywhere else to live and he’s supposed to be my family—”

Peter runs his hand up and down her back. “That’s not true. Pepper has a guest room. Her apartment is huge, MJ, and if you don’t want to stay there, Nat will always let you live at the compound. He’s not your family, baby. Families aren’t supposed to make you hurt like this, ever.”

MJ sniffs. She raises her puffy, red-rimmed eyes. “Don’t call me baby. It’s a form of infantilization.”
He cracks a pained smile. “My bad. Babushka, then.”

MJ’s laugh is watery and wonderful. Peter runs his hand through her curls. “You’re my family, MJ,” he whispers. “And I know you don’t need me to take care of you, but please just let me try to make it better? Let me try to help you?”

“I don’t need help.”

“MJ—”

“No, I don’t—” she shoots to her feet, thrashing at a grip that isn’t there and then wrapping her arms around herself. “I don’t need help. I’m fine. I’m fine, I’m—”

Panic. He knows it like the back of his hand by now. It’s in her eyes, written across her face. Peter holds her.

“I’m not.”

“It’s okay,” he whispers, when she finally quiets. “It’s okay not to be okay.”

MJ sobs. Then she’s holding him too, tighter than she ever has, even that day on the bridge. Peter wants to tell her a thousand things: that it doesn’t diminish her strength, that it doesn’t make her weak, that it won’t define her. Michelle Jones is nothing if not tough shit, but that doesn’t mean she can’t break every once in a while. She’s there for him when he does, and he wants, needs, to be there for her, too.

“Are you okay to go home with me?”

He needs her to say yes to that too, because if she doesn’t—if she wants to stay here in this stranger’s apartment or call a friend or whatever—he’ll have nothing else to do but march down the hall, find Sam Jones, and finish the job MJ started.

But she whispers, “Yes.”
He’s never been so relieved.

They same home is where the heart is, or something, and Peter thinks that might be true because the minute he walks through the door it’s like there’s a weight off his chest—one he didn’t even realise was there, one that’s so fucking heavy and then he just feels light; he is Atlas and he is hanging up the world for tonight.

There is a soft Christmas song playing from the stereo that had once belonged to Pepper’s dad, but other than that it’s quiet.

It all looks the same: the apartment, but Christmasified. Pepper always gets a real tree and it’s always a small one, propped up on a table and covered in yellow twinkle lights and tinsel.

Every time he looks at MJ it hurts, but he can’t just stop, so he spares a side-long glance. She’s fumbling with her coat, shaking from the cold and maybe the come down of her adrenaline.

Peter reaches out, as gently and obviously as possible, and helps her take it off.

“Thanks,” she breathes out.

Peter shrugs. He offers her the throw blanket that had been draped over the back of the couch instead, and MJ wraps that around her shoulders gratefully.

A clattering sound in the kitchen makes them both jump.

Then Pepper is there, looking a little dazed until she sees him. He knows; it’s a reflection of the way he feels (relieved, so fucking relieved and happy and safe).

“Peter?”
But the edges of excitement that had been building fade the instant she lays eyes on MJ, because even the dim light of the Christmas tree can’t hide the mosaic of bruises on her face.

Pepper’s expression turns hard, just for a heartbeat, only to be washed away by her usual brand of compassion.

“What happened?”

MJ explains it all.

They settle in the kitchen, hands wrapped around steaming mugs of hot cocoa because Pepper refused to give them caffeine. She turns the light on above the sink so they have something to see by, but Peter would honestly prefer to stay swathed in darkness for a little while longer.

MJ’s story is succinct. She speaks in a voice with a jagged edge that means no questions; Sam came home drunk, MJ confronted him, he slapped her, she hit him, he hit her, it spiralled from there, she pushed him into a wall, he kept trying to grab her, she broke a plate over his head and he passed out.

“Okay,” Pepper nods. “We’ll go to the police in the morning. For now, you should get some sleep.”

MJ shifts. “I… I, um—”

Pepper reaches out and grabs her hand. “The guest room is just down the hall and to the right. You’re welcome to stay as long as you like, MJ.”

Her shoulders fall with relief. Pepper, the closest, plants a kiss on her temple and tells her to go wash up.

That leaves them alone.

Peter gathers the empty mugs and carries them over to the sink, only he loses his grip on them and they fall in with a clatter.
He grips the edge of the counter to keep from falling. He’s so, so fucking tired. Every bone aches, every muscle is shredded to bits. Barcelona had cleaned him out physically and this had done all the rest.

“Peter?”

The instant her hand makes contact with his shoulder, Peter sags. He doesn’t cry because he simply doesn’t have the energy too, but he trembles, he caves.

Pepper wraps her arms around him. That feels more like home than anything else. Being enveloped by her rosemary shampoo, being held by the one person who shares the worst of his grief.

“Pep…”

“I know.”

She does. She knows about how sorry he is for being late, for no doubt worrying her, for coming home like this even though they both know there was absolutely no other acceptable option.

They draw back a little. Rest their foreheads together so they can still share a current of understanding, of safety.

“Hi, by the way.”

Pepper laughs a little. “I’m so glad you’re home, you know that?”

“Shebrushes his hair from his eyes and shakes her head with a fond smile, like maybe she wants to be upset but can’t quite manage it.
“Morgie?”

“Asleep.”

That makes sense. It’s ten, it’s way past her bedtime, but it’s been too long since he’s seen her last. Peter ends up leading Pepper to Morgan’s room despite the late hour, absently filling her in on everything she hadn’t heard since their last phone call—excluding, of course, Barcelona and his and Harley’s research.

He sticks with the mundane things. The easy things.

Morgan’s room is mostly the same, only instead of a crib she’s curled up on a tiny toddler bed, fast asleep with a stuffed bear in her arms.

“That’s fucking cute.”

Pepper laughs.

There’s just enough room on the end of the bed for Peter to sit, since Morgan is wound up tighter than a rollie pollie. He gently tucks a strand of her hair behind her ear.

“Do you wanna talk about it?”

He stares at Morgan. “I think I came really close to doing some messed up stuff tonight, Pepper.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I was pissed. Like, the idea of him doing that to her… all I wanted was to do it back.”

“But you didn’t.”
“But I wanted to.”

“But you didn’t.” Pepper kneels in front of him. “Thinking about it doesn’t make you a bad person, Peter. I’ve been thinking about it—putting on RESCUE and finishing him off, but that would ruin MJ’s chances of getting him put away for this, so I won’t. But that doesn’t mean I don’t want to.”

Peter swallows. “I just… I don’t like that that’s where I went. I’m supposed to be the good guy, right?”

“You are good. You brought here here, you prioritised her safety. That’s all that matters.”

He absorbs that. It doesn’t feel heroic, what he did—but then, MJ is sort of her own hero in this tragedy. She picked herself up, kicked his ass, and made the decision to call Peter.

Still, it’s wrong. It shouldn’t have happened at all.

“I don’t ever want to see her hurt like that. I don’t ever want to see any of you hurt like that.”

Pepper squeezes his hand. “You won’t.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I’ve been practising with RESCUE,” she tells him, to his surprise. “Rhodey and I train as often as we can. It’s not just your responsibility to look after this family, Peter. It’s mine, too.”

“I still feel like I let her down.” Like I let you all down.

“You didn’t, Peter. Believe me, you didn’t.”

“But—”
“Peter.”

“What?”

“You did good. You did the right thing tonight, okay?”

He nods and stares down at his lap with a furrowed brow. There are other things bubbling up to the surface, twisting his features, and he speaks again without really meaning to.

“I’m just… scared.”

He’s scared to grow. He’s scared to change. He’s scared he’ll evolve so much one day he’ll look in the mirror and not recognise the face he sees; that someday, all of the gradual shifts will add up and he won’t fit into the shape he’d carved for himself; instead he will be recast, moulded by time and death and circumstance, and this new person will wrap around him and wear his clothes and speak with his voice and he will grow smaller and smaller inside his hollow body until he can’t even hear the screams anymore.

“What are you scared of?”

He flounders.

“That I’m doing everything that I can, and it’s still not enough. What does that say about me?”

To his surprise, Pepper smiles. “It says that you’re trying. There’s nothing else you can do, Peter. That’s all life is: just trying things until they work.”

He gives her a disbelieving look.

“No, I really mean it. Half the time I’m just winging it, Peter.”

“Sounds fake.”
Pepper laughs. “It’s okay to feel like that, I promise. That’s why they say life is hard—”

“Petey?”

They both turn to find Morgan propped up on an elbow, rubbing the sleep from her eyes with a chubby fist.

Peter isn’t exactly aware of the way everything else becomes suddenly insignificant the second he lays eyes on her. It’s sort of just something that happens, like his subconscious shuts off to leave her the absolute focus of his attention.

“Hey, shortcake.”

Morgan’s lower lip starts to tremble. She shakes her head, drowsy and upset. “You didn’t come home when you were ‘posed to,” she mumbles, “I had a bad dream that you were gone forever.”

She starts to cry and Peter wastes no time pulling her into his arms. “Hey,” he whispers, “I’m sorry I was late, baby, but I’m here now, okay? I promise.”

Morgan buries her face into the crook of his neck. “Missed you.”

“I missed you too, Mongoose.”

Pepper is watching them with sentiment painted all across her face. She lays her hand on Morgan’s back, just to assure her she’s there, too, and not going anywhere either.

Morgan leans away with hair stuck to her face from her tears. Peter brushes them dry. “Did you bring my Seeber?”

He grins. “Yeah, I did, but you’re gonna have to wait til morning for it, okay?”
“But why?”

“Cuz it’s really late and you’re supposed to be asleep right now, remember?”

Morgan whines. She flops off of him and crawls away, Pull-Ups in the air, and falls face first into her pillow. “Maybe if you didn’t wake me up,” she mumbles.

Peter and Pepper laugh. Pepper leans over to kiss her cheek. “We’re sorry, baby.”

“S’okay. Missed Petey anyways.”

Peter covers her up with a rocket-ship patterned blanket and kisses her cheek, too. “Bet I missed you more.”

“No.”

“Yeah.”

“Nooo.”

He grins and kisses her again. “Go to sleep, weirdo.”

“You’re weird.”

Peter lets her have the last word. His reply is a simple stroke of her cheek, wiping away the residue of Pepper’s chapstick. Morgan hums sleepily and burrows deeper into her blankets, perfectly peaceful now that she knows he’s here with her prized Sea Bear.

Later, Peter is lying in his bed staring at the fading light of the glow in the dark stars on his ceiling, running over the past few days in his head.
A part of him wants to call Nat because he knows if anyone could finish a job cleanly and quietly, make it so MJ doesn’t ever have to think about this again, it would be her.

Another part of him wants to call Harley, because life is hard and bringing back the dead is harder, and it would just be nice to have a momentary escape from all of this.

Then his door opens.

MJ slips inside.

“This is against the rules.”

“Don’t be such a brown-noser.”

Peter smiles. He looks over when she’s settled beside him, hair splayed out over the pillow, the light just dim enough to hide the worst of her contusions.

“Are you tired?”

“No.”

He nods. Reaches out and takes her hand. It feels good to be so close, despite the way his stomach flutters because of where they’re being close.

“I missed you,” he whispers.

MJ stares at him for a long time, almost like she’s weighing the worth of her answer, weighing the worth of him.

She kisses him. Lightly, softly, easily.
“I love you, Peter.”

He’s told her the same thing a dozen times or more, but it feels different when the words are aimed his way. It feels like breathing after drowning, re-discovering gravity after being adrift in space for three weeks, like coming home.

“You’re late.”

Peter pushes the window shut with his foot and glares at Harley from the ceiling. “Well excuse me for missing curfew, Mother.”

His friend sighs. He’s surrounded by holograms, situated on the floor in the centre of the room. Peter flips down to join him and peels off the mask.

“So what’ve you got?”

“Well, I updated the schematics for the suit, but I wanted to talk to you about the EPR paradox and—wait, are you bleeding?”

Peter hums, lifting his arm to reveal the tear in the suit he’d completely forgotten about. There’s a gash along his left side, and it is, indeed, bleeding. “Oh, yeah. Forgot about that. You have the med kit?”

Harley shakes his head almost wonderingly. “Bathroom.”

Peter goes to retrieve it and calls over his shoulder, “So the EPR paradox?”

They get back to work.
Peter is thirty-five pages deep in his thesis and can’t predict a foreseeable end. He’s been working for twenty hours straight, is hopped up on enough Red Bull and coffee to kill a sperm whale, and can literally see sounds. The punching of his computer keys is a distinctive shade of red that burns his corneas every point two seconds, but it can’t be stopped.

“I cannot be stopped,” Peter tacks on verbally. “I’ve been waiting for you, Obi-Wan. We meet again at last. The circle is now complete. When I met you I was but the learner, now I am the master.”

“Only a master of evil, Darth.”

Peter jerks his head up so quickly he gets whiplash. There are still imprints of his computer screen dancing in his line of sight. He blinks them away, because beneath them MJ is standing with her arms folded over her chest.

“How are you—what are you—?”

MJ shrugs. “I missed you.”

Peter smiles despite himself. “Yeah?”

“Don’t be lame about it.” She walks over after kicking the door shut behind her and sits down with him on the floor, gently closing his laptop and setting it aside. “Hi.”

Peter wraps his arms around her, breathes in lavender and chamomile, kisses her because it’s been two whole weeks since he’s seen her in person and that’s two whole weeks too long. And also, just because he wants to. “Hi. You drove three hours to see me? On a Friday?”

“I drove three hours in Friday traffic because you’re worth it,” MJ corrects, “missing you was just the catalyst. But don’t let it go to your head, I have other reasons.”

“Yeah?”

“So many. An abundance.” She kisses both of his cheeks lazily. “There’s a Bikini Kill concert in Cambridge tonight. I bought tickets.”
Which is how Peter ends up being dragged to a thrift store so MJ can buy him a leather jacket because he just ‘doesn’t look punk enough’. Even then she seems dissatisfied with the result, but Peter goes along with it even when she shoves him into the dusty bathroom of the store and starts drawing on his face with eyeliner.

“There better not be a dick on my forehead.”

“Why would I draw what’s already there?”

“Ha ha.” Peter snatches up the pencil. “Your turn.”

He doesn’t do much, mostly because he’s not actually sure what he’s doing, but MJ instructs him through the basics. He darkens the area around her eyes and ends up doodling aimlessly on her cheeks.

The concert is equal parts deafening and blinding and MJ knows all of the words to every song. Peter doesn’t, but he also doesn’t mind. He lets her climb on his back so she can scream louder than everyone else, and when it’s over, she holds his hand as they walk out of the arena.

“Pizza?”

“Chinese,” she says.

They end up tucked away in a back booth, covered in smeared charcoal and too much glitter, skin sticky with whatever beverages had been thrown around in the crowd. They just get rice and chow mein, whacking each other with chopsticks when their trajectories cross.

“Fuck, marry, kill: the dudes from Full House.”

Peter snorts. “Okay, kill Bob Saget—”

“Obviously.”
“—Fuck John Stamos, marry uncle Joey.”

Her nose wrinkles up. She pinches his with her chopsticks. “Are you serious?”

“What, you’d do it differently?”

“Dude. Obviously you fuck uncle Joey because it’s just a one time thing. If you marry John Stamos you get to spend the rest of your life screwing each other, plus he’s a softie for the kids.”

“And that sort of thing is important to you?”

MJ shrugs evasively. “I don’t know. I mean, if you’d asked me before the Snap I would’ve said no way, the world was overpopulated enough as it is, you know? But now... I don’t know. I think about it sometimes. It probably wouldn’t be so bad to have, like, one kid. Maybe. Or we could just adopt one of the like, millions of displaced kids that need homes.”

We, she had said, and hadn’t even noticed. In this future where there’s maybe one kid, it’s theirs.

Peter pretends to consider it, like it’s not something he often spaces off thinking about in his most boring classes. “I’d make a great trophy husband.”

MJ laughs. “Are you serious?”

“Well I mean, you don’t wanna give up your career for it, right?”

“No way.”

“Right, so, who stays at home with the squirt? Nannies suck—”

“Plus we’re broke—”
“Exactly. Morgan could always babysit though.”

“No way. She’s too chaotic. She’d like, blow up the townhouse.”

“So we live in a townhouse?”

She nods. “Three stories, books everywhere, and we can both have separate office spaces to put our shit—cuz I’ll tell you right now, the Star Wars dolls—”

“Action figures—”

“Are so not going in the living room.”

“I’d probably have to sell them to afford the townhouse anyway.”

“Bull, you have like millions of dollars in trust funds,” MJ says. “You could literally have a separate house just for your space toys.”

“They’re not toys, but listen, do you know what would be so cool?”

“What?”

“A secret lair. I’ve always wanted one. Like, buying out a storage unit and using it as an HQ for patrol and stuff? I mean, I know I can always use the compound but like—”

“It’s the aesthetic of it,” MJ says knowingly. “I get it. You could even sleep there on the nights where you piss me off.”

“I piss you off?”
“No, but you will someday, mark my words. And when it happens, you’re gonna wanna be as far away as possible.”

Peter grins. Their cartons are mostly empty by now and, though with his metabolism he could probably scarf down another five easy, he still slides out of the booth. “What do you think of the look, by the way? I think I might keep the jacket.”

MJ’s knuckles are pressed against her lips to hide her smile, but it’s a moot effort. “You tried,” she manages, voice laced with amusement. “You get boyfriend points for that, but if I see you in the jacket again, it’s minus ten.”

“What? Why?”

“It’s just not you.”

“And what’s me?”

“Anything but this,” she says, letting him haul her out of her seat.

“Oh come on,” Peter complains. “It’s the princess stickers, they’re throwing you off.”

“No,” MJ snorts. “That’s really not it.”

He pouts for about two blocks until she tucks herself under his arm. Peter can’t help smiling at that. They stop at the corner and wait for the green light to cross, and Peter turns to her.

It means everything that she’s here, that she spent the night laughing and singing instead of wallowing in the tragedy of last month. He knows self-pity was never her thing, but it still makes him really, really happy that she came.

She makes him really, really happy.

The light turns green.
Peter kisses her forehead as they walk.

His freshman year of college ends in a whirlwind of energy drinks and insomnia. He and Harley pull all nighters helping each other study for finals, which they could probably pass easily if their brains weren’t so full up on other shit and constantly pushed to the max with no sleep.

In the end, they pass the top of their classes, but neither of them actually give enough of a shit to look at the lists. It’s Rhodey who tells him, all proud and slinging an arm over his shoulder as they walk toward Happy’s car. “Oh, I did?” Peter asks, and Rhodey throws his head back and laughs.

He’s peripherally aware of the fact that he’s way ahead of his game. He and Harley had jokingly (but also seriously) bet each other that they could get their degrees in under four years.

“I’ll do it in three,” Harley had said offhandedly.

“I’ll do it in two,” Peter had countered, not looking up from his notes.

“We’ll both do it in two.”

Right now they’re on track for the latter, signed up for online summer classes to follow along with the schedule Peter had drawn up on a lazy November afternoon.

Harley had scheduled his flight out to Tennessee for the next week because Peter begged him to come meet Pepper and Morgan. They drive to the compound rather than into the city and Peter jumps out of the car before Happy has even fully parked. The grounds are bright and green and stretch as far as the eye can see. Peter breathes a lungful of the late spring air and grins.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” Harley mutters, “it’s fuckin’ ugly as shit.”

Peter barks a laugh. “Come on, Huckleberry. It’s time for M&M to meet her brothers.”
M&M is the little bot they’d made together over the past year, complete with her own artificial intelligence system, just like DUM-E, U, and Butterfingers. She’s named after Morgan May & Michelle and has the personality of a hyperactive toddler with a homicidal streak, so Peter thinks it fits pretty well.

It’s Morgan who finds them first, calling out a “Petey!” that echoes off the walls and floors. Peter kneels down and catches her before she can barrel into him at full speed. “Petey Petey Petey,” she blabbers, “I missed you.”

“I missed you too, Mongoose.” He kisses her cheek. “Wanna say hi to my friend?”

Morgan’s eyes widen at the realisation that there’s someone new standing beside Peter. Her cheeks flush and she buries her face into the crook of his neck, which isn’t like her at all. “Are we feeling shy today, then?”

She gives him a tiny nod, covering her face with her hands.

Peter throws an apologetic look to Harley who just shrugs. “My sister was the same way at her age.”

“Oh?”

Morgan whispers, “He has a sister?”

“Yes,” Peter replies. “Her name is Ariel.”

“Like the princess?!”

Her outburst makes them both laugh. “It’s actually—” Peter stops himself, “yeah, sure, like the princess. Why not. How about we go find mommy, huh?”

Morgan nods despondently. Harley trails along after them, hands in his pockets, soaking in the modern architecture, the training rooms, the commons with the trickling fountain and low-cut hedges.
"Why can’t I be named after a princess?" Morgan whines.

Peter chews on his answer. “What’s wrong with your name?”

“Morgan is ugly,” she proclaims. “It sounds brown. I don’t like it.”

Peter grins, absently wondering what colour his name sounds like. “You’re named Morgan because that’s what your daddy wanted, baby,” he says, “and it’s not an ugly name.”

“May should be my first name. It’s prettier.”

His heart throbs. “It is pretty. What colour is May?”

“Pink,” she decides, after a moment of thinking with her nose wrinkled up. “And yellow. And green.”

“All together?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“You know what colour all those make when you mix them?”

“What?”

“Brown.”

Morgan groans at the same time Harley snorts behind them. She pinches his cheek. “You’re a meanie.”
“I’m not a meanie, I’m just stating facts. I’ll get you a colour wheel and show you later.”

Morgan harumphs and plops her head back onto his shoulder. She plays with the buttons on his collar, all dejected and miserable until Peter, pitying, kisses her temple. Like he’d hoped, she smiles secretly and tucks her head back under his chin.

They find Pepper in the conference room. She’s on the phone with some executive from Tokyo who wants to acquire shares in the company, but she doesn’t seem all that pleased with the way the conversation is going. Her face lights up when he raps on the glass wall, though, and she quickly disconnects.

“One Mongoose, found and returned,” he says, depositing Morgan on the table top. She curls into a ball of sad, pouting up at him.

“Petey says my names are brown.”

Pepper doesn’t even ask. She pulls Peter into a hug. “You smell like boy,” she proclaims, but keeps her arms around him. “When was the last time you showered?"

“I had to pull an all-nighter for a final I took this morning,” he says. “Pep, meet Harley, aka the Bane of my Existence.”

Harley is clearly surprised when Pepper hugs him, too. “I’ve heard a lot about you,” she says. “It’s so nice to finally meet you, Mr Keener.”

“Oh, please, Harley’s just fine.”

“Or Jackass.”

“Jackass!” Morgan parrots.

“No, we don’t say that word.”
“You just did.”

“Well, I paid two seventy-five for the rights.”

“I’ll give you three dollars.”

“I meant two hundred and seventy five.”

Morgan blinks. “I have three dollars.”

Pepper shakes her head, laughing a little, all I’m sorry my kids are idiots apologetic. “Call me Pepper, then,” she says to Harley.

“Pepper!” Morgan chirps.

“It’s an orange name,” Peter announces.

“No, it’s yellow.”

“Sunset,” Peter counters, which Morgan deems acceptable.

Harley grins at them. “What about my name?”

“Red,” they say together.

Nat is kicking the crap out of MJ in the training room, and then MJ is kicking the crap out of Nat, and then the cycle starts again. It almost always ends with Nat as the victor unless she’s demonstrating a move and has to let MJ win—which is, nine out of ten times, how it goes with Peter, too. He figures he only has an edge because of his spidey senses and enhanced strength.
Still, MJ holds her own. He hasn’t exactly watched her fight before and it’s sort of mind-blowing. They move quickly, like two vipers snapping at each other. Nat watches everything, sees everything. She views the fight in a way that’s calculating, like playing chess almost, always five or six or ten moves ahead.

Harley doesn’t even try to hide his awe.

After twenty or so minutes of them watching from the sidelines, Rhodey comes in and calls it quits. He and Nat have a conference call to make with Carol Danvers, Rocket the Raccoon—who no matter how many times Peter sees him talk, he still can’t wrap his mind around it all—Nebula, and Okoye.

“Duty calls,” Nat says apologetically to MJ. “But hold up because I want to say hello to my Idiot.”

Peter, the Idiot, waves. “I brought a friend.”

“Harley Keener,” Nat says, nodding.

Harley’s jaw drops. “Holy shit.”

Peter, meanwhile, gives her a look that he hopes conveys the betrayed disbelief he feels with the fact that she actually looked up his roommate and probably stalked him, too, what the hell, Nat?

Her answering look says, Did you seriously expect me to let you live with some potentially psychopathic stranger? God, Peter, you really are dumb.

“Okay, it’s never not creepy when you two do that,” MJ says.

Peter starts and looks at her, and wow she’s fucking pretty. There’s something about the way the late afternoon light is hitting her face that makes him wish he were more capable of waxing poetic. Instead, his two brain cells come up with, “Hi.”
She flips him off, but she’s smirking. “Little late for warm and fuzzy, Loser. What’s that?”

Harley starts. He looks down at the little round ball in his arms. “This is our robot baby.”

“Her name is M&M.”

“Like the candy?”

“Yes and no. She can change colours, so it sort of fits.”

“So she’s like a… rolling disco ball?”

“With a few other odds and ends,” Peter says, because he really doesn’t want to get into every capability his robot possesses. It would both take too long and be sort of pointless on two people who aren’t that interested in mechanics. “I think Morgan wants to adopt her.”

Her face had lit up when Peter had set M&M down and let her roll around the room. He’d almost been tempted to let her keep the little bot.


“Uh—I’m sorry, what? Me? To the super important top secret meeting?”

“Just call it AA,” Nat says.

“Alcoholics Anonymous?” Harley asks.


MJ shrugs. “Okay.”
“Wait—don’t I have a say—?”

The meeting really isn’t that eventful. Carol remembers him though, and greets him with a nod and a *Hey, Peter Parker.*

Nebula is less friendly, at least on the outside. But he can tell by the way her demeanour softens—even relaxes—that she’s glad to see him. They spent three weeks together in space but haven’t really talked since. Peter is just glad she doesn’t seem to hold a grudge against him for that.

The four of them give status reports on their respective territories. In return, Peter, Nat, and Rhodey do the same. Peter doesn’t have much to say; in the last month he’d stopped a few bank robberies around the Cambridge area, talked a guy out of jumping off a building, and prevented a few shootings. That’s about it.

Carol nods though. “We’re all doing our part,” she says. “Just because it might seem small to you, doesn’t mean the things you prevent wouldn’t have had devastating consequences.”

That makes him feel a little better, and for their part, they don’t have much to say either. Carol is vague and dry and rolls her eyes a lot, but never when Rhodey speaks.

“We had a run in with a Snarklot in sector four,” Rocket announces. “Took care of that pretty quick, though.”

Nat raises an eyebrow. “Took care of it how?”

“We blew him up,” Nebula says.

Rocket snickers. “It was awesome.”

“Okay, you two are a danger to society,” Rhodey announces. “Or, actually, the entirety of the universe. Who’s idea was it for you guys to team up?”
“Ours,” says Nebula.

“We’re family,” Rocket adds with a shrug.

Peter can understand that well enough. The others can too, so the subject is dropped. Okoye talks about how well the Starbucks Coffee Houses are doing in Wakanda.

“Is there one on every corner?”

Her brow furrows. “No, of course not. That would be incredibly stupid and economically destructive. Why would—?”

“It’s a—” Peter sighs and waves her off. “Never mind. Ignore me.”

Nat hooks her pinky around his with a small smile and that makes him feel a whole lot better about being an idiot.

They all sign off shortly after that. Carol is the last to go, and Rhodey’s face actually falls when her holographic disappears.

“So,” Nat starts, smirking, “what’s that about?”

“What’s what about?”

“You know what,” Peter says.

“No, I actually don’t.”

“Oh, you’re under the impression that your raging crush on Danvers is subtle,” Nat mocks. “That’s cute, Rhodes.”
Rhodey blushes. Like actually, full on blushes. “I don’t know what you’re referring too.”

“Just your heart eyes and embarrassing amount of praise for her work,” says Peter.


“Listen, I don’t—” he shakes his head. “That would be… incredibly unprofessional and it could end up messing with the dynamic of the team, and she’s lightyears away, right? So how would that even work, and—”

“He’s thought about this a lot,” Peter mutters to Nat.

She laughs. “Don’t tease. I think it’s sort of sweet.”

Rhodey stops stammering. He glares at them. “What do I do?”

“You ask her out,” they answer together.

Harley ends up staying the summer with them. At first, he argues that Ariel will be left alone, but shuts up when Pepper easily offers to fly her out and have Happy pick her up at the airport. After that he has no further protests.

Ariel is thirteen years old and rolls her eyes at absolutely everything. She and MJ get along great and Morgan worships the ground she walks on—which isn’t a problem at all, because Ariel turns on a soft side when she’s around.

On her first day in New York they go for cheeseburgers.

“What are we doing here?” Ariel asks, rounding on Harley in front of the hole in the wall burger joint Peter used to frequent with Tony. It’s inconspicuous enough that he could get away with
treating Peter to a meal without worrying about paparazzi; the best customers are regulars and mostly
over fifty, so they don’t really give a crap who eats what where, and the windows are covered with
neon signs and newspaper clippings, so no one can really see in.

“Can you read?” Harley asks. “Come on, Ariel, sound it out with me—‘b’ makes the ‘buh’ sound
—”

“I’m a vegetarian, Harley.”

“You grew up next to a farm, Ariel.”

“Not all farmers are as humane as Old Man Marley.” She narrows her eyes. “Did you know that fifty
percent of animals are factory farmed, Harley? Before the Snap it was two in three, but it’s still half
of all animal life. And did you know that they take the beaks off of the birds? All those poor chickens
with no beaks. They can’t even defend themselves.”

“Uh, no, I didn’t know that—”

“And did you know that dairy cows only live to their third lactation before they’re culled? But
naturally they can live twenty years?”

She takes a dangerous step toward her brother. “Did you know that before the Snap, seventy billion
farm animals were killed each year for food? And even after, the death rates haven’t actually
decreased, they just don’t have as many animals to murder.”

Harley blinks. He claps his hands together. “So a salad bar? Anyone?”

Summer passes in a slow crawl. The heat is unbearable so they mostly keep inside during the day.
He and Harley work in relative silence. Peter trains with Nat daily because she doesn’t want him
losing his edge. Pepper is in and out, busier than ever these days.

At night, though, they drive into the city and Peter does patrol.

At first it had been hard for him, letting Harley be the Guy in the Chair, but then he’d almost died
twice, so he figures Ned will—

would have—

forgiven him.

Things operate smoothly.

Until a sticky Tuesday night when Peter gets strange company in an alleyway.

He’s fighting off four guys at once and it’s not really an issue until two of them find their wits and pull out guns. Then Peter is dodging bullets from two directions while trying to web them all up and make sure no one is caught in the crossfire—a thankfully unlikely scenario, given how empty the streets are this time of night (or, how empty they always are these days).

That’s when a figure dressed in black falls from the shadows and enters the fray.

They take out one of the regular dudes and one of the dudes with a gun. Peter does the same. Then there are just four assholes on the ground wrapped in his biocables.

“Uh, thanks,” Peter pants.

“No problem, Spider-Man,” says his saviour. Their voice is so heavily modified it’s hard to tell whether he’s talking to a boy or a girl. “Maybe don’t fight like shit next time.”

“Ooo,” Harley snickers through the comms, “you just got burned.”

“Right,” Peter says, trying to both a) not take offense and b) not shoot a snarky comeback at Harley.

“I’ll be off, then,” says the black-clad fighter. They’re dressed in combat boots, a baggy jumpsuit, and a ski-mask with sunglasses. It’s a cheap disguise, but it’s effective and less cringe-worthy than his first get-up. “Bye.”
“Wait—” Peter calls, “I didn’t catch your name!”

“Scorpio!” They reply, and round the corner into the night.

Peter stares for a minute. “Huh.”

One of the guys on the ground lets out a low moan.

“Got somethin’ for ya.”

Peter opens his eyes and finds Nat, upside down from his perspective, arms folded over her chest and holding a manila file.

Peter un-sticks and lands on the floor. “A mission?”

“Amsterdam,” Nat replies without preamble. “There’s some fishy stuff going on there. People going missing—and not just regular people, but mutants, enhanced kids. The baddies are calling themselves AQUARIUS. I think it’s some offshoot of HYDRA.”

“Seriously?”

He’s heard all about HYDRA. He knows that’s what made James Barnes go rogue, and he’d seen the footage of him murdering Tony’s parents because of all the brainwashing. If those methods have resurfaced, they need to have a damper put on them quickly.

Nat nods, grim. “I tracked them down using an IP address from an old email in the HYDRA files, where the work of one Dr. Van Dijk was mentioned in relation to a new AQUARIUS project. It was the only mention of it; must have missed the scrub because it was misspelled. Anyway, we’re leaving tonight.”
“What is it with people and star signs lately?” Peter wonders aloud.

Nat frowns at him. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing.” He shrugs and takes the file. For some reason, it just doesn’t feel right to tell her. “Let me read this and pack my things.”

“Amsterdam?”

One of the last things he expects is to find MJ in the lab, leaning against the counter with the file Nat had given him in hand.

“Uh,” he clears his throat. “Yeah. It’s sort of need to know, and since Pepper is in Beijing right now —”

“You want me to like, watch Morgan for you?”

“I mean… if you could?”

“No.”

He stills. “Oh. Uh, okay. I mean, I can ask Harley or Ariel or something—”

“I’m coming with you.”

Peter falters. His heart skips a beat. Anxiety makes his blood go cold. “MJ… I don’t know if that’s the best idea.”

“It’s funny how you think it’s your call.”
“I know it’s not my call,” Peter says, slowly approaching her. He sets down the books he’d been carrying. “I mean, it’s Nat’s mission, so like, I’d ask her—I just don’t know…”

“What, if you want me along?”

“No,” Peter shakes his head, “no, that’s not what I meant at all. I’m just saying I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Which is something you think is likely.”

Peter doesn’t understand why she’s come in here with packed heat, but he’s had no sleep and all this is doing is frustrating him. “Dude, of course! You could die! I could die! Even Nat could! It’s dangerous, okay? It’s not like training, or whatever. It’s serious shit—”

“And you don’t think I’m cut out for it?”

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

“It is, despite the fact that Tony Stark recruited you when you were fifteen to go and fight Captain America. But me with my years of combat training, I can’t go on one lousy mission to Amsterdam?”

Peter takes a deep breath. “You’re one of the strongest people I’ve ever met,” he says, after a small pause, “but that doesn’t stop me from being scared. I don’t want to lose you, MJ. Worse, I don’t want that to be my fault. I love you too much for that shit.”

MJ shakes her head, but her face has softened. “If I die, that’s on me, not you. Always.”

“That might be how you see it, but that’s not how it feels. That’s never how it feels.”

(he can still remember it. It’s been three years and no matter how hard he tries he can’t forget. He knows Tony wouldn’t blame him, but it feels like it should be his fault; it feels like it should have been him. He can’t shake that belief. Tony should be alive, be here to see Morgan growing and
changing with every passing day but he’s not and it’s because peter isn’t working fast enough, isn’t smart enough, and wasn’t the one fate plucked from the universe with molten hands)

MJ lays her palms on his cheeks and that always calms him down. “I love you too, so let me protect you, you stupid loser.”

He reaches up and holds her hand. “I’m not gonna stop you. It’s Nat’s call though.”

MJ nods. She kisses his nose, which is new and makes him smile.

Then she leaves.

In the end, Nat’s verdict is no. Her explanation is rushed and thrown over her shoulder, “These people are hard core, MJ. If they catch us, they won’t just kill us. They’ll torture us for a very long, long time, and maybe even decide to brain wash us, and then they’ll kill us. It’s too big a risk. I shouldn’t even be bringing Parker, but here we are. Just take comfort in the fact that he’s the expendable one.”

They take the quinjet and activate the retro reflective panels. Peter sleeps on the plane, trying to push away the guilt that gnaws at him because MJ’s fallen face has been seared onto the walls of his skull.

Amsterdam is just like any other city; sprawling and bright and loud. They don’t get a chance to look around, but rather hole themselves up in a hotel room to scope out the area where Nat reports the most activity.

“You should’ve let MJ come,” he says finally, bouncing a ball off the wall opposite himself and catching it, over and over, never missing.

Nat sighs. “Listen. You’re my kid, right?”

He frowns. “Apparently.”
“Shut up. You’re like my dorky younger brother desperate to follow in my footsteps—which is great, and I understand, I’m fantastic at what I do. But your girlfriend? She has potential. She’s the little sister I wish I had. What I don’t want is to bring her along now when she’s great but not fantastic and have her end up shot full of holes. Understand?”

Peter nods glumly.

“Good. What do you think?”

He turns and scrunches his face up at her disguise. “That wig makes you look like that woman from *The Incredibles.*”

“You mean—*Edna Mode*?!”

He laughs. “That’s the one.”

“Shit.” She pulls it off and rifles through her bag. “You’re right. Black bobs are so out of style. What about this?”

The second option is just a boring blonde wig, which is perfect. “You’ll blend right in.”

The plan

(and really, it’s the dumbest fucking plan of all time, but Peter is terrified of Nat so his arguments are short lived)

the *plan* is for Nat to get kidnapped.

Like, voluntarily.
They won’t know she’s an ex assassin, she won’t put up a fight. She’ll have a tracker on her as well as a mic, both implanted under the skin so that they won’t be found by her kidnappers.

And Peter… well, Peter is supposed to follow along to wherever they take her. And then they pull the ultimate heist: bust out around a dozen missing persons from a high security building on the outskirts of Amsterdam.

So Happy Birthday to him, or whatever the fuck.

It’s all going according to plan.

Until Peter gets shot.

Really, it’s his fault. He’s supposed to be on high alert, but he’d gotten distracted by something Nat had said over the comms and boom, a bullet right to the shoulder.

It hurts like hell but he keeps going, keeps fighting despite the searing pain in his upper arm and the steadily frigid feeling inside his body warring against the burning feeling outside of it. The blood is warm as it seeps from the wound and stains his suit, Teenage Mutant Ninja Spider Mark III, his newest creation.

But who cares; it’s not even a real suit unless it’s been broken in, right?

The worst part about all of it… is all of it. Peter infiltrates the building—a low, concrete facility that seems to be masquerading as a warehouse but inside looks more like a hospital—through the “loading dock”, where two men are standing armed by the bay doors.

Because that’s not suspicious at all.

Peter takes them out, stashes their guns, webs them up, and crawls inside—on the ceilings rather than the floors because there’s a security camera every ten feet or so. Peter covers those in webbing as
well.

“We’re all clear,” he says to Nat, through the minuscule earpiece they’d implanted earlier.

“Copy that,” she replies, and then somewhere in the distance his ears perk at the sound of some dude crying out after a crotch kick.

Peter busies himself by clearing the rooms. The first three that he finds are empty, but the fourth houses a little girl. She’s somewhere between Morgan and Ariel in age, with stringy blonde hair that covers her eyes.

“Hey,” Peter says, as softly as possible. “I’m here to help you get out, okay? Do you want to come with me?”

She looks up. Her eyes widen. “Spider-Man?!”

“And then the dude who shoots him gets shot.

And it’s not by Nat.

It’s—

“Scorpio?!”
The kids are screaming behind him and the youngest amongst them are crying, but Peter is too dazed to even process the fact that he’s injured. It’s adrenaline keeping him going, he knows; adrenaline and fear, staving off the pain, a makeshift dam that will inevitably break and bite him in the ass with the come down.

“Come on!”

They double up. Scorpio watches his back, smoothly taking out guards and scientists and whoever else is running this place—they aren’t kill shots, but they injure them well enough.

“We have to get the kids outside,” he says. “There’s an exit—”

“South side,” Scorpio finishes for him.

“Nat,” Peter taps his coms, “I need you to come around with that truck in four minutes.”

“Copy that,” she says, teeth gritted, clearly in the middle of something. He wishes she were already with them or at least on her way, but at least he’s not flying solo anymore.

They make their way through steadily and slowly. Peter’s blood pumps so loudly it sounds like gunshots, pulsating and boiling.

“Hou op!”

There’s a muscular looking soldier at the end of the hall, wearing a uniform and holding a gun. Peter flicks his wrist and disarms him in one smooth move, webbing the assault rifle to the ceiling.

“You get them to the loading bay,” Scorpio orders, “I’ll handle this asshole.”

He looks back just in time to see the dude judo flipped over Scorpio’s shoulder and land with a grunt of pain, arm popping out of his socket.
The trailer is forty feet long and houses a few mattresses and a battery operated lamp. Peter ushers the kids inside, pointing out the bags of chips and water bottles and first aid kits—one of which he grabs for himself—in a rushed, ragged voice.

They don’t even seem to notice.

“Peter!” Nat shouts from the front, “we’ve gotta go!”

“Hang on, I’m waiting on someone!”

“On who?”

“They!”

He points out Scorpio, who is running from the building at top speed. Peter grabs their hands and hauls them into the cabin of the truck. Nat is behind the wheel, out of breath, hair plastered to her forehead from the blood and sweat there. “This whole place is gonna blow in like five minutes,” she warns. “You all good?”

Peter nods.

“Listen—” he sucks in a sharp breath and winces, “I got shot—”

“Petya, what?”

“I’m fine, I just—it wasn’t through and through and I need the bullet taken out before it heals over —”

“I’ll do it,” Scorpio says.
Peter hesitates. “You’re sure?”

“Dude, you’re like dying right now. Just accept my offer and shut the hell up.”

Nat laughs at that. “Okay, I approve. Who the hell are you?”

“Scorpio,” the masked hero says. They turn to Peter. “Take the suit off, Loser.”

And oh.

They both freeze. Peter feels like he’s been sucker punched in the gut and all he can think is that she *judo flipped some dude and shot some guy and how the fuck is she here* —

He reaches over and pulls off her mask.

MJ lets him.

“In retrospect,” he pants, “that was probably obvious.”

Then he passes out.

When he wakes up he’s lying on his back in the stiff bed behind the driver’s seat. His suit is gone, his shoulder is wrapped, and MJ is at his feet glaring out the passenger’s side window with her hands between her knees.

“So,” he starts, making her jump, “Scorpio?”

MJ blushes but tries to brush it off with a shrug. “Yeah. I mean, it’s my star sign and I guess it sort of fits the whole aesthetic.”
“Yeah,” he says. Something inside Peter clicks and he knows that it’s just right, that he was an idiot to ever doubt her. “Shit. That’s… dope.”

MJ glares. “You were gonna say ‘hot’, weren’t you?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t want to like, objectify you or take away from the badassery of the name, or whatever.”

MJ shakes her head with a smirk. “You’re an idiot.”

He hums in noncommittal agreement, studying her. She’s not sporting any injuries, or at least any that he can see. It’s hard to tell with what she’s wearing, though.

“You’re gonna need a better suit.”

MJ’s head whips around. It’s obviously not what she was expecting from him. “What?”

“Well, unless you wanna keep running around in that GLAD bag—”

“You’re not pissed?”


Nat flips him off over her shoulder.

MJ squints at him like she’s trying to decide whether or not he’s being honest. Peter meets her eyes and tries, really, to convey how fucking awesome he thinks it is that she’s done this—invited a persona for herself, fought despite being told not to.

He takes her hand. “You kicked ass today, Babushka.”
“I know I did,” says Nat.

MJ snorts. “I’m Babushka.”

“Well then what am I?”

“Tetya,” Peter tells her. “P’yanaya tetya.”

Nat scoffs. “What the hell kind of twisted logic is that?”

When they get back to the compound—after an exhaustive stint in an Amsterdam police station where they return all of the missing women and children, followed by a ride in the quinjet stilted with silence—Peter finds Pepper sitting on the edge of his bed.

“So,” she says, as he awkwardly drops his bag, “I came home early expecting to find at least you here with Morgan, and instead, to my great surprise, she’s been left in the charge of a thirteen year old girl?”

“Well to be fair, most babysitters are like thirteen—”

Pepper raises her hand. He shuts up.

She pats the bed. “Come sit.”

“Okay,” he agrees slowly, “but if you kill me I’m coming back to haunt you.”

“Good. You can spend a perpetual lifetime actually watching your little sister.”
He opens his mouth. Pepper slaps her hand over it. “Don’t. Don’t try to make me laugh so I won’t be angry. Tony used to do that all the time, and I swear to god, I can’t deal with it today, okay?”

He nods.

She lowers her hand.

“Where were you?”

There’s no point in lying. He’s been doing it so long for reasons that seem pointless now. To protect her? From what? From the reality that his job means he puts his life on the line? She already knows that.

“Amsterdam.”

“That story on the news, about the factory blowing up—”

“It wasn’t a factory,” he says. “It was… they were testing people, brainwashing them. Nat thinks it was HYDRA related.”

Pepper purses her lips. She’s quiet for a moment, like she’s trying to scrape together her strength. “Were you hurt?”

“Yeah, but I’m okay now.”

Pepper takes his hand. “You’re sure?”

“Yeah, I…” he frowns. “Coming home always makes it better.”

Pepper’s touches are gentle. She understands what he needs in a way that is always unspoken. Quietly she slips off her heels and scoots back onto the bed, reclining against the pillows. She reaches for Peter.
He doesn’t hesitate to curl up next to her.

“You know I love you, baby, but the secrets? They have to stop, okay?”

Secrets, like the project. Secrets, like the letter in his pocket.

“Okay. I’m sorry for worrying you.”

“I know,” she whispers. “I think no matter what I’m always gonna worry. Comes with the job.”

Peter holds her a little tighter. “I always worry about you, too.”

Pepper’s fingers card through his hair. She kisses the crown of his head and no doubt leaves behind a faint red lipstick stain, but Peter is too tired to mind. He closes his eyes, feeling heavy and warm.

“Happy birthday, honey.”
“I want a dog.”

Morgan makes this proclamation on a sticky, sunny afternoon in Central Park. They’re splayed out on the grass, both out of breath; him from chasing her, and Morgan from the bubbly laughter that had erupted with every raspberry he blew into her stomach.

Peter glances at her. Morgan keeps her eyes trained on the sky, however, and follows the clouds.

She’s going to be five at the end of the year. He doesn’t know how to wrap his mind around the idea that it’s been half a decade since the snap. In part, it makes him sick; in another, it makes him panic.

The older she gets, the more he’s failed.

“What would you name it?”

“Strawberry.”
“Mom is allergic.”

Morgan’s face scrunches up. “To strawberries or dogs?”

“Both,” he tells her.

“A kitty then.”

“Normally I’d see what I can swing, but I’m allergic to cats.”

“Then I want an alpaca,” she says, throwing her arms up in the peak of frustration.

Peter laughs. “Why on earth would you want an alpaca?”

She shrugs. “Just feels like I should have one.”

Peter shakes his head and scoops her up. He pulls her into his lap, peppering her face with kisses while she squeals and squirms. “You’re slobbery,” she whines.

“Guess you don’t need a dog after all,” he jokes, blowing another raspberry against her cheek. She giggles against her will.

She taps his nose. “Blueberry.”

“Is that my name, now?”

“Mm-Hmm. I like blueberries the best.”

Peter plants a milder kiss on her cheek as his phone starts to vibrate in his pocket. “I know you do. Hold on for a second while I take this?”
Morgan gives him her best *Are you kidding me* face, plopping into his lap. At least she doesn’t argue this time. It’s something she’s been getting scarily good at.

“Nat?”

“Peter.”

He stiffens instantly, because instead of her usual sly tone, she sounds tense and urgent.

“What’s up?”

“I need you to come down to the compound. We have… a situation.”

“What kind of a situation?”

He can’t go on another mission. Pepper is in Sweden on business for two more weeks, which means there’s no one else to watch Morgan.

“Do you remember Scott Lang?”

“You mean Ant Man?”

“Yeah, him. He uh… he just showed up at the front gates, Peter.”

Time stops. The *world* stops.

“Scott Lang was snapped.”

He knows that. *Everyone* knows that. Scott’s name had been among the list of the Vanished. No one
could account for his whereabouts at the time of the snap or after.

So that means…

“He wasn’t. We thought he—listen, it’s really complicated and he would do a much better job explaining it, but the gist is that he was stuck in some quantum-time-regulator thing for five years, only for Lang, it was five hours.”

Peter quells his disappointment.

“Quantum-time-regulator?”

“I don’t know. But Peter… he wants to use it to reverse the snap.”

He brings Morgan. The drive makes her antsy and by the time he gets to the compound, the sun has gone down and she’s fast asleep, so Peter carries her inside.

He finds Nat in her usual wing of the building, but she’s not alone. With her is a worn out looking Scott Lang… and Steve Rogers.

“Petya,” she says, and it’s more than a greeting; it’s an apology for not telling him about just what it was he’d be walking into.

“Nattie.” Peter tries for a small smile. He shifts Morgan in his arms.

“I see you brought the squirt.”

“Pepper is out of the country for a while,” Peter explains. “I volunteered to be babysitter.”

“M’not a baby,” Morgan mumbles sleepily.
“Yes you are.”

“No.”

He rolls his eyes. “I’m gonna go put her in her room, okay?”

Nat nods. Hopefully she understands that he doesn’t want Morgan anywhere near this. He doesn’t want to get her hopes up only to crush them.

But fuck, for the first time in years, Peter has hope. It’s a quiet, relentless thing that refuses to abate. It’s gasoline and Nat has lit the match, and now he is burning with it.

Morgan whines when he tries to get her to unlink her arms from around his neck. For a solid second she just dangles there like a monkey before she falls onto the mattress in a heap.

Then she’s crying.

“Hey,” Peter bundles her up against his chest, “what’s wrong, Brownie Bite?”

“I want mommy.”

“Oh,” Peter says stupidly. He had figured—he and Pepper both had—that it would be hard for her to deal with Pepper being gone for so long. It’s already been one week and there are twice that many to go. Pepper’s never been away for longer than a few days before.

“Well how about this? How about I call mommy and you can talk to her until you fall asleep. How’s that sound?”

Morgan nods, miserable and put out.

It takes three rings for Pepper to pick up. When she does, she’s out of breath and still finishing up a
conversation in Finnish. “Hi,” she greets after a minute, “I’m so sorry I didn’t call you today, kiddo, I’ve just been so swamped. Is everything okay?”

Peter glances at Morgan, who is now covering her face with her hands and shaking with silent sobs. “Uh, yeah, it’s just… do you have a minute? Somebody misses you a whole lot.”

“Aaw, Peter, you can just tell me you miss me. You don’t have to pretend it’s someone else.”

“Ha-ha. But it’s Morgan.”

“Is it bad?”

“Sort of. Listen, I have an AA meeting—”

“Alcoholics Anonymous?!”

“Okay, first off, that joke got old after the first eight million times, and second: I really have to be there so I’m gonna leave my phone with Morgan and you guys can talk, okay?”

Pepper sighs. “Alright, give me to the munchkin.”

Peter holds the phone out to Morgan, who eyes it with distrust. Hesitantly she takes it. “Mommy?”

He overhears Pepper’s bright, Hi, Sweetie! and watches as Morgan’s face lights up. He smiles, kisses her forehead, and leaves her with her mother.

“You’re talking about creating a different timeline,” Peter says flatly.

“No, no, see—because we would return the stones before anyone ever knew they were missing—”
“Have you ever heard of Hugh Everett’s Many Worlds Interpretation?” Peter asks, squeezing the rubber stress ball he’d grabbed from… somewhere, he can’t remember anymore. “If you mess up, if you change anything, what you do is create an alternate timeline. Reality forks. Do you understand how dangerous that could be? Regardless of the fact that you want to reverse the snap in this universe—and right now, I’m factoring the existence of a multiverse, here, because without it I don’t know how any of this would be possible—but back to the point: you fix this universe, but when you go back to return the stones and you screw things up? Anything could happen and the consequences of those mistakes are… unquantifiable. Think the domino effect but like, large scale.”

Scott blinks. “Um.”

Peter sighs. “Listen. Say we nab up the stones our first time through. Fantastic, wonderful, if impossible. What’s even more impossible is going back to make your returns, or whatever. That’s like, jumping from a moving car, off a bridge, and into a shot glass. You would need to create an entirely separate device that would allow you to navigate the quantum realm and actually coordinate yourself within it.”

Nat leans toward him. “How do you know all of this?”

Peter fishes the flash drive out of his pocket and slides it across the table to her. His voice is quiet. “What do you think I’ve been doing for the past five years, Nat?”

“Okay, okay,” Scott cuts in, “you mentioned a multiverse? What if we could find a way to like, travel through that? Find a reality where no one was snapped and—”

“And what? Kidnap them all and bring them here?” Peter shakes his head, standing to pace. “I’ve already considered that. It’s… not feasible.”

Nat is still watching him like a hawk, but there’s something sorrowful about her expression, like she’s seeing a part of him she wishes she weren’t.

“So what are you saying?” Rogers asks. “That it’s not possible?”

“I’m saying it’s complicated,” Peter says, too fried to even be angry with him. “Quantum fluctuation messes with the Planck scale, among other things. It’s… Time as we understand it is relative. It’s an abstract concept. It varies for different observers depending on your speed through space—which we
describe as a three dimensional arena. Space is where you get your coordinates of length, width, height; time is your fourth coordinate: direction. As we understand it, this fourth dimension only moves forward. What I’ve been trying to do is find a way around that. If we’re bringing quantum mechanics onto the table, I could… maybe. But it’s a delicate process.”

Nat had been half listening to him ramble and half scanning through his countless files. “Jesus, Petya.”

“Detecting three-dimensional holographic models and scales,” FRIDAY announces from the ceiling. “Would you like me to upload them?”

“Go ahead, FRI,” says Peter.

Just like that they’re flashing in front of them as FRIDAY scans and scatters them around the room. His theorems, spectrums, and paradigms.

“We gave up,” Peter tells Nat. “Harley and I. This is three years worth of work and it never went anywhere.”

“But now you have something else to work with,” Nat tells him firmly.

Peter scrubs a hand down his face. “Maybe.”

Maybe. And isn’t maybe everything?

“You know, at first I didn’t get it.”

Peter looks up and finds Steve Rogers leaning against the outer concrete wall with his arms folded over his chest, looking right at him.

Peter slides his phone into his pocket. “Didn’t get what?”
“Why Tony would recruit a fifteen year old kid to be an Avenger.” He smiles. “But now? I get it.”

Peter sighs. He’s wiped out, mentally, emotionally. It’s hard to remember the reasons for his resentment of Steve after going so long without really thinking about him at all.

“Technically I wasn’t an Avenger until I was sixteen.”

Steve hums. He takes a few steps closer and Peter makes no move to walk away. The super soldier squints out over the rolling grounds, painted in shadow, interspersed with soft spilled moonlight.

“When you look back on it now, do you think you were ready for it?”

Peter doesn’t even have to consider his answer. “No. Still don’t.”

Steve nods. He looks at Peter straight on. “Neither do I.”

Peter doesn’t hit him with some hero-worship speech of denial like he might have a few years ago. He understands, from watching Nat, from watching Tony and Pepper, what a toll this life takes. He understands because it’s taking a toll on him.

He looks down at his beat up sneakers. “I know about what happened in Siberia.”

Steve doesn’t even flinch. “I figured,” is all he says.

“He’d just found out his parents had been murdered. Worse, he’d found out it had been your friend who’d done it, and he’d watched it happen. And then you defended Barnes.”

“I did.”

“Why?”
“Bucky is—was my friend.” He frowns. “Is. Always will be, whether we bring him back or not.”

“Tony’s your friend too.”

“I think he’d beg to differ, but since he’s not here, I’m sure you’ll beg on his behalf.”

Peter stiffens. “You were listening,” he realises. “Christmas, like, three years ago? Are you serious, dude?”

“Only by accident,” Steve assures him. “I… I wanted to thank you then, but I’ll do it now. For being there for Nat and Rhodes and Pepper and all the rest of them. For watching out for Tony’s daughter.”

Peter swallows the bitter in the back of his mouth. “They’re my family.”

“And they’re mine, too.”

*Most of them, Peter thinks, not all. And not the same way they are mine.*

Rogers sighs. “I’ll regret what happened between me and Tony until the day I die, Queens. There’s nothing I can say that might excuse what I did, and I won’t insult you by trying. But I want you to know that despite the way you might feel about me, I’m in this with you. I’ve got your back.”

Peter nods haltingly. “Yeah. Ditto, Brooklyn.” He shoulders past Steve to walk inside, and as a consequence, misses the super soldier pulling out his phone to google what the hell *ditto* means.

Peter turns. Steve stashes his phone. “Your shield is fixed, by the way,” he says. “It’s in Lab 1B.”

Steve, Scott, and Nat leave together one morning and come back with Bruce Banner—who seems to have fully embraced his green thumb.
“I want Shrek’s autograph,” Morgan begs him, the minute she lays eyes on Dr Banner. “Please please please?”

Peter doesn’t know how to explain to her that Dr Banner isn’t Shrek, but rather a world renowned scientist. As he’s trying to get the words out, she sneaks away and asks Bruce herself.

He laughs and gives it to her.

―

“Let’s try one last sim before I blow my brains out,” Peter says, pacing the length of the table. He’s holed up in the conference room with the blinds drawn and he’s been working for so long, he’s not sure if it’s day or night. In the hangar, Nat and Scott and the rest are experimenting with Bruce’s theorem, but something about it feels off to Peter. “How about an inverted Möbius strip, please, FRIDAY.”

“Processing…”

He studies it. “Let me have that eigenvalue, the particle factoring, and a spectral decomposition.”

FRIDAY hums. “Just a moment.”

“Don’t worry if it doesn’t like, work,” he says offhandedly, trying to ignore the way his heart is pounding. *It has to. I’m just sort of—”*

“Model rendered.”

Peter looks up.

**MODEL: SUCCESSFUL.**

“Well *shit.*”
“Shit!”

Peter whirls. Morgan is standing in the doorway, grinning, and Peter realises that he must have fallen back into a chair in his shock. He feels like crying, but instead he shushes her. “We don’t say that word. C’mere, kiddo.”

Morgan rushes over, the door rattling shut behind her. She climbs into his lap and looks up at the holographic. “What’s that? It’s pretty.”

“That is what’s gonna save a whole lot of people.”

That’s gonna save your daddy.

Morgan tries to reach up and grab at it. “But it’s just a circle.”

He grins. “Kinda seems that way, huh? Sometimes it’s the simple stuff, I guess.”

“Bet you could save even more people with a square.”

“Maybe,” laughs Peter. “How bout we go get something to eat?”

“Juice pops?”

“Yeah, juice pops.” He picks her up. “Just as long as you don’t tell mommy what you said when she gets back.”

“That’s exploitation, Petey.”

Peter blinks. “Yes, it is. Who taught you that? Did I teach you that?”
She shakes her head. “Aunty Nat.”

“Oh, it was Aunty Nat,” Peter nods. Morgan soaks up every word she learns like a sponge. He doesn’t think she’s actually capable of forgetting things. Once or twice, he’s suggested to Pepper that they test her IQ, but Pepper hadn’t wanted to box her into a category or put expectations on her shoulders. She just wants to let Morgan be a kid.

Peter turns around on his way out of the room at the last second. The Möbius strip glows with artificial light, taunting, an intangible representation of made-from-scratch tangibility.

He can’t remember the last time he felt like a kid.

It turns out, Scott turned into a ten year old, then a baby, and then an old man.

Peter comes by just in time to see the last of it. He can tell they’re all frustrated, but it’s Steve who walks away.

Peter follows him.

“Banner’s theorem doesn’t work,” Steve says. Peter falters at the remembrance that he’s not the only one around here with super hearing anymore. “I know it’s only been a week, but I just—”

Peter is about to reply that he knows, he knows how to do it, what went wrong, how to fix the problem.

And then their ears perk together at the sound of a distant car engine approaching at top speed. A Mustang rounds the corner, blasting Led Zeppelin and overshooting its mark.

The car backs up a few feet.

Harley rolls down the window. “You rang?”
Peter grins. “Huckleberry.”

Harley slips out of the car. He takes off his sunglasses. “Let me guess: he turned into an old man?”

“Uh, yeah,” Steve stammers. “Among other things. How did you—who are you?”

Harley looks him up and down and then plasters the smile he reserves for old ladies across his face. “Harley Keener.” Then he turns back to Peter. “The old man thing, it’s the—”

“EPR paradox,” they finish together.

Peter grins. “We needed a Möbius strip.”

“Ah, so you figured it out a little bit later than I did,” surmises Harley. “Guess that makes me the smart one.”

“If that’s what helps you sleep at night.”

His friend smirks. “Well anyways, I fixed your little navigation problem.”

He tosses over a device which Peter catches with ease. It looks almost like a watch, but he knows there’s far more to it than that.

“A fully functioning Time-Space GPS. That’ll make it so we can coordinate where and when we are, keep a running log, and sync up when needed.”

Peter could cry. Instead, he settles for kissing his idiot friend’s cheek. “Thank you.”

Then the back door of the car opens. “Dude,” Ariel drawls, “how long were you planning on keeping me stuffed back here so you could make your stupid dramatic entrance? It’s hot. I’m dying. I need AC.”
On the day Rhodey, Nebula, and Rocket are due to arrive, Peter has annexed one of the labs for himself.

It’s where MJ finds him.

He doesn’t notice her until there are arms wrapping around his abdomen. He starts at first, but relaxes when the familiar scent of her shampoo permeates the air around him. MJ rests her chin on his shoulder.

“You’ve been working for sixteen hours straight,” she informs him softly. There is no judgement in her tone; just worry, making her words latch and halt as they spill out.

He still apologises.

“It’s okay.”

She is comforting them both, he knows, when she nuzzles against him and kisses his neck. There’s an ease to the action that draws him out of the long lines of RNA he had been scanning until his eyes started to smart.

Peter turns around. She threads her fingers through his hair and he, in turn, rests his head against her sternum. Her heart beats steadily and he closes his eyes to the tune of it.

“Is Pepper back?” he asks the floor.

Her fingers are warm against his neck. They dance there, and then trace the collar of his shirt. “Yeah. She took Morgan into to the city.”

Something inside of him breaks. Peter’s insides churn with an anagmalation of fear, of longing, of sorrow. It feels like the end of something and a part of him is terrified of what that means. The rest wants to ignore it and focus on the inferno, the hope that eats up everything else.
He tilts his head back to look at her. MJ pushes a curl from his face. “What are you doing?” she asks. “What are they building up there?”

He doesn’t know what to say except the truth. So he tells her: about Scott Lang’s return, about what he’s been doing the past five years, about the time machine they’re constructing in the quinjet hangar.

MJ takes it all in silence. By the end of it she has moved away from him. She bites her thumb nervously, without even realising she’s doing it, he’s sure.

“You really think you can do it?”

“I know we can.”

But his voice doesn’t hold the same conviction he feels inside. Peter has run over the numbers a thousand times, a plan is in the works, the machine is half finished thanks to Scott. Despite it all, he has doubt and it gnaws away at him the same way MJ gnaws her finger.

Then her gaze falls to the RNA sequencing he had forgotten about. “That doesn’t look like it has to do with time travel.”

“That’s because it doesn’t.”

“Are you gonna tell me about it?”

“No.” Peter bites his cheek. “I’m hoping there won’t ever be a reason to, so no.”

MJ purses her lips. She’s fidgeting with ill-contained anxiety. He knows it’s not just about him; she’s weighing all of the possibilities in her head—if it works, and her mother and sister come home to discover that Sam Jones is rotting in a jail cell on charges of physical abuse—if it doesn’t, but they
kill themselves trying.

She sits down on the stool next to him.

“Peter.”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t put this all on yourself,” she whispers. “It’s too much responsibility and if it doesn’t work—”

“I find your lack of faith disturbing.”

MJ snorts. “I’m not lacking faith. You might be the only person in the whole world I can actually count on... Loser.” He smiles. “I just don’t want this to be the thing that breaks you, Peter. You said you’ve been working on this for, what, four years? And if it doesn’t pan out... I just don’t want you to get, like, tunnel vision, you know?”

Peter takes her hand. “Can I tell you something in the hopes that the romantic undertones outweigh how cheesy it is?”

“Jesus,” MJ rolls her eyes. “Lay it on me, Parker, but be warned I might barf.”

He touches his forehead to her own. “No matter what happens, the only thing for me at the end of that tunnel is you.”

“I’m glad you warned me,” says MJ as she leans away. “That was fucking gross.”

Peter laughs.

MJ kisses his cheek.
The rain comes down in icy droves, sheets of glass that shatter into droplets as they impact the surface of Nat’s umbrella.

Peter stands beside her, shivering.

“So we just, like, wait here while he kills a bunch of people?”

Nat gives him an irritated look. She’s tense tonight, perennially careening toward the building they’ve been watching for the last two hours. She is a magnet drawn to her pair, and as much as it bothers him that the person to charge her is a literal serial killer, he understands.

“The men he’s… dealing with… they're not good people, Peter.”

“They’re still people.”

“I know that—”

“Do you? Because the last time I checked, it’s not our job to decide who lives or who dies. We’re not the Grim Reaper club, Nat, we’re the Avengers. We don’t track down Japanese syndicates and administer what we decide should be justice, okay—”

“You’re rambling.”

“I’m not rambling—”

“I get it, you’re nervous,” Nat rests her hand on his shoulder, “you're worried I’m going to forget about you.”

“Okay, my objections to that are threefold—”

“I’ll allow them.”
“—number one: you’re assuming this is even gonna work, that he’s gonna want to come with us, which I think is a little optimistic considering the scenes he’s been leaving behind with this little murder spree gap year or whatever. Second: I am not nervous. I know I’m your favorite. And third, I’m not rambling. If anything, you’re being abnormally snippy.”

“Everything about what you just said is false.”

Peter scowls. “I just don’t like the idea of standing here while people die.”

“Criminals.”

“Your morality compass has a screw loose.”

“Compasses aren’t mechanical, they’re drawn to strong electromagnetic fields.”

“Everything can be mechanical if you have a big enough imagination.”

Nat’s face scrunches up. “What the hell does that even mean?”

“I don’t know, but I’m making it my life’s quote. Write that shit down, I want it on my headstone when I go.”

She shakes her head. “You need a psych evaluation.”

“The amount of hypocrisy in that statement is just astounding—”

“Hush,” Nat says suddenly, the good natured smirk he’d worked so hard to achieve vanishing in an instant, “that’s him.”

Peter squints across the downpour, bright and electric with the hazy, spilling glow of neon signs. Two men are fighting in the street with katanas. Nat grabs Peter by the arm and leads him closer,
though she strays well clear of the light.

The fight ends. The figure in the black raincoat stands without any real triumph over the corpse of the Japanese yakuza leader and then, like breathing, rounds on them.

Nat doesn’t flinch.

“You shouldn’t be here.”

Peter has never heard Clint Barton speak before. He doesn’t expect the sound to be so broken, so heavy with defeat.

“Neither should you,” says Nat.

“I’ve got a job to do.”

Nat frowns. “Is that what you’re calling this?” she asks. “Killing all these people isn’t going to bring your family back.”

Barton’s face changes—crumbles, really, and Nat’s features contort to match his pain. They are broken mirrors of one another.

Nat shifts, almost like she wants to move forward and offer comfort, only to stop herself at the last second. “We found something,” she tells him. “A chance, maybe.”

“Don’t…”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t give me hope.”
Nat swallows. “I’m sorry I couldn’t give it to you sooner.”

Barton looks away from her like he simply can’t bear the sight of Natasha Romanoff, open and pleading and on the verge of tears. It’s a hard thing for Peter to see, himself.

“It’s been five years,” Barton hisses. “Five years and you come to me now? What’s changed?”

“A lot of things,” Nat says. “We should go somewhere to talk—”

“No. No, not until you… I need to know. I have to know what—I’m sorry, who is this?”

Peter realises that, for the first time, he’s the one being addressed. “I’m Peter Parker. Spider Man.”

Barton looks him up and down. Not disparagingly, more curious. “And I suppose there’s reason you’re here?”

“I’m the guy you almost killed in Cairo a few years back,” Peter says, and Nat pinches him. “I’m-I’m also here to explain everything.”

Barton frowns. “A kid?”

“That kid graduated with a mastery in thermonuclear physics after three years of study,” Nat snaps defensively. “He’s the one who figured it out.”

“Figured what out?”

“Time travel,” Peter says, like it’s the simplest thing in the world.

They end up perched at the counter of a greasy burger joint. The storm rages outside and it feels almost like home, only Peter is sitting beside an ex-Shield Agent turned Avenger (and then
subsequently turned anime-style movie murderer), explaining the basics of what they’re trying to do on a paper napkin with a half-dry ballpoint pen.

“This is insane,” Barton announces, when Peter’s lecture is winding down. “You can’t possibly guarantee it would work.”

“No,” Peter agrees, “I guess maybe we can’t. But can I ask you something, Barton?”

The archer wipes his mouth. “Shoot.”

“Could you ever forgive yourself if you didn’t try?”

The older man doesn’t reply. Peter pushes on. “I know that I couldn’t. I can’t speak for you, but the people I lost? I would give anything to bring them back.”

Barton glares at the red linoleum countertop, mouth twister bitterly, the weight of loss insurmountable upon his shoulders.

“I know what it’s like to lose everything,” Peter tells him quietly, though he doesn’t mind if Nat hears. “I know what it’s like to feel like there’s nowhere to go, that there’s nothing that could possibly bring you out of all that dark.”

Barton side-eyes him. “So what did it for you, then? What brought you into the light?”

Peter glances at Nat. Together their eyes fall to the hourglass tattoo on his forearm, the one that matches Barton’s; they have both been staring, both wondering what it means to be the only ones with her insignia branded onto their skin.

He thinks of Pepper, and Morgan and MJ and Harley, and everyone else he’s lost. For the first time he allows himself to entertain the thought that they aren’t forever lost.

He looks Barton dead in the eye. “I let myself hope.”
It takes five seconds.

For Peter, those seconds are agony.

And then they are over.

They are over and Clint Barton stands alive and well on the platform, clutching a baseball glove and panting, crying.

Harley throws his arms around Peter, who has never in his life felt more stunned. “It worked!”

It works.

“What are you doing out here?”

Nat steps closer, not at all surprised he’d heard her before she’d announced herself. He was trained by her, after all.

Also, the spidey senses definitely don’t hurt.

“I could ask you the same question.”

Nat doesn’t get an answer. She sighs, deciding to let him lead the conversation. “I smelt something funny. Thought I’d get some fresh air.”

“It’s Ariel,” Peter snorts. “She’s burning sage to cleanse the compound of evil spirits.”

“Guess that’s why we’re out here, then, huh?”
Her kid turns, smiling. “Are you implying I’m anything less than an angel?”

“Me? Never.”

Nat sits down next to Peter. They’re situated on a bench outside beneath the gazebo. Rain falls lightly upon the surface of the river, a thousand rippling kisses. The air is clearer, sharper, and the cold embrace of the wind reminds them that they are alive. That they have a job to do.

“Nobody keeps secrets from me.”

“But you keep secrets from everybody else.”

“That’s true.”

“So tell me a secret.”

Nat hums. “What kind?”

“Budapest?”

He’s smirking, the little shit. Nat whacks his arm. “Never. I promised Clint.”

“If he asked about Barcelona, would you tell?”

Nat smiles at him. “Never.”

Peter absorbs that. He looks away from her. That’s how he’s been spending most of his time, lately; sitting and ruminating on anything and everything. Nat remembers a time, eons ago, when Tony would reluctantly answer her once-a-month phone calls. They never talked about the team, but they talked about Peter.
Tony had described him as a huge pain in the ass, a spritely squirt, the world’s biggest nerd—Jesus, Nat, you should see how I decked out his room, it has Star Wars wallpaper. Kid’s gonna love it.

Peter, to Tony, had been bright and young and awkward and rambling. Tony had liked to make out that Peter was obnoxious, that he could barely stand the kid, that he was at his wit’s end, but Nat always knew it was an act.

Tony had loved him.

And Peter still loves Tony.

It’s a tragedy of unquantifiable proportions. He’s a son doing everything he can to bring back his dead father, who, if everything goes right, will return to find out that he has not just one, but two children.

And now, in this world of grey and ash and collapsed stars where hearts are supposed to be, Peter is worn down, battered and bruised, as dark as the sky above them.

Death had snuffed out his light. Loss after loss.

He shivers suddenly. Nat doesn’t even think before taking his hand and resting her chin on his shoulder. There was a time when the very idea would have repulsed her. Human contact and the Black Widow didn’t mix. She was a machine, hard-wired to kill without mercy.

But here she is.

“You know, Wanda used to do this thing,” Nat begins. “A lot of the places we stayed in when we were on the run didn’t have TV, and we would get crazy bored, so Wanda would think of her best dreams—those ones where everything goes right and the whole world is this warm, safe place—and she’d play them for us in our heads.”

Peter hums. The sound is a vibration against her cheek. “That sounds nice.”
“It was.”

“Do you have a good dream?”

Nat nods. “I do. It’s a secret, though.”

Peter squeezes her hand. “Tell it to me?”

“It’s not a dream so much as a feeling,” Nat says after a small pause. She leans against him fully, closing her eyes and surrendering to the memory. “How I imagine it to be. Dancing on a stage in front of hundreds of people.”

“What’s it like?”

“Warm. Almost hot, because of the stage lights. There’s no sound. Just me and the music. It’s a part of me, and I’m a part of it. I move through it and it moves around me. But the best part is when I fall.”

“That’s a good thing?”

“It’s a great thing. Mistakes are what make us human.”

__________________________________________

“Why do you have a different last name from us?”

Morgan’s question makes Peter’s fingers fumble. He loses footing with the braid he had been weaving into her hair. Frustrated, he starts again, thinking.

“I, uh… I had a different mom and dad.”

He doesn’t know what else to say. It’s true, after all. It’s why he’s a Parker and not a Potts, or even a
Stark. For a minute Peter actually entertains the idea of what that might have been like; knowing the truth all along, being raised by Tony.

It’s too strange for words.

“But you’re my brother?” Morgan presses.

“Well, yeah, but it’s—” he stops himself before he can say complicated. It is, without a doubt, Morgan Potts’ least favourite word. She understands that things can be hard to explain, but prefers to crack down rather than brush under the rug. Peter sighs.

“My parents died when I was really little,” he finds himself saying.

“Littler than me?”

“By a bit, yeah. And after they were gone, I went to live with my aunt and uncle, but they both ended up leaving too.”

“Like daddy?”

Peter hesitates. “My aunt, yeah. She went the same day daddy did. But my uncle… that happened a long time ago.”

“Oh. I’m sorry, Petey.”

Peter kisses the top of her head so she knows it’s okay. “See the thing is, kids always need someone to look after them, and so that’s what mommy did for me. She knew no one else could be there.”

“And now she’s your mommy too?”

“I… yeah. Now she’s my mommy too.”
“So why can’t your last name be Potts like me?”

“Because I… I don’t want to forget where I came from, Mo. Who I came from. I don’t have any family left, which means I’m the last Parker. I don’t there to be no Parkers left, you know?”

It’s a lie.

The last of his blood family is sitting right in front of him, but he can’t tell her that. Most of the time, Peter doesn’t even think about it. She would be his sister whether or not they shared a father, but here they are.

Morgan holds up the elastic and Peter ties off the braid.

“I could be a Parker too,” she suggests. “And mommy? And then there would be three Parkers instead of one.”

Peter smiles. “I wish, but that’s not how that works, small fry.”

Morgan turns around, frowning. “But doesn’t it get lonely? Being the last one?”

“Sure it does, Mo, but I’ve got you, right?”

Morgan rests her forehead against his own and smiles. She pokes his cheek. “You’re always my brother,” she tells him, “no matter who’s your mommy or your daddy.”

“That is very noble of you to say,” a new voice proclaims.

They both turn to the entrance of the cafeteria and find Nebula leaning against the door, her arms folded over her chest.

Morgan beams. “Nebbie!”
“Morgan. Hello.”

Morgan isn’t deterred by Nebula’s clipped tone. She never has been, really. Like most things, she takes it in stride and runs up to Nebula, throwing her arms around her legs. Nebula awkwardly pats Morgan’s head.

“I bring gifts,” she says slowly, when Morgan finally pulls away.

Peter raises an eyebrow. “Yeah?”

Morgan practically drags Nebula over to the table they’ve commandeered for themselves. It’s covered in an array of butterfly clips and apple slices and bobby pins. Nebula adds to the mix a box covered in brown paper with the world’s worst excuse for a bow on top, and a strange looking piece of foodstuff.

Peter grins. “A Garden Fruit.”

Nebula nods. “For you. In exchange for a favour.”

“You don’t need to bring me stuff for that,” Peter tells her. “You can just ask me, okay?”

Nebula studies him and then offers a strained jerk of her chin. She touches her head. “It’s my wiring,” she explains. “I keep… glitching.”

Peter nods. He instructs her to take his seat while Morgan rips open her gift. “Chess!” She squeals, showing Peter the box.

“I thought perhaps we could play,” Nebula says, almost hesitant.

Morgan squeals some more, practically falls out of her seat in her haste, and climbs onto Nebula’s lap to pepper her face with kisses. “Thank you thank you thank you,” she jabbers. “I love you, Nebbie.”

Nebula ducks her head. “It… it was no problem.”
Morgan doesn’t even notice the lack of returned sentiment. She is too busy tearing the box open and setting up the pieces. They settle across from one another while Peter carefully pries the modified golden plate from Nebula’s head to review the circuitry beneath.

As he works, they talk. At first their conversation is trivial. Morgan grills Nebula about space and aliens and monsters and constellations, and Nebula answers every question slowly, haltingly.

Then Nebula speaks without prompting.

“I had a sister, you know,” she says. “Her name was Gamora.”

Morgan moves a pawn. “Was she blue like you?”

“No, she was green,” Nebula says. “We… we were like you and Peter, you see. Not related by blood. But still sisters. Still family.”

“Do you miss her?”

“Yes.” Nebula looks down at the board. “It would seem we have come to a stalemate.”

Morgan pouts. “Poop.”

“Poop indeed.”

“I’m sure you both tried your best,” Peter reassures. “Why don’t you go again?”

“Is there—?” Nebula turns to him, “is that a piece of my circuitry in your mouth?”

It’s just a screw. He’s holding it between his teeth. Peter grins and winks at her. “Relax, I don’t have cooties.”
“Cooties? What are those, some lethal Terran bacteria?”

“It’s what’s all over boys,” Morgan says. “It lives in their spit and if you kiss ‘em you die.”

Nebula glares at him. “Is this true?”

“No, it’s not true,” Peter rolls his eyes. “Morgan, who told you that?”

“Ariel.”

“Who is Ariel?”

“A menace,” Peter gripes.

“Do you want me to get rid of her for you? I can use lethal measures.”

“What? No—”

Morgan perks up. “What are lethal measures?”

“It is a practise of killing that involves no chance of survival—”

“Okay, that’s enough talk about murder and death for today,” Peter cuts in. “Neb, you should be good to go.”

“Just in time for the meeting, then.”

“Meeting? What meeting?”
“Thor has arrived.”

“Waitwaitwaitwait— did you say Thor?!?”

Peter has never met Thor. He’s heard of him, he’s seen him on TV, and when he was younger (okay, when he was in high school) he even owned a few collectible action figures.

He’s heard just about everything: tall, hot as fuck, literal god of thunder, complete badass.

This is not the reality that greets Peter Parker when he walks into the conference room.

“Dude, I think Jeffrey Lebowski ate Thor,” Peter mutters to Nat.

She whacks him. “He’s had a rough time,” she chastens, “but he’s here, right? He’s trying.”

The meeting is a chaotic, never-ending mess. They each share what they know about the stones and Nat compiles notes. Steve suggests they start with Aether. All eyes turn to Thor.

“Is he asleep?”

“No, I’m pretty sure he’s dead.”

Harley leans out and nudges Thor with his shoe. The actual fucking god flails and Harley jerks back, right into Peter’s waiting grip. But Thor just yawns, stretches, and stumbles over to the board. “Where to start? The Aether…”

Nebula tells them about the soul stone. Peter knows it’s hard for her. He stands in quiet solidarity while she talks, because he knows she’s not one for sentiment or touchy-feely stuff.
Night falls. The others drift off to various areas of the compound to sleep or think or brood. He and Nat, however, are sprawled out on the table while Bruce is curled up on the floor.

The room smells like mint and patchouli; Ariel had drifted in about an hour ago and lit incense because she said they were two seconds from wigging out and this’ll really balance out your energies I promise.

It hasn’t balanced out anything for Peter though. Funny the things one remembers about the dead.

May used to get patchouli oils from the Wednesday farmer’s market in Queens. She would burn it on days where her carpal tunnel acted up or she got migraines. Peter had hated the smell of it.

He still does, but for different reasons now.

“That Time Stone guy…”

“Doctor Strange,” Peter supplies.

“Yeah, what kind of a doctor was he?”


Nat freezes. “He lived in New York?”

“Yeah, Sullivan Street,” Bruce says.

Nat nudges Peter excitedly where he’s resting against her side. “Guys, if you pick the right year, there are three stones in New York.”

“Shut the front door!”
“I got a bad feeling about this Vormoir place,” Bruce says around a mouthful of food, “I mean, two people go, only one leaves? Doesn’t sound safe.”

“Gamora was killed,” Nebula reminds him.

“Yeah, okay, but what if she wasn’t?”

“Impossible. She was too good a fighter. Thanos must have taken her by surprise.”

“But—”

“Hey, what have we said?” Steve cuts in. “No shop talk at the dinner table, remember?”

They both quiet. Peter has barely spoken himself. He glares down at his noodles like they’re the cause for the way his stomach is churning, and not the prospect of the mission tomorrow. Peter prods at them with his chopsticks because they just deserve it.

“What is this?”

Peter looks up. Harley is staring at Ariel, who simply shrugs. “It’s tofu.”

“It’s what? Excuse me?”

“It. Is. Tofu.” She pokes him. “I want you to try it. Maybe you’ll like it enough to stop eating meat.”

“Oh my god.” Harley looks a little green, inspecting the lifeless grey lump on his plate. “Why don’t you just feed me arsenic and be done with it?”

“It’s good.”
“It’s jiggling,” Harley counters, and just to prove his point he shakes his plate. “It looks like cat food, Ariel. I can’t eat this.”

“Thirty-five billion dead animals a year, Harley,” Ariel snaps.

“If that’s the cost for edible food, then so be it.”

Ariel gasps. “Oh my god. I need to get away from you, you’re throwing off my chakras.”

“Your what now?”

“You know, life is full of suffering and suffering is caused by desire, therefore if we eliminate desire we eliminate suffering.”

Harley holds up his hand, clearly trying not to laugh. “I’m sorry, since when are you a Buddhist?”

Ariel folds her arms over her chest. “I’m exploring different theologies.”

Clint rises from the table abruptly and storms away. Peter is the only one positioned well enough to see his tears.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Peter turns to her. He’s standing by the windows that overlook the river, bundled in a cardigan with too-long sleeves that Pepper figures either belongs to Harley or MJ (or all three of them, at this point). He looks cold. He looks small.

His mouth opens and closes as he struggles to answer.
Then, “I couldn’t.”

Pepper steps closer. Her heels dig into the blue pads that cover the floor in the gym, so she kicks them off.

“You could’ve.”

“See, no, I couldn’t have.” He is biting the inside of his cheek, gnawing on his words. “I didn’t know if I could do it. And if I’d told you? If I’d gotten your hopes up and then realised it wasn’t gonna happen? I’d never be able to forgive myself. I still won’t.”

Pepper purses her lips. At first, she had been angry. It had been Steve who had explained it to her, and hearing him speak always pisses her off, so she assumes that must’ve had something to do with it. But it still makes her angry that he’d been keeping something this big from her, that he’d neglected to tell her so many things. Cario, Barcelona, Switzerland, and now this. They are supposed to be a family, the exception to the rule of blood vs water; he is her son.

Pepper doesn’t know exactly when it had happened. Maybe when she was curled up on the birthing table screaming and shaking and crying her eyes out, begging for Tony, deliriously bartering for some god she didn’t believe in to return him to her, please, and then Peter had taken her hand and coached her through the pain and whispered all of the right things. He’d even gotten up on the table with her so she would have someone to lean on.

Or maybe it had been earlier, when he’d come home with a gunshot wound and Pepper hadn’t even blinked before plucking it out with a pair of pliers, bandaging the wound while he rambled on about the people he’d saved and the criminals he’d caught and the empanada some Argentinian woman had given him when he’d stopped her restaurant from being robbed.

Or later than that, even, when they’d gone to Coney Island together; her and Morgan and Peter, and Morgan had gotten cotton candy all over everything but Peter had just laughed and held her anyway, despite her sticky hands on his cheeks; and he had held her again when she’d gotten scared because of all of the people and the noise and the lights; and again, on the way home, she had fallen fast asleep in his arms.

He is her son.

And tomorrow, he might die.
“I wanted to stop,” Peter whispers suddenly, before she can say all of the things she wants to. “I did stop. But if I’d told you, I never would have. I would’ve died to do this. I still will.”

“No.”

Peter’s eyes fly up. “What?”

“No.” Pepper shakes her head. “You’re not risking your life on a hairpin chance, do you understand me? If you do this, you stay safe.”

“I mean, I don’t really know if there’s a safe way to do this—”

“You find a way.”

“Pep.”

“Peter.”

He smiles. It’s the soft kind, the one that means he’s thinking something too sweet to say.

A tear streaks down his cheek, sudden and startling. It lands with a loud plop on the safety mat.

“Peter?”

“You’ve done so much for me,” he says. “I just… I don’t know how to thank you.”

“Thank me?” Pepper shakes her head. “Baby, loving you isn’t something you need to thank me for. You’re my kid.”
“Yeah but…”

He trails off. Pepper reaches out and grabs his hand. “But what?”

“If it works, if we do this… it’s not gonna be the same, you know? Everything is gonna change. And don’t get me wrong, I want them all to come back, but I… I’m just not ready to stop being your son.”

Pepper hugs him even before he’s done talking. Peter stiffens in her arms and then relaxes in one movement.

“This doesn’t just stop. We’re bringing them back, not reversing the last five years. You don’t just \textit{stop} being my kid, Peter. That doesn’t go away.”

Peter returns her embrace. They stay like that for a moment.

“I love you, mom.”

Pepper’s eyes burn but she \textit{won’t} cry. She is made of steel and he is made of iron and they don’t \textit{bend} easy, they don’t \textit{break} easy.

\textit{He won’t die.}

“I love you, too.”

“Five years ago, we lost. All of us. We lost friends... We lost family... We lost a part of ourselves. Today, we have a chance to take it all back. You know your teams, you know your missions. Get the stones, get them back. One round trip each. No mistakes. No do-overs. Most of us are going somewhere we know, but it doesn't mean we should know what to expect. Be careful. Look out for each other. This is the fight of our lives. And we're gonna win.” Steve glances at Peter. “Whatever it takes. Good luck.”
“He’s pretty good at that,” Rocket mutters.

Scott grins excitedly. “Right?”

Peter shifts nervously on the pad. Beside him, Nat is practically bouncing up and down. She’s ready for this in a way that he’s not, confident in a way he never could be.

“Go for it, Shrek,” Peter says.

Bruce snorts. “Tractors engaged.”

Peter flexes his hands and throws a glance over his shoulder. Pepper is standing by the monitors. He smiles at her, and she smiles back.

They had said their goodbyes earlier. He had asked her, one last time, if she wanted to come. Pepper declined, claiming someone needed to stay on the ground.

He’ll never admit it, but he’s glad.

He thinks she probably knows anyway.

Clint and Rocket are bickering about something. Peter looks at Rhodey, who is wearing the modified suit Peter had made for him, complete with leg braces and a personalised helmet.

“Watch Nebula’s back?”

Nebula scowls. “I could kill you a thousand different ways before you even knew what was happening.”

“A thousand, huh?” Rocket looks up at Peter. “That means she likes you.”
Rhodey snorts. “I’ve got her six,” he promises.

There is a high pitched whirring sound that grows steadily louder.

Nat throws him a smirk.

“See you in a minute.”

Quantum travel gives Peter the worst sort of vertigo. One second everything is stretched out ad infinitum, bright and blinding and strange; the next second, he is standing in an alleyway in the middle of New York City, trying not to vomit.

Somewhere in this city, May is alive. Peter tries to remember what it was that she’d been doing the day of the Chitauri attack. The hospital, he thinks; she’d been called in to help with the influx of emergency injuries. And Ben…

*Ben* is here. Ben is probably out on the streets right now, fielding frightened civilians to safety. He’s not six feet underground in a cedar box with silk lining. He’s not scattered ashes on an apartment floor.

“Alright, we all have our assignments,” says Steve, somehow still the picture of composure. “Two stones uptown, one stone, down. Stay low, keep an eye on the clock.”

The four of them nod, but the intensity of the moment is ruined when Bruce’s past self thunders down the street, stomping on cars and raging incomprehensibly.

The Bruce of now, or the future Peter supposes, looks away in embarrassment.

“Feel free to smash things along the way,” Steve suggests.

“I think it’s gratuitous,” Bruce mutters, ripping his shirt off, “but whatever.”
He leaves them. Steve turns to Peter, Harley, and Scott. “Time to shrink, Lang.”

Scott rolls his eyes but follows Steve’s command. “Alright,” he says through the comms a moment later, “I’m safely nestled in Keener’s luxurious locks.”

Harley squirms. “Jesus, you itch.”

“So I’ve been told. What conditioner do you use, by the way?”

Steve sighs. “This is gonna be a long day.”

“Funny, that’s exactly what my wife used to say five minutes after she got home from work,” Scott tells them, sarcastically bright.

Peter frowns. “Dude.”

“Well, she’s an ex wife now. I guess that’s why.”

“Change into your gear,” Steve orders.

Peter and Harley nod and slap their wristbands. Being encased in nanites is like having freezing cold water crawl along the skin. Peter’s suit forms around him, all black and more high-tech than ever.

Harley’s suit, on the other hand, is silver. “I knew it wasn’t a Halloween costume,” Peter had quipped upon the first time seeing it, when Harley had had to come save his ass from some gigantic lobster-monster that was tearing up the Hudson.

“Nice costume,” he says now, just to fuck with him.

Harley sighs. “I suddenly relate to the former Mrs. Lang on a metaphysical level. Also, Halloween isn’t for another two days.”
Rogers cuts in before they can start bickering, or worse: bitch slapping each other. “Alright, alright. You good?”

“Golden,” Scott says.

“Whatever,” Harley replies.

“Status report?”

“I am now a quarter of an inch tall, and we are sixty-four feet from the tower. That’s the equivalent of three-point-two miles. That’s a long way,” Lang says, “even for a man of science.”

“Lucky you got me, Innerspace,” Harley snipes, and sparks his repulsors.

Harley Keener isn’t one for waxing poetic, but damn if seeing Tony Stark walking around his New York City penthouse isn’t enough to shatter the heart into a thousand dangerous, rusted shards.

He looks younger than Harley ever knew him to be. The light of the arc reactor peeks out below his Black Sabbath t-shirt. He’s right there, twenty feet away tops.

He’s not, Harley thinks determinedly. He’s not there. He’s not even real to you. He’s not your Tony.

“Are you getting ideas?”

“I’m not getting ideas,” Harley hisses.

“Are you sure? You look like someone killed your cat, which is—I mean, I understand, it’s hard—”
Harley closes his eyes and counts to five so he doesn’t actually flick Lang off his shoulder. “Has anyone ever told you you’re fucking loud as shit?”

“Shit don’t speak, it just reeks.”

Harley scowls, despite the fact that Lang just uttered his new favourite slogan and he definitely wants it on a t-shirt (or twelve, plus hats, maybe bumper stickers too)—

“What’s it looking like up there, Keener?”

Harley’s frown deepens at the sound of Steve Rogers’ voice. He sort of hates him, even if the older man did absolutely nothing to incur his wrath. Harley doesn’t even know the details about what went down between him and Tony; all he knows is that the world was divided between the two like Edward vs Jacob on crack, and in the debate, he’d chosen Tony’s side.

And if there’s one thing Harley Keener can do, it’s hold a grudge.

“I don’t know.” He listens. “Apparently a STRIKE team is coming?”

“That means things are wrapping up,” Steve reports. “I’m almost at the elevators.”

Harley tenses as the STRIKE team enters the penthouse. “We’ll take that off your hands,” one of them says to Romanoff.

“By all means,” she replies breezily. “Careful with that thing.”

“Unless you want your mind erased, and not in a fun way,” Barton tacks on. He looks dramatically different than the man Harley remembers; younger, brighter, almost boyuant.

“Who are these guys?” Scott asks.

“HYDRA agents,” Steve says through the comms, “but we didn’t know that, yet.”
“Well you should’ve,” Harley replies. “I mean, look at that one dude’s haircut.”

“And the tattoos,” Scott tacks on.

“They reek of evil. This was totally obvious. And god, while I’m critiquing fashion choices, that suit makes your ass look flat as fuck, Rogers.”

“Aren’t you kidding me right now? What is this, a runway?”

“Don’t listen to him, Cap,” Scott says, “as far as I’m concerned, that’s America’s Ass.”

And you’re a kiss ass, Harley thinks, but doesn’t say it as he’s too busy eyeing the briefcase with the stone. Tony is straddling it, which… “That’s some big dick energy,” Harley whispers. “Okay, you’re up, Lang.”

“Alright. Flick me.”

Harley does. He waits, watching while the Avengers bicker with Bruce until he storms off. Harley taps the EDITH glasses that Peter had loaned him. “Okay, sceptre is in the elevator just passing the 80th floor.”

“On it,” says Steve. “Parker, are you positioned in the lobby?”

“Aye aye, Captain.”

“I can’t hear you,” Harley sings.

“Aye aye, captain—”

“Ooooh, who lives in a pineapple under the sea—”
“What the hell is happening—”

“Absorbent and yellow and porous is he—”

“Please stop.”

Harley snickers. “Okay, whatever. I’ll meet you down there, I just need to take care of something first.”

“What?!” Rogers demands. “Kid, you can’t just go off on your own. We have to stick to the plan, remember?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Harley says, slinking down empty hallways, “trust me, there will be no adverse affects.”

“Kid—”

Harley turns off his comms.

He slips into the workshop using the clearance code he had learned years ago; the one that works even now: VIRGINIA.

The place comes to life.

Harley approaches the desk and takes out a flash drive. “Long time, no see, huh Jar?”

The elevator doors slide open, Tony Stark walks out, and Peter’s heart stops.
For a solid ten seconds he just doesn’t breathe. All of the air is gone from his lungs and he’s thirteen again, he’s thirteen and he can’t breathe and uncle Ben is dying right in front of him and it’s cold, it’s so cold, there’s ice in his veins and nothing but dark, dark, dark for lightyears; space never ends, the nothing never ends, death never ends.

But here is Tony, alive.

His father is standing twenty feet away from him.

“Hey, Pickled Piper,” Lang says, snapping him out of whatever black hole he’d almost been swallowed by, “did you know that Stark uses Axe cologne?”

Peter blinks the tears from his eyes. “Uh, I’ll file that information away for later. Just do the thing, would you?”

“You’re sure it won’t hurt him?”

“It’s just a mild cardiac dysrhythmia,” Peter reminds him, putting his hands behind his back so it won’t be obvious they’re shaking.

“That doesn’t sound mild.”

“Just trust me, okay? I read all about it. He should be fine.”

Okay, so maybe he’s not totally sure. Peter had studied the older models of the arc reactor extensively to figure out which parts were absolutely essential for continued survival and which ones could be gone without for, say, a thirty minute ambulance ride to the nearest hospital.

Tony is arguing with the SHIELD-but-actually-HYDRA agents. “I know you got a lotta pull, I’m just saying—”

(TonyTonyTonyTony)
“Okay, then give me the case.”

“*Dude, now,*” Peter hisses.

Tony flails. “Get your hands off!”

“Scott, I’m serious, you’re cutting it close here.”

“Here goes!”

Just like that, Tony is on the ground, writhing and clutching his chest with wide eyes. He rolls onto his side and for just one single heartbeat, their eyes meet.

There’s a spark of something, maybe fear.

Scott pushes the case toward Peter, who startles out of his daze and stoops to grab it. “Great. Awesome. So now we go, right?”

“Right—”

The rest happens at once.

Bruce bursts out of the stairwell and whacks Peter into the far wall.

(!!danger!!)

His spidey senses are a little late on this one, muffled under blankets of grief and longing and *tonytonytony.*

The case goes flying. Loki grabs it.
“I cannot believe we screwed up so bad!”

“Yeah, well, you know what I wanna know?! Why you didn’t just crawl up Thanos’ ass a long time ago and get rid of him that way?! I mean, where were you when the Snap happened, anyway?”

“Up his—what, like a reverse poop?!”

“Yes!”

“No!” Scott bursts. “No, that is not in my job description!”

Peter isn’t listening anymore. He swerves toward the sidewalk and rolls down the window. “Huckleberry.”

Harley sighs. He gets in the car.

Peter pinches him.

“Ow! What the hell was that for?!”

“For turning off your comms,” Peter says, “and for freely walking the streets of New York like an idiot.”

“You’re mean when you’re cranky,” Scott remarks from the back seat.

“I’m not mean. I’m never mean. I’m a ray of fucking sunshine.” He grips the steering wheel so tight it starts to bend. “God, Harley, you don’t turn off your comms! Ever. That’s rule one.”
“Yeah, okay, but it worked, right? I mean, I’m assuming Rogers got the sceptre and you guys got the tesseract, so—it” he stops talking abruptly. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, don’t tell me.”

“Okay, fine, I won’t.”

“You didn’t get it, did you?”

“You said you didn’t wanna know—”

“Peter! We had one shot!”

“I know that!” Peter explodes. “I know we only had the one! And now, we have zero! Zero chances!”

Harley’s face scrunches up. Peter looks away. He pulls into an alley and takes a moment to breathe. God, they really fucked up. They had one chance, and now they’re gonna have to go back and tell the others that they failed.

Well, Peter failed.

Steve succeeded, apparently.

He drops from the sky, right into the alley they’re parked in. Peter sighs and leans his head out the window. “Cap,”

Steve turns. Peter clears his throat. “We have a bit of a problem.”

“Huh,” Scott scoffs. “Yeah we do.”

“These idiots didn’t get the fucking cube,” Harley clarifies, leaning across Peter, who decides he might as well get out of the car.
Steve already seemed to have gathered the issue, though. “Well, what are we gonna do now?”

“I might have an idea.”

Peter rounds on Harley. “What?”

“Remember those SHIELD files on the tesseract we read when we were trying to find the best time to grab it up?”

Peter does remember. “Garden State, military installation.”

“Wait, what?” Scott steps toward them. “You do realise we only have one particle left each, right? That’s it. We’re not going anywhere else, understand? You use your particle? Bye bye, you’re not coming home.”

Steve raises an eyebrow. “Yeah? Well if we don’t try, no one else is coming home either.”

“Listen—” Harley holds up a hand, “I’ve done a fuck ton of reading on these particles. I’m telling you, if we go where I’m saying, I think we have a chance to acquire both the particles and the cube.”

“Tesseract.”

“Shut up.”

They both look at Steve. He studies them.

“Whatever it takes, right?” asks Peter.

Steve nods. “When were they both there?”

Harley steps forward. They form a loose semi-circle. “I have a vaguely exact idea.”
“How vague?”

“How vague?”

“What are you talking about?!” Scott demands. “Where are we going?!”

Peter snaps his fingers, thinking. “They would have been there…”

“Who is they? *What are we doing?*”

“Improvising.”

“Right,” says Scott. *What are we improvising?*

Peter takes the sceptre case from Steve and hands it to Scott. “Not ‘we’. You are taking this back to the compound. Please. And thank you.”

“But—”

“Suit up,” Harley says.

“What’s in New Jersey?!”

“0-4, 0-4,” Peter mutters. Their heads brush together as they re-configure the times on their GPS devices. “Uh, 0-7—”

“0-7,” Steve repeats.

“1-9-7-0.”

do this, and this doesn't work, you're not coming back.”

Harley jerks his chin. “Thanks for the pep talk, pissant.” He looks to Steve. “We good?”

Rogers nods. “We’re good.”

“Alright, ladies, let’s go.”

They drop just inside the limits of the facility, behind a grey brickwork building. It’s lucky, Peter knows, but he doesn’t take the time to dwell on it. Carefully he leans around the edge of the wall.

“Clear on this side. You?”

“Two men approaching.”

“Good,” Harley whispers. “You two are gonna need something to wear. Can’t have you walking around in that shit.”

“They’d better not be in bell-bottoms,” Peter mutters. “That’s all I have to say.”

“What is it with you two and fashion?”

Peter doesn’t reply. He comes up behind Steve, ears perking at the sound of approaching footsteps. When their targets are close enough, he and Steve exchange a nod.

“Excuse me, Sir,” Peter says as the first guy—a scientist by the look of him—gets close enough, “do you have a minute to talk about our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ?”

“Uh, what?”
Peter clocks him. Steve does the same with the soldier. It’s a calculated punch, and the guy drops like a marionette. *Lights out,* Peter thinks. He drops to his knees and fumbles with the guy’s coat and shoes. The name tag around his neck reads *Dr. Arnim Zola.*

“What the hell were they both doing back here, anyway?” Harley wonders.

Peter finds the answer tucked away in the trouser pockets of Dr. Zola.

Harley’s eyes widen. “No way.”

“Is that—?”

“Weed,” Harley breathes. “Gimmie.”

Steve chokes. “Okay, no, this is where I draw the line. We’re here to do a *job,* not—not use illicit substances behind a bathroom.”

“Illicit substances?” Harley snorts. “It’s *weed,* Captain Crunch. What, have you never done any before?”

“I’ve… I’ve…” Steve puts his hands on his hips. “I’ve *dabbled.*”

Peter rolls his eyes and tosses Harley the bag. He goes about stripping the doctor and changing into his uniform while Harley rolls a joint. Steve watches him disapprovingly for a moment before following Peter’s lead.

Peter empties out Zola’s briefcase. Papers and pens clatter over the gravel.

Harley sparks up. “Puff for luck?”

Peter, who smoked his first joint on his living room couch with May for his sixteenth birthday, takes a
grateful pull. It doesn’t do much but make him lightheaded, because old weed is fucking weak compared to the stuff of modern-day.

“Okay,” he says, adjusting his tie, “here’s the plan: I go get the tesseract, Steve, you go for the particles. Harley, your job is to watch these two until we get back—”

“I’m also gonna need you to make a phone call for me,” Steve cuts in. “Can you do that?”

“What do I look like to you, a fuckin’ ape?” Harley demands. “Yeah, I can make a phone call. Who to?”

“Pym.”

“Right,” Harley nods. “Where’s a pay phone?”

“So you weren’t actually like, born here, were you?”

“No, but the idea of me was,” Steve replies.

Peter hums. “Okay, so, you’re SHIELD, running a quasi-fascistic intelligence organisation. Where do you hide your base?”

He taps the EDITH glasses and scans the perimeter. There’s an entrance to what looks like a bunker about fifty feet away, but the reading the glasses give off is different: it’s actually an elevator. He jerks his chin toward it.

“In plain sight, then,” Steve says with a shrug.

They head for it. The clearance scanners aren’t high-tech by Peter’s standards, so hacking into them isn’t much trouble.
They step inside the elevator.

There’s a woman reading from a file. She eyes them curiously, and so Peter steps in front of Steve. He’s not the tallest, but he does his best to obscure her view. They don’t need to screw this up, too, after all.

Peter arrives at his floor.

“Good luck on your mission, Captain,” he says awkwardly.

Steve just nods. “Good luck on your… project, Doctor.”

Finding the tesseract is surprisingly easy. Peter just turns on EDITH’s scanning function until he comes across the glowing cube. It’s being held in some airtight lock box that Peter has to use Harley’s iron gauntlet to cut open.

“Hi,” Peter whispers to it. “Please don’t break on me? Or like, explode?”

Carefully he takes it and stuffs it in the briefcase, breathing a sigh of relief when he latches it closed.

“Arnim, you in there? Arnim?”

Peter rounds at the sound of a new voice, eyes wide. Around the corner steps a man in a beige suit, all 70s sideburns and slicked back hair. The worst part is, Peter recognises him.

“Hey!” He shouts, when Peter hastily turns around and tries to flee because fuck. “Door’s this way, pal.”

“What? Oh, right. Yeah.”
Howard Stark approaches him. In life, he is not as cold as Peter was expecting. There’s something sharp about his demeanour, but that’s about all that Peter can gauge. The rest is carefully hidden behind dark brown eyes, just like Tony’s.

It strikes Peter then that this man is his grandfather.

He’s never met any of his grandparents before.

“I’m looking for Dr. Zola. Have you seen him?”

Peter has a brief flash of a man lying crumpled on the ground with weed in his back pocket. “Dr. Zola? Uh, no. Haven’t seen anyone, actually.”

Howard squints at him. “Aren’t you a little young to be a scientist?”

Peter scrambles for an explanation. “Oh? Yeah, well, I uh—I started college at fifteen.”

“Fifteen? Jesus, really?”

He swallows the surge of panic that rises as he wonders whether or not he just created the standard by which Howard Stark expects his son to live up to, and then remembers that’s not how time travel works.

“Yeah. That’s—that’s why I’m here, actually. I’m a visitor. From MIT.”

“Huh. MIT. Got a name?”

Peter blinks. “Uh… Howard…?”

Howard Stark snorts softly. “Well, that’ll be easy to remember.”
“Howard… Potts.”

This just in: Peter apparently only has one brain cell!

“Well, I’m Howard Stark,” his grandfather says, offering his hand for Peter to shake.

“Trippy.”

Howard Stark grins. “Well, it’s a popular name. Shit, now, don’t pull it.”

Peter winces and loosens his grip. His strength always flares up when he’s nervous.

And then, like being doused in freezing water, Peter is just cold. All over. There is ice coating his skin, ice in his veins, frost lining his lungs turning his breath sharp.

Something is wrong.

But at the same time, nothing is. Nothing has changed. He’s still in a sub-level lab with his dead father’s very dead, very alive father.

And every particle in his body is screaming that something happened, something just happened.

The tattoo on his forearm burns.

“You look a little green around the gills there, Potts.”

Peter squeezes his eyes shut. “Yeah, just, um, long hours, y’know?”

“Wanna get some air?”
Peter nods. “Yeah, that’d be great.”

“That way,” Howard smirks.

“Right.”

“Need your briefcase?”

Peter doubles back for it. His heart is pounding so loudly in his chest he’s sure Howard must be able to hear it. Desperately he tries to think of what to do if the older man catches on, what he might say, but the only thing between his ears is white noise.

“You’re not one of those, are you, Potts?”

“What?”

“You know,” Howard mimes taking a puff.

“Oh, uh, no. No way.”

“Huh,” Howard shrugs. “Shame. I hear it stimulates the creative centres in our brains. People like us could benefit from that sort of thing, I think.”

Peter doesn’t know what to say to that. He awkwardly ducks his head as they walk toward the elevators, and as discreetly as possible, sniffs the collar of his lab coat.

Jesus.

Harley leans up against the wall, huddling between it and the payphone. “Hello, Dr. Pym?”
“That would be the number you called, yes.”

*Oh, so he’s a passive aggressive bitch,* Harley thinks. *Okay, I can work with that.*

“This is Sgt. Keener from shipping? We have a package here for you.”

“Bring it up,” Pym orders, voice tinny through the piece of shit receiver. Harley contemplates hanging up just to fix it.

“See, that’s the thing, sir: we can’t.”

“I’m confused, I thought that was your job.”

*Damn someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed.* Harley rolls his eyes. “Well, it’s just… Sir, the box is glowing, and to be honest, some of our mail guys aren’t feeling that great.”

Pym’s voice grows urgent. “They didn’t open it, did they?”

“Yeah, they did,” Harley smirks. “You’d better get down here.”

The line goes dead. Harley hangs up the phone and turns back to the slumped bodies on the ground. He nudges one with his foot just to make sure they’re still out of it, and then brings his joint to his lips. “James Bond? I don’t know her.”

“Yeah, this is Chesler. I need every available MPs on sub-level 6. We have a potential breach.”

Steve ducks into the first door he can find, fingers fumbling for the knob. He can’t really remember the last time he felt this nervous about anything.
Well actually, that’s not true. The first time the remainder of the team had gathered after the Snap—
that hadn’t been easy. He’d largely spent the night walking on eggshells, trying not to say the wrong
thing, or say anything at all at points; this feels a lot like that, only amplified by a thousand.

And naturally, the office he’s hiding in belongs to Peggy Carter.

Steve’s heart stops. His hands shake as he carefully picks up the framed photo of her, her smiling at
the camera, cheeks darkened with rouge, hair perfectly done up. She’d always been so pretty, even
under the worst sort of circumstances.

Peggy, smiling at the camera, surrounded by her family.

“Your husband called.” a voice says. Steve rips his eyes from the photo and spies a woman high-
tailing after another—after Peggy. “He says he’ll be home late and he’s sorry, but if you want, he’ll
pick up dinner to make it even and take your son to soccer practise tomorrow.”

Peggy laughs. The sound is bright, blinding. She sets a stack of papers on a desk and rolls her eyes.
“Charming.”

“I think it’s sweet.”

The smile grows smaller, twists into something softer. “I suppose you might be right. Would you ring
him up and tell him not to grab take away from that dingy place around the corner? It made me sick
last time.”

Her assistant nods. “If that’s all?”

“Yes, go on,” Peggy waves her away. “Leave me to my mountains of paperwork.”

The other girl giggles and leaves. Peggy hovers, sorting through her folders, existing, breathing, a
wall and a glass pane between them; decades between them; people between them.

It had never been the right time.
And it never will be.

Steve takes a step back. He sets the picture down. The picture of Peggy and her family. The picture of Peggy happy, living, *just fine without him*.

Oddly enough, it doesn’t hurt.

He’ll miss her. He always has and he always will. But she’s okay, right? And that’s all that matters.

Steve smiles. He turns back to the door, figuring the coast is probably clear by now, but takes a last look.

She doesn’t notice him.

“Goodbye, Peg.”

“Flowers and sauerkraut?” asks Peter, eyeing the items Howard Stark has stowed away under his arm. “Hot date?”

He doesn’t know why he asks. Apparently he’s just completely incapable of keeping his mouth closed for longer than a thirty second interim. It’s also the worst question, because he *knows* that Howard Stark should at least be married by now—but then, it’s not like Tony had ever spoken of him favourably, had he?

“Actually my wife is expecting,” Howard says, “and uh, too much time at the office.”

Peter struggles to piece that together in his head. Tony is a fucking *baby* right now. An *unborn* baby. A fetus. However many miles away, there is Tony’s mother, pregnant with…

With Peter’s dad.
“Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” Howard says. “Hold this, will you?”

Peter takes the flowers—violets, he thinks—and the can of sauerkraut, while Howard fixes his tie. He bites the inside of his cheek. “So how far along is she?”

“I don't know... uh... She's at the point where she can't stand the sound of my chewing. I guess I'll be eating dinner in the pantry again.” Howard grins. “You have kids?”

“Oh, um, no.”

“Course not. You're too young, look at you. How old did you say you were again? Fifteen?”

“Twenty-one,” Peter corrects. “I started college at fifteen.”

“What a feat. How hard was that, huh?”

“It was...” Peter trails off. “It was hard. My dad... he didn't make it easy. Whatever I did, it didn't ever seem to be enough, you know? He always wanted more outta me.”

Howard chews on that. Peter hopes, sincerely, that the words become branded onto his brain. He hopes, if at all possible, that at least one thing will change. Normally he'd worry, but if there's one thing that's worth creating an alternate timeline for, it's giving Tony a better childhood, right?

“Can I tell you something, Potts?”

“Sure.”

“I’m hoping it’s a girl.”
Peter raises an eyebrow. “Yeah? Why’s that?”

“Less of a chance she’d turn out exactly like me.”

Before Peter can say anything to that, the elevator doors slide open. They walk back into the daylight. “So where are you at with names?”

“Well for a boy, my wife likes Almanzo.”

Peter struggles to wrap his head around a universe where Tony’s god-given name is Almanzo Stark. “Maybe uh, sleep on that one a bit?”

Howard laughs. “So your old man, he was tough on you?”

Peter slows a little. “Yeah, he, uh…” the words die in his throat. “I didn’t know him very well before he died. But he pushed me, you know? There was this one time… this one time I screwed up real bad. He was so angry, but it… I don’t really think it was at me. More—more at himself, I guess. When he asked me why I did what I did, I told I just wanted to be like him. He said he wanted me to be better.”

Peter meets Howard’s eyes, really meets them, for the first time.

They are Tony’s. There is a knife in Peter’s chest carving his heart out because those are Tony’s eyes staring right back at him.

Those are his eyes.

“I’m still trying,” he says. “Every day, I’m still trying to be better, but do you know something?”

“What’s that?”
“I don’t think I ever will be.”

Howard looks Peter up and down. “You seem to be doing pretty okay for yourself to me, Potts,” he says. Peter shrugs a shoulder. “And anyway, that kid isn’t even born yet, and you know what? There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for him.”

“Can I give you some advice, Stark?”

“My ears are open.”

“Don’t forget that.” Peter hesitates. “It’s easy to, I think. But sometimes… sometimes everything we need is right in front of us, but we just keep looking for something else.”

Howard takes that in. Nods slowly. “Thanks, Potts.”

“Anytime, Stark.”

The older man gives him a funny look and then walks away, toward an expensive looking car where a driver is waiting.

Peter stands, stuck, for a moment.

Edwin Jarvis looks over at him.

Peter raises his hand and waves.

When Steve signals that it’s time for them to leave, Peter hurries across the courtyard as inconspicuously as possible. He follows Steve through the base until they reach the low, grey building that houses the toilets.
“So?” Harley demands, standing with the still-unconscious bodies of the two military men.

“I got my thing,” Peter replies.

Steve pulls out three red particle cartridges and doles them out. “Let’s sync up, shall we?”

Being sucked through time is probably similar to the feeling of being swallowed by a black hole, Peter thinks as he doubles over the second they phase back onto the platform.

He raises his eyes,

and his heart stops.

“Did we get them all?” Bruce asks—or at least, that’s what it sounds like, but his voice is muffled by the ringing in Peter’s ears.

Someone answers. Someone else, maybe Rhodey, asks a question.

And then they all catch up to what Peter has already realised; they all feel the cold he had felt before, probably the moment it had happened.

Bruce’s voice is clear and loud, _deafening_. “Clint, where’s Nat?”

There is no answer.

They don’t need one. The silence speaks for itself.

Nat is gone.
y’all: okay but are you gonna merk nat

me: kskjdjdj bitch do i LOOK LIKE the type to spare her

no but seriously this is the chapter i’m most insecure about out of all of them because it relies so heavily on the actual movie so i hope?? it wasn’t boring or crusty or repetitive!!!!! also keep in mind that this is only chapter 4 of nine and like,,,ya girl did not agree with many of Endgame’s choices so!!! don’t give up hope <3

also credit where credit is due: that steve & peggy thing came from a tumblr post by @rxgersrxmanxff, which i liked so much i ended up using here bc steve and peggy both deserved better than that shit
Chapter Notes

FIRST OFF thank you all so much for all of your feedback!!!! I’ll reply to them all ASAP <3

second: i’m sorry lmao

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Somehow, at some point, Peter ends up on his knees. He is alone. His knuckles are bloody from beating them against the wall in a blind rage.

The tears burn as they fall, one after another.

He just can’t seem to stop. Every time he tries, gasping for breath like he’s breaking through the surface of the sea, it just starts all over again.

It’s not fair.

It’s not fair that it was her. It’s not fair that she’s gone. It’s not fair that she had to die so that others could live.

If this is a balance, if this is cosmic equity, he wants no part in it.

He just wants Nat back.

(Nat, who picked him up whenever he fell; Nat, who dragged him through hell but made it seem like heaven; Nat, who was is family; Nat, who was his best friend.

It was his fault. Why is he here, and not her? What makes him more deserving? Shouldn’t it be her, the person who had fought the longest, given the most of themselves?
Peter has given pieces. She had given her whole heart.

“Please,” Peter whispers. His forehead is pressed against the cool tile floor and his arms are wrapped around his head. “Please, don’t take her away from me? Please give her back? Please, I just need… please.”

There is no answer.

There is no divine justice.

Peter sobs.

He leaves the room four hours later. In his wake is a broken table, splintered wooden chairs, shattered glass and crimson stained walls.

Pepper doesn’t ask what happened to his hand. She doesn’t ask where he’s been.

She simply sits him down on a chair opposite her and starts to bandage his wounds. He wants to pretend, for a moment, that they’re back in Manhattan and she’s just helping him in the wake of some minor skirmish from patrol.

But she’s not. They’re sitting on uncomfortable plastic chairs in the cafeteria because Nat is gone and he’d been so fucking angry about it, he’d probably broken his hand.

“Peter.”

“Don’t.”

“You don’t even know what I was going to say.”
“I—I just can’t.” He swallows roughly, pushing back the acrid bile rising in his throat. “I don’t want to be anything right now, okay?”

“What does that mean?”

“It means—”

frustration; white hot anger, plumes of smoke that sear the lining of his lungs and make his chest tight; it’s not Pepper’s fault but it feels like it should be someone’s, right? It can’t be Nat’s, because she’s not here to blame anyway.

She’s a bloodstain on some planet it outer space.

They don’t even have a body to bury.

“Peter?”

He’s not Peter. He’s not anything. He feels like a meaningless collection of cells, random and wrong, stitched together crudely to create some patchwork of a human.

Pepper puts her hand on his forearm, right over the tattoo.

He pulls out of her grip.

“Peter.” Her voice is shaking, now. She’s scared or hurt or upset. “Peter, honey, please. Come on.”

Another touch, on his back this time. That’s better. Easier to handle. He doesn’t have to see it, and it doesn’t feel like acid on his skin.

“It should have been me.”
“Don’t say that,” Pepper whispers fiercely. “Don’t you ever say that, do you hear me?”

“But I—” his nails are digging into his palms and the words are so hard to get out. They’re lodged in his throat and moving at the speed of city traffic at five in the afternoon. “I don’t… I don’t know what to do.”

Pepper sets the gauze down that she had been using to patch him up. She places her hands on either side of his face, thumbing a tear away. “You finish this. You fight for her. And maybe—maybe we can use the stones to bring her back with everyone else.”

Peter clings to that. He clings to her.

Pepper pulls him into her arms when he starts to cry.

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“What?”

“Yeah,” Peter’s voice is raspy. “Us.”

Thor steps forward, his face a mask of confusion. “What?”

“I just thought maybe, if there were others… that we should tell them,” Steve explains. “That she’s gone.”

“But, see, she’s not,” Thor insists. “You’re talking about her like she’s dead. Why are you acting like she’s dead? We have the stones, right? As long as we have the stones, Cap, we can bring her back, isn’t that right? So stop this shit. We’re the Avengers, get it together.”

Any hope Peter had that Thor might be right dies when Clint speaks next.

“We can’t get her back.”
Peter rounds on him. “Why not?”

Clint glares out at the rippling, sun-stained surface of the river. “It can’t be undone. It can’t.”

Thor laughs dryly. “I’m sorry. No offense, but you’re a very earthly being, okay? We’re talking about space magic. And ’can’t’ seems very definitive don’t you think?”

“Seconded,” Peter mutters.

“It can’t be undone,” Clint repeats. “Or at least that’s what the floating red guy had to say—”

“Bullshit,” Peter snipes. “I don’t care what some random alien said. Nat was my best friend, she was my sister, and she loved you, Barton. She put herself through hell for you, kept trying to track you down and convince you to come back when you went rogue. She wasn’t gonna stop, and do you know what she said to me when I asked her why? She said if it was her, you’d never give up. Don’t prove her wrong.”

Clint’s face crumbles. “It was supposed to be me. She sacrificed her life for that goddamned stone. She bet her life on it.”

Bruce screams and with a sudden burst of rage he grabs the bench that Peter and Nat had sat on together what feels like a lifetime ago. He hurls it across the water.

Then there’s nothing left to destroy. His shoulders sag. “Clint is right, Peter. We have to… we have to make it worth it.”

“We will,” says Steve.

“We should still try to get her back.”

“The man of spiders is right,” Thor says. “We can’t just… lie down and accept it when one of our brethren falls. If she was willing to die for us, we must be willing to return the favour; otherwise, we
are cowards.”

Peter straightens, feeling a burst of sudden, fiery rejuvenation. They’ll try. They’ll make her sacrifice worth it either way, but they won’t roll over and take it willingly.

Soon the others are gone and it’s just Peter and Clint.

“You wish it was me, don’t you.”

“I can’t.”

Clint looks up. “What?”

“If I did, she’d come back as a ghost just to kill me,” Peter explains. “On second thought, maybe I should say I do.”

The older man snorts bitterly. “She… she said, before she—she asked me to look out for you.”

Peter folds his arms across his chest. His eyes sting, but he refuses to cry. She’s not dead. I won’t grieve for someone who isn’t really dead.

“I don’t need you to look out for me.”

“Sure,” Clint says, “but I’m still gonna.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I’m more afraid of her ghost than I am of you.”

A reluctant, bittersweet smile twists his lips. “Guess I’ll look out for you, too.”
“Hey, it’s MJ. I’m probably off, like, saving the world or doing something even more amazing, so leave me a message or whatever. Bye.”

“Babushka. Hey. I, uh… I’m back, but… not everything went the way it was supposed to. Call me back when you get this, or just-just come straight to the compound, actually. Please. I love you, okay? I love you so much.”

Peter enters the lab just as Harley is guiding the last stone onto the gauntlet. For a second they all stand, collectively tense.

“Boom!” Rocket yells.

Harley and Bruce both jump, and Harley steps into Rocket’s space like he might actually be about to throw hands with a snickering raccoon. “Jesus,” he sighs. “You fucking trash panda.”

Rocket stops laughing. “The hell’d you call me?”

“A trash panda,” Harley snaps. “You backwoods, garbage eating—”

“Okay, okay,” Bruce cuts in. “Would you both settle? We got the stones in, no need to be so wound up.”

“Oh please, there’s every need! You and I both know how volatile those things are.”

They both turn to look at the fully assembled gauntlet again like it’s an explosive device waiting to go off—and this time, there’s no off button.

Peter clears his throat. They jump and Rocket laughs again.
“Shit, you scared me,” says Harley, and then his face softens. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good,” Peter tells him. “Just fine. Great. Have you seen Happy?”

“He uh, took Ariel and Morgan into the city. Didn’t want them anywhere near this, and all. Thought it was best.”

“Oh. Right.” Peter nods. That makes sense. He’d only been wondering because he figured MJ would have an easier time getting here with a ride. But Morgan and Ariel being away while they do this… that takes priority.

“Well!” Harley claps his hands together, “Rocket, why don’t you go grab everyone else and we can get this show on the road, huh?”

“Alright, glove’s ready,” Rocket tells the rest of the team as they file in, “question is: who’s gonna snap their freakin’ fingers?”

Truthfully, Peter had never really gotten that far when he thought about bringing everyone back. It was more the how, more is it even possible at all? Now, faced with the choice, faced with the ability, he opens his mouth to volunteer, when—

“I’ll do it.”

They all turn to Thor.

Scott looks incredulous. “Excuse me?”

Thor shakes his head and steps toward the gauntlet. “It’s okay,” he says, when they all start to protest over him.
“Wait, wait,” Steve cuts in, “Thor, just wait, okay? We haven’t made a decision yet.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, what? Were you just sitting around awaiting the right opportunity?”

“We should at least discuss it, man,” Scott says.

Thor is still looking at the gauntlet. He is dangerously close. Peter steps between him and the device while the rest continue to put up a fight. “Just *stop it,*” Thor hisses, “just let me do something good, something great.”

There are tears in his eyes and Peter knows that he needs this, he needs a win, maybe more than any of them do. Being defeated by Thanos had hit him harder than most; he’d lost a brother, half his kingdom, his *home.*

“Listen to me,” Peter starts before anyone else can speak, “I know you feel like you have to do this, but it’s not safe, okay? That thing is channeling enough energy to light up a continent—”

“And what do you think is coursing through my veins right now, man of spiders?”

“Cheez Whiz?” Rhodey asks. Peter throws him a look.

“*Lightning,*” Thor corrects.

“Yeah? Okay. But here’s the thing: no. This isn’t on you—”

“But *I* must—”

“I’m telling you, you *can’t* do it,” Peter tells him. “We don’t need anyone else dying for this, Thor. You put that glove on, you won’t make it five seconds.”

“He’s right,” Bruce says. “Lightning won’t help you, pal. It’s gotta be me.”
And no, no, that’s not what Peter had been gunning for, but Bruce’s eyes are on the gauntlet now, and it’s not determination in them so much as resignation. “You saw what the stones did to Thanos. They almost killed him. None of you could survive. But me? I’m practically half gamma, it’s like… I was made for this.”

“That’s not true.”

Bruce rips his gaze up. “What?”

“You’re not the only irradiated one in this room,” Peter reminds him. “My genetics were altered with gamma, too. I survived.”

Rhodey closes in on him. “Peter, you can’t be serious—”

“Of course I am. You think I would’ve done all this if I wasn’t ready to go down for it? I need to bring them back. I have to bring her—”

Rhodey puts his hands on Peter’s shoulders. “Hey, hey, Pete.” His voice is quiet, just for them. “What am I supposed to tell Tony when he comes back and finds his kid all chicken fried? You can’t be the one to do this, I won’t let you.”

Tony. Peter had forgotten about Tony. May, Ned, Harley’s mom, MJ’s little sister—his vision had tunneled with Nat. If she was willing to sacrifice herself, shouldn’t he be, too? Isn’t that what Thor said?

But Tony. Tony would kill him if he died doing this. He’d be so pissed.

“Let Jolly Green do it, little man.”

Peter glances at Bruce, vision swimming. He nods.

A few minutes later, they’ve suited up in preparation for the snap. “You good, Gumby?” asks Harley.
Bruce nods. “Let’s do it.”

Peter swallows roughly. “Okay,” he says, “remember: you’re bringing back everyone that Thanos snapped away five years ago. They’ll pop up again now, today. Don’t change anything from the last five years.”

“Got it,” Bruce says, sounding very much like he does not, in fact, got it.

Peter lets it slide. Bruce is probably the smartest person in the room. He can handle snapping his fingers without screwing everything up or zapping Morgan out of existence or whatever.

“FRIDAY,” Peter calls out, “do me a favour and activate protocol 8?”

“Sure thing,” she replies readily. All at once the room darkens as metal panels slide down over the windows and exits. It’s the lockdown protocol, one of many that Peter had memorised when Pepper had given him the list in case of emergencies.

Bruce reaches into the glass box so that the gauntlet can affix itself to his hand. “Everybody comes home,” he breathes.

*Even Nat, Peter thinks. Nat and Tony and May and Ned, and Mr Delmar’s wife, and Mr Harrington, and Rhodey’s mom and MJ’s little sister—*

Bruce starts to scream in pain. Peter watches, agonised, and ends up being held back by Rhodey.

“Take it off!” Thor shouts. “*Take it off!*”

“No, wait,” Steve orders, and they all freeze. Bruce is breathing heavily, hunched over, but—“are you okay?”

“I’m okay,” he gasps. “I’m okay.”
Then he tries to raise his arm and the screaming starts up all over again. There are electric volts of energy bursting from the stones, filling the room with multicoloured light. Bruce grunts.

He snaps his fingers.

There is no beautiful moment of rectification; no clouds parting to reveal the sun after a week long storm. For five seconds the whole room falls silent and still, and then Bruce collapses. The gauntlet slides off of his arm and Clint kicks it away, slightly scorched and hollow.

“Bruce!”

“Don’t move him,” Peter says, running over before any of them can hurt him more than he already has been. He sets to work applying the solution he’d concocted for severe burns and hopes that’ll be enough, because every bone in his body screams to hold off on the other thing.

“Did it work?” Bruce asks them, dazed and grasping weakly for Steve.

“It was worth a shot,” Thor says comfortingly, “it’s over. It’s okay.”

The lockdown lifts.

A cell phone rings.

“Guys!” Scott shouts. “I think it worked!”

Peter doesn’t even have a chance to rejoice in it, because suddenly Bruce’s eyes are blown wide open in sheer terror and Peter’s sixth sense is screaming at him to look up—

(!!danger!!)

“Oh, shit—”
The left side of the building blows inward.

The muffled sensation fades to a ringing as Peter comes to, blinking slowly. He raises his hands, confused, and stills when they come into contact with concrete.

“What…?”

He can’t even hear his own voice. He is under water. He has to be. He feels wet and there is something cold pooling beneath him. But the concrete… the concrete doesn’t make sense…

Then he remembers: the ship. There had been a gigantic, alien looking vessel hovering over the compound. And then there had been heat, a red hot inferno that had swallowed them all up whole.

The building had come down.

Peter is trapped underneath a building.

Again.

“No,” his breath hitches. “No, no, no. T-Tony? Tony?”

Silence, cut only by his stilted gasps.

“Please, D-dad, help m-me—”

It doesn’t matter if he’s faced worse things than this, or that years have passed. It doesn’t matter. All that matters is, he’s stuck. He can’t move, he can’t breathe, he can’t see anyone or hear anything and they could all be dead and he’ll be trapped under here forever—

*Hey, get it together, okay kiddo? Just breathe.*
Peter gasps. He gasps and he sobs in harmony, because the voice in his head is Tony’s; he hasn’t let himself hear it for so long. Peter had thought he’d forgotten the sound, and maybe he has—maybe this is just what he remembers it to be.

But he holds onto it. Grasps it like a rope and uses it to pull himself out of his gaping panic.

Peter closes his eyes, pressing his palms flat against the rough hunk of debris.

Hands on either side of his face, warm and calloused. The smell of Tom Ford cologne. Quippy one liners thrown out in a shaky voice to hopefully distract him enough to make him laugh through the way his throat is closing up.

_It worked_, Scott had said.

And so Peter pushes. He pushes because he cannot be afraid, because people could be dying, because if Scott was right then out there somewhere is Tony, and Peter will be damned if he dies before he gets to him.

His hearing returns in the midst of his own frustrated, pained screams.

Then the slab is pushed off and Peter rolls out of his concrete coffin.

There’s water everywhere, leaking from busted metal pipes. The world is a wash of red from the emergency lights. Peter spits out dirt and dust, throat stinging, grunting as he crawls on all fours toward the most open area.

“I can’t breathe,” a small, strained voice says, “I can't breathe! I can’t breathe!”

“Canopy! Canopy! Canopy!”

Peter’s stomach churns. Everything is suddenly so very _loud_ and the air is so hot, sticky and covering his skin in a grimy film. He heaves up whatever the fuck it had been that he’d last eaten and wipes
his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Peter!” Bruce yells, “get them out of here!”

Peter hadn’t even noticed Bruce, but he sees him now; straining beneath the weight of the roof, covered in radioactive burns, Atlas holding up the sky.

Bruce isn’t looking at him. He’s looking at where the voices had come from.

Rhodey. It’s Rhodey, out of his suit—he’s dragging himself toward where Rocket is pinned. “Hurry up, come on!” The raccoon urges.

Peter stumbles toward them. Rhodey is struggling, using a rebar to lift the weight off of Rocket. Peter gets there just in time to simply push it. Rocket wheezes as he wriggles free. “Oh, thank god.”

“I don’t know about god, but Peter’s right there.”

“Ah, shut up.”

“We have to get out of here,” Peter says, voice hoarse. He rounds on Rhodey and slaps a bracelet over the older man’s wrist. The suit starts forming, but it’s too slow; Peter can hear the rush of water, the support beams groaning. “Rocket, run.”

The raccoon doesn’t need to be told twice.

“Mayday, mayday,” Rhodey calls through the comms. “Does anybody copy?”

Peter slaps his own bracelet so the nanites will start repairing the damage his suit had taken. “Bruce!” He screams. “Get the hell out of here!”

“I can’t!” Bruce yells back. “You’ll die!”
“We’re in the lower level and it’s flooding,” Rhodey is saying, “is anyone there?”

“Wait!” a gravelly, static-wrapped voice seeps through the earpiece Peter is wearing. Scott. “I’m here! I’m here! Can you hear me?”

“I can hold it,” Peter mutters to himself while Rhodey returns Scott’s call. “I think I can hold it.”

“You cannot,” Rhodey argues. He stands shakily. “We gotta get Bruce outta this.”

“Help me block the water.”

They work quickly. Peter does his best to stop the dangerously hurried flooding process. The water is up to their knees, and then their thighs. Rhodey starts lifting some of the weight off of Bruce.

“It’s not gonna work!” Peter decides. “Lang, where are you?!”

“I’m coming,” he replies. “Just hang tight!”

“Rhodey, if you let me—”

“You are not getting pinned underneath this,” Rhodey snaps. “I don’t care how strong you think you are, I’m not taking that risk!”

Peter wades closer. The water has risen to their ribcages. “Rhodey, we won’t make it if I don’t try—”

“We won’t make it either way.”

“I’m here!”

Suddenly Peter is hearing him through both the comms and somewhere in the space around them. He
searches, but finds nothing.

Then Scott goes Big.

“Oh,” Rhodey says. “I forgot he could do that.”

Peter has to crane his neck just to see all of Scott. “Yeah. It’s pretty awesome.”

Bruce grunts as the wreckage he’d been holding is taken away. He sucks in a lungful of air. “So. We were attacked?”

“Seems like it.”

“Sounds like there are a few asses that need kicking, boys,” Scott says, shrinking down to normal size for the moment. “Shall we?”

They run.

“FRIDAY, do a scan of the building, give me routes to any survivors.”

“Oh it,” FRIDAY says. “Downloading them now. Your nearest pit stop is Steve Rogers, up the nearest staircase and to your right.”

“I see that. Do you have vitals on Pepper?”

“Ms Potts is on level one doing search and rescue. She is in the suit and her vital signs appear to be stable.”

Peter breathes a sigh of relief. They skirt around a corner. “Karen, patch me through to RESCUE.”
Peter takes the stairs two at a time. Behind him, Scott does the same. His heart beats with his footfalls, loud and abrasive and much too fast.

“Peter?”

“Pepper?”

“Oh, thank god. Are you okay? Is everyone okay?”

“I don’t know yet, I’m working on that part—”

“There was an explosion, and I thought—was it the stones?!”

“No, we’re under attack,” Peter replies. “I haven’t-I need to assess the situation and I’ll get back to you, okay? But when I signal you, come.”

“Right. Yeah, right.”

“Pepper?”

“Yeah?”

“Everything is gonna be okay.”

“Liar.”

His smile is weak, but it’s there. He orders Karen to end the call. The four of them emerge from the
wreckage of the building. Peter spots Steve’s shield lying abandoned on the ground, so he scoops it up on his way.

They find Cap on the ground still out of it.

“Hey, Brooklyn,” Peter shakes him, “wake up, would you?”

Steve’s eyes fly open. “What—?”

Peter hands him the shield. “You dropped this.”

“What happened?”

“My bet is on Thanos,” Peter replies.

Steve groans as he sits up. Peter helps him to his feet. Together, the five of them survey the damage to the compound. It’s not pretty; at least half of the building has been decimated, maybe more. The grounds are littered with the remains of the building: broken walls, cracked foundations, rubble where the ground used to be.

And in the midst of all of it, there is Thanos.

Peter had hoped he had seen the last of him on Titan. They’d gotten their asses royally whipped in that battle, and here they are again, already on their knees and it’s just starting.

“I should take up a career in fortune telling.”

“Queens.”

“Right, sorry. Bad time.”
“What is he doing?” Rhodey demands.


“Where are the stones?” Steve asks.

Peter shakes his head. “Somewhere under all of this, I guess. At least he doesn’t have them.”

It’s the only silver lining Peter can find. Steve lets out a low sigh. “We keep it that way, then.”

Thor glances at them. “You know it’s a trap, right?”

“Naturally,” Peter replies, “but I’m down to zero fucks in my back pocket where this fucking grape is concerned, so.”

“Good. Just so long as we’re all in agreement.” Thor opens both of his hands and, with the roll of thunder and the crackling, electric smell of ozone, his weapons fly into his open palms. It is, without a doubt, the most badass thing Peter has ever seen.

And he’s seen some stuff.

“Rhodey, Scott, do me a favour?” Peter turns to them. “Go find Pepper and Harley, lead them through. I don’t know if Clint and Nebula are okay either, so—”


“Bruce, go with them.”

“Peter, I’m—”
“Half dead on your feet from radiation poisoning and chemical burns? Yeah, I know. Please go with them. They might need you.”

Bruce sighs. “There’s no need to patronise me, kid, I get it.”

They depart. Peter almost regrets it, but he needs to know that Pepper and the rest are okay. It’s a trap, which means Thanos is the diversion. That means splitting their forces gives them their only fighting chance.

Peter glances at Steve.

They walk.

__________________________

MJ is in her Behavioral and Integrative Neuroscience class when the world starts to end.

Figured it happens during one of her most important midterms.

It’s eerie, sitting in the lecture hall with only the sound of pens on paper and computer keys being pressed, when all of the sudden everyone’s phones are lighting up at once.

“Woah woah woah, people,” her professor calls, when everyone starts reaching for their devices, “we still have thirty minutes. I’m sure if it’s that important, the dean would tell us over the—”

“All students to evacuate the campus immediately. This is not a drill. Classes are cancelled until further notice. I repeat: all students to evacuate the campus immediately.”

“Intercom,” Professor Michaels finishes lamely. “Okay, I guess time’s up—”

“Holy shit!” some guy shouts. “Aliens are attacking the Avengers compound!”
MJ goes cold. The feeling is all-encompassing, merciless. Her stomach swoops as she sits up, twisting and roiling, making her throat burn with bile.

Peter had called her. He had called her during her Adolescent Development midterm and she hadn’t answered, much less gotten around to listening to the voicemail he’d left.

And now he’s under attack, and/or dead.

“Fuck,” she hisses, snapping out of her shock. She gathers up as much of her things as she can carry at once and stuffs the rest in her bag. “Shit, shit, shit.”

“Hey! Single file, please!”

All of her classmates are flooding down to the main exit. MJ goes up, instead, climbing the rows to the back doors of the ampitheatre. She fishes her phone out of her pocket on the way, drops a book, has a split second internal debate, and leaves it.

“You have: one new voicemail; from: Peter Parker;

“Babushka. Hey. I, uh… I’m back, but… not everything went the way it was supposed to. Call me back when you get this, or just-just come straight to the compound, actually. Please. I love you, okay? I love you so much.”

His voice is shaking through the whole message. He sounds broken, like he’s clinging desperately to his last vestiges of strength and she is supposed to be one of them, but she hadn’t picked up the phone.

MJ stands frozen in the middle of the quad. Around her, people are running and yelling and screaming and just generally panicking like a bunch of headless chickens. “Oh my god,” she whispers. “Oh my god, I’m an idiot, I’m a fucking idiot—”

She keeps walking, pushing her way through the mass of students. “Why didn’t I go with him? Fuck, fuck.”
Fucking midterms. She’d chosen college over participating in what had to be the most important Avengers mission yet. What had she been thinking?

It’s not a matter of pride or an egotistical assumption that had she been there, things wouldn’t have gone to shit. It’s just that she would be there at all.

MJ tries calling him, but to no avail. She scrolls through her contacts (an admittedly short and exclusive list of people) and finds Happy Hogan.

Three rings later and he picks up.

“MJ?”

“Harold, what the fuck is going on?”

“I have no idea,” Happy replies. “I mean, it worked—I know it worked, but the rest of it? I’m as lost as you.”


“Yeah, yeah, listening.”

“You have Morgan?”

“Course.”

“Okay. Don’t take her to the compound. There’s a quinjet in a warehouse on 84th and 3rd. Go there, be ready to leave. I’ll call you when it’s time.”

“Leave where?”
“Okoye said if anything went down like this, Wakanda was home base. And Happy—my… my mom, my sister—?”

“I’ll get them.”

“Right.” MJ forces herself to breathe again. “Okay. Thank you.”

“Don’t worry about it—and hey, keep me updated, alright?”

“Yeah. Obviously.”

She hangs up. Her hands are shaking so badly her phone drops to the sidewalk and the screen shatters. No, she can’t be like this. Get a grip. Breathe.

MJ picks it up and walks straight ahead, right into the nearest alleyway.

Four minutes later, Scorpio comes out.

“You could not live with your own failure. And where did that bring you? Back to me. I thought by eliminating half of life, the other half would thrive. But you’ve shown me that’s impossible. And as long as there are those that remember what was, there will always be those that are unable to accept what can be. They will resist.”

Peter squints at Thanos. “Does that wrinkled ballsack you call a chin ever stay still?”

Thanos falters for a beat. “Ah. The bug. My Nebula tells me that you and I have been acquainted before. I watched the footage of our fight. It was… particularly amusing.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you were all kinds of tickled. And hey, since you’re not well-versed in Earth’s bionomics, I’ll let the whole bug vs arachnid thing slide. What I won’t let slide is your miserable purple ass back on my planet.”
“And I’m thankful, because now I know what I must do.” Thanos stands. “I will shred this universe
down to its last atom. And then, with the stones you’ve collected for me, create a new one. Teeming
with life, but knows not what it has lost but only what it has been given. A grateful universe.”

“Borne out of blood,” Steve spits.

Thanos shrugs. “They’ll never know it. You won’t be alive to tell them.”

Peter and Thor exchange a glance.

Together, they charge.

“Okay, I’ll bite: where the hell are we going?!”

“To find Pepper! I’m tracking her location!”

Pepper hears their voices carry down the hall. She glances at Harley, who isn’t in as bad of shape as
he’d seemed before; mostly cuts and bruises, but he’s got a nasty concussion to top things off.

“You good?”

“It’s potty time, Ms Party—” his face scrunches up. “Nah, that ain’t right. Shit, I’m pretty fucked up,
huh?”

Pepper snorts. “A little. Come on.”

They meet in the hallway. Rhodey hugs her. There’s a certain brand of relief after all of these years
that comes with seeing someone alive after fearing the worst. It’s a tug-of-war between exasperation
and repose.
“You good?”

“I’m fine,” Pepper says quickly. “Where’s my son?”

“Out kicking Thanos’ butt,” Lang tells her. “Or the other way around, most likely. But hey, he’s got a pair, I’ll give him that.”

It’s the last thing Pepper wants to hear. Her idiot kid out trying to stop the genocidal maniac that had wiped out half of all life? The fact that Thanos is here at all? She doesn’t have a clue how that’s possible, but she’s not about to waste her breath asking after that asshole.

“At least tell me the stones worked,” she practically begs.

“No, yeah. At least, I’m pretty sure.” Lang shrugs. “Again with the uncertainty, but it sure seemed like it. There was this really nice Disney moment where the sun came out and there were all these birds finding their branches again and… and then Thanos blew us up.”

Pepper stares. “Is he real?” she asks Rhodey.

“Very. Come on, let’s try and find Barton.”

“Wait,” Harley calls suddenly. He has moved away from them and is standing with his ear pressed against the wall. “There’s something… something in here, I think.”

“What, in the walls?”

“Yeah, it’s-it’s moving?”

Pepper steps forward, about to tell him to get away because he’s either more concosused than she thought and making things up, or he’s right and in severe danger of getting injured even more.
It’s the latter.

There’s a heavy thudding sound. Harley jerks back. Together, they all form a loose circle.

The tile cracks and convexes.

Three sets of repulsors charge up as some freakish alien monster busts through the hole it had created. It screeches in anger.

“Oh that is one ugly alien,” Scott mutters.

“Karen, taser webs.”

“On it.”

“Okay, Thor, hit me.”

They move in coordination; Peter aims his biocables for Thanos, while behind him, Thor cracks his weapons together. The lightning encases him, washes the world in a blinding shade of blue, but Peter holds his ground while Thanos writhes and screams in frustration a few yards away.

Then Peter is yanked off of his feet.

Something hard impacts his left side. There’s a sickening crack as his ribs are broken.

Thanos tosses him aside like a rag doll.

“Peter?” Karen’s voice is urgent. “Peter, wake up.”
“M’n’t ‘sleep,” Peter mutters, blinking the black spots from his eyes. “Hurts…”

“Calling RESCUE.”

“Wh’t? K’r’n… ‘hat’s rude.”

“You have three cracked ribs and severe contusions on your right side. I suspect you’ve sustained other internal injuries, but my operating systems are malfunctioning because of the heightened voltage, so I can’t tell.”

“Thought you were… programmed to be optimistic.”

“I have stress too, you know.”

“Oh, of course, don’t mind me.” Peter pulls himself to his knees. He clutches his throbbing side and spits blood onto the ground. “That’s definitely a good sign, huh?”

“You should go to a hospital.”

“Little preoccupied right now.”

He rises shakily and looks over his shoulder. “Oh, no shit.”

No shit, because Steve is wielding Mjolnir and kicking Thanos’ ass. Well, until he isn’t. Thanos stabs Steve in the leg and knocks the hammer away.

In a burst of sheer, absolute madness, Peter aims a web for its handle and yanks down.

Mjolnir slips into his hand.

And it doesn’t fall.
“Man of spiders!” Thor bellows. “I knew it!”

“That’s what he said about Steve,” Karen informs him, oblivious to his obliviousness.

“Oh, wow,” Peter mutters stupidly, still staring at the hammer in his white-knuckled grip. “Ned is gonna flip his shit when he hears about this.”

Then Peter send an arc of lightning right for Thanos.

He doesn’t know how, exactly, he does it. It just happens; an instinctual siphoning of all of his anger, charged to an electric rolling boil, aimed at the man who tore Peter’s life apart, who tore the world apart.

Thanos roars with anger. “I will… squash you,” he grits out, when Peter ceases the blast of energy.

“Dry up, Dursley, you great prune,” Peter retorts, and ups the ante.

Thanos screams. He’s fighting through the pain, channeling his anger, too. It’s a battle of wills and Peter is already battered, already half-bested. He ends up on one knee, heaving, while Thanos stands triumphantly.

He swipes his double-bladed sword and knocks both Peter and Steve away in one fell swoop.

“Ow,” says Peter, skidding to a halt face-down in the dirt.

“Queens.” Steve grabs his forearm and pulls him up. “That was…”

“Awesome?” Peter grins despite himself. “Yeah, man, you too.”

“In all my years of conquest, violence, slaughter... It was never personal.” Thanos regards them with absolute, sheer disdain. “But I’ll tell you now, what I’m about to do to your stubborn, annoying little
planet... I'm gonna enjoy it. Very, very much.”

“That’s a cute story,” says a new voice, “but I like this one better.”

Harley smirks when Thanos spots him, like he’s not afraid at all. “I give you the count to ten to get your ugly, purple, no-good keister off my planet before I pump your guts full of badassium.”

“And who are you?”

“Your worst fuckin’ nightmare,” Harley says. “Eat this, numb-nuts!”

He sends a high powered blast right for Thanos’ face. It doesn’t do much but piss him off and singe his edges a nice shade of indigo.

Steve tightens the straps on his shield. He and Peter look at one another, and it’s understood: this is their final stand, and they will fight until their last drop of blood is drained from their bodies.

*Whatever it takes.*

Something crackles in Peter’s ear.

They both freeze.

“*Cap, you hear me?*”

“What—?”

“*Cap, it's Sam. Can you hear me?*” There is a pauses when Sam speaks next, it sounds like he’s smiling. “On your left.”

Peter and Steve both turn.
Never in his life has Peter felt anything like this. It’s like reaching into Pandora’s box and grasping the pure, unadulterated hope within; like taking the first gasp of fresh air after drowning; like seeing the sun after months locked away in the dark. He hadn’t realised how down-trodden, how bruised, how empty he had been until there are dozens of golden portals opening across the battlefield, showers of sparks and soldiers marching and here, back, alive.

It worked.

Peter breathes.

And then he laughs. The sound bubbles up in the pit of his belly and bursts out, loud, bright, blinding.

“It worked,” he whispers in awe.

Steve shakes off his own astonishment. He stands three inches taller and raises his shield.

“Avengers,” he calls, “assemble.”

There is a loud, deafening, collective roar. They head to battle.

“Brooklyn!”

Steve turns. He follows Peter’s gaze to the enemy ship above their heads. It’s only one of the outliers, but it’s been firing at their army and taking out significant chunks of their forces.

Steve angles his shield. Peter sends an arc of lighting for it. Just like he’d hoped, it bounces off the surface and strikes the vessel above.

It falls with a streak of smoke against the crimson sky and explodes upon impact with the ground.
Peter’s hair stands on end. “Toss up!”

Steve throws the shield. Peter throws Mjolnir. They trade; Peter uses the shield to block a blast from one of Thanos’ soldiers. Steve charges the ground and fries a few others.

He whips around and tosses the shield like a frisbee. “Duck!”

Steve avoids getting hit by a hair. The shield knocks back some grey, squid-looking alien that had been gunning for them both. Steve catches the shield when it boomerangs back toward them.

Peter has only ever moved like this in fights with MJ or Nat. It’s a cohesion that comes only after years of practise. Peter thinks they can only work like this simply because they understand each other, because in many way they’re the same; because of the molten fire in their veins, the desperation in their hearts, the resilience in their bones.

“Okay, clearly we have a lot to catch up on.”

Peter and Steve round, both on the aggressive, but the new arrivals are friendlies. Peter recognises both Falcon and Barnes from the airport. Steve introduces them again anyway, and this time he is Peter Parker, not Spider-Man.

Peter waves. “Sorry for trying to kick your asses that one time.”

Sam Wilson snorts. “Don’t worry about it. Wouldn’t wanna go against you now though, that’s for sure.”

“What the hell is this, a tea party?”

MJ is standing behind him, perched on a ledge above the crater he and Steve had basically carved into the ground with their excessive use of Thor’s hammer.

Her hands are folded over her chest and she looks equal parts unimpressed and badass.
“How’s the suit?” Peter asks.

She shrugs. “Kitschy. We need to work on your definition of otherworldly and vaguely threatening.”

“I’ll pencil it in for later. Can you do me a favour though?”

“Depends. What is it?”

“Duck?”

MJ doesn’t even question it. In the same instant that she tucks and rolls, Peter grabs Mjolnir from Steve, throws it toward the creepy crawly that had been about to pounce on her, and then pulls the webs he’d attached to the base of the handle. He catches the hammer when it comes flying back.

MJ gets to her feet, knives drawn. “Jesus.”

Peter tilts his head to inspect the blades better. “Are those serrated?”

“Yeah?”

“That’s hot.” She laughs. “Bet I can kill more aliens than you?”

“Oh, it’s on, Parker.”

“Am I still stoned or are you Tony Stark?”

Tony doesn’t know what the hell is going on. He isn’t even completely sure where he is. All he
knows is that half an hour ago he had jerked awake on Titan after enduring the agonising sensation of being stripped apart atom by atom and then sewn back together again. He doesn’t know about the time that stretched between the two occurrences. Strange had said something about five years passing, but it was all a jumble to Tony.

He couldn’t listen, couldn’t focus on anything at all. The only thing he could think was, Where is Peter?

Gone, he was gone, along with their ship and that blue alien chick. The reality of five years had slowly started to settle with him, sparked a dull ache in his bones.

Five years. Peter had left Titan. Who knows if he’d survived? Tony sure as hell doesn’t.

He doesn’t know if Pepper is okay, or Rhodey; he doesn’t know who was snapped and who wasn’t; he doesn’t know what’s going on now.

But he does know that voice.

Tony whips around at the sound of it, eyes wide as he takes in the incomprehensible sight of Harley Keener hovering a little ways away, clad in a black and silver form-fitting suit.

On his chest in favour of a standard arc reactor is a glowing Hello Kitty insignia, like a kids’ bedroom nightlight.

“What the fuck?”

“Good to see you too, old man,” Harley says as he comes closer, impossibly casual, like it’s just any old Tuesday afternoon.

“You stole my look.”

“Correction: I improved your look. And speaking of, we need to get you a new suit. I mean, yeesh. Crusty. So last season. Can’t even go into night club mode. Strip, old man.”
Tony blinks. He tries very hard to make the connections in his head, but it’s not working. There are too many gaps. The pieces don’t fit right.

“What are you doing here?”

Harley shrugs. “I’m like, a JV Avenger now,” he tells him.

A JV Avenger. Amazing. Wonderful. Very cute. But who’s in the big leagues? Who’s calling the shots right here, right now?

Tony knows he won’t get answers to any of those questions. He settles for pinching his brow and asking the first thing that comes to mind. “Did you say you were stoned?”

“Maybe a little. Also concussed. I don’t know. Parker mentioned something about you being injured maybe? I need to see the wound.”

“Parker? Like Peter?”

“Who the fuck else? Now seriously, lift the shirt.”

Tony feels like his own brain is tripping over itself, a sensation he hasn’t really felt since his days of excessive drug use and cross fading; it doesn’t feel like any of this is real, and yet at the same time, it’s too real. It’s like to make up for everything he missed his mind has shifted gears, turned on hyper aware-mode. Colours are more vibrant, sounds are louder, he can taste the ash and iron in the air.

“It’s not so bad,” he says, “I put a sealant on it—”

“Oh for—JARVIS, give me vitals, please.”

“Woah, wait, pause—”

“Vital signs are steadily dropping, Mr. Keener. Sir is going to need medical attention soon.”
“Yeah? Well we’re fresh out on doctors, so I guess I’ll have to do.”

“Okay, I’m sorry, did I step into some alternate reality by mistake? Because this right here? It’s blowing my mind, really, but I’m gonna need some explanations before you start poking and prodding, Keener.”

Harley isn’t listening to Tony anymore. He’s forced the shirt up to expose the wound, which is deep. Thanos’s blade had cleaved completely through his left side, actually, and just thinking about that makes it ache and throb angrily.

He’d applied his own sealant to it, but it’s mostly worn off by now. Harley’s brows knit as he sprays his own formula over the gash, something cooling and smelling of mint.

“That—yeah, I think that should hold until we can get you patched up someplace nice. Now, old nanite housing unit, please?”

Tony now has the heels of his palms pressed into his eyes. He doesn’t feel very inclined to listen to the kid, so Harley takes the liberty of pulling the triangular unit off of Tony’s chest so he can affix the new one.

Tony stiffens as the new suit encases his body. There’s something unnerving about it not being his own creation. It’s like donning someone else’s skin.

“Wow.” Harley tilts his head to admire his work. “Gianni Versace is quaking.”

“You’re telling me you made this?”

“Course, who else?” Harley grins. “We’re matchy-matchy, see? Well, almost, I figured you wouldn’t want me switching up your colours. I was so tempted to go for pink and purple, but Pete said you’d kill me and if you didn’t then he would, so whatever. We’re sticking with boring old hot rod red.”

Tony takes a deep breath. Alright, new suit. That’s something tangible, something he can accept.
He refuses to allow himself to freak out. He won’t think about it right now, won’t let himself venture
down that road, because already just seeing Harley so much older is too much, and his breathing is
already starting to quicken—

“Hey, Tony,” Harley lays a hand on his shoulder. “Just breathe, it’s okay. Just breathe with me.”

Tony nods jerkily. He grabs Harley’s wrist and holds it. Harley is real. Harley is calm, even with the
carnage around them. It’s going to be okay.

“Thanos is here?” he asks, ragged, hoarse, determined.

Harley nods grimly. “You ready?”

He isn’t, but he never will be. It doesn’t matter. The face place drops and his HUD appears, clean
and yet no less high tech; immediately he’s keyed into the comms.

“Hey, Losers, we’re about to die, remember? Get your asses moving.”

“Who is that?” Tony asks, mic still off. FRIDAY immediately zeroes in on a figure across the field.
She’s moving quickly, kicking ass with a precision that echoes Nat’s, almost.

“That’s Scorpio,” Harley supplies. “She and Peter are basically married. You’ll love her.”

“I heard that,” Scorpio grits out. “We’re not married.”

“Well, I don’t know what the fuck else you’d call a committed four year long relationship. I mean,
y’all are so ride or die—”

“Please shut up.”

“Rude,” Harley snaps as he fires up his repulsor jets. “I’m going to find Peter and fight with him
because you’re no fun.”

Tony can’t think of anything he’d like to do more, so he follows without question.

Fifteen minutes later and the kill score reads something like,

MJ: 7

PETER: 9

They fight back to back trying to thin out the army, but there are just so many of them. It doesn’t matter that they’ve been training for this for years or that they fight like they’re just one singular person, using each other as springboards and vaulting out of the way without having to be told.

In the mayhem, somehow, they lose track of one another. MJ goes one way and he goes another, and it feels like it’ll never end, they will never win, all that will be left of their planet is a desolate rock where life once was.

Peter fights for that; for all of the things he took for granted. Blue cloudless skies and sprawling green grass and Morgan clutching at monarch butterflies. Life, warmth, the unpredictable, unfathomable, unimaginable force that is love. He feels it like he’s never felt it before, fire in his veins, heavy in his gut.

Something to fight for.

Something to live for.

Something to die for.

Peter’s limbs turn to lead. His heart beats slower. It’s then that he loses track. All of the thoughts in his brain just evaporate and he barely hears it when Barton’s voice cuts through the screaming, the dying, the clash of metal on metal.
“Cap, what do you want me to do with this thing?”

It prompts Peter to look up and scan the battlefield. He spots the older man hauling ass through the chaos, looking a little scraped up but alive and clutching the gauntlet in his arms.

“You brought it—” Peter stops himself. “Dude.”

“There was an incident in the sewers,” Barton snaps defensively.

“Just get the stones as far away as possible,” Steve says.

It’s sound advice to Peter, but Bruce doesn’t seem to agree. “We have to get them back where they came from,” he argues.

“No can do,” Peter says, mid-flip. “Thanos destroyed the quantum tunnel, in case you missed that part.”

He lands somewhat unsteadily. He ends up rolling to one knee to break his fall. Scott is saying something but his voice cracks and skips through Peter’s earpiece and there is so much, so much carnage, so much blood, so many broken pieces and broken bodies.

“Hey.”

Peter looks up. Rhodey is standing above him, but he leans down the instant he gets a better glimpse of Peter’s face. “Hey,” he repeats, impossibly gentle, his grip loose but grounding. “Pete?”

He wants to stay like that. He wants the rest of the world to go away so that he can find Tony and talk to him, tell him about all of the things he’s missed, tell him how sorry he is for all of this.

Tell him he’s his son.
“I’m good,” he says instead, ragged, breathing wrong. “I just—needed a sec.”

Rhodey nods slowly. His hand twitches. Whatever touch he had been contemplating remains a mystery as a shadow drapes over them, long and narrow.

Peter turns and finds Doctor Stephen Strange. He addresses him. “You said one out of fourteen-million we win, right? Tell me this is it.”

Doctor Strange shakes his head as his gaze dips to Peter. “If I tell you what happens, it won’t happen.”

“God,” Peter grunts, pushing himself up, “I forgot the part where you spoke in riddles.”

Strange shrugs. “Part of the gig.”

“Is being wrong part of it, too?”

Strange considers that. “It would come as a great surprise,” he says. “But it wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Really reassuring.”

“Yeah, well,” Strange shrugs, “bedside manner was never my strong suit.”

“Listen, as much as I love to listen to all of you bicker, I assume we need to do something about those stones that doesn’t involve a back-yard pick up game of pass the gauntlet, correct?”

Peter freezes.

“Is that—?”
He answers Rhodey’s question the only way he can, frantic nodding and a wide smile, eyes burning with the tears that spring at the sound of Tony’s voice, tinny and grainy but there.

“Holy shit,” he breathes. “Rhodey, he’s—”

“He’s alive,” Rhodey finishes, reaching for Peter. “He’s—we did it, didn’t we? He’s here somewhere, he’s—it’s gonna be okay?”

He almost balks at the older man looking to him in search of reassurance. It’s always been the other way around. He doesn’t know if he can provide and then he doesn’t have the chance to because his eyes catch something over Rhodey’s shoulder.

Pepper, fighting.

Pepper, falling.

She’s plummeting fast, her repulsors sparking in and out. Peter can only push past Rhodey and move toward her, his webs catching on a broken support beam high up, his muscles straining as he swings as fast as he can.

Pepper yelps when they collide. Peter skids to a halt with her in his arms. They tumble in the dirt, but it doesn’t affect her as much as it does him. Even the adrenaline can’t mask the pain of his injured arm, his aching body.

“Peter,” she gasps, pulling him up with her. “Are you okay?”

“Am I okay? Me? Are you kidding me? Are you?”

She rolls her eyes. “My interface took a hit, but I’m fine. I just got distracted.”

By Tony. He knows that without having to ask. Now more than ever before he feels an irrevocable wave of mounting frustration. Tony is here, he’s close, and despite the fact that Peter’s hasn’t seen him yet, he lets himself believe it.
They’ll find him. They’ll get him back for real, get him to safety.

“Okay,” he says, “listen to me—”

She doesn’t have the chance to. They’re both thrown with the force of a nearby explosion.

“Underoos?”

Ringing in his ears, static filling his brain. There’s nothing, black spots, and then everything; an avalanche of unfiltered noise that has him hissing and covering his ears.

“Pete,” says a voice. “Hey, kiddo, it’s okay. It’s me.”

It’s me.

Underoos.

Peter’s eyes fly open. There’s a hand on his forearm and another on his shoulder. He reaches out and grabs one of them. Solid, cool metal, hard against his fingertips.

It’s not an illusion. It’s not part of a nightmare. It’s not a dream or a hope or a wish on a birthday candle.


“Oh, it’s Tony now? Guess all it takes is my literal death for you to stop calling me Mr Stark, huh, kiddo?” Peter laughs, but Tony doesn’t. Not really. “Is it still kiddo? Strange said—”
“I know.” Peter still hasn’t let go of Tony. He doesn’t think he can. “I know, and we’ll talk about it later, I promise.”

Tony doesn’t seem happy about it, but he nods and hauls Peter to his feet. It seems like he just keeps falling, and for a half a second, he wonders if maybe he’s just supposed to be the one on his knees.

“You good?”

Peter’s discomfort must be obvious, but he nods, ignoring the pain in his ankle and choosing to focus on Tony instead. “I’m good. I’m—I’m really really good.”

Five inches and a watery, strained laugh between them.

He feels like he’s standing in a vacuum. There’s no sound and all the air is compressing around him, making everything smaller, pulling him toward Tony.

Peter staggers.

Tony catches him before he can fall. Peter stumbles, grabs on, and closes the space between them.

It’s the easiest thing in the world to lean against him. For the first time in years, Peter allows someone else to shoulder his weight, hold him up, keep him standing. He just needs a break, just needs a second to breathe.

“Good,” says Tony. “This is good. I was really thinking we were there and I’m glad you agree—”

“It’s not a hug, I’m just using you for a crutch.”

“Right, naturally.”

Peter squeezes his eyes shut and holds Tony tighter, holds his father tighter; the man who doesn’t even know they’re blood related, but still presses a kiss to Peter’s cheek anyways. “God, I can’t believe you’re really here.”
“So it’s really been…?”

“Yeah.”

Tony leans back. His hands are rough and warm on both of Peter’s cheeks and there’s something so vulnerable about the way he looks now, something soft. “Are you okay, Peter?”

It’s not the first time someone has asked him that over the last five years, but it’s the first time he’s really bothered to consider the question before answering it.

His voice shakes. “I don’t know? I don’t…”

He wants to say yes. He wants to scream it, wants to smile, wants to laugh, but Tony is a blown glass ornament, he is a box with the words FRAGILE stamped on every side; if Peter is getting him back now only to lose him in the next ten minutes, he’s going to lose it.

He is almost okay.

And there is not a word more tragic, more heartbreaking, than almost.

Because now Peter knows what he has to do. Or rather, what he can’t let Tony do.

He knows, and he knows in his heart that it’s right.

Peter swallows roughly.

“Kiddo?”

“Yeah,” he nods, ankle already feeling slightly better as his healing factor kicks in. There’s no reason for him to still be leaning on Tony like this, except there is every reason. “I’m good, let’s go.”
Then Peter opens his hand.

Tony frowns. “What are you doing?”

“Just wait.”

Not three seconds later, Mjolnir slaps against his palm. Peter scans the perimeter and decides on the best course. There’s a tugging sensation in his gut as the hammer comes alive, electric and light. Peter uses it to cleave a path through the enemy ranks.

“That’s really never gonna get old,” he marvels, flipping the hammer.

Tony is slack-jawed. “Okay,” he says, clearly trying to compose himself. “You and I are having a long talk later, understand? Because this is—I feel like I’m on an acid trip right now.”

“You and me both.”

“And how would you know what an acid trip feels like? Peter Parker, I swear to god, if you’ve been dropping E—”

“No!” Peter pauses. “Once, but only to see what it was like, and it was terrible and I’m never doing it again so relax—”

“Relax?! Relax, he says. Relax. You did—and you want me to—Peter.”

Despite himself, Peter is smiling. “I didn’t actually do acid.”

“What?”

“You should’ve seen the look on your face, though. Now come on, we should find the others.”
Rhodey finds them first.

In the midst of the havoc their paths cross again. Twenty yards away, Wanda Maximoff is assaulting Thanos with a volley of debris, and then Thanos is ordering that his army rain fire on the field.

The next thing Peter knows, Rhodey is colliding with him and there’s a ring of golden, runic looking patterns above their heads protecting them from the blasts.

“Peter, listen to me: T’Challa has the gauntlet, but I need you to—”

His words die away, withering like leaves against autumn winds. Rhodey stumbles and Peter reaches for him as a reflex, but the older man doesn’t fall.

He just keeps staring.

“Tones?”

Peter wishes he could leave them alone to talk, but a) they’re in the middle of a war zone about to die and b) he’s not feeling particularly inclined toward the idea of abandoning Tony, which is really stupid considering Tony doesn’t actually need his help, Peter just can’t comprehend the idea of walking away from him.

But if there’s anyone he trusts to make sure Tony stays okay, it’s Rhodey.

Rhodey, who takes a stumbling step forward, dazed with shock. Rhodey whose smile is sudden and splits his face, cuts wrinkles around his eyes, is so impossibly glad to see Tony that he’s in tears after just a single heartbeat.

He throws his arms around his best friend. Tony raises his eyebrows, shrugs, and then smirks. “I’m gonna pretend I haven’t actually been dead five years and this is just how you always react to seeing me.”
Rhodey throws his head back and laughs; it’s the kind that Peter has found to be a rarity over the last few years. He and Morgan are really the only people Peter has noticed have been able to draw it out of him.

Tony smiles. “What are you looking at?”

Rhodey puts his hands on either side of Tony’s face. “I’m lookin’ at you.”

In the middle of all of this, the weird magical shield thingie over their heads dissipates when the gigantic mothership in the sky changes its target.

“Karen, what are they firing at?”

“Something just entered the upper atmosphere.”

“Danvers,” Peter breathes, finally drawing the attention of both men beside him as the cannons on the mothership are single-handedly dismantled in less than a minute.

Peter shakes his head to clear it. “Okay, as much as I hate to draw attention away from the centre of our collective universe, we gotta move.”

“Wait, who—am I the centre of the universe?”

Rhodey snorts. “Rising from the dead is gonna do wonders for your ego, man.”

All of their preparation, all of their effort, every life they lost and what does it come to?

Peter claws at the gauntlet, pulls, replaces it seamlessly, and rolls.

A split second lasts an infinity.
He hasn’t forgotten. He’ll never forget the night in the rain, the cold that seeped into his bones and etched the words on his heart, *with great power comes great responsibility*. He hasn’t forgotten the first lesson.

He hasn’t forgotten where he came from, or how he got here. He knows people died to get him this far, and what better way to repay them then to die for the same reason? To die so that so many others can live?

He will never forget. In whatever capacity that he remains; be it an echo or a shadow or a star; he will never forget the light of Pepper’s laughter, the warmth of May’s arms. He will never forget nights sprawled on the compound rooftop with Nat by his side waiting for the sunrise. He will never forget lying on the ceiling of his dorm room dropping cheese puffs into Harley’s mouth. He will never forget holding Morgan for the first time, will never forget easy Sundays in the park or holding her while she cries or making her smile.

He will always wish that he had gotten more, that he had been there for longer, but it’s okay.

She’ll have Tony, won’t she? She’ll have Pepper.

And really, it’ll be better like this, to restore the balance instead of throwing it off. Tony never has to know. Everyone who ever did will be gone soon.

Peter takes a deep breath through the excruciating waves of pain. It’s hard, really, to think or see or even exist as his body is microwaved from the inside out.

Thanos smirks. “I am inevitable.”

And that’s okay. Death is inevitable for everyone. Thanos is not the grim reaper. It’s not up to him to decide.

Nothing happens.

Peter raises his arm, chest heaving, pain, *so much pain*, filling his lungs with fire, tearing his skin apart.
He looks away from Thanos, who doesn’t deserve to take his last words, his last breaths. Like mercy, like fate, like forgiveness, his eyes find Pepper’s because of *course* she is there.

“T’im so sorry.”

Peter snaps.

Chapter End Notes

OOP—
It feels like a dream.

It is distant, hazy; the pain is predominant, everywhere all at once, something he breathes in and out as he makes his way over to the slab of concrete that had once been a part of something solid and sturdy that has now been reduced to a ruin.

Peter leans against it. He stumbles. Falls.

Arms reach out to hold him but it hurts, it hurts so much Peter can’t even react to the pain. It hurts so much he can’t even register any more. He has hit his limit and then some; gone beyond what he ever thought he was capable of stomaching.

It’s everywhere. It’s everything. It’s red and black and burning.

“Peter,” someone sobs. Shaky voice and hands, on his chest over his suit, light and brushing his bare face, stinging like slaps. Something so gentle shouldn’t feel like that.

“Pep,” he rasps, because it has to be her. It can’t be anyone else.

She kneels beside him and he sees the tears streaking on her face, golden like sundrops. He wants to say, it’s okay, do you remember Coney Island when we held Morgan’s hands, do you remember the pillow fort we made when it rained that day, do you remember that midnight in December when we skated in Rockefeller Centre and the lights flashed white and blue and green, it's okay, I'm always
with you, I’m right there, it’s okay.

He wants to say it, but he just can’t.

More hands, rough and warm. His name is a sob on Tony’s lips and how fitting is it, really, that he’s lost two sets of parents and he will die in the arms of his third. They are his bookends, and from start to finish despite all of the turmoil and loss, he’s been so loved.

He wants to tell them he loves them back, so much, that if his love is a star it will be the brightest echo of light, that if his love is the sun it will be pale and yellow and melt their morning dew tears, that if his love is a sky he will stretch himself to keep them safe, always.

He wants to so badly.

But it’s not time yet.

“Peter,” Tony says again, shaky, a hazy figure, “buddy, look at me?”

It sounds like he’s two seconds from breaking, one cubic litre of water away from a bursting damn. Tony is scared. No, Tony is terrified.

No matter how hard he tries, Peter can’t seem to turn his head. It’s like one half of his body isn’t working anymore. He reaches out with his right arm and Pepper’s hand grabs his own. “Pep,” he rasps, “my... thigh.”

It’s not what she’s expecting. Her face scrunches up and her eyes flit to where he’s talking about, and she must think he’s delusional. Even with his half melted brain Peter can gauge that from her heartbroken expression. “Baby, listen, I’m right here—”

Peter’s grip tightens. “My... left thigh.”

He doesn’t have a lot of time. There’s a darkness on the periphery of his vision and it’s closing in with every slow, baited beat of his heart.

Pepper shakes her head. “Honey, you’re not hurt there.”
Of course he is. Of course he’s hurt there, but that’s not what he’s talking about. For once the pain is the last thing on his mind. He needs to get her to understand but Tony is holding his right arm and he can barely move his left, and there’s just no time.

An infinitesimal shake of his head. “Tap… it…”

Pepper stares. He squeezes her arm again, does his best to say with his eyes, *I’m serious Pep, come on, we don’t have all day here,* but he thinks she just sees dark.

She taps his leg and there is the hidden panel sliding away to reveal the syringe, that and the letter, the two things he could not have gone without today.

She grabs the needle first. “Peter, what…?”

He twists his arm as the nanites initiate Protocol 9. They retract above his forearm and band around his bicep, creating enough pressure for his veins to pop. They’re blackened, probably thin, but it’ll have to work.

“*Now;*” he manages.

Pepper shakes her head. She’s doing that thing, the thing where she’s so flustered she can’t even comprehend anything beyond the point of frustration, the thing where she puts her hands on her face and sputters and asks him how he could be such a big dumb idiot.

He breathes in a laboured way, and it’s getting worse with every inhale, getting harder, but he doesn’t even blink because he *needs this to work.*

“Do… you… t-trust me…?”

Her answer is a sigh, almost like relief. “Of course.”

“Pepper,” Tony says, “whatever it is, do it *now.*”
Peter wishes he had the strength to turn and look at Tony but he just can’t. He has to make sure the reaction happens. He’s never tested it before on a live subject and so it’s well within reason that it’ll just die as soon as it’s injected, but maybe, *maybe*.

Pepper pulls the cap off the needle and plunges it into his arm.

The effect is instantaneous; Peter goes completely rigid, back arching, eyes flying wide with panic he can’t even vocalise. The darkness recedes and in its place is a red-hot fire, and there are magmatic rivers underneath his skin.

Then:

Black.

———

“Peter?” Pepper tries.

Nothing.

Pepper places her hands on either side of his face, carefully, and tries to get him to wake up. “Peter? Can you… can you hear me?”

“KAREN?”

Pepper’s heart skips at the sound of Tony’s voice, but she doesn’t have time to focus on it. Her vision has tunnelled and it’s just Peter, just them.

“Peter’s heartbeat is getting stronger, but he’s far from stable,” KAREN reports. “His BPM is 30 and climbing.”

Pepper sobs. The sound is broken, a release of the pent-up grief she has kept such a careful handle
on for so long. She falls toward him and Tony catches her, helps her stay upright; he will always catch her before she falls, just as Peter will always be there for her to lean on.

Tony holds her tight so she doesn’t shatter like he knows she wants to.

“Pep,” he whispers, “it’s... it’s okay.”

It isn’t. It isn’t okay, but Peter has torn himself apart for this, spread himself thin for this, lost for this, fought for this, and she will be damned if the cold tendrils of death take her son, take her baby.

It’s not the end.

Rhodey kneels by them. He looks sick as he places his palm against Peter’s forehead. “He’s cold.”

“He needs more than whatever that was,” Tony says. “He needs a hospital, or—”

“We will take him to Wakanda,” T’Challa interjects smoothly. He stands over them, far from an impassive figure. His fists are curled and there are dried tear tracks on his cheeks. “We have the best doctors. It is the only place for him.”

They can only nod their thanks.

The logistics of how they’re going to get there, how they can possibly transport Peter without injuring him further seeing as his suit is melted to his skin, don’t present themselves to Pepper.

But Strange comes over, waves his hands, and in a shower of sparks provides salvation.

“P-Pep?”

Pepper pushes off of Tony. She’s not crying anymore, just trying to make it from one breath to the next.
Peter raises his good arm but can’t quite seem to grasp at her. Pepper takes his hand anyway. “Hey, baby,” she whispers. “You’re gonna be okay.”

“T-Tony?”

“I’m here.” Tony scoots closer. “I’m right here and I’m not going anywhere, kiddo, I promise.”

“Good.” Peter nods weakly. “Don’t. Don’t... go away ’nymore. ’S too much already.”

Tony’s laugh escapes the wrangled grip grief had trapped it inside. He takes Peter’s other hand. “I’m so sorry.”

“Not your fault.”

Pepper wipes a tear from Tony’s cheek while he keeps talking just to have something to do. She knows someone is coming with a stretcher, either on their end or Wakanda’s, but in the meantime there is only the stilted silence and the weak strain of Peter’s breathing. “You did it, kid. We won because of you. God, look at you. I’m so proud, Pete.”

“M’not a hero,” Peter mutters. “Where’s my berry?”

“What?”

“He means me,” Harley says suddenly, cutting through the crowd Pepper hadn’t even realised had formed. “Hey, asshole. Don’t die, okay?”

Peter nods. He closes his eyes. “‘Kay.”

Okay, Pepper thinks, is a more relative term than time itself.

She stays with him, keeps his hand in her own, because she knows he would do the same for her.
“We need to call Cho—”

“She’s already on her way.”

“Okay, but there are still about a thousand other things I need to take care of, and you’re pushing me, why are you pushing me?”

“Just shut up and get inside.”

With a final shove, Tony is alone with Pepper in an empty—examination room, maybe? There’s a bench like the ones in regular hospitals, but everything in Wakanda is so high tech, it could be a bedroom for all he knows.

“Sit down.”

“Pepper—”

“Listen, you’re not subtle,” she says, going over to the cabinets to rifle through the wares, “I can tell you’ve got a few broken ribs, and if you hadn’t noticed, you have about three gigantic gaping wounds on your body.”

Tony frowns. His eyes flicker down. “I do?”

He does: there’s a gash along his right forearm that’s carved through his armour, another on his side, and the last he discovers on his forehead. There’s dried, coagulated blood stuck to his skin. “Well, will wonders never cease.”

“Exactly. Sit.”

“What is this, obedience school?”
“Yes,” she says forcefully, guiding him toward the bench, “and you’re dangerously close to getting zapped, Fido.”

Tony sits. “This is the last thing I should be doing right now. Peter is in surgery right now, I should —”

“What, be operating?”

“Maybe.”

“Tony.” Pepper grabs his face. Her hands are warm and he has no choice but to look right at her, instead of the door he had been eyeing desperately. Her thumb strokes his cheekbone. “There’s nothing you can do right now. I know it sucks, believe me, I know, but you’ll only be in the way.”

“Right,” he whispers. All of the sudden his eyes start to burn and he just feels useless, completely and utterly pathetic. Peter is who knows where, having been dragged off in the chaos, and there’s no telling his condition or whether or not he’s even still alive; whether or not he’s awake or asleep, scared or so mentally scarred he can’t even remember his own name.

It feels so wrong to waste even a second concerned with himself when his family is fractured and scattered across this unfamiliar hospital. He should be with Peter, or at least Rhodey. He should be helping with the injured or clearing the wreckage or something, something useful.

“Right,” he says again, cheeks hot, eyes burning and swimming. “Right, okay—”

“Tony, breathe.” Pepper’s fingers rake through his hair over and over while he shakes, fists balled up, frustrated and aching. The motion is soothing and gentle. “Just take a second, okay? No one’s expecting anything of you right now.”

“But I—”


Tony closes his eyes. There’s a rustling sound as she sits beside him, and then Tony is pulling her
closer. His breathing is laboured and sharp as he holds her. It hurts. God, he hadn’t realised how much. Every breath feels like he’s being stabbed in the chest, making them shallow and ragged, but at least he has her. At least she’s safe.

Who the hell is he kidding? She doesn’t need saving. She doesn’t need him to be her salvation anymore. She’s her own hero. He can’t quite wrap his mind around the ways she’s changed yet; there’s a roughness to her, a harder, bitter edge. Her eyes are guarded even as she cries, her voice is level and flat even with her fear.

Grief had sculpted her, shaped her into something new, something with cracks and crevices poorly sealed over. Grief for him.

“Pep,” he whispers, terrified, “god, I’m so sorry.”

Pepper runs her hand up and down his arm and leans against his shoulder. “It’s gonna be okay. I’m here.”

It helps. The simple assurance is immeasurably grounding, something she’s always had a knack for. Tony’s eyelids grow heavy and her touches slow to a lazy pace, up and down, light against his skin.

“Thank you,” he whispers after a while.

Pepper’s lips brush his knuckles. “Don’t thank me yet. I still have to stitch you up and we both know how terrible I am at that.”

Tony straightens and almost laughs. Almost. Pepper keeps a hand on his side and studies him. “Can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“Do you…” a deep breath, “do you remember any of it? Being—being gone?”

Tony thinks, hard, because somewhere in the back of his mind is the impression of orange, like a sunset, but the sun never fell all the way and the moon never came out. Eternal, everlasting; his absolute worst nightmare.
But it’s only an impression, something hazy without real shape.

“No,” he says, “I don’t remember.”

“So it really just feels like it’s been, what, an hour?”

“Something like that.” He looks down at his hands, flexes them. “I, uh… I can’t imagine how hard —”

Pepper kisses him. Softly, the kind of kiss that aims to shut him up, the kind that makes up for all the others they’ve missed. “I don’t wanna hear that,” she whispers when she pulls back. “I don’t want to talk about how hard it’s been. I don’t want an apology. I just want you to be here, with me. Can you do that?”

Tony doesn’t even have to think. “Of course, Pep. You got me.”

Her fingers are gentle against his cheek, like her smile, but her eyes are weighed down and darkened with all the sadness she doesn’t want to unload on him. He wishes she would. He needs to know what’s going on inside her head, he needs to know how to fix this, how to make it right.

“You got me, too.”

Peter jerks awake in a brightly lit room.

The ground is hard beneath his back. The walls are white and beyond the glass pane windows he can see skyscrapers; New York like it hasn’t been for years, bustling and alive against a pale blue sky.

Peter sits up. Oddly enough, there’s no pain. Nothing hurts. He feels lighter than he has in a long time, really. After all, how can you carry grief when you’re the one who’s dead?

“Oh, but you’re not dead, bambino.”
Peter’s head whips around.

There’s a woman perched at a baby grand, her fingers trained on the ivory keys, a soft smile pulling at her lips. She’s older, but not old. Her eyes sort of sparkle as she watches him slowly push himself up, and when he gets close enough, he sees that they’re dark and brown and warm.

Peter had thought, when he’d met Howard, that he’d gotten his eyes from him.

He sees now that he was wrong. These are his eyes, these are Morgan’s eyes, these are Tony’s.

The woman pats the bench and scoots to accommodate him. Peter sits slowly, somewhat uncertain.

“Do you know who I am?”

The answer comes immediately. “Nonna.”

Maria Stark’s smile widens. She nods, and then reaches up to brush his hair from his eyes. It’s longer right now, and not matted with blood and sweat and dirt. He can feel her, really feel her, when her fingers lightly brush his scalp and trace the tip of his ear.

“Why am I here?”

“You’re here because you deserve to choose,” she replies. “Most people don’t get that luxury, but you, bambino, you get to decide.”

“Decide what?”

She thumbs his cheekbone. “I think you know.”

He does.
Whether to live, or whether to die.

“I won’t be selfish enough to ask you to stay with me, despite how much I’d love to be with you. But I will be selfish enough to ask that when you go back, because you will, you do everything in your power to live. It’s been a long time since anyone in our family has seen the ripe old age of eighty.”

“What if I…” Peter swallows, roughly, and forces himself to just say it. “What if I don’t want to go back?”

*What if I’m tired?*

Maria frowns. “And why wouldn’t you want to?”

“But because I’ve done everything I needed to do. I’m not… I did what I was meant to. I followed through with my purpose, or whatever the fuck—pardon my French—and I… maybe there’s a part of me that doesn’t think I’m supposed to go beyond this point?”

It’s scary to say, to think, to feel.

Maria stares at him for a long moment. Then she huffs and whacks him upside the head. “If that isn’t the biggest load of *cacca di cavallo* I’ve ever heard—and I raised your father, so believe me, I’ve heard a lot.”

Peter rubs the back of his head. “It’s not horseshit, it’s… my instincts.”

“Your instincts are *wrong*.”

“They’re rarely wrong.”

“They are this time.”
“Nonna.”

“Peter.”

He can’t help smiling. It’s painful, palpable, how gaping her absence suddenly is. She should’ve been there. She should’ve got to see him when he was born, when he graduated high school, when he went off to college. He can’t imagine she’s the type of grandma to bake cookies on a Sunday afternoon, but maybe…

“Can you teach me to play a song?”

Maria hums, eyeing him with something like suspicion. “I only play for people who want to live.”

His smile widens into a grin. On impulse, one he leans into readily because in this in-between space it’s simply hard not to, Peter presses a kiss to her cheek. “Okay. You got me, I’ll live to be an old man. When you see me next I’ll be old and wrinkly and gross.”

Maria sniffs around her own smile. “That’s not how death works, mio nipote, but I suppose you have the right idea.”

She grabs his hands and lays them on the keys. “This is middle C. It’s the starting point for every player. This is the heart of the piano, where the notes are most even and level. As you travel left, they get lower, more intense. To the right, higher and softer and lighter. But here in the middle, the sounds are steady.”

“So it’s like the Goldilocks position?”

She hums. “Precisely. Play your right pinky—that’s G. Now your left—good, that’s F.”

Peter glances at her. “Can I ask you something?”

“You just did.”
“So that’s where we get it.”

“Hmm?”

“Nothing. Anyway, why did you marry Howard?”

Maria glances up at him sharply. Then she sighs. “Even the hardest men have soft edges. And he wasn’t very hard when I met him. That came with time, as it usually does. When we were young, he saw the world much as you do: something wide and open and full of problems for him to fix, full of possibilities. And then, as it often does, the bad things stacked up one after the other, his brain was too big for his heart, and both wandered far and away from me and my little Anthony.”

Peter considers that. “We all do that, don’t we? Fixate on what we want instead of what we have.”

“There’s the wisdom I gave you. Yes, you do. It’s exhausting being the wife of a Stark.”

“So… why stay?”

She repositions his hands. “Stupid, ridiculous reasons.”

“Like?”

“Love,” she says. “And Catholics don’t believe in divorce.”

“I thought we were Jewish.”

“Jewish-Catholic.”

“Is there maybe a loophole in there?”

“I don’t believe in loopholes.”
Peter grins again. He plays the notes for her, the ones he learned a long time ago that are coming back to him now. He remembers easy, soft songs. Her eyes light up as his fingers press the keys.

Maria rests her chin on his shoulder. “You play well. I wish we could have preformed together at the Christmas Galas.”

Peter hums. “We haven’t hosted one of those in a while.”

He’d only ever attended one, at Tony’s invitation. It had been months before the Snap, and the memories of the night are so clouded it feels like someone else’s life. He remembers feeling distinctly out of place among the crowds of wealthy socialites, remembers how much his tux had itched, and remembers Tony rolling his eyes every time Peter had tugged at his bow tie. He’d fixed the cockeyed angle each instance without complaint.

Maria sighs as the song ends. “It’s almost time for you to go.”

Peter nods. He feels it too.

“I’m sorry I didn’t know you before now.”

She strokes his cheek again. “That’s alright. It was nobody’s fault but HYDRA’s. Tell that to James, wouldn’t you? Tell him I forgive him. And tell my idiot son to get his head out of his culo and forgive that man, too.”

Peter smiles. “Will do.”

“And Peter?”

“Yeah?”

“Know that no matter what, I am fiercely, undeniably, unconditionally proud of you.”
His eyes start to burn. One last time, he lets himself move with his emotions. He kisses the crown of
her head and closes his eyes as the world starts to grow brighter, too bright, but not burning. Just
warm, a hug, a sea breeze, a kiss goodnight, goodbye.

The apartments General Okoye provides for them are nicer than MJ was expecting. They’re built
seamlessly into the hospital; wide and spacious rooms with comfortable beds and modern furniture.
On a normal day it would be heaven to MJ, but right now it’s too hard to focus on anything but the
dread.

It’s settled heavy in her stomach, weighing down her limbs so she has to practically drag herself to
the shower.

MJ is a practical person. She knows that Peter is utterly out of her reach right now, in the hands of
doctors that may or may not know how to treat his condition; she knows there’s nothing she can
reasonably do.

But that doesn’t stop her from feeling restless. It doesn’t stop the stupid anxieties that invade her
brain, curling around the rare optimistic thoughts and injecting them with a cynical poison.

He could be dying.

Odds are, he’s dying.

And the worst part is, the thing she feels most, more than all of the fear or hope or latent strings of
grief, is anger.

She’s pissed off, more than she can ever remember being. Even when her mom would roll over and
take Sam’s stupid mental manipulations, even when Charlie would come into her room and pull the
heads off her dolls, even when Nat had benched her on the Amsterdam mission.

He’d known he was gonna do this. He’d known and he hadn’t told her. He’d planned for it,
constructed some serum that had done who knows what. It could’ve helped or made it a thousand
times worse and the idiot had no way of knowing what the outcome would be; MJ may not be a
chemist, but she’s clued in enough on science to know you need to test your shit before you put it on
the market.
Then he’d been sitting there dying, veins blackened, face slack, body burnt and disfigured and wrong, and he hadn’t asked for her. She doesn’t resent Pepper, she doesn’t resent Stark, but Harley, yeah, she could do with punching his teeth in or something.

But it’s whatever, right? Because it’s out of her hands now. There’s nothing she can do and she tells herself that over and over.

It hurts.

Feeling this useless, bothering to waste even a nanosecond concentrating on anything else. It’s twisted and fucked up and there’s nothing she can do.

And he’s gonna die.

MJ lets the water beat against her back like little bullets. She rests her forehead against her knees and thinks about screaming, about beating her hands bloody against the walls, about saying fuck it and taking a damn boat to like, Antarctica or something, leaving it all behind.

But she can’t do any of that because the person she loves the most in the whole wide world is going to die today, probably surrounded by strangers, essentially alone in some sterile OR.

She sobs. It aches, it burns. Her lungs are on fire but the waves just keep coming, keep slapping against her heart, until she can’t breathe anymore and she’s gasping and so numb from the heat of the shower that her body isn’t even her own anymore.

Her fists clench. Her jaw locks. She refuses to cry anymore.

MJ swallows back the sob that’s threatening to tear her in two. She reaches up and turns the water off.

Thirty minutes later and she finds Harley Keener on the floor of a hospital hallway, legs stretched out
in front of him, staring at nothing.

“Hey, asshole.”

He looks up. Blinks once and then twice. There’s a gash on his forehead that’s been hastily patched up and MJ wonders briefly if anyone had done it for him, or if he’d done it himself. Swallowing the brief surge of pity, she steps closer.

He holds out a red paper bag. “Skittle?”

*Typical,* MJ thinks, rolling her eyes. She sits down next to him and glares at the proffered candy. He shakes it like that’ll somehow make it more appealing. “Relax, I won’t give you grape.”

“They all taste the same, you know.”

“Bullshit.”

“It’s true. You only perceive the different flavours because you’re psychologically conditioned to.”

His face scrunches up. “Nuh-uh. That’s a fuckin’ lie if I ever heard one. I know for a fact the green one tastes more sour than the rest. What’s your sauce?”

“I’m a psych major.”

“Yeah, no.” Harley spreads his hands. “Something happens to my tongue when I eat the green one, okay? I’ll buy that the rest are the same, whatever. But different parts of your mouth react to different flavours, okay? Your taste buds are sectioned. Sour shit makes you drool more—”

“Ugh, gross. I don’t wanna hear about your drool.”

“I’m speaking of science,” Harley says, “and my hypothesis is that the green one actually has a sour flavour.”
“Okay, fine. Give me the bag and close your eyes.”

Harley obliges readily. MJ selects a red skittle from the bag and hands it over. “Eat. Tell me which colour it is.”

“Fuck if I know,” Harley says. “Sugar.”

MJ takes out a green one. “Again.”

“Same.”

“You’re dumb shit, you know that, Keener?”

Harley shakes his head in disappointment. “I can’t believe I just let myself get played like that.”

“Excuse me?”

They still.

MJ doesn’t have to look up to know who’s spoken, because she recognises the woman’s voice. Granted, they’d only met a handful of times before and never for that long, but there is no mistaking May Parker.

MJ’s stomach rolls. She shoves the candy at Harley and stands. “Ms. Parker.”

At that, Harley’s eyes widen. He scrambles to his feet. “Shit—uh, I mean, hey. Hi.”

May studies them both with an inscrutable expression. MJ would almost believe she was mad, if it weren’t for the nervous wringing of her hands and the tension in her shoulders. She focuses on MJ. “Happy told me…” she squeezes her eyes shut. “He said it had been five years, but I didn’t believe him until now. God, Michelle, you’re…”
“Older?” Harley supplies after a small pause.

MJ whacks him. “Listen, numbnuts, if Happy’s here that means Ariel is too. Go find her or something.”

His eyes light up. “Shit, you’re right.” He looks back at May. “I’m so sorry, Ms. Parker, it was great meeting you, but I gotta find my sister so—”

“Right, yeah,” she waves him off, more confused than anything else. “Of course.”

Harley bolts. MJ hovers, despite how much she’d rather go with him. Happy had told her he was going to find her mother and Charlie. They’re here somewhere, and five years has done wonders for the coil of resentment she used to harbor for them. There’s just an aching, bleeding hole in her heart where they used to be.

But May needs someone. She doesn’t know where Pepper is at, or even Stark, so she decides that she’ll have to do.

“Where’s Peter? Is he okay? Is he here?”

MJ bites her cheek. She opens her mouth and then closes it again, not quite sure how to say it. “Uh, he is. He’s here. I can’t tell you where because I don’t know, and believe me, I’d like to just as much as you would. I don’t know if he’s okay either, but I know there are a lot of people doing their best to—to make sure that he is.”

It’s about the best she can do.

May stares. Her face doesn’t crumple, she doesn’t fall to the floor and start crying like a part of MJ is expecting.

It seems like grief hasn’t stolen from her strength, it’s added to it; layers of iron and steel, a hard expression, guarded eyes. May Parker knows what it’s like to lose, and after so much of it, her body reacts by going into lockdown mode.
“Where is Tony?”

“I don’t know that, either.”

“Alright.” She takes a deep breath. Doesn’t seem impatient, exactly, but drawn. “Okay. Is there a place to wait?”

“Uh, down the hall I think? There’s a room with a bunch of chairs, anyway. I can—I can sit with you? If you want?”

May runs a hand through her hair. “No, that’s—I’m fine, thank you. Really. Your mother was with us, and your sister. I think you should go and see them.”

“Right.” MJ shifts, but makes no real move to leave.

Then she surges forward and pulls the other woman into a hug that takes them both by surprise. “I’m really, really sorry. I can’t imagine what this is like for you, and I know I’m not helping, but—”

May winds her arms around MJ. “Oh, sweetie,” she whispers. “I know it’s not your fault. And I’m used to waiting on my idiot kid, alright? I can handle it.”

_Not like this_, MJ thinks, because this isn’t a superficial stab wound or a bullet in the shoulder or a concussion, this is something in a league of its own. It’s unfathomable, it’s devastating, it’s completely ridiculous and totally stupid and she swears to whatever higher power there might be that she will _kill_ Peter Parker if he lives through this.

But MJ pulls away. Wipes her cheek, embarrassed to have even cried.

May doesn’t look like she thinks any less of her for it. If anything, her eyes shine brighter. “Five years, huh?”

May Parker isn’t an idiot.
“Yeah. Five years.”


MJ squeezes her hand. “It’s MJ,” she says. “You can—you can call me MJ.”

Peter opens his eyes to the sound of something tearing through the air. On instinct he reaches out to catch it before it can hit his chest.

In his hand is a grimy baseball. Twenty feet away, Ben stands in a dirt-dusted jersey with a hat on backwards, the sun beating down against his brow. “Nice catch, Spider-Man.”

Peter stares. The ball falls limp and rolls off the base.

“Hey, don’t look so surprised. Like I could let you traipse around the in-between and not say hi?”

Peter’s mouth catches up with his brain. “Uncle Ben?”


Peter grins. Inside his chest, something blooms, rises warm like the sun. “Like I could forget an ugly mug like that.”

Ben laughs, and then he’s hugging Peter. He’s wished a thousand times for just one more minute, one more hug, one more smile, and now that it’s finally happening, it’s like no time has passed at all.

Ben leans back. He gives Peter the smile. “Look at you,” he marvels. “You’re almost as tall as me.”
“I’m pretty sure we’re the same height.”

“Nah, I definitely have an inch or two on you.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

Ben grins. He puts his arm around Peter and guides him away, toward the empty dug out. “I used to play here when I was a kid, with Rich and a few other kids. We all thought we’d make it big, but you know, life happens. And, uh, stops, too.”

“Ben, I’m so—”

“If the word sorry comes outta that mouth, I’m gonna have to whack you.”

Peter grins, but it falters. “It was my fault, Ben. I shouldn’t have gone out that night, I should’ve just stayed at home—”

“You were grieving.”

“I was eleven.”

“Sometimes it happens later,” Ben says. “Sometimes it takes years. You were too young to understand what not having parents meant at three, Pete. It’s only natural it snuck up on you like that.”

Peter’s mouth feels dry. That’s the other thing. “Ben—”

“I know.”

“About… about me? And Tony?”
“Oh yeah. Believe me, I’ve had a lot of time to wrap my mind around that one. Still throws me for a
loop sometimes, but y’know, it is what it is.”

“So you’re… you’re not mad?”

“Mad? Why would I be mad?”

“Because I’m not…”

“If you say you’re not really my nephew—”

“You’re gonna have to whack me,” Peter finishes with a small, rueful grin. “I know.”

Ben shrugs. “I mean it. You’re… honey, you’re my kid. You always will be. From the minute you
were born, I—did you know that May can’t have kids of her own?”

Peter blinks. “No, I didn’t. I always thought—”

“Yeah, that’s what we wanted people to believe. That it was some personal choice, that we just
‘couldn’t incorporate them into our lifestyle’. But she’s known since she was young. We tried in our
first year of marriage and when nothing ever came of that…” he frowns. “Anyway, we knew it
wasn’t ever gonna happen for us. But the minute I met you, kiddo, I loved you like you were mine.
Loved you so much I—” he stops, smirks, “you ever heard the expression, I’d take a bullet for you?”

Peter scowls. “Don’t do that. Don’t make jokes.”

“It’s not a joke, it’s a fact. I want you to understand that there is no universe in which I wouldn’t die
for you. I know that for a fact.”

Peter tries to wrap his head around that. “You mean…?”

“It always happens that way.”
“And I never—?”

“No.”

Peter opens and closes his mouth. “God.”

“It is what it is, Pooh.”

He can’t help smiling at the old nickname. Gently he bumps Ben’s shoulder with his own. “I wish it were different.”

“I don’t,” Ben says, to his surprise. “This is the way things are supposed to be, kiddo. Tony is your father. In every universe. Somehow, someway, you always find each other.”

“So what, does death grant you some all-seeing eye?”

Ben snorts. “Something like that.”

“Sounds pretty cool.”

“Don’t be getting ideas.”

“I’m always getting ideas,” Peter says.

Ben sighs. He leans back in the shade and looks at Peter with a tilted head. “Rich wanted to see you, but he wasn’t sure if you’d wanna see him.”

“I…” Peter swallows. “I wouldn’t mind.”
It’s partly true and partly a lie. He knows that Richard Parker was, for all intents and purposes, his father for three years. He knows that there was probably a whole lot of love there once from both ends, but these days it’s a hard image to conjure up. He can’t even remember what Richard looked like. In his head he imagines someone like Ben, but reedier and shorter. The love he feels for Richard is borne more of appreciation, but it isn’t strong like the love he has for Ben. It’s hard to admit even to himself, but it’s true.

Ben nudges him with a dirty sneaker. “Hey, it’s okay. No need to break your back over it. We both get it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. But he wants you to know that it’s okay. To call Tony dad, I mean. To love him like that. He says, don’t let him get all tied up over who’s who and what’s what, cuz he’ll always love you, and he understands.”

Peter swallows. He nods. “Right. Could you… could you tell him thanks?”

Ben smiles and ruffles Peter’s hair. “Of course, honey. And Peter?”

“Yeah?”

“Remember that I’m right here, and I could never blame you, and if I see you back here before at least another sixty five years has passed, I’ll—”

“Whack me.”

Ben grins. “That’s right.”

Tony wakes up to one hell of a headache. Like, ‘evocative of hangovers from his college days’ level bad.
They’re camped in the hallway of the hospital wing where Peter’s being operated on. Pepper had wrangled the information out of some official and now they’re alternately pacing up and down the sterile white hallway, waiting.

Tony is the one on the floor as of now, one knee up, ignoring the aching, trying not to entertain the agonising thoughts about what might happen if Peter doesn’t come out of that OR alive.

He will. He has to.

Pepper is biting her nails. It’s something he rarely sees her do, and it means she’s stressed to all hell.

“Pep, your pacing is giving me second-hand anxiety, and I’m already anxious enough as it is.”

Pepper stops dead. She stares at him for a moment with a half open mouth, almost like she can’t believe what she’s seeing, like she’s looking at a ghost.

“What?”

“Nothing,” she breathes.

Now he’s even more confused. Frowning, he says, “I won’t ask something stupid like whether or not you’re okay, but Pep, do me a huge favour and sit down?”

Pepper keeps gawking. Then she blinks and, dazed, comes over to sit beside him.

Tony offers his hand. She stares.

Takes it.

“So maybe we should talk about you being gone, after all.”
Tony raises an eyebrow. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” A squeeze of his palm. “Because our kid is in there and he could be dying, and there’s a lot you need to know. I mean—there’s a lot, Tony.”

*Our kid.* Tony finds himself fixated on that. “May went out like me, didn’t she?”

Pepper nods.

“So you and Peter…”

Her forehead falls, coming to rest against her raised knees. Her face twists with all of the turmoil he feels inside. She chokes back a sob. “He’s my son.”

It’s strange. It’s beyond strange; it’s almost incomprehensible. Just yesterday the two hadn’t even been on a first name basis; he thinks, actually, that they’d probably only been in the same room a handful of times. And now it’s today, and *today* they’re family, little and broken and god, Tony thinks he might fall apart thinking about it. They’d only had each other for *so long.*

He wraps his arm around her, holds her to him. “He’ll be okay.”

He *will* be. He *has* to be. There is no other acceptable outcome. Tony glares at the red line that divides them from Peter and contemplates, not for the first time, simply saying ‘fuck it’ and crossing it anyway. At least then he could see Peter, he could know what was going on. He could be there if maybe—

And then like floodgates opening his mind is swamped with a thousand terrible possibilities. They won’t have anesthesia strong enough for him here. What if he wakes up in the middle of surgery? What if he’s lying there scared and cold and alone? What if there’s nothing they can do to fix him? What if he’s already…

What if he’s already *gone?*

His breath starts to quicken and before Pepper can twist in his arms to enclose him in her own, he
shoots to his feet and starts to pace, himself.

“Tony.”

“How long has it been? Two hours? Three?”

Pepper wipes her face. “Longer.”

Tony shakes his head. He’d fallen asleep. He’d let himself fall asleep while his kid was—no, no. He won’t go there. Peter will be fine. Peter will be okay.

“I don’t understand what’s taking so long.”

“They’re doing everything they can.”

“But what if there’s something—”

“If there’s something they need from you, they’ll ask.”

“Stop presenting me with logic!” Tony says shrilly. “I just want—I want to know. I want to see him and I have to tell him that everything is gonna be okay, okay? Oh my god. Oh my god, Pepper, it’s been five years. God, what the hell? What did you—what happened?”

Pepper looks up at him with red-rimmed eyes. “A lot,” she says quietly.

“Like?”

Her palm swipes at her cheek. “Nat died yesterday.”

Yesterday. Yesterday Tony had talked to Nat over the phone. They’d had a short, somewhat clipped conversation that had ended in a laugh and unspoken I miss yous. He hadn’t seen her in person for
three months.

Now, apparently, he will never see her again.

“How?”

“I don’t know all of the details, just what Peter was able to…” she sucks in a sharp breath. “It wasn’t good, but—she chose to go out, in the end.”

Tony presses his thumb against his left palm, hard, to try and work out the chronic ache. It does little.

“What else?”

He needs to know. All at once. He needs all of the big things dumped on him, needs the band-aid ripped off.

Pepper runs a hand through her hair. “God, I don’t even know where to start, Tony. There are so many things, and I—there’s something you need to know, about you and Peter—”

The doors at the end of the hall burst open.

The waiting area is spacious and clean and comfortable. There are couches rather than uncomfortable rickety chairs, refreshments readily available, and instead of those sticky puzzles and acabuses, there are brain-teasers and books for the kids. Morgan runs out of Happy’s arms and right for them.

In the middle of it all, there’s everyone else.

The whole team, May Parker, Rhodes, MJ and her family.
“Y’all are still here?”

Steve answers, simply, “Of course.”

“It might be a while,” Harley finds himself saying, which is stupid; of course it’ll be a while. They’re trying to reverse severe radiation and possibly the loss of an entire limb, here. It won’t be some thirty minute routine procedure, no matter how technologically advanced Wakanda is.

But Steve says, “We’re staying,” and so that’s that.

“Barton?” Harley asks, after scanning the crowd and coming up empty.

“With his loved ones,” Thor reports. “A group we are apparently not a part of—”

“Thor,” Steve says warningly. “He needs this. Let it go.”

“Of course, of course,” Thor smiles, strained. “I understand.”

Harley knows it’s not that Thor doesn’t understand, it’s just that the demigod has lost so many people, and he’s desperate to cling to the one family he has left. That includes Barton, it includes everyone in this room, Harley supposes.

“How bout you sit?” He suggests to his sister, who looks more drawn than she has since right after the Snap. “I’ll get us something to eat, okay?”

She nods slowly. “Yeah, right.”

The sound of a shrill voice makes them both turn around. “I don’t care! I don’t care what he did, I don’t care what happened!”

The woman yelling is tall and blonde and blue eyed. It takes a moment for Harley to realise that she’s also MJ’s mother. She happens to be furious, cheeks flushed and holding MJ’s forearms in a vice grip that has Harley rushing forward to intervene without a second thought.
“Mom, seriously, you’re hurting me—”

“Oh, I’m hurting you? You’ve torn this family apart! Hurts, doesn’t it?”

“Mrs. Jones,” Harley tries, reaching forward to pull her off, “please let go—”

“And who the fuck are you supposed to be?!”

“If I have to ask again I’m calling security—”

“Oh, security?! This has nothing to do with you! I don’t even know who you are! And I swear to god, if you touch me, I’ll have your ass arrested! Let me deal with my daughter myself.”

Harley’s face morphs into an expression he hopes conveys the message of: Bitch, are you out of your god damn mind? “Uh, no?”

“Excuse me?”

“Just do is all a favour and let go?”

“Lady, listen to the man,” Sam Wilson says suddenly. “Nobody here wants to hurt you, but you’re in a room with a dozen trained fighters still hopped up on enough adrenaline to give a horse a heart attack—”

“So, what, I get dragged here by some man named Happy and I’m told that you,” she shoves MJ, who is so caught of guard she ends up losing balance and falling against Harley who catches her unsteadily, “drove away my husband while I was dead—”

“Sam Jones was arrested on charges of physical abuse,” Harley grinds out lowly. “And from what I’ve heard, he was a piece of shit long before you left the picture.”
MJ’s mother’s demeanour changes from hostile to genuinely confused. “What?”

“Please don’t say it again,” MJ cuts in before Harley can repeat himself. She rubs the red marks on her arms. “Mom, this was a mistake. You should go.”

“Like hell I—”

“Mom.”

MJ’s sister, Charlie, stands up and walks over to them. Her face is set with determination, a look not unlike the one MJ gets in the middle of a street skirmish or when she’s about to dominate some elitist douchebag in a debate. She doesn’t look much like MJ other than that, but it’s all Harley needs to know how far the apple has fallen from the tree with these two.

“Let’s go.”

“Charlotte—”

“You heard. I heard. Everyone heard. Let’s go.”

“Charlotte, this doesn’t have to do with you.”

“It has everything to do with me,” Charlie counters. “And I don’t wanna be here anymore. I just wanna go home, okay?”

MJ is about to open her mouth, probably to tell them that’s not even possible anymore because their apartment had been seized, but MJ’s mom actually gives in to her younger daughter’s demands with a weak nod.

The look she sends MJ is withering.

Harley puts a hand over his heart like a Southern old lady at risk of a stroke the minute they’re out of sight. “Oh my god, I was so ready to fuck a bitch up for you.”
“I need a drink,” MJ mutters.

Harley blinks. “That’s definitely a healthy way of dealing with what just happened.”

MJ falls into her seat. “Can you blame me?”

“I don’t blame you,” Bucky Barnes pipes up from across the coffee table. “She’s a piece of work.”

MJ snorts. “Try living with her for sixteen years of your life.”

The winter soldier visibly winces. “I think I’d rather die.”

Steve whacks him. “Buck.”

“What? We all saw what just happened.”

“Yeah, okay, but if you could like, do me the courtesy of pretending you didn’t, that would be great,” MJ requests dryly.

Bucky shrugs. “Say no more. Hey, Wilson, you catch that Jets game from five years ago that was last week to us?”

“Are you actually trying to start up a conversation with me about sports?”

Harley tunes them out. He sinks into the seat next to MJ and waits. He knows they aren’t exactly close, but he’d been the one Peter had called to freak out to after the whole Sam Jones thing, the one that had told MJ in plain terms that she was entitled to one ass whoopin’ free of charge, the target being whomever she so chose. MJ had snorted and flipped him off at the time.

Now her fingers part and she peeks at him. “He’s getting out on parole next week.”
“What?”

“Yeah. And she’s just gonna go back to him, because the only side she’s ever seen of that prick is his dopey soft one. But if he... if he can do that to me, who’s to say he won’t snap one day and do it to her? Or Charlie? I mean, I know they’re like their own little family and I was always the outsider, but... he was so angry, Keener. I hadn’t even realised how mad I made him just by existing, you know?”

She shakes her head. “I don’t even know why I bothered. I just... I thought I meant more to her than that.”

Harley wants to tell her she does, that deep down her mom cares. But what kind of a mother hurts her kid like that? Looks at them like that?

“I—”

“Don’t,” MJ lifts a hand. “Just like, tell me she’s a bitch so I can move on.”

“Well I mean yeah, okay, she’s obviously a bitch, but—”

“Nope. That’s it. That’s the end of the conversation.”

“MJ—”

“No, she’s right,” Barnes says. “Your mother is a complete hussy.”

Harley literally has no clue what to say to that. Thankfully he’s saved from further conversation with the former assassin by May Parker, who perches next to them with a damp paper towel she’d likely retrieved from the bathroom down the hall.

“Can I see your arms, honey?”
MJ hesitates before holding them out, revealing the slightly bloody half moons imprinted into her skin. May is gentle as she dabs at them, and to her credit, MJ doesn’t even flinch.

Harley can’t help but watch May and miss his own mother, but she’s so far away and unreachable right now, all he can do is nurse the longing.

His knee starts to bounce. MJ glances at him questioningly, but Harley waves her off.

Then Happy Hogan strides back into the room from wherever he had gone to after dropping Morgan off. His face is utterly unreadable.

When Peter wakes up next, he’s lying on a metallic tray gurney in a room with dirty tile walls, like an abandoned hospice centre from the thirties. He shifts, swinging his legs over the side.

“Sleeping Beauty awakes.”

Peter doesn’t start. Even without looking he’d been able to sense the figure lurking in the corner, shrouded in shadow. That’s just the way things work here.

“Sorry,” the woman says. “Was that cliche?”

Her voice is dry, laced with amusement. He catches a glimpse of a tight leather suit and for a minute, just a heartbeat, he thinks it might be Nat.

But then a woman with brown curly hair steps into view. Her smirk is a knife’s edge, her eyes are hard but hold a certain measured warmth; she looks like she could be Nat’s sister, really.

“Very close,” the woman says, stepping even closer. He’d be creeped out, but nothing he’s seen in this in-between state has threatened him before, and there’s something about her that actually puts him at ease. In fact, he thinks he might recognise her. “I could’ve been if things had been different, but they didn’t roll that way.”
Peter frowns. “But you knew her?”

“For a little while when she first came to this place. I had been here longer. I told her about what they did to the girls in the Red Room.”

Peter knows, in vague terms, what exactly she means by that. What little research he’d done had made him feel sick.

“This is the room where it almost happened to me. That’s where they strapped me down.”

Peter looks at the gurney. He shifts uncomfortably. “But you escaped?”

She nods. “I did.”

“How?”

“I killed them all,” she says, like it’s the simplest thing in the world. Then she hops up onto the gurney beside him. “The doctors, the nurses, even the general watching from that window up there.”

She points. There is indeed an observation deck, and the glass window that’s mean to separate the students from the patient is cracked and bloodied.

When he turns back to her, she’s studying him. There’s an intensity to her scrutinisation, a desperation in her eyes.

“I told you I did bad things, Peanut Butter Pants.”

All at once it clicks. With a crushing wave of vertigo that has him clutching the edge of the gurney so tight it bends, Peter remembers her.

The pictures on the mantelpiece in the living room. The slanted blocky handwriting in the faded letter. She’s doesn’t look exactly the same now; a blonde dye job and a haircut, distant pixilated photos, it’s not the same as seeing her for real. In his mind he’d just seen yellow, someone light and
But kids never do see the jagged edges until they have a few of their own, do they?

“Mom?”

Mary Parker nods. Much like Maria, she doesn’t cry, but she does reach out to touch him. “You’ve got your dad’s jaw, and his eyes. I suppose I should be thankful. The less you got from me, the better.”

Peter shakes his head. “I don’t understand.”

“Then ask me,” she says simply. “What do you want to know, Peter?”

“You… you were with Nat in the Red Room? How could you have killed—?”

“Do you mean ‘how’ as in morally, or how as in logistically?”

There’s something almost robotic in the way she tilts her head to regard him. It’s the same way Nat has always been, talking about killing like it’s just something you do, something you learn the way you learn to spell or read or write.

“Both?”

“Well, they were trying to give me a forced hysterectomy at the age of thirteen, so I think I get a pass there, right?”

“Uh, I suppose.”

“And logistically… well, some people acquire powers. Other people are born with them.”
“You have…?”

She nods, curls bouncing. “It’s not something I can explain. It doesn’t really have a name. It’s just this… blackness that lives inside me. Lived. It’s what got me killed.”

“I thought that you and dad died in a plane crash?”

“A fabrication by HYDRA.”

“HYDRA?”

“Well where do you think I went after the Red Room? God, it’s embarrassing to talk about. I thought I was escaping, but I was tricked.”

“How?”

“I was fourteen years old and selling my body just to survive. I’d been picked up by this ring. They advertised me as their Little Russian Doll. One night five men rented me out and wanted to… do things to me… all together. I had never actually done anything at all before then, just practised with the other girls. It…” her face twists. “Only one of the men lived. I thought he meant to spare me, give me a home and a life, and he did in his own way. But he knew exactly who I was. By the time I realised I’d only been roped back into what I’d run from, it was too late. I was in too deep.”

“They brainwashed you? Like Bucky?”

Her smile twists. “Bucky. That’s cute. The girls in the Red Room called him Zima. I had another name.”

“What was that?”

“Papa.”

Peter blanches. “Don’t tell me he was actually your—”
She laughs. “No, but that was how they told me to see him. He taught me to kill, and to dance.”

She hops off the gurney and leans against the wall to face opposite him. “You’re thinking hard. Either that, or you have to poop. I don’t know, it’s been a while since I’ve had to read you.”

Peter absorbs that. “So this whole time, my mother was like, an evil assassin?”

“Yes,” she says plainly. “They called me Viper. And then I… it doesn’t make up for the things I did, the people I killed in their name, but I deflected. I was eighteen when I finally started to break out of the cage they’d put my mind in, and I was terrified. I met Richard because I’d been sent to execute him. He was a SHIELD agent, see—”

“I’m sorry, what? I thought he was a geneticist?!”

She shrugs. “He was both.”

“Okay. Okay. Cool. So it was like, your classic Romeo and Juliet situation?”

“Sort of,” she smirks. “Not quite. We danced around each other for years, running into one another on missions, refusing to kill the other. Richard helped me progress. He made me see the world the way everyone else does, instead of the way I’d been made to see it. In a way, that only made my life worse. I hated the things I’d done, what I’d been turned into. But he also helped me see that it wasn’t all my fault.”

Peter chews on that. “But what about me?”

Her face changes instantly. She comes closer, reaches for him again, runs her fingers through his curls. “You are the best thing I’ve ever done. The only good thing.”

“I don’t believe that. You sound pretty brave to me.”

Her eyes close. She rests her forehead against his own and Peter is struck by how normal it feels, not
just because she’s his mother, but because it’s a feeling he’s never forgotten. It’s the same way with May, with Pepper.

She was his first mother, but she wasn’t his last.

“I wanted to be there for you,” she whispers. “I wanted to watch you grow. But I think… I think if it had been me, I would’ve done it wrong.”

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s true. It’s not what I was made for.”

“You’re not supposed to be made for anything,” Peter tells her. “And I—I missed you. I miss you.”

She holds his hands in her own. “I know. I miss you too. But you can’t stay.”

He knows that. He’s accepted it. Still, it feels cruel to him, being reminded of her, being able to see her, only to have her ripped away again.

A part of him wants to stay. Not all of him, but maybe if he could just leave a little piece, a little sliver of his heart to keep her warm in this place. Maybe that would be enough to let her know how grateful he is, and how sorry. She’s been through more than he could have ever imagined, suffered more than he ever would have wished, but she’d still found it within herself to have him, to find love, to kindle hope for something better.

“God,” Mary whispers, smiling now, really smiling, “I don’t know how you came from me.”

“Don’t sell yourself short.”

A watery laugh. Hands on his cheeks. Tears in her eyes. “You have so much waiting for you on the other side,” she says, and Peter doesn’t know if she means the side of the living or the side of the dead, but it doesn’t matter; either way offers him an indescribable comfort.
It’s going to be okay. No matter what happens, *everything* will be okay.

Just like that, a weight he hadn’t even realised was there is lifted from his shoulders. He feels like he’s floating.

Then the edges of his vision grow fuzzy and the feeling of her hands on his face fades as the light grows brighter, blinding, white.

Tony doesn’t want to look at Peter sprawled out in sleep on the gurney, but he does anyway, because he can’t stop himself.

He doesn’t like what he sees: scarred skin, red and pink and irritated, all along his right side. Beyond that, harder edges that speak of time, of ageing. Years Tony wasn’t there for, years he *missed*.

His stomach flips at the thought and then Strange is grabbing his arm, speaking to him at what’s probably a normal pace but feels like slow motion to Tony, almost. His mind is having trouble capturing and comprehending the words, and then Strange rolls his eyes.

“It’s not bad news, so stop looking like you’re about to piss your pants.”

Tony blinks. Breathes. “Let me look at the scans.”

Strange hands them over. There are several, which Tony holds up to the light to look over. The first is of his brain, and the time reads three hours ago. It’s terrifying; over half of Peter’s right hemisphere is just dark, dead matter.

But another, more recent scan shows that it’s slowly mending, neurons coming back to life.

“The rate with which he’s healing is… impossible. It’s unlike anything I or any of the physicians in Wakanda have seen.”

“Is there more?”
Strange nods grimly and hands over another envelope. “That’s his DNA. The results were certainly illuminating.”

Tony doesn’t know much about genetics. At least, he wouldn’t consider himself an expert by any means. But he’d studied enough when dealing with Pepper’s predicament after the Mandarin to know at least a little about what he’s looking at.

“Do you see that?” Strange asks. “Those alleles shouldn’t be there.”

“He’s healing so quickly because he’s been mutated,” Tony realises. “Extremis was created to quickly heal injuries and even regrow lost limbs, but it was stupidly made. Big antioncogene problem. If you gave it to someone with cancer it would just result in them dying faster because the cancerous cells would end up multiplying—but he… he fixed it.”

Strange hums in agreement. “Beyond that, his healing gene was utterly destroyed by the radiation. Peter anticipated that. He somehow managed to work it into whatever it was he injected himself with. It acted as a sort of booster shot, and now it’s just… a waiting game.”

Tony absorbs that. He turns back around to face Peter, who hasn’t moved, who won’t wake up.

But now, at least, they know it’s possible he might.

The terrifying part is what comes after.

Tony’s eyes flit to Pepper, who’s sitting by Peter’s bedside holding his hand. She’s just… waiting. Watching. Gaze stuck like glue to the chest that rises and collapses with every breath.

“Go be a wizard somewhere else,” Tony says to Strange.

The man scoffs, but maybe somewhere underneath all of the pomp and grandeur he gets it. Maybe he understands that Tony needs to be alone with his family, alone with the two people he loves most in the world.
Once he’s gone, Tony walks over to Pepper. He puts a hand on her shoulder, sweeping her hair away gently. “When was the last time you slept?”

She bristles at the question and inches closer to Peter almost protectively. “I’m not sleeping.”

God, what have they been through together? What is it that’s bound them together so tightly, made them family?

*My death,* he thinks.

Tony winces and sinks into the chair next to hers. “He is.”

She doesn’t answer. Just keeps staring, thumb gently stroking his palm. He’s never quite seen her like this. Usually, when it’s him in the bed, she’s frazzled and prone to lecturing him about what a moron he is for almost dying. *This* brand of attention is different. It’s softer, almost vulnerable. It’s like she just can’t help it.

He’s her son.

But…

“Pepper,” he tries again, laying his hand on top of both of theirs, wrapping his arm around her, “I can watch him.”

Leaning against him, shaking, for two seconds she tries to hold her resolve. He can see it crumble and there’s nothing more heartbreaking. Tony keeps holding her as she finally sobs. It’s like a dam bursts and it all starts pouring out.

Tony kisses the side of her head. “I’m right here.”

Just like that she’s twisting in his arms to wrap her own around him. Pepper buries her face against his neck and cries, and holds him, and all of the rough, jagged edges are smoothed out like rocks in a river with every tear.
“It’s okay.”

“No it’s not.”

Tony runs his arm up and down her back. Again, he can’t help looking at Peter.

The kid—who’s grown up so much in the blink of an actual eye he can hardly be construed as such anymore, and that makes Tony’s stomach roll to think about—looks small, shrunken, shadowed.

It shouldn’t have been him. It should have been Tony who snapped his fingers, should have been Tony who had to endure five years of grief. Peter should be the one disoriented but safe and alive, preserved, awake.

He wants to be angry. At some point, he will be angry, but right now he’s just so tired.

Still, he says, “I’m not going anywhere.”

Pepper’s fists curl around the fabric of his jacket. It’s the same one he’d been wearing that morning, the same one he’d been wearing when he crumbled down to his base elements.

“You should really go shower though,” she tells him, when her tears finally taper off some. “You smell.”

Tony’s lip twitches. “Nuh-uh, Ms Potts, that’s not how this is gonna roll this time. I fuss over you, not the other way around. Besides, the more ripe I am, the more likely he’ll wake up sooner. I’ll be like, human amoenia.”

That earns him a watery laugh. Pepper wipes her cheeks as she leans back, almost sheepish until he kisses both sides of her face.

Her eyes soften and her expression morphs into one he doesn’t recognise.
“What?”

“I just missed you,” she whispers. “Every day.”

Tony hums. “Well, naturally. I’m very missable.”

Pepper laughs, which is all he could ever hope for and more. Then she kisses him, the kind that starts out with a smile but melts into something softer, that has his heart rate spiking and then tapering out into something lazy and relaxed and slow.

“Gross!”

They both jump, rounding at the sound of a very small voice. It had come from the mouth of a little girl whose face is twisted with disgust. “Mommy doesn’t kiss boys.”

Pepper’s grip tightens as Tony’s heart skips and oh, oh, the little girl is Pepper’s kid, and he’s not so good with estimating ages but all the math points to the little girl being—

Being his kid, too.

“Happy,” Pepper is saying to the man Tony had barely even registered the presence of, the man holding the little girl’s hand, “I didn’t think you’d be here.”

Her tone is pointed. Happy blinks out of the stupor he’d developed upon seeing Tony. “This is where Michelle told me to go,” he says defensively.

Pepper runs a hand down her face. “Okay. Okay, listen—”

“Pepper,” Tony starts, panic rising.

“I was going to tell you, but I thought we had more time—”
“Pepper—”

“I know this is the absolute worst way to find out about something like this but I need you to know that I’m so—”

“Pepper—”

“Tony,” Pepper says, “what?”

“I was right?”

Pepper’s furrows and then clears like parting clouds. “Yeah,” she whispers. “Yeah, you were right.”

Tony soaks that up. Nods. Lets his gaze fall on the little girl again. She’s wearing green corduroy overalls and a cherry-patterned shirt. She looks like any other, what, four year old? But she’s not. She’s his.

It’s—it’s—

What the fuck? What the fuck is he supposed to do about this? What was he thinking? He can’t be a father, he can’t raise a child! Besides, she’s already lasted this long without him, so—

“Petey?”

His heart stops. They all look at Peter, but Tony keeps looking at her, because he doesn’t think he’s ever heard anyone sound that small or scared in his entire life.

Without even thinking about it, he holds out his hand. Without tearing her gaze from Peter, she takes it. Trusts him. Let’s him pick her up and gently deposit her onto the bed.

“Be careful, Morgan,” Pepper warns.
Happy comes to a stop at the foot of Peter’s bed. He’s twitching like he doesn’t know what to focus on more, a feeling Tony shares.

“Boss,” he says softly, eyes full of warmth.

It’s ridiculous. This morning he was yelling at Tony about wedding dates. Now he has a beard and he’s got grey hairs and he actually looks happy to see Tony.

“Hey, Hap.”

Happy smiles. He shakes his head in wonderment as he turns his attention back to Peter. “Little idiot did it, huh?”

“Yeah,” Pepper whispers.

And it occurs to Tony for the first time that of course, something had to have been done, some gigantic time consuming impossible task; something so back breaking and heart wrenching he can’t even wrap his head around it. Peter brought them all back. How, Tony doesn’t know, but he’s never been more proud in his whole life.

“He gonna be okay?”

Tony raises an eyebrow. “Why Happy, I didn’t know you cared?”

Happy doesn’t look affronted, exactly, but his face turns sad. “Course I care. He’s, uh… you learn to live with people. When you lose other ones.” A shrug. “Whatever. Kid’s an asshole. Just tell me—tell me he won’t die?”

“He won’t die,” Tony says, because he’ll make sure of that. Peter is not allowed to die, ever, by any means, under any circumstances.
Morgan scoots a little closer. Reaches out with a tiny, tentative hand and gently touches the burned side of his face. Then she leans forward and presses a kiss there.

“Now he’ll wake up quicker,” she announces, before lying down beside him and draping an arm over his stomach.

Tony just stares. Like an idiot he can’t tear his eyes away, but he can’t bring himself to speak, either.

She’s small.

She’s staring right back at him.

“Your beard is funny,” his daughter informs him, and stretches an arm up to touch it. Her hand is soft like Pepper’s, small. She snickers suddenly. “Petey can’t even grow one.”

“Morgan.”

Just like that she’s plucked up by Happy and deposited on the floor. He keeps ahold of her hand as she giggles maniacally and—

yeah, that’s definitely his kid.

“Morgan, huh?”

“Yeah. You’re my daddy, right? Petey says it’s my name because you liked it,” she tells him, head tilted. “I got a bone to pick with you, mister.”

“Oh my god,” Pepper looks almost humiliated. “This is—this is not how I thought this was going to go.”

What? He almost says, didn’t think I’d meet my daughter over the body of my comatose son? Didn’t think it would take five years? Didn’t think I’d just stand there like an asshole?
Morgan doesn’t seem to care. She just clambers right back onto the bed so that she can see him better. “You’re in the pictures,” she tells him. “And you look like us. That’s how I can tell.”

He’s in pictures. She’s clearly a genius. Amazing, wonderful, but his brain keeps getting stuck on *look like us, you look like us, daddy, you’re my daddy, right?*

There’s something there. There’s something there that itches, that *burns*, a white hot sun spot, *searing*.

Tony swallows the bile in the back of his throat. “Yeah?”

A nod. Big brown eyes. They study him with an unnerving intelligence. God, is this how people feel when *he* looks at them?

“Your name is red,” she announces.

Something tugs at the corners of his mouth despite himself. “Yeah? That’s my favorite colour.”

May Parker isn’t an idiot.

She knows she… went somewhere. Something happened to her, and while she was gone the world changed. Kept moving, kept turning. People died, others were born, and others just kept growing.

Peter kept growing. It’s not so obvious as he lays frail in the hospital bed, dead to the world, but it’s the truth.

There’s a scar on his jaw. A tattoo on his forearm. Slowly fading burn marks on his skin.

Tony said those would go away completely after a while. Then he had said nothing else, and the two of them had said in silence nursing cups of coffee that slowly went cold, forgetting to even sip lest
they miss a skip of his heart or a hitch in his breathing.

It’s been hours, now. Night has fallen. Tony had convinced Pepper to shower and nap, while he ‘kept an eye on the kid’.

May thinks maybe the only reason she relented was because Tony wouldn’t be alone. As it is, he’d finally fallen asleep about forty minutes ago. His head rests against Peter’s side and his face is scrunched up, like even in dreams he’d rather be awake.

May just keeps staring. The room darkens. Time passes, but at least it’s time she’s here for.

Eventually another sound joins the dim cacophony of steadily beeping monitors and soft breathing; the door slides open, shoes scuff the floor.

“He’s still out of it.”

There’s a small gasp. “Jesus, I thought you were asleep.”

May wipes her eyes. “I wish.”

Michelle—or MJ, Peter has always called her MJ—studies her cautiously for a minute. Peter had only spoken about her a few times, and to him, she’d been so intimidating, May, and super super scary, I seriously have to get to practise on time or she’ll like, kill me, or eat me or something.

May looks at her now and sees someone skittish, like a deer. She sees someone who is exhausted and angry and battling a storm of other emotions. She sees someone who has kicked and bled for everything they have, someone who is tired of losing, someone who refuses to lose anymore.

“Go ahead and sit.”

MJ still hesitates. After a minute, she slowly lowers herself into the chair opposite May and Tony. She takes Peter’s hand and all at once her face changes, opens like a flower under the sun.
Her eyes soften and her free hand reaches out, fingers running through Peter’s hair.

“He’s an idiot.”

Whatever May had been expecting, it hadn’t been that. Still, she can’t exactly disagree. “Pepper said he did something to stop Thanos’ army?”

MJ shakes her head. “He could’ve died. I wanna be pissed, I am pissed, but it’s… I’m just glad he’s gonna live.”

(Me too,” May whispers.

Her eyes fall to Peter. His jawline is stronger. He’s grown into himself more, even in his weakened state. It’s hard to wrap her mind around the person he was this morning, looking at who he is now.

So she holds onto what she can: Peter as a little kid, building a fort in their living room during a power outage; Peter when he had first come to live with them, small and scared and crying for his parents; Peter at thirteen, glasses askew, telling corny jokes as they walked through the city in December snow.

He’s her baby. He’ll always be her baby, even if he’s twenty one and he’s learned to live without her and he’s done so many things that she might never even know about.

It’s not supposed to be this way yet. They were never supposed to be like that.

“He baked a cake every year on your birthday.”

May’s eyes shoot to MJ. She’s still looking at Peter, absentmindedly tracing the hourglass tattoo on his arm.

“What?”

“He, um… strawberry rhubarb, right? That’s your favorite?”
May’s stomach drops. “Yeah, that’s the one.”

MJ nods. “He never actually said it was because of you. I didn’t even realise it was your birthday until this last year. I think he just… wanted to remember you in his own way. And we would always eat it on the roof of your old complex, just me and him, because Pepper and Morgan are allergic to strawberries and…” she shakes her head. “Anyway. I just… he didn’t forget you.”

May doesn’t like thinking about it: the sharp stabs of resentment she feels whenever Pepper reaches to pull Peter’s blankets up or stroke his hair back or take his hand every time it twitches. Yes, she knows for five years they had only had each other, and yes, she is eternally grateful to Pepper for taking care of her boy, but no, she can never honestly say it doesn’t hurt.

That helps, though. It helps a lot.

May swallows. Her hand, palm up and open, stretches into the space between them.

MJ hesitates.

Then she takes it.

“Thank you.”

MJ shrugs. They both turn back to Peter and watch, and wait, and wonder if he will even remember them when he wakes up; if maybe it won’t matter who he forgot during those five years, because he will have forgotten them all anyway.

Ariel has been waiting for her phone to ring so long it’s almost dead.

Momma said she would call again when she found a safe place. The world is in a state of upheaval, people are getting hit by cars because they’re popping up in the middle of the street, they’re getting shot, robbed, appearing on bridges or in the middle of buildings that had been demolished years ago.
and just falling.

Dying.

But Rose Hill is quiet. That’s what Ariel tells herself over and over.

Two of the four cows will come back, a couple of birds will return to their branches, and the scary old lady who had lived in that mouldy house will have to find a new place to live, seeing as her old one was torn down.

Rose Hill is quiet and there’s no reason to believe her mother will die like a bunch of other people are.

But all the footage is scaring her. It’s being plastered all over social media just like videos of people getting dusted were. In those days, Harley had tried to shield her from the worst of it.

She’d been younger then.

Now she’s fourteen. It’s been five years since her mother last saw her, five years since she gave her a morning hug or a goodnight kiss.

Will she even recognise Ariel?

Maybe not. She’s grown a lot. Maybe a whole foot, not that she’s really measured. She just knows she’s taller than most. Momma doesn’t know that. Momma doesn’t know about how Ariel braids her hair in two plaits instead of one now, or about how she’d gotten her first period on the way home from school and neither she or Harley had had any money on them so he’d smuggled her a box of pads under his shirt, or about how they spend half their time in New York so Harley can be a Walmart Iron Man (or Spider-Man’s sidekick, whatever).

She doesn’t know any of it. She should have been here but she wasn’t. She’d just disappeared.

For a long time, Ariel had pretended she hadn’t even died. She’d told herself lies like, Momma just skipped down like Daddy did, and maybe one day she’ll come back and we can all be together
Well, maybe not Daddy. He’s a putz.

At some point Harley leaves her to go wash up. Ariel promises him she’ll stay put. The minute he’s out of sight, she gets up from her chair and wanders the halls.

The hospital is so white it’s blinding. There’s not a speck of dust in sight. It doesn’t smell like a hospital though, like disinfectant and dead people. It smells like nothing at all. Somehow that’s even more off putting.

Ariel stops.

She sinks to the floor.

Pulls out her phone and waits for a Tennessee number to appear.

*BATTERY LIFE: 23%*

The screen doesn’t change. Its blackness taunts her. Ariel locks her jaw and debates whether or not to chuck it across the hallway.

“Uh, hi.”

Ariel’s head snaps up. About ten feet away, right where the trajectory of her broken phone might have been, there’s a girl about her age. Her hair is dark and she’s wearing a faded flannel shirt and scuffed up jeans. She looks... normal. It’s strange to see someone like that in a place like this, packed to the brim with superheroes and all the fancy tech her brother’s been drooling over.

“Are you Lila Barton?”

The girl’s nose scrunches up. It’s adorable, plain and simple. “No. I’m Cassie Lang?”
“Ah,” Ariel nods. “Makes sense.”

“It does?”

“You and your dad have the same ‘I'd pay the floor to swallow me up’ energy,” Ariel observes.

The corner of her mouth quirks up. “Oh.”

“So,” Ariel pats the floor. “I hear it doesn’t bite unless you cash in two sixty-five.”

Cassie Lang finally grins. It’s the blinding, sun eclipsing her face, kind. She shuffles over and sinks to the floor next to Ariel. “So what’s your uh… how do you play into all of this?”

“My idiot brother is a wannabe superhero.”

“Yeah? That’s cool.”

“Not when you’re his keeper.”

Cassie glances at her. “My dad is Ant Man. But you already knew that. Obviously. Because you’ve met him. I’m sorry, I was born socially awkward, it’s a birth defect—”

Ariel snorts. “So your dad moonlights as a Shrinky Dink. Is your mom that Van Dyne chick?”

“No. She’s… I don’t actually know? I think they’re dating. I don’t know. Last time I saw them I was like nine, but upon reflection it’s pretty obvious they were into each other. But yeah, my mom lives in San Francisco.”

“Really? Is it cool there?”
“It’s…” she sighs. “Just like everywhere else.”

“That’s deep.”

Cassie laughs. “No, I meant—”

“I get it,” Ariel nods. “Everywhere’s all screwed up. Can’t run from it even in sunny California.”

“So where are you from?”

“Bum-Fuck Tennessee,” she says, and sticks out her hand. “Ariel Keener.”

Cassie shakes. “So you’re like, a small town kid?”

“Yup. Everyone knows their neighbor, everyone’s everyone’s brother, and all the boys fuck their mothers.”

Cassie laughs. “That sounds awful.”

“It is. I would’ve loved to have grown up in a city.”

Cassie shrugs. “It was okay. I remember the good days. There’s this park that overlooks the Haight-Ashbury houses and if you go there on the right days it’s pretty quiet. But after… after it was always quiet.”

Ariel absorbs that. She taps the edge of her phone, the morse code rhythm for cute-cute-cute.

“What’s wrong?”

Ariel starts. She meets Cassie’s eyes and quickly looks away in the same instant, because they’re so open and warm and soft and fuck, she really is one of those losers that falls in love every point two
“Nothing. Just... my mom. She hasn’t called.”

“Why don’t you call her?”

“Can’t. We had to sell our farm after the Snap and her cell got disconnected, so there’s no number. She’ll have to use Ms. White’s phone, or maybe Old Man Marley’s.”

Cassie snorts.

“What?”

“Nothing. I just never lived in a place that was so small there was an Old-Man-Something.”

Ariel grins, and then starts laughing. Cassie laughs with her.

“Yeah, I guess it’s pretty stupid. He’s not even the oldest guy in town.”

“Does he shoot trespassers and accuse the local teens of planting weed in his lot?”

“Yes, actually.”

“Then he’s worthy of the moniker,” Cassie declares.

Ariel’s cheeks hurt. She can’t remember the last time she smiled like this, but it fades the minute her phone starts to ring.

“Hello?”
“Ariel? Baby?”

“Mom,” Ariel closes her eyes and leans forward, bracing her elbows on her knees. “God, what’s going on? Are you okay? Are you safe?”

“Yeah, I’m—I’m with Ms. White,” she replies, and her voice is shaking and that makes Ariel scared because her mom, no matter what, never is. She had swallowed her fear the day they realized dad had skipped down, swallowed it when the bills kept coming and the cost of living just got higher and higher, swallowed it when Ariel had fallen from a tree and broken her arm at seven years old.

“Okay,” Ariel nods.

She will be the strong one now. Whatever it takes. She’ll be strong for all of them, as long as they need her to be.

“Ariel, baby, where are you?”

“I’m—” she struggles with the idea of explaining that she is secured in one of the most impenetrable places in the world, and settles for a lie, because either way she’s too far for her mother to get to her anyways. “I’m in New York.”

“What? What are you doing there? Where is Harley?”

“He’s here too. We were—you should turn on the news, if you haven’t. There was a fight upstate? He was—he was there and—”

“Oh my god,” her mom is saying. “Ariel, what the hell?”

“I’ll explain everything, I promise, but Mom—”

Her phone dies.

Ariel lets it fall, limply, into her lap. She puts her face in her hands and breathes, but it doesn’t do any
good. She starts to cry anyway, because being strong makes her feel so weak and worn.

“Hey,” Cassie whispers. Ariel jumps and then sobs harder. Cassie puts a hand on her shoulder. The touch is gentle and soft. “Hey, it’s okay.”

Ariel shakes her head. “No.”

“Yeah,” Cassie insists, slowly urging Ariel to rest her head in her lap. “I know it seems like it’s not, but she’s okay, right? And so are you, and so’s your brother. That’s all that matters. The rest will work out eventually, okay? You just have to give it time.”

It’s already been long enough, Ariel thinks, but takes the hand that Cassie offers so she doesn’t sink any further into her fear.

Tony doesn’t have to look to see who it is hovering in the doorway. An electric pulse down his spine, a certainty, he just knows.

“You’re late,” he quips. “Where’s my sandwich?”

“Yeah, sorry,” Harley says. “They don’t have tuna flavoured IV fluid.”

He steps deeper into the room and Tony smiles. “I have a lot of questions for you.”

“Me? Why me?”

“Well, no one else will tell me anything and since you’re such a blabbermouth…”

Which is how he ends up with his account of just how it was that the millions of vanished people were brought back. Harley has to be embellishing in places, because they sound too far fetched for words, but Tony doesn’t interrupt to call bullshit once.
He just takes it all in silence.

“So Peter—”

“Saved everyone’s asses. Twice over.” Harley’s mouth twists as he looks at Peter. There’s something about it—the distaste, the hands in the pockets, the squint—that’s so strangely familiar.

_Ah_, Tony realises. _It’s the Rhodey Look._

“Listen,” he says suddenly, “I have to get to Tennessee. My mamma—”

“I’ll fly your mom out.”

Harley stops. “What?”

“I’ll fly her out. First class, tomorrow morning or tonight, whichever works best for her. You’ll see her even sooner that way.”

Harley blinks at him. “God, I forgot how infuriatingly nonchalant you are about being generous. It’s disgusting.”

“Those are big words.”

“Well,” he lifts his shoulders, “I would’ve been Summa Cum Laude at MIT if they did that sort of thing.”

Tony rolls his eyes. He leans back in his chair and regards Peter, who for all of the stories of heroism and genius and bravery, just looks so small. The scars have already faded to a bright pink stain across his skin, angry and raw.

“What did you major in?”
“Biomechanics,” Harley says.

It’s not at all surprising. It still makes him smile, though. “I suppose this means we can all go to alumni parties together, huh?”

“Rhodes and Peter won’t like that, much.”

“Nah, but they’ve put up with us this long, haven’t they?”

“Guess so.” Harley scuffs the floor with his shoe. “I’ll, uh… leave you alone. And thanks, Tony.”

“Don’t mention it.”

He waits, sensing somehow the kid isn’t done yet, and sure enough Harley calls back to him on his way out the door.

“Yeah, Keener?”

“He, uh…” Harley rubs the back of his neck awkwardly. “He really missed you. A lot. Just so you know.”

Then he’s gone.

Tony turns back to Peter. They’re alone again. It’s always harder when they’re alone, because there’s no one else’s panic to bounce off of. He just keeps sinking into his own, falling deeper and deeper.

Tony reaches out. He takes Peter’s hand.

At least this, he can hold on to.
“I missed you, too, buddy.”

“Eat it.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Doesn’t matter. This is non negotiable. Eat the salad.”

Pepper glares, raising her eyes from the laptop screen she’s only been pretending to pay attention to. It’s been a quiet hour, what with Morgan down for her nap in the adjoining family room and all of the others keeping a respectful distance. Pepper’s been able to at least fool Tony and May into thinking she’s doing some work toward repairing the compound and helping with the after effects of the so-named ‘Blip’.

Her hands flex over her keyboard. “No.”

Tony sighs. He sets the salad down in front of her, anyway. “Pepper, honey, a bite of the food? Just one?”

“Tony, dear, absolutely not.”

“Starving yourself isn’t the answer.”

“That’s cute, coming from you.”

Tony spreads his hands. “What is this? An attack? I’ve eaten, I’m eating—”

“Oh, what, a protein bar?” She snorts, even though it really isn’t funny.

“God, would you listen to the two of you?” May bursts. “Who’s your marriage counsellor? I want
names.”

“We’re not married.”

“Good.”

Tony blinks. Then he looks back at Pepper, grinning as much as he’ll let himself. He leans down and pecks her cheek and god, Pepper had missed that so much. It’s hard to stay mad when simple things like him breathing, speaking, existing in the same room as her, make her heart skip a beat.

“Please eat.”

“Fuck you.”

She wins a real laugh at that, but it falters just as quickly. They both look at the bed, listen for the steady rhythm of Peter’s heartbeat. Any humour she’d felt withers away inside of her, replaced only with guilt.

Sorry, he’d said, on his knees and too far away to save. Sorry, because he’d known that what he was about to do would break her, would rip her apart the same way it did him. Sorry, because they are supposed to be each other’s someones, the ones that stay, the ones that last.

Pepper doesn’t want him to be sorry. She just wants him to live.

Tony hovers over her shoulder. He fiddles with Peter’s saline drip and squints at the readings on the monitors and keeps adjusting his pillow every five seconds.

“Tony, it’s fine.”

“No it’s not. It keeps un-fluffling. Do you see? Do you see the right corner? The distinct lack of fluff? What is this, cotton? No, he needs memory foam, he needs his neck supported—”

“You’re fussing, Tony. Do you realise that? Do you see yourself?”
“What I see is an uneaten salad.”

“Oh, for god’s sake—”

“No, he’s right, Pep,” croaks a new voice, “if you don’t eat that fucking salad pretty soon I really might have to scream.”

They both freeze, words dying away on their tongues, turning with wide eyes.

Peter grins at her. Alive, awake, okay.

“Hey, Ms Potts,” he says, now that he has her attention (undivided, inhibited only by the tears threatening to fall); “is there any water?”

Chapter End Notes

*covers face with hands* i know it’s probably not medically accurate and i hope it doesn’t suck GOD i’m so nervous

also PLEASE CHECK OUT THIS AMAZING GORGEOUS WONDERFUL FANART OF HARLEY, PETER, & MJ BY @moonestaly ON TUMBLR:

https://moonestaly.tumblr.com/post/187803098914/moonestaly-peter-stank-please-dont-have-a

i have been crying all day???

i love u all btw <3
Peter tries to sit up, but to little avail. There are hands pressing him down into the mattress in an instant, preventing him from moving.

His head spins. The lights are too bright. Every bone in his body aches and his insides feel like soup. Probably has something to do with being microwaved by a bejeweled glove, but whatever.

It’s beside the point. The headache and the aching and the pain, it all becomes irrelevant the second he registers the sound of Pepper’s tears.

Peter basically vomits the first words that pop into his head.

“That wasn’t a joke by the way. Water would be really nice.”

It does the trick. Pepper stops crying in favour of blinking at Peter: face flushed, eyes wide and red-rimmed, lips pulled up at the corners.

“W-What?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t say that in French, right? I saw that on E.R., once, I think? Some guy had brain surgery and woke up speaking Spanish. They didn’t carve out parts of my brain, did they? Because if so, I’m torn between, like, suing or taking the dead pieces home in jars and putting them on the mantelpiece.”

They don’t even have a mantelpiece.

“We don’t even have a mantelpiece,” Pepper says, dazed.

She and Tony are still gaping—and wow, it’s Tony. For a second it hadn’t even registered as strange
to see him there hovering by his bedside; that was just the way things were supposed to be. But then he remembers all of it, all of the grief and heartache, and suddenly it’s not just normal, everyday, unremarkable; it’s everything.

Peter finds himself reaching out, and of course Pepper takes his hand. Even better, Tony’s fingers card through his hair. It’s sort of like how he always pictured having parents would feel.

“Why are you crying?” He asks Pepper. “Did someone hurt you? Who do I have to kill?”

She squeezes his hand and for the first time he notices the angry hue to his own skin. Her own is so much paler. “Don’t be a moron. What’s the last thing you remember?”

Peter thinks and then instantly regrets it, because the answer his mind provides is pain. Overwhelming, all consuming pain. The feeling of his nerves being fused together, his insides melting, his brain turning to mush.

“I used the gauntlet.”

Pepper winces. “Yeah. How are you feeling?”

“Uhh, discombobulated. Incredibly confused. How did I—?”

Pepper’s face darkens. It means she’s super pissed off but too worried about his well being to actually yell. “We don’t have to talk about that right now,” she says, glancing to his right. “All that matters is that you’re gonna get better.”

Peter follows her gaze.

Just like that, every ounce of his attention is devoted to the woman at the end of the bed in the high waisted jeans and tank top, like it’s still spring, like no time has passed.

(They were going to go to Coney Island; he was going to get back from his field trip to MOMA and they were going to go to Coney Island, and now it’s five years later and he’s never forgotten, but he reached for Pepper first and he’s been in limbo for who knows how long and—)
May is crying.

“Hey, kiddo.”

Peter’s mouth snaps shut. He rounds on Pepper. “I’m sitting up.”

“Peter —”

“Pepper,” he counters, desperate now and pushing against their grip, “I’m sitting up. You’re not the boss of me and—you’re still pushing me, why are you pushing me—”

“You need rest—”

“If you don’t let go I’ll do you one worse and actually get out of the bed.”

Pepper’s lips press into a thin line. May steps forward. “Peter, honey, she’s right—”

“Oh, don’t feed her ego,” Peter says. He reaches out. “If you hold me back it doesn’t even count.”

May’s face is graced with a smile which edges in disbelief, like she’s the one that’s gone five years without seeing him, like she can’t believe he’s here and talking.

Still, she wraps her arms around him.

Patchouli oil and rosemary and home. Peter had forgotten it all. He had forgotten the sound of her breathy, relieved laugh. He had forgotten what it was like to smile so blindly it hurt. He had forgotten.

May pulls back too quickly. She takes his face in her hands. “Oh my god, look at you,” she whispers, voice a mix of awe and complete, heart-shattering sorrow. “You’re so grown up.”
Peter is still trying to catch up with the fact that she’s here. “Hi,” he says stupidly.

“God, you even sound different,” May tells him. Her voice is shaking. “Happy said it had been five years but I could hardly believe it, and now…” she sniffs. “I’m so sorry, baby.”

Peter shakes his head. “It’s not your fault. Please, please don’t be sorry for this. I know you would’ve been there if you could—”

“I just missed so much. This morning you were just my little baby boy and now you’re so tall and,” she sucks in a sharp breath, “you look so much like Ben, you know?”

Just like that his smile falters. She notices, they all notice. He still can’t bring himself to care. He forces it back, nods a little. It isn’t really true, but she can’t know that, yet. He can’t crush her like that.

Black spots dance before his eyes. He squeezes them shut.

“Okay,” cuts in Tony suddenly, “I think maybe, uh, lie back down now?”

“I’m fine,” Peter protests.

“Oh, I’m sure you’re feeling just peachy, Parker, but if you could still do an old man the courtesy? Spare me the heart attack and all that?”

A part of him knows they’re right, knows he needs rest, knows he’s just subjected himself to severe radiation poisoning; the other part needs to be awake, needs to feel them, needs to make sure they’re real. He can’t close his eyes because what if it isn’t, and what if when he opens them next they’ll just disappear?

Then Tony puts a hand on Peter’s shoulder. “Pete,” he says, “please?”

The darkness is already taking hold again. His head feels heavy, his body light. He reaches for Tony.
“You’ll be here when I wake up?”

Tony doesn’t hesitate. His fingers are gentle as they run through Peter’s hair. “Of course,” he whispers. “I’m not going anywhere. Promise.”

Peter nods. A promise is a promise, right?

As long as Tony is here. As long as he stays.

Peter can sleep.

―

“Being awake was just too much of a strain,” Dr Cho tells them. “He exhausted himself and passed out, that’s all. Aside from the obvious injuries still healing, he seems to be in good health.”

The words repeat on a loop in Tony’s head. In good health, in good health, in good health.

He stays with Peter just like he said he would. The others move around him, coming and going. For a while Pepper paces the floor of the room, wall to wall, muttering to herself and throwing the occasional worried glance at Peter.

“Pep, we’ve talked about this before.”

“Talked about what?”

“The pacing. The rhino on a rampage breathing. Ringing any bells?”

Her face scrunches up. “The memories are fuzzy for me.”

“Right.” Naturally. “Well, you don’t need to be anxious, remember? Cho said he’s fine. He woke up and he remembers us, and he seems—” Tony’s breath hitches. He reaches for Peter’s hand again.
“He seems okay.”

Pepper is so deep in her own head she hadn’t even noticed his lapse. “I’m not anxious.”

“Of course you’re not. Hey, remember those breathing exercises we learned in couple’s therapy? Deeply in and out?”

She pauses. Glares at him. “I’m fine. I’m breathing.”

“Not deeply in and out.”

Pepper’s hands fly to her face. “God, I hate when you do that!”

“Do what?!”

“Make me laugh when I’m trying to be mad!”

“Why on Earth are you trying to be mad?”

“Because he’s—” Pepper presses her palms against her temples. “He’s so stubborn he woke up hours before he should have and the first thing he does is make jokes! God, you two are a pair, aren’t you? Always deflecting, always suppressing.”

Something about that makes Tony’s stomach twist in discomfort, but Pepper is too much on a roll to really notice. “You know, I don’t know what else I was expecting. And who hurt me? What am I supposed to say to that when it’s him?”

Tony blinks. “Him?”

“Him!” She shakes her head. “‘Sorry’, he says, and then he almost kills himself and he wakes up and acts like everything is normal and okay and—”
“Pepper,” Tony cuts in, “I hate that he did it, too.”

She freezes. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” He sighs. Leans his head back and glares at the ceiling. “It just… I would’ve done it. If I could’ve, I would’ve done it without a second thought, and I know how much that might’ve pissed you off, but… I think we can both agree we’d rather see me lying here than him, right?”

Pepper swallows. “I’d rather it was neither of you.”

“Pep.”

“Don’t… don’t make me choose.”

Tony shrugs. “I’m not trying to. I’m just saying, I wish I could’ve.”

She runs a hand through her hair, which is looking increasingly unkempt. It’s unlike her. He tries to think—when was the last time he’d convinced her to shower or nap? Two days ago?

“I know what you’re about to say,” she mutters. “I can feel you gearing up for a lecture on self care.”

“Oh, really?”

“Really, and I’d like to remind you it’s been about a day and a half since you last ate something.”

Tony scowls. He leans forward in his seat a little, like being just a tad closer to Peter will help him feel less like he’s being squeezed through a trash compactor, pressure on all sides, crushing him until he finally snaps.

“Oh great, you’re bickering again.”
They look up and find May Parker holding two disposable cups filled with steaming liquid. “I brought you coffee,” she says.

Tony decides one thing right then and there: May Parker is nothing if not a saint. He accepts the proffered cup with thanks that can’t possibly convey his gratitude.

May’s expression softens. She lowers herself beside him. “How are you feeling?”

Tony shrugs. He considers his answer. “Overstimulated.”

“I’ll be taking that, then,” May says, pulling the coffee back.

“No, wait, I lied, my stimulation levels are normal—”

“He’s talking about himself like he’s an artificial intelligence system,” Pepper says to May wryly, “that means it’s bad.”

May scrutinises him. “When was the last time you slept?”

“If I lie can I have my coffee back?”

“No. And you can’t lie, either.”

“I can so.”

“Give me a number.”

“Seven.”

May rolls her eyes. “You should sleep. Your gigantic brain is trying to keep you awake and I’m not going to give it more fuel.”
“But May.”

“Tony.”

He huffs. “If Peter were awake—”

“He would agree with us,” Pepper says easily, without looking up from her phone. Oh, joy, she’s reverted back to business to keep herself from going insane. “Trust me. Now sleep.”

“Alright, okay, here’s a proposition for you: I sleep, you shower and eat. Sound even?”

Pepper looks up and squints at him. “You’re pushing it.”

“Fine, just a shower then.”

She considers it. Finally, a rare defeat flashes in her eyes and she pockets her phone. “God, you’re horrible, you know that?”

“Yes,” he says. “I love you, too.”

He hopes the small smile he sees on her lips isn’t his imagination. Tony holds onto that as he scoots marginally closer to Peter’s bed after she storms out. He can’t really get any closer, and it’s easy to simply lay his head down beside Peter.

He turns his head to the side to see May. “Is it as weird for you as it is for me?”

“What, your backward flirting?”

“I do know,” she says. “And it is. Weird, I mean. I don’t… I don’t know how to wrap my head around it. I can’t even begin to comprehend how difficult this was for all of them.”

Tony hums, shifting his attention back to Peter again. “At least we can try to make it easier on ‘em now, right?”

“Yeah,” May whispers. “We can try.”

The next time Tony wakes up, it’s quiet.

The only sounds are soft exhales and beeping monitors. May is gone, probably to catch up on rest. Pepper isn’t here either, and he doesn’t know what to make of that.

Tony chooses to focus on what’s right in front of him rather than worry about where they are. Peter’s cheek is pressed against the blankets and his eyelids flutter as he sleeps. He looks so much younger like this, like the dweeby teen from yesterday.

Tony can’t stop himself from reaching out and running his fingers through the kid’s curls, despite how parental and gross it should be. It isn’t, though, weirdly. Never was. It’s just easy, too easy to gently untangle the knots, to brush his thumb over Peter’s ear, to stroke his cheek.

Peter jerks awake.

For a beat he doesn’t even seem to register Tony. His eyes are wide open and full of nothing but panic. “Kid,” Tony says, careful not to speak too loudly because he knows Peter doesn’t react well to that after a nightmare.

And that’s what this is. The aftermath of a nightmare.

Peter blinks a few times. A half-moon develops on his brow as he takes Tony in. “You’re still here,” he observes, voice raspy from sleep. “Am I allowed to sit up, now?”
Tony’s lip quirks but the smile is suppressed. “How do you feel?”

“Confused,” Peter admits. “I’m pretty sure I had a vivid dream about…” he frowns. “Doesn’t matter. It was weird, though.”

“I can do weird.”

“I don’t wanna talk about the dream.”

“Then what do you wanna talk about?”

The kid shifts. He has that look on his face, the look that means his mind is running a mile a minute and he’s carefully considering what to say next.

“I think we should… start slow,” he says.

Slow. Tony can do slow. He nods and plunges forward. “Pete, I want you to know—”

“Hold on,” Peter requests. He takes a deep breath and presses his palms to his eyes. “I really, really don’t want to hear the whole ‘it should have been me’ speech because the thing is, you’re wrong. It shouldn’t have. And if it had been, okay, fine, but what about Pepper? What about everyone who needs you? Everyone who spent five years missing you and—and trying to save you?”

The kid’s voice is breaking and his eyes are welling up. Tony reaches out and takes his hand, but it’s really not enough. A hug isn’t enough. How do you apologise for five years of not being there?

“Can you just,” Tony gestures vaguely. “Please?”

Confusion belies his anger. “Can I what?”

“Just make some room for me, would you?”
Peter blushes. “Are you—but I—”

Tony can’t help grinning. “There’s my stammering spiderbaby. Please, for me? Since you’re dying and all.”

Peter rolls his eyes. “Fine, but if Pepper gets mad, you’re taking the fall.”

“Wonderful. I couldn’t be more grateful,” Tony says. “Scooch over, I know you can do it. Five years hasn’t made you an old man.”

“It has on the inside,” Peter mutters, but he finally obliges Tony’s request and makes a good bit of room for him on the bed, fumbling ungainly with his various IV lines and tangled sheets. At least his awkward nature hasn’t changed. Tony grins. “Is this like when newborns need to be close to their parents? Do you need extra love?”

“I think it’s the other way around.”

“Yeah, sure, whatever helps you sleep at night.”

Tony isn’t listening anymore. The kid’s insurmountable sass takes the back burner as he wraps his arm around Peter’s shoulders. Peter, to his surprise, tucks his head under Tony’s chin and curls up in a ball of spiderbaby and oversized MIT hoodie and latent irritation.

It’s too adorable, really.

“So, I pissed you off?”

“We don’t have to talk about that.”

“Yes, we do. I don’t… I’m done with all the secrets. I’m done with the lying.”

“We’re lying right now.”
“Ha ha.”

“Hey, is it still kiddo or do I have to start calling you Spider-Young-Adult? Or—”

“I think you’re still old enough that it really doesn’t matter.”

Tony barks a laugh. Then he gently runs his fingers through the hair at the nape of Peter’s neck, resting his cheek against the crown of his head. “What’s on your mind?”

“You, at the moment,” Peter replies quietly. His voice is slightly muffled against the fabric of the grey shirt they put Tony in. “Literally. Figuratively. Also, you should probably text Pepper and let her know I’m awake—or actually, just let me, there’s this meme I want to send her. Pass me my phone?”

Tony hums and obliges, doing his best to silently dissect all of the connotations behind that. Peter has Pepper’s number on his phone, which he promptly pulls out to do just as he said he would. Pepper’s name is labelled ‘Salty Pea’, which carries a whole other list of what the fucks Tony doesn’t have the energy to vocalise.

“Hey Tony?”

“Hmm?”

“Where are we?”

“What?”

“Like geographically,” Peter specifies, looking around the room. “Because this place has a really futuristic vibe and if you’re about to tell me I was out for five years too—”

“Wakanda,” Tony cuts in with a smile. “And you’re fine, it’s only been four days.”
“Wakanda,” Peter repeats. “And how’s that?”

“Strange did that glowy portal thing and we brought you here,” Tony explains. “Now, it’s my turn to ask questions.”

Peter glances up at him through dark lashes. “I reserve the right to not answer.”

Tony snorts. “Alright. So… the kid?”

“Which kid?”

“My kid.”

Peter smiles. “You mean Morgan?”

“Her, yes.”

His voice is tight. Too tight, really. Hadn’t he told Pepper he was ready? Hadn’t he been so eager about it he’d actually brought it up in conversation (only to be corralled by Strange)?

But there’s a difference, a really big difference between being there for the birth of your kid, holding them in your arms for the first time, watching them grow up; versus meeting them halfway down the line and having to get to know them when they’ve already become.

Peter taps his forehead and Tony realises that is complete, utter bullshit.

He can do this. He’s done it before. And this time, maybe it’ll even be easier. Morgan is part of him, right? They share genetics. Maybe they can all go for cheeseburgers or something.

“You’re spiralling.”
“I am not.”

“You are,” Peter props himself up on one elbow. “I can tell. Your face is all scrunched up.”

“Is it?”

Peter sighs. “You’re overthinking it. She’s four years old and her favourite colour is blue and she’s been saying fuck you to authority figures since the day she was born. You guys’ll be best friends in no time.”

“And she… does she know who I am?”

“Of course. I’ve told her all about you.”

His heart skips at that. He’s grateful not to be the one hooked up to all those monitors. “Really? And she believed it? Because when you look back on my life, it really does seem pretty fictitious, and—”

“Tony, she’s four. She believes anything.” He pauses. “Well, most things.”

“What happened to your sunny optimism?”

Peter sighs. He rests his chin on Tony’s chest. “I don’t know. A lot of things happened.”

He had only been keeping up with the banter, but the seriousness of Peter’s answer gives him pause. He hesitantly reaches up and cards his fingers through his hair. It’s easy to do when Peter is asleep, but doing it when he’s awake and having those big brown eyes snap to his own, watching Peter’s cheeks flush, is a different story.

“Tell me?”

“Tony…” Peter takes a shuddering breath. “Tony, Nat died.”
His heart sinks. “I heard.”

Peter leans back. He shakes his head, almost like he’s disgusted with himself. “It was—she sacrificed herself to bring everyone back. I wasn’t even there. God, I should’ve been, I should’ve—”

“Kid, what?”

There’s already so much he doesn’t understand, so much about what the world has turned into isn’t adding up and Tony would almost believe this is an alternate dimension rather than his own accelerated by five years. In his memory, Peter and Nat have never even spoken. To think that he’d be this devastated, clutching at that hourglass tattoo on his arm Tony’s taken to stroking…

He shakes his head and focuses on the thing easiest to him: comforting Peter. “You shouldn’t have been. I know Nat, and she wouldn’t have wanted you to see that.”

Peter looks down. He realises that he had unconsciously been playing with the hem of Tony’s shirt, blushes, and lets go.

“I feel like I failed,” he whispers. “Even if we got everyone back, I still feel like there was more I could’ve done.”

“Bullshit. You did… Peter, you did everything.”

“But she…” Peter sucks in a sharp breath and curls against Tony. “I just really miss her.”

“I’m sure she misses you, too.”

“No.” Peter shakes his head. “No, I think… I think wherever she is, she’s mad at me.”

“Why would she be mad at you?”

“Because I’m an idiot. Because I snapped my fingers. Because I let her walk into some trap like an absolute moron and I wasn’t there to stop her from—”
“I was there to stop you and I still couldn’t,” Tony points out. “What makes you think it would have been any different for you?”

Peter sniffs. “I can take her in a fight.”

Tony laughs again. “Yeah, right.”

“I’m serious,” Peter insists, pushing himself up. “I can! It happened once! And if I had been there—”

“Okay, I’m gonna stop you right there,” Tony cuts in, “because if there’s one thing I’ve learned about Natasha Romanoff in all the years that I’ve known her, it’s that when she sets her mind to something, nothing and no one can stop her. Not me, not Clint, and certainly not you.”

“Why ‘certainly’?” Peter asks. “I’m a lot better at kicking ass than I used to be, you know.”

“I’m sure.”

“Good, you should be.” He pauses. Squints. “That was patronising, wasn’t it? It sounded patronising.”

“Me?” Tony scoffs. “I would never.”

Peter squints. “I could take you. Maybe not right now, but on a good day. I could definitely take you.”

“You could never.”

“Yeah? Says the king of no self preservation. I know all your moves. The suicide slam, the worm in the hole—”

“I’m sorry, what? No self preservation? I think that’s you if it’s anyone.”
Peter snorts. He folds his arms over his chest and flops down next to Tony rather than on him, like he wants to convey his irritation but can’t actually bring himself to leave his side.

Thirty seconds pass.

“I’m sorry,” Peter says.

Tony laughs. It’s watery, relieved. “You really have to stop with the sorrys, you know that?”

“I know. I… I think I apologise less. Maybe.”

“Maybe.” Tony smiles. “We can work on it.”

Peter repositions himself, laying his head to rest over Tony’s heart. Tony’s hand ends up in his hair again, and like always, the motion winds up relaxing him. “You got a haircut, didn’t you?”

“Pepper said I had to,” he mutters. “She said homeless wasn’t a good look for me.”

Tony smiles softly. “She took care of you?”

“We take care of each other,” Peter corrects. “May was dusted too, in the Snap, so there was no one left. We just… helped each other.”

Tony nods. There’s something irrevocably pleasing about that, and yet at the same time, it makes his stomach twist. He doesn’t like that they’d been so alone they’d had to lean on each other. He hates that he hadn’t been there for them.

“Your heart rate is climbing.”

“Thank you, FRIDAY,” Tony jibes sarcastically.
Peter’s nose wrinkles. “Why do your AIs get cool accents but mine don’t?”

“You never asked.”

“I never even knew I was getting an AI.”

“Well that’s… completely valid.”

Peter snorts. Tony is almost fully supporting his weight now, and with every minute that passes in soft silence, Peter’s breathing evens out. Tony’s arm is starting to fall asleep and his hip is aching but he doesn’t mind at all. He just shifts a little and pulls Peter closer.

“Petey?”

Tony lifts his eyes and finds to his surprise and vague horror that Morgan is in the doorway. “You’re here?”

“Of course I’m here,” she says. “Did he wake up?”

“He did.” Tony glances at Peter, who shifts a little in sleep.

“My kiss worked, then,” she announces, so pleased with herself she practically preens. “It means I have superpowers.”

“Please,” Peter grunts with eyes closed, “your only superpower is being the most annoying kid on the planet.”

Morgan pouts. “You’re a turd.”

Peter laughs and the sound is like music to Tony’s ears, especially when Morgan’s giggle joins it. He’s never felt anything like this; such an overwhelming rush of affection for a kid that, a week ago,
didn’t even *exist* to him, and another that he had been helplessly trying to convince himself was only a colleague in Tony’s eyes, only a mentee.

It’s like the universe got so fed up with him putting shit off that it took matters into its own hands.

Into *his*, it had thrust *them*. Peter, battered and brave and alive; Morgan, cheeks flushed and eyes bleary from being awake so late at night. He frowns. “Shouldn’t you be with people?”

Morgan shrugs. “You’re my people too.”

“Is that so?”

“Course.”

Peter stretches an arm out. “Come here, Mongoose.”

At the nickname she beams, clambering gracelessly onto the bed. She takes off her backpack. “I brought books.”

Peter perks up. “What kind?”

“The reading kind,” she says, in an exasperated way that’s so Pepper it has Tony grinning. Morgan seems to find courage in that. She scoots closer. “You and Mommy always read to me when I’m sick, so…”

“You’re gonna read?”

She prickles at Tony’s disbelieving tone. “I can *read*.”

“Of course, of course, I meant more…” he frowns and ends up blurting the only thing he can think. “Aren’t you supposed to be mad at me?”
Tony feels Peter stiffen at his side. Morgan frowns. “For what?”

“For not… being there? For missing your whole life?”

“I don’t know,” Morgan shrugs. “I can’t even remember being a baby.”

“I can’t remember it either.”

Morgan wrinkles her nose. “Petey says I pooped a lot and made him and Mommy drug addicts.”

“I’m— what?”

Peter laughs. “It’s true.”

“So,” Morgan adopts a business-like tone that is eerily like her mother. “Little Prince or Goodnight Moon?”

She holds up the books for them to choose.

“Why not both?”

Her grin tells him this was the answer she had wanted. Morgan edges toward them and then Peter is tucking her against his body without an ounce of hesitation. He rests his chin on her head. “Daddy’s gonna read to us, aren’t you, Dad?”

Tony’s heart skips a beat. He tells himself to relax, that Peter’s just doing the thing everyone does, addressing a kid’s parents by ‘mom’ or ‘dad’ like those are their god-given names. He doesn’t mean…

Tony clears his throat. “Yeah, ’course.”
He takes the books and shifts, focusing on the bright pictures rather than their expectant eyes. He starts to read, and slowly they both relax against him, and within a little while they’re fast asleep.

Tony falls with them.

At some point in the night, Peter wakes up again.

Morgan is sprawled out on top of him and Tony is still there, an arm wrapped around them both. Peter is almost too scared to move for fear of waking either of them up. It might ruin the moment, shatter the tranquility.

Then someone shifts to his right and Peter realises Pepper is there, now, filling out stacks of paperwork which she reads by the dim bedside light.

“Can I ask you a question?”

Pepper looks up. Smiles softly and slips off her reading glasses. “Go ahead.”

Peter looks at Morgan and Tony again, and then at her. “Is this real?”

Something in her face changes, takes on a sadder, sentimental tone. It doesn’t kill her smile, though, and she reaches out to take his hand. “The realest thing there is.”

“Good,” he nods. “That’s really good.”

Sometimes it’s hard to tell. After the in-between space, the memories of which are growing hazier and hazier, he grapples with the concept of illusion versus reality. But this is real. He can hear Morgan’s tiny sighs and smell Tony’s aftershave. It’s real, they’re here, it’s okay.

Pepper regards all three of them. “I should probably thank you—”
“Don’t,” Peter cuts in. “This isn’t… don’t thank me for this. I don’t want it all to feel like a— a transaction or—”

“Okay,” Pepper whispers. “Alright. No thank yous. Does that mean I at least get to yell at you some?”

Peter smirks. “Maybe in the morning after the Mongoose gets a full night’s sleep.”

“Like she’s the problem?”

They both look at Tony and grin. Peter ends up laughing. “I feel loopy,” he tells her.

“That’s probably the morphine.”

“I’m on morphine?” Pepper nods. “Damn. That’s good shit.”

“Better than Morgan’s pheromones?”

Peter hums. He leans forward and sniffs the top of Morgan’s head just to see. “Nah.”

“Well, I just learned a whole lot about you both I wish I hadn’t.”

Peter blinks at the unexpected sight of Rhodey in the doorway. He’s dressed in a hoodie and track pants, looking run down but okay. “Uncle Rhodey!”

Rhodey sends a dry look to Pepper. “So he’s high?”

She laughs again. “They upped his dosage about an hour ago. It’s finally kicking in.”

Rhodey snorts. “You know you should probably both be resting.”
“We know,” Pepper says.

“We don’t care,” Peter finishes.

Rhodey rolls his eyes at them. “Right. Two peas in a pod.”

It’s an old joke, so old it should be stale by now, but it still manages to make Peter smile.

Rhodey comes over. He kisses Pepper’s cheek first and then hovers by Peter’s bedside, one hand resting on Peter’s shoulder, eyes on Tony. “You feeling okay now, little man?”

“Definitely,” Peter nods. “I’m not even chicken fried, see?”

Rhodey laughs. “I see that, yeah. You’re lucky.”

“Yeah, well,” Peter shrugs. “There’s a first time for everything, right?”

“Can I ask you a question?”

MJ looks up from her book. They’re both propped up against pillows, her sneakers kicked off to the floor, his head on her shoulder. It’s been almost a week in the hospital. Super healing is hard work, but he thinks they might finally be able to return to New York soon.

She’d been there when he’d woken up after that first day of fading in and out, arms folded over her chest as she scowled down at him from his bedside. “Idiot,” she’d said.

“There she is,” he’d replied, grinning like a complete moron. Just as he’d hoped, she’d been unable to stop herself from smiling back.
By now she’s mostly gotten over the irritation she’d been harbouring and she doesn’t have any complaints about him wrapping his arms around her and randomly pressing kisses to her cheek and neck.

“Go for it.”

He braces himself.

“Do you still think about the townhouse with the adopted kid and the dungeon where you chain me up when I piss you off?”

MJ snorts. “As I recall, it was a Bat Cave for you to hide in.”

“Semantics.”

She shifts. Sighs. “Yeah, I think about it.”


“Was that all?”

“Oh, yeah, sure. Just, uh, in this dungeon vs Bat Cave universe, are we married?”

He can literally see the vein in her neck jump. “I don’t know if I’d gotten that far.”

“You got to baby in the baby carriage but skipped marriage?”

MJ rolls her eyes exaggeratedly, setting aside her paperback novel to fold her arms over her chest. “What kind of a conversation is this? Twenty questions or ’serious but we pretend it's not’?”

“ Aren’t they all like that?”
“If it’s serious, I’m gonna warn you that if you propose to me right now, the answer will be no.”


MJ narrows her eyes. “So what’s your objective?”

Peter laughs because she’s looking at him the same way she looks at criminals on the street when she’s trying to throw them off by giving them random psychological Q&As in the middle of fights. “Jesus Christ,” he says. “Marry me.”

MJ’s eyes widen.

“It’s a joke,” he throws out quickly.

“Is it?”

“I don’t know, is it?”

“Dude.” She gives him a light shove. “Do not fuck with me like that. You know I have issues with marriage as an institution.”

“Which is why I’m asking,” Peter says. “I’m just… where does it go? Life partners? Friends with benefits who live together and have a kid?”

MJ sighs. She takes his hand. “Why are you thinking about this?”

“Too much almost dying in the space of one month,” he theorizes. “Plus I met… doesn’t matter. I just got this weird domestic picture in my head I can’t shake. But I know that’s not you, and I don’t even know if it’s me. I mean, we fight crime, we stop alien armies, and our biological kids would get thrown out of school for crawling on ceilings, you know? Everyone would think they were possessed by the devil.”
MJ startles him with a laugh. “You know, I hadn’t even thought of that?”

“Well I did. It was terrifying.”

“I think it’s hilarious and it almost makes me want to have kids just to see it.”

“See? Look what I’ve done. I can’t keep my mouth closed and now I’ve opened the pod bay doors and all the scary adult stuff is infecting our minds. I’m the worst.”

“No you’re not. People are supposed to have this talk.”

“But remember when our biggest concern was making it through high school?”

MJ snorts as she pulls her knees to her chest. Peter rests his head back on her shoulder. He knows they’re nowhere close to marriage and kids and mortgages; MJ is still working on getting her degree, and Peter…

Peter has something else to worry about. Something that, for the moment, is a much more pressing matter than conversations about the far off future.

It doesn’t stop him from wondering about it, though. And it’s easier to think about than all of the other stuff in his head.

There’s a knock on the open door and May sticks her head into the room. She looks like she’s rested more, which Peter is more than grateful for. The past couple of days she’s been nursing dark rings around her eyes and every smile has been drawn.

“I hope I’m not interrupting something.”

“You absolutely hope you are,” Peter argues.

May grins.
“I grabbed this for you,” she holds out a bowl of fruit, “and I took out all the honeydew because I know you think it’s flavourless and gross.”

“It is a miserable fruit, I concur with that,” MJ says. She slides off the bed.

“Where are you going?”

MJ rolls her eyes at his whiny tone. “I’m leaving you alone with your aunt,” she says, and then scowls. “Don’t give me that look.”

He plays innocent. “What look?”

“You know the one. I’m turning around now. Goodbye.”

Peter throws his head back against the pillow. “You’re mean. I’m gonna set the townhouse on fire.”

She flips him off over her shoulder, and then it’s just him and May, who raises her eyebrows at him. It’s definitely a look of her own, one that means she’s not at all impressed with the weird as shit dynamics between him and his girlfriend, but hey, crazy times.

“So that was MJ.”

May keeps staring.

“From decathlon.”

“Yes, I know.” She perches on the bedside chair and starts cutting up his fruit like he’s five years old, or inept.

He decides not to dwell on it. She gets like this sometimes. After she found out he was Spider-Man, she’d rushed around the kitchen making him a peanut butter and jelly sandwich while screaming at
him over her shoulder in Italian. Then she’d laid it on the table after slicing it into triangles and forced him to eat while she yelled some more.

Peter smiles at the memory, which at the time had been one of the scariest in his life. Now it pales in comparison to others.

He plays with his fingers and stays silent for a moment, considers what to say and disregards each possible route of conversation because it’s just not right. What do you tell the aunt you’ve missed so much it aches for five years, who comes back without really grasping that any time has passed at all?

May isn’t grilling him like he knows she wants to, but he can feel her watching him, an anxious peripheral presence.

He lets her, lets her take in all of the changes, the ones that had been so gradual and subtle to him but must stand out to her like sore thumbs. He can’t even place them. What had he looked like at sixteen? It’s hard to remember. All of the old photos are gathering dust under his bed at home.

*Home*, as in Pepper’s apartment. Home, as in not the seventh floor walk up he and May had lived in since the day his parents had died. He knows there are still other people living there now, since every once in a while he checks the listings for it online just to look at the pictures.

It’s become one of those leased-every-eight-months apartments, but he can still remember the scratchy couch with the grandmother-style print in the living room, and the crates of records May had collected over the years that she refused to sell no matter how tight money got, and the plants in the window box that died every two weeks (which he promptly replaced like dead goldfish, praying she wouldn’t notice, that she would chalk up their sudden rejuvenation to extra sun or water). He remembers the smell: burnt baked goods and herbal incense.

He remembers their life together, but it’s been so long it feels like someone else’s.

“I love her,” he blurts. “Just, y’know, if this was supposed to be a sharing chat. I don’t know. It’s been five years and I know you do that thing where you magically read my mind, but I thought I’d say it anyway. I’m gonna marry her. Like, if she’ll let me. Maybe have her babies too, I don’t know ___”

May holds up her hand. There’s a smile threatening to split her face and it gives him hope. “I’d like to point out that it’s impossible for you to have her children.”
“Hey, you never know,” he shrugs. “Life finds a way.”

May laughs. “I suppose you’re right.”

He is, without a doubt; after all, she wouldn’t be here right now if it hadn’t. Half the universe wouldn’t.

He holds out his hand. She takes it. “How are you?”

This time her laugh is laced with bitter. She looks the same way she used to after thirty hour shifts at the hospital, bone tired and practically delirious after dealing with so many screaming babies and terrified parents and draining surgeries. He can tell the answer won’t be a good one.

“Kathryn is dead.”

Peter tries to remember who Kathryn is. It takes a second, but he recalls a perky blonde lady who had always given him candy when he visited May at the nurses’ station, called him *sugar* and *twink*, and had probably meant a whole lot more to May than she had to him.

He takes her hand. “I’m so sorry, May.”

“There was… a car accident,” she whispers, dismal. “Five years ago. She was six months pregnant.”

“That’s awful.”

“Yeah.” She nods. Finally looks at him. “I don’t even know where to start feeling. I don’t know whether I should be pissed off that I was… zapped out of existence or sad for everything I missed, or amazed at the person you’ve become, or frustrated because I don’t know who that is. Tell me—tell me where to… what to…”

“I can’t.” Peter shakes his head. “I can’t tell you what to feel first. I can just tell you I’m here. I’ll help you through it, always.”
May ducks her head, dark hair curtaining her face, so Peter reaches out and tucks it behind her ear. It gets her to look up, eyes red and brimming with tears.

“You’re not my kid anymore.”

It’s the way she says it that has him vaulting forward to pull her into his arms; broken, wrenched from some hollow in her heart and forced out into the air between them like it’s all she’s been thinking for the last couple of hours.

“May,” Peter shakes his head. “That’s not true.”

“You’re all grown up,” she continues. “I blinked and here you are.”

“Yeah,” he whispers. “It was a really, really long blink for me, though. I missed you like crazy.”

Her face softens. She moves to sit on the edge of his bed and strokes his hair back, like she always used to when he was sick or stressed or scared. Now, he thinks, it’s not him who needs the comfort. “We’re gonna be okay?”

Peter smiles. He kisses her cheek. “Of course. I’m really glad you’re back, May.”

“I’m glad I’m back, too.”

Her smile is small, but it’s there.

If Peter ends up on the floor of the shower with his head in his arms, folding deeper into each sob, no one knows. If he stays there for far too long with the high pressure water beating against his shoulders and raining down his back, no one knows.

Grief comes in waves. He’s learned this. There are moments when it’s not so bad, when he can
almost pretend there’s nothing wrong.

And then there are moments like this one, where he is all alone and there is nothing left to distract him.

It’s over.

They won.

So why does it feel like they lost?

Nat is dead. It’s something he has to face up to. No matter how much he wants to sweep it under the rug and keep hoping he can find a way—because after all, they’d done this, right? Saved half the universe? What’s bringing back one more person?

As much as he wants to do that, he knows if she were here right now she’d slap him upside the head and call him stupid.

But she wanted this more than any of them. It’s not right, it’s actually just so fucking unfair that she doesn’t get to see it.

She’s gone.

She’s not coming back.

He’s left with scraps, the little things, memories that’ll fade one day, go from vibrant to noir to nothing.

Peter, swerving through the streets of Spain in a car more expensive than his life insurance policy, Nat screaming at the top of her lungs for him to watch for pedestrians, his shrill retort of I know what I’m doing, Natasha! and the laughter that had bubbled out of her as a result.

Nat, holding his hand on the plane back from Barcelona, squeezing it every time they hit turbulence
and he flinched because this is how his parents had died.

Peter’s parents and the truth about who his father was, is. She had been the only person who knew and now he’s alone with the secret once more. He hadn’t realised how lonely it had been at the start, and though neither of them really spoke about it, it had just been nice that there was someone who knew he was, is, Tony Stark’s son.

He’ll have to tell him. Peter knows that. He knows he’ll have to tell all of them.

But for now he swallows the secret along with the sob threatening to tear him in half. He reaches up and turns the water off.

After a week and a half Peter is well enough to be moved from the hospital bed to the apartments Tony and Pepper are staying in with Morgan. They’re spacious and modern and clean, and he knows that there are at least a dozen other identical ones housing the rest of the team—who are all being kept here on what Okoye is referring to as ‘mental leave’.

At two in the morning the day before they’re finally set to return to New York, Peter closes his bedroom door and finds Clint Barton perched on the countertop in the kitchen, legs folded Indian style, nursing a beer.

He tries not to start at the sight. It’s not like it’s shocking, necessarily. Clint is a former spy, after all, and Peter had gotten the feeling he’d want to talk at some point.

So he keeps casual. Hops up beside Barton and takes the silently offered bottle.

“Thought you’d be with your family.”

“Yeah,” Barton nods. “The kids are all resting, and Laura wanted to decompress, so I wandered out.”

“Wandered out or wandered up?” Peter asks, directing his eyes to the ceiling where an air duct vent is hanging open.
Clint huffs a laugh. “She really told you everything, huh?”

“Tony told me that,” Peter says. “And no, she didn’t. Not Budapest, anyway.”

“You gonna ask me what happened?”

“No. If you told me about Budapest, I’d have to tell you about Barcelona.”

“Barcelona? What happened there?”

Peter smirks and shakes his head. “No way.”

“God,” Barton laughs. “She really was just the worst, wasn’t she?”

It gets Peter laughing, too. He thinks maybe he’s crying a little at the same time, but then, so is Clint. Neither of them comment on it.

“Before she died, she gave me this,” Clint says after a pause. From his pocket, he pulls a silver chain, upon which hangs a pendant that looks suspiciously like a spider. Like his spider, the one sewn into the heart of his suits that houses his retractable drone, CHARLOTTE.

“She had another pendant on it, an arrow,” Clint says. “I kept that one for myself.”

Peter nods dumbly. He stares down at the necklace, limp in his hand. “I miss her,” he whispers.

“I know.”

“It feels… wrong to just accept it, you know? I mean, after all of this, after everything we did to get everyone else back, and we’re just gonna…”
He trails off.

Clint seems to get it, though. He puts his hand on Peter’s shoulder. “It’s what she wanted, Peter. We have to honour her choice.”

“Bull.”

“Peter—”

“Don’t you think if she could be here right now, she would be?”

“I…” he looks down. “Of course. But what can you do?”

Peter thinks about that. He sets his untouched beer aside and squints at Barton. “Tell me what the red dude said.”

Nebula finds him later.

He’s standing on the rooftop of the hospital staring skyward, hands tucked into the front pocket of his hoodie. It’s night and the sky is splattered with a thousand silver stars, glittering and winking down at him. Peter cranes his neck just to take in the whole sight.

“Does it still bother you?”

Peter doesn’t jump. He’d heard her approach, soft mechanical whirs and light footfalls, though not light enough to fool his ears.

“Does what?”

“Space.”
Peter turns to look at her. Her eyes are turned down, but they slowly rise to meet his own eventually. “It used to. Sometimes it still… but when I remember it, I remember being in it. Like it was about to swallow me up whole, you know? Looking at it this way, it’s just… flat.”

Nebula nods.

Neither of them speak for a while.

“You’re leaving, aren’t you?” he asks.

Nebula nods. “Soon. I thought I would… I wanted to say I’m… what happened, with Thanos. It was my fault. I should have been—”

“It wasn’t,” Peter says. He turns, looks at her head on. “That wasn’t you. I mean, it was, but… I know you wouldn’t have done it. I know you’re better than that.”

Nebula nods jerkily. Her metal hand flexes. “I killed myself.”

Peter nods. He’d heard Clint’s account. “Wacky shit, huh?”

For a second, it looks almost like she’s going to smile.

Then she squares her shoulders and raises her chin. “Gamora is my sister. Not by blood, but… she always tried to save me. To keep me safe. I owe it to her to find her.”

Peter nods. “I understand.”

“I know. But you… you are my brother,” she whispers. “It is important to me that you know, if I could stay…”

Peter hugs her.
For at least half of it, Nebula is stiff. Then she slowly, tentatively raises her arms to complete the embrace. His throat closes up and he squeezes his eyes shut to stop from getting all teary eyed and emotional because he knows that bothers her.

He pulls back. “You do what you need to do. I’m always here.”

“Not always.”

“But for a while,” he amends.

Nebula nods. She takes a small step back, and then another. “Good luck,” she tells him.

“Yeah, you too. And Nebula?”

She turns. “Yes?”

“For what it’s worth, you’re my family too.”

This time the smile is real, small as it is. “It is worth more than you know.”

“You have all of your stuff?”

Peter rolls his eyes. The sight is familiar and somewhat comforting; it’s like he’s still just a teenager fed up with the juice boxes he keeps finding in Tony’s fridge. God, those were the good old days.

“I have no stuff.”

“That’s not true,” Tony protests. “You have those cool pajama pants that Shuri brought for you, with
the Kermit patterns, and that sweater Harley gave you—”

Peter snorts. “I have all my stuff. Except my dignity. That’s lying around somewhere on the battleground, but what can you do.”

Tony snorts. “Yeah, that’s usually how it goes.”

“Tony.”

He looks up. Pepper is in the doorway of the suite, but she’s not alone. It hadn’t even been her who had spoken.

It had been Steve.

Tony’s heart rate climbs and he doesn’t need Peter to tell him it’s happening, this time. He can feel it climbing up to lodge in his throat.

Steve fucking Rogers who Tony had trusted, who Tony would have died for, killed for; Steve fucking Rogers who had taken that trust and twisted it, spit on it, thrown it out the window. Steve fucking Rogers who had tried to kill him.

Steve, standing next to Pepper. Barely three inches of space between them. No tension, no judgement.

“You look good, Tony,” Steve observes, like he hasn’t noticed the way Tony has stiffened. “I know I should have come sooner, but I figured you’d want your space—”

Tony wants suddenly, desperately, to run: not away but towards, towards the man who had turned his back on the team, on Tony.

But Peter is standing pointedly in his way. Tony finds his arm curling protectively around the kid’s shoulders.
“Did you need something, Rogers?”

Steve’s face changes. There’s a brief flash of uncertainty. He exchanges a look with Pepper and something passes between them.

“I just wanted to see how Peter was feeling.”

“Well, that’s sweet of you. Isn’t it sweet of him? To come here and check on you? Real sweet. Hey, Steve, why didn’t you bring your pal Bucky along? At least then it would have been an even fight.”

“Tony,” Pepper says warningly, taking a step forward, “this isn’t the time for—”

“For what?”

“I know it still seems fresh to you, but it’s been so long for the rest of us—”

“So what? I should just forget? Just because I’m a little behind on the uptake?”

Steve sighs. “If you want me to leave—”

“I do.”

“Then I’ll go. Whatever makes you most comfortable.”

“Comfortable? When you’re here? Not likely.”

“Tony.”

It’s not Pepper this time. It’s Peter. He’s stepped out of Tony’s grip and his eyes are hard, his jaw locked.
“So you too? Both of you are on his side now?”

“There are no sides,” Pepper argues, sounding exhausted, broken, and it’s enough to yank him from the resentment carving up his heart with a rusted knife. “We all worked together to get you back, Tony. Steve helped.”

“You wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for him,” Peter adds.

And oh, isn’t that cute, Steve standing taller at his kid’s words and smiling all *fond*, all *familiar*. “Thanks, Queens,” he says, “but it’s okay. I’ll go.”

And then he does.

“You should both go too.”

Pepper and Peter stiffen. She looks stricken and he… he looks almost *dangerous*. Tony realises he’s not just pissed about the Steve thing, he’s angry on behalf of Pepper, too.

*One little happy family,* Tony thinks. And it doesn’t include him. They’d moved on, started lives of their own, mended things with good old *Steve*.

“Tony, don’t be an idiot,” Peter snaps.

“An idiot? You think I’m the idiot here? Really Queens?”

He regrets the biting remark as soon as it leaves his lips. Peter winces. “It’s more complicated than you think.”

“I don’t care how complicated it is,” Tony says, “but here’s something simple for you: I think I need space. Some time. I’d like to be alone for a little bit.”
“What, just like that?” Pepper demands. “You’re walking away because of Steve?”

“Not just because of him,” Tony says, and this time it’s the truth. “I need to think. I need to adjust. Why don’t you two, uh, stay in that apartment? The one in Manhattan? I’ll… I’ll camp out in the Tower.”

Pepper blinks in utter disbelief. He doesn’t know if she’s pissed or stunned or both, and either way he wouldn’t blame her, but it’s still true. He can’t breathe. He doesn’t know what’s going on and he can’t stop to think because every two seconds there’s something else and this has just taken the cake for him.

“You can’t hide forever,” Peter tells him.

“I’m not planning on hiding.”

Pepper is looking between them with a rapid-fire intensity. She stands rigid, pale in a sick way. Tony feels fucking awful for it.

Peter plants his feet on the floor. Glances at Tony and then Pepper. “You coming?”

Pepper wipes her cheeks. She looks right at Tony. “Are you sure?”

He nods. It’s the only movement he can manage. He feels so weak, inside and out. He feels like an idiot.

“Okay,” Pepper whispers, sounding anything but. “We’ll stay in the apartment.”

Dr Strange opens a portal for them and they step out into the living room of Pepper’s Manhattan skyrise apartment.

May doesn’t know what to make of it. She doesn’t know how to handle Peter’s quiet rage or the way Pepper has been desperately trying to hold herself together. She doesn’t know what to make of the
pictures on the walls: the ones of Peter in his graduation cap and gown, of him and MJ at a senior prom both dressed in tuxedos, of him and Harley Keener standing in front of a brownstone building, beaming at the camera.

He’s changed.

Peter, for all of his secrets, had been someone she could always reliably define. He was not nebulous, he wasn’t good at lying. He wore his heart on his sleeve and saved, believed, trusted.

Now his features are carefully schooled. She doesn’t know what he’s thinking. She doesn’t know what he’s feeling.

It scares her more than anything else.

She thinks if she keeps watching him she will re-learn it all, like it’s just fallen out, like she’s just forgotten but can pick it back up as easy as riding a bike after ten years.

But that’s not the case.

His smiles aren’t as wide. His eyes are no longer big and brown and wide open; they are darker and guarded. He doesn’t fidget, he doesn’t twitch. Every movement is carefully crafted and put into practice, and everything around him is observed.

How is it possible that he’s become a stranger in the blink of an eye?!

A stranger, that is, until Pepper Potts’ daughter runs into his arms the second they appear in the woman’s living room.

Just like that, like the sun rising, he’s her baby boy again: all big smiles and flushed cheeks and unadulterated adoration morphing his features into something warm.

May’s heart settles back into her chest for the first time in days.
“Dov'è papà?”

The little girl’s question is uttered in a breathy whisper, hand cupped to Peter’s ear, but May can still hear her. She understands, too, because Italian was the first language she ever spoke in. She grew up in a haze of cigarette smoke and throaty Italian curses tossed from red-stained lips. Her mother had been a force of nature, and when cancer had taken her, May had refused to speak the language for years—until Peter had come along and stolen her first exasperated, *Dio, bambino*, after getting paint all over the fridge and tabletop.

Peter answers her softly. “Arriverà presto, bambina, lo prometto.”

Morgan Potts nods, whispering a soft ‘Oh’. She plays with the strings of his hoodie, a faded grey thing bearing the insignia of MIT.

She was supposed to be there. She was supposed to drive him, hover until he got sick of her, kiss him goodbye and make him promise to call her until she got sick of hearing from him.

Instead he’d been all alone.

No, actually, not alone. He’d had someone, someones.

Pepper Potts has already settled across from May. There is a well worn paperback novel laying unread on the couch beside. Her attention is fixated on her phone, with which she furiously texts.

“Petey, Petey, Petey, bo-beetie, fee, fi, fo feeties,” Morgan sings, tapping his cheeks. Peter grins at the attention, rampant and bright. He surprises May by kissing her nose, which wrinkles up at the contact. “Ugh. We talked about cooties.”

“And we established I don’t have any.”

“Nuh-uh. You’ve got ‘em, I can see.”

“Yeah? Where?”
“There’s a purple one right there,” she tells him, poking his chin. “And a green one in your eyeball.”

Peter laughs. “Yeah?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Peter?” asks Pepper suddenly, finally looking up, “I have to make a phone call and it’s about time for her nap. Can you put her down?”

Immediately Morgan starts to whine. “I don’t need one, Mommy, promise.”

But May’s spent enough time around a much younger Peter to recognise that tone, all slow and sluggish with sleep. The little girl’s eyes are visibly starting to droop as she pouts up at her mother.

Pepper leans over and kisses her forehead. “Sure thing, baby. But how about you do it for me?”

“Oh, can we play that card now?” asks Peter. “Because in that case, you both need to nap. For my sake.”

Pepper rolls her eyes.

Fond, familiar.

Maternal.

“I wish, believe me.”

“Yeah, Petey, I wish,” Morgan says. “But I got tons of stuff to do, and—”
“Cute,” Peter says. “Still no.”

“Petey!”

He stands up, her arms still around his neck. Then he turns to May. “Come with?”

May tries to hide her surprise. She swallows, opting for a shaky smile, and nods because she doesn’t trust her own voice.

She trails a little behind Peter as they walk through the hallways of the house. Morgan is pouting over his shoulder, slumped in defeat. He carries her with ease.

“You’re Petey’s aunty?”

The question makes May start, but she brushes that off just like before and smiles breezily. “Yeah, kiddo.”

“So does that mean you’re my aunty, too?”

The question is asked with so much hope, mouth pressed against Peter’s shoulder to accentuate her chubby cheeks, eyes wide and big and brown, just like Peter’s had been.

“Yes it does,” Peter answers for her, and then turns a little. “If that’s okay?”

“That’s just fine,” May replies, because it is. After all, the kid is adorable and clearly loves Peter. She’s always loved being an aunt, so what’s one more?

“Yay!” Morgan beams. “Aunty May and Morgan May!”

May’s throat feels dry. Her eyes fly to Peter’s, and he answers the question she doesn’t even ask: “Pep named her after you. For me.”
The sudden rush of overwhelming gratitude she has toward the other woman almost makes her want to double back and hug her, but the shame makes her stay planted in her path forward. She should have been on her knees thanking Pepper Potts, not silently nursing the beginnings of a mild resentment.

After all, hadn’t they been friends before? And surely, May would have done the same for Morgan in a heartbeat.

It’s all just so… much. Too much to comprehend. Morgan is living proof of five years passing that May just didn’t exist for, just like the hourglass tattoo on Peter’s forearm and the way he holds himself now; not quite so small, not nearly so desperate to be swallowed up whole.

Peter carries Morgan over to her bed. The little girl hangs off of his neck for as long as she can manage and then finally falls onto the star-patterned sheets.

“I don’t wanna sleep.”

“Yes you do, I promise, you just don’t know it yet.”

Her face twists. “Maybe I’ll want to if I can have a juice pop?”

Peter considers her. “I should say no.”

Morgan starts to smile. She knows she’s already won. May doubts there’s much of anything he could refuse her and so of course, Peter runs off and returns with three: cherry, orange, and lemon, the last of which he gives to May.

He hasn’t forgotten the little things. His soft, sweet smile hasn’t changed any. It’s there as he hands over the popsicle, ever-present as he listens to Morgan ramble. He’s still Peter. He’s still good and kind and caring, still the boy she raised even if someone else was doing that job for a while.

He kneels beside the bed and asks her if she’s done with her popsicle. There’s only a tiny bit left which he takes for himself. “There, now you are.”
She frowns. Peter wipes her mouth with the sleeve of his sweatshirt and then pushes her down. “That face goes there.”

Morgan sits right back up. “You’re a poopy head. I’m not tired.”

Peter just laughs. “I’m a what now?”

She raps her knuckles against his temple. “Poopy.”

“That’s rude.”

“It’s not. Ask Aunty May.”

May flushes when addressed. It’s ridiculous, how nervous, how out of place she feels. Still, she rolls with it. Everyone is dealing with enough shit as it is. “It’s true. It was even your name when you were born, but I convinced your mother to change it to Peter.”

“The betrayal,” Peter laments. “How will I ever go on, knowing all this time I was just a stupid poopy?”

Morgan giggles. “Poopy Parker.”

“Okay,” Peter nods. He pulls her blankets up. “Don’t be a delay fish. Bed time.”

“But no one else has to sleep during the day,” she pouts. “It’s not fair.”

“Oh, I know,” Peter says. “I’d give anything to be able to take a nap, you know that?”

“So sleep with me.”

“Yeah, I walked right into that one, huh?”
May steps forward, feeling more and more like an outsider with every passing second. But she knows kids. She’s a pediatric nurse and she raised Peter from four years old on. She knows nap time issues and nightmares, so she says, “I’ll… I’ll stay, if you want.”

Morgan’s face lights up. “Really?”

“I mean, yeah, of course. If that’s okay.”

Peter is practically beaming. “Of course it’s okay,” he says, and turns to Morgan. “May is the best cuddle-buddy, kiddo. She never hogs blankets and she smells super good.”

“You’re hired,” Morgan announces.

May can’t help laughing. She perched on the edge of the bed, kicking off her sneakers. “I can’t wait to add cuddle-buddy to my resume.”

Morgan burrows into the blankets and pats the spot next to her, and May smiles. “Just let me tie my hair back.”

“Petey can braid it,” she suggests. “He braids super good.”

“Yeah?” That’s new.

Peter scoffs as he drops onto the bed, but he takes May’s hair and starts to braid it, anyway. “Does this count as resume-worthy material?”

“What, is your masters degree not enough?”

She’d seen it hanging on the wall with all of the pictures. Peter sighs. “Yeah, I figured you hadn’t missed that.”
“I miss nothing.”

Peter ties her hair off. “What can I say? I got bored without you around.”

He says it casually, but May knows he means it, and it’s both a relief to hear and heartbreaking. She hates that he had to miss her like that, hates that he had to go so long without her.

She should have been there.

But you’re here now, assures a voice in the back of her mind, the one that always sounds so much like Ben. That’s all that matters.

Is it?

Peter leans down and kisses Morgan’s forehead. “Urgh, your lips are cold,” she complains.

“Are they cold? Are they? Guess,” he kisses her forehead again, “who’s fault,” her cheek, “that is?”


“You’re yucky.”

“You’re… repulsive.”

Peter raises an eyebrow, clearly impressed. “Big word. Who taught you that one?”

“Mommy. She said it to some bone-head on the phone.”

Peter snorts. “Bone-head?”
“Yeah,” Morgan nods and sleepily rubs her eyes. “Don’t get that one. We all have head bones.”

Both Peter and May laugh at that. Peter catches her eye and then he kisses her cheek, too. “Thank you, May.”

“You don’t have to thank me, kiddo.”


May’s chest tightens. She takes a deep breath, eyes burning with unshed tears. “I larb you, too.”

With one last look at the both of them curled up on the bed, Peter rises. “Go to sleep or I’ll sell all your toys,” he calls on his way out.

Morgan snorts in the dim light, grinning. “Poopy.”

Just like that, they settle into a routine of sorts. Peter cooks because they’re both terrible at it and he, at least, is passable. They watch movies. Ned comes over to spend the night and Peter tells him about college, about how he and MJ got together and everything with Beck. By the end of the night they’re both in tears and apologising to the other for inarticulable reasons.

MJ comes over. At first it’s just in passing, and then the circles around her eyes grow progressively darker and then, without either of them really realising it, she’s splitting her time equally between the apartment and her dorm room.

None of this does anything to fill the hollow void in Peter’s chest.

He wants to be pissed. He wants to rage and scream and maybe break a few of Steve Rogers’ limbs, but he can’t. He won’t.

He’s set in this resolve until the night he finds Pepper doubled over on the couch, sobbing into the dark. “It’s okay,” Peter whispers, wrapping his arms around her. “Everything’s gonna be okay.”
“You know, I don’t know what else I was expecting. Tears of joy, maybe? I mean, he wanted Morgan—”

“You think this is about Morgan?”

“Yes! Of course it is!”

“Wait, I’m sorry,” Peter shakes his head to clear it, “you think he’s avoiding us because he’s too afraid of confronting the fact that he has a daughter?”

Pepper shrugs uselessly. “Maybe.”

“And you’re mad at him for it?”

“...Obviously?”

“Pepper…” Peter sighs. “You can’t expect him to just take it in stride. He missed five years. I can’t even imagine what that would be like.”

“I know, I know.” She stands, rubbing her hands up and down her arms like she’s cold. “It’s just… It’s not supposed to be like this. God, Peter, I’m so sorry.”

It’s not her fault and he tells her that. He tells her it’ll work out because he has to believe it will. Even if Tony is pissed, he’ll come around, right?

Or not.

One week turns into two.
It’s not like he’s actually mad.

They’ve gone longer than this without talking, right? It’s not like it’s a big deal. Tony just needs time. He needs time to heal.

It’s just time.

“This is ridiculous, Tony!”

It’s the fourth time she’s said it in so many hours of screaming at him. Tony glances up from the repulsor he has disassembled on the countertop. There are pieces everywhere, actually. He’s sitting in a sea of his own armour, laid vulnerable and under attack.

“It can’t keep going on like this.”

“Going on like what?”

Pepper’s face goes suddenly, carefully blank. “You’re pushing us away,” she snaps. “Me, Morgan, Peter, and why? Because you’re pissed at him?”

“I’m not,” Tony says. “Has he called me? Has he come by?”

“He’s afraid to!”

“Afraid?” Tony scoffs. “Afraid of what, that I’ll hurt him?”

He would never hurt the kid.

“You already are,” Pepper hisses.
There’s fire in her eyes. It cows him. Tony sets the screwdriver down and pinches his brow. He knows what he’s doing. He’s avoiding. He’s pushing the kid further and further away, and why? Because…

Because Peter doesn’t even need him anymore.

Because Peter is all grown up.

Because Peter had looked at him and for a second, Tony had doubted the belief that Peter would never hurt him.

“This needs to stop,” Pepper whispers. “You have no idea the things he’s done for you, Tony. The things he’s done for me.”

“Pep—”

She holds up a hand. “No. I’m leaving. You can either find some sense or pout here like a little kid. It’s up to you.”

“Are you sitting on top of a basketball hoop?”

It just so happens that he is, scuffed up sneakers braces against the pole. Peter squints down at MJ. “I don’t know. When was the last time you got your vision checked?”

“Fuck if I know, that shit costs money.”

Peter snorts. “You killed my joke.”

“Make a new one.”
“Can’t. I’m too depressed.”

“Isn’t depression just a fancy word for feeling ‘bummed out’?”

Peter sends her a dry look. “MJ, you ignorant slut.”

She rolls her eyes. Peter climbs down from his perch and joins her on the ground. She narrows her eyes. “Are you really depressed?”

“I don’t know what I am. Don’t ask me, I’m still trying to figure it out.”

MJ’s nose wrinkles up. “Aren’t those Taylor Swift lyrics?”

“I was hoping you wouldn’t realise. God, she’s so relatable, huh?”

“Oh yeah. So relatable.”

They both grin. MJ reaches out and pokes his shoulder. “You can tell me.”

Can he?

Can he tell her about the thing that’s been eating him up inside for weeks, for years? Can he tell her about how much it hurts that Tony hasn’t reached out, and how stupid he feels for not trying to do anything about it? Can he tell her how useless he feels with Nat gone, probably forever?

Peter takes a deep breath. He makes up his mind.

“There’s something you need to know about me and Tony.”
Pepper blows curls of steam off the surface of her coffee. The cool November air is helping it along in that regard as well, but she clutches it while it’s still hot to keep her hands warm.

“Should we do something, you think?”

Pepper glances at the woman beside her. May is bundled up in a plaid coat, and that paired with her high rise flare jeans make her look like she just stepped out of the seventies. It’s a look Pepper wishes she had the low profile to replicate.

“We should, I just don’t know what, yet.”

May frowns. She sips her latte. They keep walking. It’s taken some getting used to, the way the streets of New York are suddenly full to bursting again. She knows there was disaster after disaster upon the reversal of the snap, but things seem to have calmed down now. Businesses have reopened, the wreckage has been cleared away. Life is moving forward again.

Except her life. It seems like it, if anything, is going backward.

Pepper comes to an abrupt halt in the middle of the sidewalk. She turns to May. “Peter’s really glad to have you home. I know it’s hard—”

“Pepper, I’m not mad at you—”

“I just wanted to make sure he was happy and safe—”

“If anything, I’m grateful—”

“I know he’s your family, but I care about him, I love him—”

“He’s your family, too. You adopted him, didn’t you?”
“I just think we should…”

“Work together?”

Pepper smiles. May smiles back. “I’m sorry,” she whispers. “I just feel like… like I took something from you. If I’d been away from Morgan for five years and come back to see her all grown up…”

May nods. “It’s difficult. I won’t lie to you. But I’m trying my best. I have to be strong for Peter, you know? And for myself.”

“Right.”

They keep moving. They talk. They plan. If there is one other thing they can agree on, it’s that their boys are complete and utter idiots.

“You’re a dumbass.”

“I see you brought Chinese food.”

“The food is irrelevant,” Rhodey says. “It’s for if I get hungry while I’m yelling at you.”

“You’re gonna yell at me?”

His best friend raises an eyebrow. “Would it be the first time?”

“No, which is why you should know how ineffective it is at this point—”

Rhodey raises a hand. Tony catches himself because the look in his friend’s eyes is dangerous. “I’m gonna stop you right there, because there are a lot of other things I could be doing right now. Like, for example, helping the rest of the world get back on track. Now I’m sorry I’ve been sidetracked the
past couple weeks, but Tones, I swear to god, this bullshit has to stop.”

“What bullshit?”

“Tony!” Rhodey sucks in a sharp breath. “You didn’t see that kid while you were gone. He was devastated, Tony. Don’t push him away like this.”

“I’m not the one doing the pushing.”

Rhodey shakes his head. He doesn’t look disgusted, exactly, just sad. “We’re getting together for dinner tomorrow. Come if you want.”

Tony doesn’t come.

They don’t really celebrate Thanksgiving.

They try to, anyway, but it doesn’t feel right. The dinner table is stilted with silence and the food doesn’t taste all that great (though May had tried her best and Peter scarfs down as much as his stomach can actually handle).

Not really eating dinner leaves him starving, though.

He wanders out on his own, hands tucked into his pockets, enveloped with the autumn chill.

He doesn’t feel like webbing anywhere or taking a cab, so he just walks until he’s standing in front of a familiar tower, one that’s so tall he has to crane his neck just to see the whole thing.

He could go inside. He has a pass, after all. It’s the highest level clearance offered.

Peter shivers and burrows deeper into his coat. He’s going to have to make up his mind soon, or he’ll
end up freezing his ass off.

“It’s Thanksgiving. You don’t look very celebratory, Petya.”

Peter freezes.

Nat steps into his line of sight with a smirk.

He can’t move. He can’t think. He can’t breathe.

“God,” he blurts, “you are just unbelievable, aren’t you?”

Nat laughs. The sound is bright and so loud it drowns out the rest of the city for a heartbeat. She slinks up and loops her arm through his like it’s only been a minute since they last saw each other rather than a month.

But then, there’s a lot of that going around.

“How are you…?”

“Steve,” she says. “He used the stone for a trade. Bartered with Red Skull, I guess. One minute I was… anyway, I woke up next to him in this lake. I helped him return the rest of the stones, and here we are.”

“Here we are,” Peter repeats. She makes it sound so easy. “Nat, you died.”

“I know.”

“You died when you didn’t even have to.”

“Yes I did.”
“No,” Peter insists. “You didn’t need to—you shouldn’t have done that. I thought we wouldn’t be able to—”

Nat puts her hand on his arm. Her expression is soft, full of sorry. It’s rare for her. “Peter, I’m here now.”

“You said you wouldn’t go away. You have no idea how much I needed that to be true.”

Nat pulls him into her arms. Peter realises it’s the first time they’ve really hugged, like, ever. He finds himself leaning against her as much as she does him. They find a balance, a harmony. Nat cups the back of his neck with a cold hand (and he can’t help but thinking of it being so, so much colder, frozen, her eyes dark and lifeless, her body limp).

“You know I love you, right?”

“Well when you make it so obvious...”

Nat tuts as she leans back. “I never meant to hurt you.”

“But you knew.”

“What?”

“Voromir. You knew what you were getting into, didn’t you?”

“I had an idea.”

“Then why didn’t you let me—”

“Because I knew there wasn’t a damn thing I could’ve asked of you that you wouldn’t have done, that’s why.”
“Okay, fair.”

Nat grabs his hands. “I’m sorry for breaking my promise.”

Peter tilts his head back and pretends to consider her words. A snowflake drifts down from a black sky, and then another, and soon a whole flurry of them like the night is tearing itself open to unleash the cold. “I suppose I wouldn’t be adverse to forgiving you…”

Nat punches his shoulder. “A month without me kicking your ass really boosted your ego, huh?”

“Oh, definitely.”

She laughs. Her hair is dusted with snow, and even Natasha Romanoff can’t help her cheeks flushing from the cold.

Peter fumbles for his pockets as he remembers. “I think this is yours?”

Nat grins at the sight of the necklace. “I bet you just couldn’t wait to mortify me for being so sentimental.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I was thinking.”

She ropes it around her fingers. “Guess this means I have one more pit stop to make tonight.”

“Guess so.” Peter backs up a step. “Tell Barton I said hi.”

“Sure thing.” Nat squeezes his hand and then lets go. After a few lingering seconds just to prove to himself that she’s okay, Peter turns his gaze back to the tower. “You gonna go in?” she asks.

Peter hums.
The man who ran to Peter’s school and saved him from a sensory overload episode is up there; the man who let Peter sleep on his shoulder during movie nights and neither of them ever said anything about the fingers that would gently card through his curls. It’s Tony, Tony who drew stupid pictures on sticky notes and left them around the lab and eventually, in his lunchbox, just for Peter to find and laugh at. Tony who had bandaged wounds and pulled out bullets and freaked out with the slightest spike in Peter’s biometric data.

He’s up there and he’s Peter’s father and for a second too long, Peter surrenders to the fear.

“Not tonight.”

Tony turns off the security camera footage.

He hadn’t actually meant to keep watching, but he also hadn’t been able to rip his eyes away from Peter’s face.

Seeing him happy, hearing him speak so dryly, shot pulses of warmth right to Tony’s heart and he realised right then just how fucking stupid he was being, how petty and ridiculous.

So he gets up out of his chair with such haste it falls over. Tony ignores it, reaching for a coat. Of course, there’s only a sweatshirt in the lab and it doesn’t even belong to him. It smells like popcorn and licorice and something so distinctly Peter that has Tony throwing it on without a second thought.

He grasps the door handle and finds that it won’t budge.

“Uh…”

“Boss.”

“Yeah, FRI?”
“In light of recent events, I believe there are some things that I should show you.”

Tony turns, slowly. She sounds almost regretful. “What do you mean?”

“Recordings. Videos saved to my systems. And…”

“And?”

“There’s a letter, Boss.”

“A letter? From who?”

“Mary Parker.”

“A letter from…” Tony squeezes his eyes shut. “FRI, babe, you’re really holding me up here with this, so I think it would be beneficial to all parties if you just cut to the chase, huh?”

“The letter was addressed to Peter. I don’t have a physical copy on me, but at various points I was able to see the contents and scan them.”

“That’s a huge invasion of privacy.”

“Yes, but I am an artificial intelligence,” FRIDAY argues. “And Peter is aware of what I did.”

“Is he, now?”

Every second that passes, Peter is getting father and father away and Tony is starting to freak out a touch. He steps deeper into the lab, though. “What are you trying to tell me, FRI?”
A monitor lights up. Tony wanders toward it, hands stuffed in the front pocket of the Star Wars hoodie.

On the screen is a baby.

“What’s this?”

“I’m starting with what I believe to be the best sequence of events—”

“FRI, I really don’t have time for a stroll down memory lane—”

“Boss,” FRIDAY says, pleadingly. “You should see these. I believe it would benefit you greatly and relieve some of your distress toward Peter.”

“I don’t have distress.”

“You are distancing yourself from him emotionally because of the betrayal you experienced with Steve Rogers—”

“Okay, okay, that’s enough armchair diagnosing.” Tony perches himself at the desk. “Start the reel, I guess.”

The first video is dated Dec. 22, 2018. The video is flickering and pixelated, clearly filmed on an older camera.

“Okay,” says a voice, and Tony finds himself leaning forward instantly because that’s Peter, only he doesn’t sound that far off from the teenager Tony knew. His voice is higher and gentler, a soft whisper. “So I know this is probably lame, and maybe even pointless, but I can’t get the idea out of my head.”

The camera zooms in on a sleeping baby, wearing a pink onesie and one of those hospital-provided hats. Her eyes are closed, and Tony knows without a doubt it’s Morgan.
“You’re gone, right? That’s what I keep telling myself. But there’s this part of me that… I just keep thinking maybe it’s not true. So call me stupid, but I figured I’d document the important stuff, just in case.”

The camera zooms. Tony is transfixed, eyes glued to her tiny sleeping face. “So, Tony, this is Morgan. Your daughter. Say hi.”

Tony swallows thickly. A whispered “Hi,” is ripped from his throat against his will.

“She was born seven pounds, four ounces, and you can’t tell right now because she’s sleeping, but you have the same eyes.”

Morgan shifts a little in her clear, plastic crib. She makes a soft mewling noise but then falls silent again.

“I want you to know I’m gonna keep her safe. I’m gonna keep them both safe, Mr Stark. I promise. I know it… I know it should be you here. I know that and I’m sorry. But I’ll do my best.”

Morgan starts to cry for real and the video ends abruptly.

The next one starts so quickly Tony doesn’t even have time to breathe. He sees Morgan sitting in a high chair, still a baby but significantly older. In front of her is a small cake with blue frosting.

“Do you think we should put on a candle?” Peter asks.

“And risk her eating it while it’s still on fire? I don’t think so.”

“Okay,” Peter says, sounding amused. “So the goal of this is basically just to let her like, Hulk-smash a cupcake, right?”

“Essentially.” Pepper’s hand can be seen straightening Morgan’s bib as she babbles. “Alright, baby, go nuts.”
Morgan stares. Blinks.

“Do we… do something?”

“You’re asking me, the first time mother?”

“No, I’m asking Pepper Potts, CEO of the world’s largest tech conglomerate and knower of all things there is to know.”

“Don’t suck up. You’ll get your cake soon.”

Peter laughs, and so does she. The sound makes something settle inside of Tony’s chest. It’s just so right, and when Morgan starts giggling too it’s even better. It’s the best sound he’s ever heard.

“How long is this gonna take?”

“I don’t know. She normally goes crazy when you put food in front of her.”

Peter zooms in on Morgan’s smiling face. Her nose scrunches up and she reaches out a chubby hand toward the cupcake on her tray.

Then, almost daintily, she swipes some frosting off the top and licks it.

“Oh my god,” Peter marvels. “She’s developing… manners? At one?”

“No way. She’ll smash any second.”

Peter scoffs. “I’ll take that action.”

Morgan doesn’t smash. She takes her sweet time licking away all the frosting and then pieces bits of the cake away.
“You know what I think?”

“What do you think?” Pepper asks dryly.

“I think she knows how badly I want cake, and she’s purposely taking forever.”

Pepper leans forward just enough with her laughter to be seen, and Tony wishes he could pause the frame there, stare at her bright, happy smile forever.

If he did, maybe he would notice the bags under her eyes.

The hollowness to her cheeks.

“She’s a baby,” Pepper says.

“She’s the antichrist,” Peter retorts decidedly. “Look at her. Look.” He zooms way in. “She knows.”

The video ends.

The next come in small cuts that have Tony gripping the edge of the counter so tightly his knuckles go white. Pepper, standing alone in an office screaming her head off, sobbing her heart out, breaking things. Peter, asking for Tony mistakenly while he’s working on some project in the lab at the compound, and then bursting into tears. It’s as he’s crawling underneath the table to curl up and cry even harder, sobbing Tony’s name over and over, that Tony finally finds his wits.

“FRI, stop.”

The video pauses.

“Why... Why are you showing me this?”
“I believe it is necessary for you to understand that while there were good times, there were also bad ones,” FRIDAY says, like it’s the simplest thing in the world. “They grieved for you. They missed you. How will you ever comprehend the intensity of their emotions if you do not observe all sides of their mourning periods?”

Tony shakes his head. He doesn’t care. He doesn’t care about the science or psychology behind it. He can’t see this.

“Turn it off.”

“Boss—”

“I’m serious, FRIDAY, turn it off!”

“I do not believe that to be the most advisable course of action.”

“I don’t care—”

“Boss, please.”

Tony balks. His AI is begging him. Her voice sounds almost broken. He sucks in a sharp breath and rubs his eyes, not even realising he had been crying until he feels the cold tears on his cheeks.

“Fine. Okay. But make it… make it a happy one.”

It switches to something lighthearted: Morgan’s first steps. She stands, falls, and is mindless to Pepper and Peter bickering in front of her. “Hi, shortcake,” Peter calls. “Come to mommy, okay?”

Morgan giggles, and it’s adorable. “That’s fucking cute,” Peter says, which pretty much parallels Tony’s own thinking.
Morgan finally stumbles over, right into Pepper’s arms and then toward Peter.

It’s good. It makes Tony’s insides ease again. He takes a deep breath and wipes his cheeks. “Shit, FRI, what are you trying to do to me, here?”

“I’m trying to get you to understand that despite the fact that Peter and Pepper tried to move on, neither of them truly got over your death,” she says. “Peter compiled these videos of Morgan on a tape that reads, ‘For Dad’.”

“Dad?”

“Yes,” FRIDAY says, and this time what looks like a scan of a handwritten letter shows up. “Dad.”

Tony leans forward to read it.

The whole thing takes all of five minutes to comb through, but he spends another ten simply staring.

His heart hammers against his sternum like it might break through the bone any second. He stands. Stumbles. Grips the counter to keep himself from falling. “FRIDAY…”

“There’s more.”

“FRIDAY—”

“You know what’s safest?” Peter’s voice causes Tony to whip around. “Stairs without razor sharp edges. I mean, honestly, there’s a baby living here.”

“Morgan only stays in Pepper’s line of sight—”

“Yeah, now, while she can’t walk. But be honest with me, FRI: with her genetics, does it seem likely she’ll have any sense of self-preservation?”
“No,” FRIDAY replies glumly. “The two of you have that in common.”

Peter just freezes. Tony does too, staring wide eyed at the screen. “What is that supposed to mean?”

It goes on. FRIDAY explains how she gained her knowledge. She tells Peter about a DNA test, and as she does, the results pop up on the screen beside the one playing the video. Tony practically trips over himself trying to get to them. He scans the results and listens, and then the results are forgotten when Peter throws a metal tray against the wall and starts screaming at the ceiling.

“So he’s my father, so what? It’s not like he’s here, right? So what good does it do to know that, huh? What am I supposed to do with that?!”

“Peter,” FRIDAY says, “you should calm down.”

“Calm down?! My whole life is a fucking lie, okay? Do you get that? No, of course you don’t. You’re a program. You don’t have feelings, FRIDAY, so how can you possibly understand what it feels like to learn that the man you thought was your father isn’t and the man you wished was is and they’re both dead!”

*The man you wished was, is.*

“You’re right,” FRIDAY says. “I don’t know. I’m glad I don’t. It sounds awful.”

“Yeah, well. It is.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Just… don’t tell anyone. Please?”

“Of course, Peter.”

“I’m sorry for yelling at you and saying you don’t have feelings.”
There is something so innocent about that. He’s just a kid here, probably seventeen at most, and he’s apologising to an AI for yelling at her. Tony can’t think of a time where he was so considerate.

But FRIDAY says, “That’s alright. It’s true.”

“Maybe, but it… it’s nice to think otherwise sometimes.”

“I can understand that. Peter?”

“Yeah, FRI?”

“I miss him too. In all the ways that I am capable.”

Peter’s fists curl around the countertop. “I bet that’s a lot.”

“Not half as many as a son grieving his father.”

Tony’s son sobs.

His son.

For so long Tony’s thought of Peter as his kid. It was just a simple evolution. Peter was ‘the kid’ in those early days, when Tony was still trying to keep a distance and not form emotional attachments because he was pretty sure if he lost anyone else, he might really snap. Then Peter was ‘kiddo’, on nights sprawled in the living room with half empty pizza boxes and the light of the TV casting a hazy glow over their features. Then time had passed, there had been a thousand days like those, a thousand jokes sniped between them and a thousand hesitant touches hastily disregarded as unimportant.

Peter is his kid.
Biologically, and in every other way that matters.

“Do you understand, now?”

“Yeah,” Tony says, “I understand that if you keep me locked in this lab a second longer I’m going to body slam through a pane of three inch solid glass and I don’t care whether or not I die, I’m finding my son.”

My son.

It’s surprisingly easy to say.

“Alright,” FRIDAY acquiesces, and there’s an audible click as the door unlocks. “And for what it’s worth, I apologise for holding you up.”

“Like hell you’re sorry,” Tony mutters. He races over to the door.

“Boss!”

FRIDAY’s voice stops him in his tracks. It’s really her tone that does it for him, fills his stomach with a heavy dread.

“What now?”

“Boss, Peter Parker’s vitals are dropping at an alarming rate and he seems to have lost at least a litre of blood.”

“What?!” Fuck. *Fuck.* Peter is going to die and Tony isn’t even going to be able to tell him how stupid and sorry he is. “Send me his location, now!”
It was supposed to be a fun old fashioned family Thanksgiving.

Instead, his best friend had come back from the dead, he had gotten side tracked by a stray dog which he’d let lead him to a beat up looking warehouse, and naturally he’d ended up getting shot three times in the calf, shoulder, and thigh.

Oh, and he’d left his webshooters at home.

“Honestly,” Peter grits out, hobbling along like some old man in need of a walker, “the one day I let up because I think, hey, it’s a holiday, maybe the criminals can pack it in for a night? But no. No, that’s impossible, Peter! What on Earth ever gave you such a stupid idea, Peter?”

He manages to wrangle a gun from one of the three drug dealers he’d dropped in on (they’d been packing enough coke to kill, like, a lot of people), and he’d subsequently subdued two of them by chasing them off but not actually hitting them.

They’re so strung out they probably think they’re dying anyway, but whatever.

At least he only misses when he wants to.

It’s the third one giving him a hard time. Peter had chased after him with adrenaline filled veins and cornered him in the abandoned office of the warehouse. It was there that he’d gotten shot the third time.

It had brought him down to his knees. Peter hadn’t let that stop him, though. He’d thrown the fold up chair behind the desk at the drug dealer, succeeded in knocking his weapon away, hauled himself to his feet and then punched the guy so hard he probably wouldn’t wake up until next Tuesday.

But hey, all in a day’s work.

Peter stumbles out of the office. He braces his hand against the wall. After a minute, it falls weakly away, leaving a sticky red handprint in its wake.

Black spots dance in his vision.
“Is this what dying is?” He asks, somewhat shrill, and then passes out.

__________________________

Tony lands somewhat roughly on the roof of a derelict concrete warehouse. He doesn’t bother to retract the nanites to their housing unit in case there’s still a fight going on.

He takes the stairs down, not bothering to consider their wavering stability for one iota of a second.

Peter isn’t hard to find.

He’s lying face-up in a pool of crimson. His eyes are closed and he looks almost like he could be sleeping.

That’s what scares Tony the most.

The uncertainty. Stopping dead for a beat too long, throat closing up, stomach dropping into the pits of hell, staring at his dead, dying kid.

“Peter,” he rasps, running forward. “Peter, hey, can you hear me?”

He gathers Peter’s head in his lap, careful not to jostle him too much. Peter doesn’t react at all. His eyes stay firmly shut even as Tony’s fingers press against his neck.

There’s a pulse. It's weak and threaded but it’s there.

“FRIDAY, talk to me.”

“Vitals are worsening,” she reports. “BPM is 23. He needs medical attention immediately.”
Tony nods. He does his best to quickly apply a sealant on the wounds that he can see, so in the very least the bleeding will be staunched. After that he doesn’t waste anymore time before scooping Peter up into his arms and firing his repulsor jets to plummet out of the hole where the skylight is supposed to be.

The MedBay of the tower is vacant at this hour (at most hours, really, with the team so scattered); Tony breaks through the stale tranquility by bursting into the first emergency station. He lays Peter down as gently as possible on the gurney.

“What happened?”

Tony rounds as Helen storms toward them, looking like she’d hastily thrown on whatever outfit was closest. Her shirt is buttoned wrong.

“He was shot,” Tony chokes out.

It’s happened before, but never this badly, never this many times at once. And there’s so much blood, soaking through Peter’s clothes, turning them scarlet.

Cho moves quickly and mechanically. She cuts off Peter’s shirt, clears away the blood, hooks him up to a few monitors while the bleeding has stopped. Soon the sound of Peter’s weak, erratic heartbeat fills the room.

“He’s gonna need a blood transfusion,” Cho says quickly. “Do you have any on hand?”

Tony blinks. “I—no. But we have the same blood type.”

Cho looks up. “Okay,” she says. “Help me get him onto his side, I need to take this first bullet out.”

Tony does as she asks. Cho gently removes the sealant and pales at what she finds beneath. “Shit.”

“What?”
Cho doesn’t answer right away, which only makes Tony’s blood pressure skyrocket. Had he done something wrong by trying to stop the bleeding? “Cho, what is it?”

“The wound closed rapidly,” she tells him, “I’ll need to—to open it up again to remove the bullet.”

Tony almost drops Peter. They both jump when he groans beneath them.


She doesn’t even wait for his response before running off. When she comes back, she’s holding a bottle of super-strength pain relief pills labelled ‘Steve’. Just that is enough to get Tony’s heart pounding even faster than it already is. Any more and it’ll actually explode in his chest.

“If he wakes up, we give him these,” she says, setting the bottle close. “Hand me a scalpel.”

Tony does as she asks and winces when the edge of the blade cuts through the red-raw skin of Peter’s shoulder. And this, of course, is what Peter seems to decide is a good time to open his eyes.

He thrashes immediately. Tony tries to keep his hold, and Cho immediately steps back. “Hey,” he says, “Hey, Pete, it’s just me.”

Peter blinks blearily. “T’ny…?”

“That’s right, bud,” Tony tries for a smile.

“Mad at me,” Peter says, sounding less angry and more like a kicked puppy. Tony’s chest throbs as Peter’s eyes fill with tears. “I’m dyin’?”

“I’m not mad at you, Peter, and you’re not dying,” Tony says. “Just hold on for me, okay? Can you do that?”
Peter’s face scrunches up. “Hurts.”

“I know, kiddo.” Tony brushes Peter’s hair from his eyes. “I know, and I’m sorry. I can help with that, though.”

He helps Peter swallow back a couple of the pills. Cho isn’t sure about the dosage with Peter’s enhancements, but she recommends two to be safe. Peter swallows them without arguing, and when he turns his eyes on Tony they’re so full of misery and dejection, it cleaves Tony’s heart right in two.

“It’s gonna be okay, baby,” he whispers, while Cho moves busily around them. “I promise. I’m right here and I’m not going anywhere, okay?”

“Promise?”

Tony takes his hand, suppressing a wince at how scarily cold it is. “I promise.”

“Hold out your arm,” Cho instructs. Tony does without thinking. He doesn’t wince or take his eyes of Peter for a second when the needle is pricked into his vein. There is a freezing, numb feeling as his blood seeps into the tube.

It’s going right to Peter. That’s all that matters. It’s making him stronger.

“Okay,” Cho says, “I don’t want to risk either of you losing a substantial amount of blood, so lets do this quickly. Peter, tell me if it hurts, alright?”

She starts to cut. Peter winces and grits his teeth.

“See, kid, that’s what she means by hurt.”

“I’m fine,” Peter gasps. “Jus’ keep goin’.”

Cho looks at him warily. After a second of deliberation, she does as he asks and carves around the bullet. Then she grabs a pair of tweezers. “This’ll be worse, but I think the meds should have kicked
At first it isn’t. The feeling of Cho digging around for the bullet has Peter gasping and hissing in pain, squirming beneath Tony’s grip. Then about halfway through he just relaxes.

He looks at Tony, confused. “You’re a meanie.”

Tony glances at Cho, panicked, but she stops the freak out before it can even start. “It’s just the meds. They’re making him a little loopy.”

Tony nods. He re-focuses on Peter, who’s scowling at him. It shouldn’t be something Tony finds so amusing or adorable.

“I’m a meanie?”

“Uh-huh,” Peter nods. “Kep’ ignorin’ me, an’... s’not s’pose-ta be like that…”

He stares mournfully up at Tony, eyes welling with tears. Tony feels heavy as he wipes them away. “I’m so sorry, kiddo. I know I messed up bad this time.”

“Screwed the pooch,” Peter proclaims, and wrinkles up his nose. “S’gross analogy, y’know. Don’t know why it’s a thing.”

Tony laughs a little. Cho has moved on to suturing up his shoulder wound now, and the steadiness of her hands coupled with Peter’s lucidity calms him a little. His kid is gonna be okay. He’d scared Tony bad enough to gear him up for a heart attack with the next strong wind, but still. He’ll live through the night and into the next day.

“I never apologised for that, either,” he finds himself saying.

“For wha’?”

“Yelling at you that day.” Tony swallows his guilt, his nausea. “I’m so sorry, kiddo.”
“Don’t have to be,” Peter shakes his head. “I mess’d up. S’okay.”

“It’s not, and I do have to be sorry. I wanna be better than that, Pete. I don’t want you to… to be afraid of me.”

Peter shakes his head even harder. “Not afraid. Love you.”

Tony’s heart skips. He forgets how to breathe.

“I…” he chokes down some inhuman noise and reaches out to cup Peter’s cheeks so his son is looking right at him. Big brown, Bambi-like eyes stare up at him, wide open and blown. “I love you too, baby.”

Peter’s face changes, morphs into the biggest, goofiest smile Tony has ever seen. “Knew it.”

Tony laughs. “You’re ridiculous, you know that?”

Peter nods. “Mmhmm. Get it from you.”

It’s such a simple slip of the tongue, and were Tony unaware of the truth he would’ve chalked it down to Peter being doped up and confused, but now he knows. Now the idea of Peter inheriting behaviors, features, habits, takes his breath away.

“Guess so, huh?”

Peter hums. He reaches up with the hand connected to the IV and touches Tony’s face. “Don’t leave me ’gain?”

“Course not, kiddo. I’m staying until you get so sick of me, you push me off a roof just to get your inheritance.”
“I’d never,” Peter protests petulantly. “Never ever hurt you.”

“Yeah?”

He nods. “Yeah.”

That’s enough for Tony. He takes Peter’s hand and kisses the back of his son’s palm. Peter throws him a long-suffering look in response. He doesn’t even notice Cho wrapping his through-and-through calf wound.

In fact, neither of them do.

When Peter comes to, he immediately regrets it. The lights are too bright and opening his eyes is a big mistake. He winces, squeezing them shut again.

“FRI, lights at twenty percent.”

Just like that the pain is forgotten. In the now dim room, Peter still can make out Tony. His dark features are darker, his silhouette is hazy, but he’s there.

“Well well,” he croaks, “how the turntables.”

Tony snorts. He rises from his chair and leans over Peter, fiddling with the IV bags. “Geez, you’re not even gonna try and hug me?”

“I’ve learned from my mistakes.”

Tony sighs. His arm twitches like make he wants to make some movement, but in the end he suppresses it. Peter sort of resents that.
“Can I…?”

Peter waves. “S’not my house.”

“That’s not true.”

“No? Oh, what’s that?” Peter mimes picking up a phone. “The last month is calling, it begs to differ.”

“You know, as adorable as the whole deflecting thing is, I think cutting to the chase is probably a lot healthier, huh?”

“Whatever. You know best.”

Tony nods sagely. “Dads usually do.”

Peter freezes. For a moment, there is no sound other than the steady, monotonous beep of the monitors. Then Peter tries to speak, but all that comes out is a pathetic squeaking sound.

Tony laughs. “Yeah, that was about my reaction, too.”

“So you…?”

“FRIDAY has a big mouth.”

“Oh my god.”

“Yeah. She showed me all these videos and the DNA test results and that letter from Mary—”

“Oh my god—”
“And… god, I hate to say this, you know? But I just… I don’t remember. I’ve been sitting here for the past two hours trying to piece this together in my head and I… I’d like to say the night was memorable, but in those days it was just… it’s all a bit of a blur.”

“No,” Peter says, voice higher than he’d like, “no, I get it. You know how it is. Parties, tequila shots, a one night stand. Boom, baby. Cool.”

Tony’s lip quirks up. It doesn’t last. “If I’d known…”

“You would’ve, what? Paid child support?” Peter snipes, but inside he’s screaming because he’s saying all the wrong things, speaking abrasively, trying to push Tony away so he doesn’t have to confront the problem and wow, like father like son, huh?

But Tony doesn’t even flinch. “That, among other things.”

Peter’s curiosity trumps his anger, his fear. “Like what?”

“Well, raised you, for a start.”

He looks away. “You’re just saying that.”

“No, I’m really not.” All the sudden Tony’s fingers are running through Peter’s hair, gently, the motion easy and soothing and almost natural. Peter turns his eyes up and finds Tony’s expression is soft, almost fond. “God, I don’t know how to explain how I know, I just do. I was a wreck in those days, but one look at you and I think… I know I would’ve turned things around for you.”

Peter realises he’s been leaning into the touch. He stills, but doesn’t move away. “Then why have you been ignoring me?”

“That’s… different.”

“Oh? Do tell.”
Tony throws him a look. “Alright, Sass-Bucket, buckle up,” he says. “Here’s the thing: Steve Rogers was like, my father’s holy grail. His ark of the covenant. All my life, the only thing I remember him genuinely caring about was finding Captain America. He said once, making Steve into what he was, was the greatest thing he’d ever done.”

Peter’s eyes widen. “He said that to you?”

“Well, no, but I overheard. Steve was the greatest thing. Not marrying my mother, not having me. But Rogers.”

There’s a hollow brand of bitter lacing his tone. Peter finds himself reaching out to take Tony’s hand. Tony is so deep in memories, he doesn’t seem to notice.

“I wanted to resent him for it, you know? But I couldn’t. Like it or not, his Spangled Ass ended up being my family. I trusted him. Confided in him. Relied on him.” Tony shakes his head. “And then…”

“Siberia.”

Tony’s head whips around. “How do you—?”

“I… came across the archived footage.” Peter frowns. “I didn’t mean to, I just… I hated him for what he did to you. I still hate what he did, but Tony, he helped me save you. I know it doesn’t make it all better, and I know it’s not easy for you, but he is trying. He’s sorry.”

Tony sighs. He doesn’t even have the energy to get angry about it. “You’re probably right. But like you said, it’s hard for me. Seeing you and Pep with him… I got territorial, and then I got scared.”

Peter frowns. “Scared?”

“I trusted Steve. I let him into my life. He stabbed me in the back.” Tony’s mouth twists. “Suffice to say I have… trust issues. Especially where he’s concerned. I guess I got it into my head that maybe —”
“That I’d gone Team Steve?”

Tony snorts. “Something like that.” Peter shakes his head, which just spurs Tony on. “I know it seems like a bunch of excuses, but I didn’t like that you don’t need me anymore or that—”

“Oh, bull.”

“What?”

“Don’t need you anymore?!” Peter sits up, wincing through the pain. “That is the biggest load of crap I’ve ever heard in my whole life. That’s just off the charts stupid.”

“Pete—”

“No. Shush. *I’m* doing the talking now.” Tony gapes. “Do you think I would’ve spent five years of my life searching for a way to bring you back if I didn’t *need* you anymore?! What, are you crazy? I invented time travel for you! I suffered through a conversation about sauerkraut with my dead grandfather for you! I—”

“Woah, wait, back up, pause,” Tony holds up his hands. “You *what*?”

“Time travelled?”

“No,” Tony shakes his head. “The dead grandfather? Do you mean *Howard*?”

“Oh, yeah,” Peter clears his throat, somewhat sheepish. “That was a trip. Your mom was pregnant with you at the time and *everyone* was wearing bell bottoms and—”

Tony looks like he might short circuit. “I—what did you… what did you talk about?”

“You,” Peter replies. “You in the context of you as a baby and you as my… anyway, it was weird.
He also asked me if I was a pot-head and seemed disappointed when I said no, which is just, you know, food for thought.”

Tony squeezes his eyes shut and pinches his brow. “What the fuck, kiddo.”

“Yeah, I know. But anyway, moral of the story is: I will always need you. I mean, look at where we are right now. This stuff still happens to me, like, three times a week. I would’ve died if it weren’t for you—”

“Don’t say that.”

“Why not? It’s true. You saved me.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t think we’re even-stevens by a long shot.”

Peter shrugs. “I won’t hold you to it.”

“God.”

“What?”

“Nothing, I just… I was sitting here wondering how it was that I didn’t see it sooner, you know?”

“People imitate those that they admire.”

Tony pauses. “So you admire me?”

“I didn’t say that, I was just providing you with a reasonable psychological explanation for you not having noticed.”

Tony grins. His face softens. “It’s because of how good you are. Still throws me off. I can’t believe
someone like you came from someone like me.”

Peter squeezes his hand. “You’re better than you think.”

“I shut you out.”

“I forgive you.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“Well I do.”

“Why?”

“Because I love you,” Peter says, simply, easily. “Because I know this isn’t easy for you, because I can’t imagine how hard it would be to wake up and find out you have a five year old daughter and the world drastically changed while you were asleep—”

Peter stops talking.

He stops talking because Tony is kissing his forehead.

“I love you too,” he says when he pulls back. “God, you don’t know how much.”

Peter ducks his head, cheeks warm. He feels warm everywhere, really, like the sun is rising inside of his chest and filling his veins with fire. Five years he’d been lying and hiding and pushing himself to the limit, and for the first time since the Snap, his shoulders sag with a release of tension he hadn’t even realised had been there.

He holds out his hand. “Hi dad, it’s nice to meet you, I’m son.”
Tony laughs. He shakes. “Hi son, I’m dad.”

Peter pulls. Tony makes a muffled noise of surprise, but settles against the bed and wraps his arms around Peter. “You have to stay until I say. My bed, my rules.”

Tony hums. “Whatever you say.”

“Also,” Peter goes on, “I think we should both make a pact not to be stupid anymore.”

“I’d agree, but I think that’s impossible.”

Peter holds him a little tighter.

“Are you trying to mark the creation of the pact by aggressively cuddling me?”

“Maybe.”

Tony snorts. He kisses the crown of Peter’s head again and starts to idly run his fingers through Peter’s hair. Peter wonders if he even realises he’s doing it.

He feels himself getting heavier, eyelids weighted. Lazily he tucks his head under Tony’s chin and settles, hearing his pulse steadily thrum beneath his sternum.

“Peter?”

He hums sleepily.

“When people ask, don’t tell them I found you through YouTube.”

They both laugh.
An hour later, Pepper is running into Peter’s room, windswept and half-soaked from rushing through droves of icy winter rain. She stills when she registers the scene before her: Tony and Peter, curled up on the bed together.

Tony cracks an eye open. “Sorry for calling you so late,” he whispers.

“What happened?!”

Fear makes her voice shrill. Tony gestures for her to lower her octave. Pepper obliges, stepping closer, setting her bag down and peeling off her wet coat.

“He got shot a few times.”

“What?”

Despite the fact that it happens quite a lot (all too frequently, really) it still makes her stomach drop.

“It was nothing, just a skirmish,” Tony assures her. “Cho patched him up nice and neat and he’s gonna be just fine.”

Pepper relaxes. She perches on the edge of the bed, reaching out to stroke his cheek.

She meets Tony’s eyes.

“I’m sorry,” they say, at the same time.

Pepper smiles. “I know you needed to… adjust,” she says. “I should’ve tried to understand more, should’ve been there—”
“Stop,” Tony cuts in, almost pleading. “I’m the asshole here, okay? I pushed everyone away because I just couldn’t deal, and that’s… that’s done. I’m done with that. Only ridiculous amounts of affection and happy endings for us from here on out, okay?”

When Tony says something like that, he means it. So Pepper nods. She takes his hand and brings his knuckles to her lips to kiss. “You two worked everything out, I see?”

Tony smiles. He turns his attention back to Peter and Pepper’s heart skips a beat when she sees the look on his face.

It’s love, in its purest and simplest form.

“Mostly.”

Pepper feels her heartstrings ease. She could cry, but she doesn’t. That’ll come later.

“Where’s Morgan?” Tony asks.

“I left her with May.”

He nods slowly. “Maybe… maybe bring her here? And Honeybear?”

He wants the people he cares about close. He wants to apologise, to atone by smothering them with love, and Pepper isn’t about to say no to that. She nods and slips off the bed, pausing only to lean down and kiss both of their temples.

“Idiots,” she mutters, and walks out.

Later, after wriggling out from beneath a sleeping Morgan and Tony, Peter wanders the MedBay.
His IV stand trails behind him, squeaking against the floor as he walks.

He finds Pepper sitting alone on the floor, knees drawn up to her chest, a hand over her mouth and deep in thought.

“What’s the going rate for thoughts these days? A penny? A nickel?”

Pepper looks up. “A dime, but I’m feeling generous, so you get one free.”

Peter settles next to her. “Lay it on me.”

“I was thinking June.”

“June?”

“The wedding.”

Peter turns so quickly he gets whiplash. “Wow.”

Her brow furrows. “What?”

“Nothing, it’s just…” he shakes his head. “I spend five years thinking of you as Tony’s fiancé and then I up and forget the two of you are engaged.”

“Oh? So that’s all I am to you? The fiancé?”

He rolls his eyes. “Naturally. After that you’ll be the evil stepmother.”

He doesn’t realise what he just implied for about ten heavy, infinite seconds. Peter finds that she is staring at him, her eyes sad.
“I just meant—”

“I know what you meant.”

“I—what?”

His heart jumps into her throat as she pulls something from her pocket, something he’d assumed had been destroyed along with his suit. Just like that, vague memories string together in his head; his voice weak and croaking, asking her to retrieve the serum, the one that was always stored with the letter.

Of course. God, he’s an idiot. How could he have forgotten that?

“I found it in your jeans once a long time ago anyway,” she whispers while a tear spills over. “Thought I would hold onto it just in case. You know, for someone trained by Nat, you should be a little better at hiding your secrets.”

Peter balks. He looks at the floor, at the walls anywhere but her. “I should’ve told you.”

“It’s okay. I understand.”

“Are you… are you mad?”

“Mad?” Pepper surprises him with a laugh. “Honey, why would I be mad?”

“I lied to you. I kept something huge from you. And my mom…”

“What, slept with Tony? You think that bothers me?” Pepper reaches out and strokes his cheek. “I’ve loved him for a long time, but in the beginning I was just an assistant. It’s not like he cheated.”

Peter swallows thickly. “So you’re… you’re cool with this?”
“Cool with you being Tony’s long lost son? With me getting to become your step mom?” She smiles. “That’s reason enough to marry him right there.”

Peter matches her expression. He leans his head to rest on her shoulder. “I still feel bad.”

“Don’t. It’s been a long time since I found out and I still love you just the same.”

Peter takes her hand. “Cool.”

“So what do you think? Will you be the best man at my wedding?”

“Hell yeah. Fuck gender roles.”

Pepper laughs. She presses her lips to the top of his head. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For being there for me. For helping me through this.”

“Aww, shucks, Pep,” Peter grins, “you’ll always be my someone.”

Her smile is soft, indulgent. “You promise?”

“Promise.”

They stay like that for a while longer, leaning on each other as the sun comes up. Then they rise together with the dawn and wander back to the hospital bed where Morgan is curled up in Tony’s arms.
It feels like family.

It feels like home.

Chapter End Notes

this chapter is absolutely the one i am the most nervous about (and i know i say that with every chapter but i mean it af this time) so BLeASE,,,nice bois only in the comment section,,,

i love u all <3

TWO CHAPTERS LEFT!!!!!!
It’s half past noon on a Saturday afternoon when Steve Rogers returns to the compound for the first time since the battle.

“I see you grew the beard back.”

Peter looks up at Nat’s observation. As always, the sight of the older man churns up an amalgamation of conflicting emotions. Sure, Steve beat the shit out of Peter’s dad one time and nearly killed him, but he’d also saved Nat’s life last month and he’d helped Peter bring his father back from the dead. So in the spirit of Christmas, he’s decided to let bygones be bygones.

Well, hopefully. If today goes well.

It had been his idea. He’d presented it to Pepper first, who had stared for all of two whole minutes and then walked away. She’d come back an hour later with a list of pros and cons an inch thick.

Nat had been even less enthusiastic, if possible.

“You know what sounds like a terrible idea? That.”

“It is not a terrible idea, it’s a good idea. You’re just jealous you didn’t think it up for yourself.”

“Thinking gets you killed.”
“And that is exactly the sort of thing someone who’s died would say.”

Nat hadn’t even taken offense. She’d just snorted, the way she always does when anyone brings it up. It’s sort of infuriating actually. No matter how many times he tries, he just can’t get her to crack on this.

Now it’s too late. The plan is underway. Steve Rogers leans against a load-bearing wall that’s still sans paint and tucks his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “I did. You dyed your hair red again?”

“Just cut it,” she corrects.

These, Peter supposes, are the sort of awkward conversations two people have when they return from alien planets after one of them died and came back to life.

“It’s a good look,” Peter cuts in, just to ease the tension. “Very… ‘seventies dad’.”

Steve’s lips quirk up into a smirk. “Wouldn’t know much about the seventies.”

“They say kids can endure emotional developmental stages out of order. Maybe it’s the same with fashion trends and popsicles.”

Nat chucks a screwdriver at him that he barely dodges. “Ow!” he complains, despite it not even grazing his skin. “That could’ve impaled me!”

“Oh, please. If I wanted you impaled you’d already be bleeding out on the floor by now.”

“Watch what you say, Romanoff. You never know what I’m secretly recording so I can turn your ass over to the NSA.”

Nat laughs. “I eat the NSA for breakfast.”
“Boom, you’re toast.”

“So are they.” She jerks her head at Steve. “Come on, let’s go find Shell Head and get this over with.”

The four of them settle in the conference room. It’s part of the only finished and refurbished wing in the compound, the most isolated from the noise of constant construction.

Tony had already been holed up in there going over paperwork and schematics for new suits. He’s been studying all of Peter’s work; every night Peter finds new notes in the margins of his college papers and dissertations, he gets text after text during the day about the logistics of time travel, nanotech, and gene splicing research. Some of them are long winded, rambling paragraphs of open stream thought. Others are simple messages: god you’re a fucking genius, and did you know that we write our Rs the same way? and you name dropped me like 8 times in this research paper i don’t know whether to be flattered or frightened.

Tony looks up when they enter. At first his face is open, he’s smiling a little, happy to see Peter and Nat.

Then he catches sight of Steve and his expression darkens around the edges.

“Rogers.”

“Tony,” Steve retorts.

Peter’s dad studies the three of them. “What’s this supposed to be, then?”

“I thought—”

“We thought,” Nat cuts over him, because there’s no way she’s letting him take the fall for this all on his own.
“That it would be a good idea to, you know…”

“Air your shit?”

Peter nods. “In the spirit of Christmas.”

Tony looks them up and down. His gaze lingers on Steve the longest. Neither of them appear overtly hostile; Steve stands with his hands still in his pockets, slightly hunched, but eyes on Tony. Peter’s dad clicks his pen as he considers the offer. Then he says, “Humbug.”

“Oh, come on,” Peter circles the table, practically begging, “this whole grudge thing can’t be good for you. I’m—I’m worried. About, like, your heart—”


“The two of you need to sort out your issues sometime,” Nat says. “What happens when the world needs saving again and you’re still at each other’s throats?”

“We’re not at each other’s throats,” Tony says loftily. “We’re in the same room and we’re not trying to kill each other. There, problem solved.”

“Except, y’know, no.”

Tony gives Peter a dry look. “Kid, I have a thousand things to do today—”

“And I totally understand—”

“There’s an entire extra wing being built and Pepper put me in charge of supervising it—”

“I’m just asking for an hour,” Peter pleads. “Just one. Sixty minutes. Thirty-six hundred seconds starting now. Thirty-five hundred ninety nine, thirty five hundred ninety eight—”
“Alright!” Tony holds up a hand, but Peter can tell he’s trying his hardest to keep a smile off his face. “Alright, fine. You’ve got your hour.”

“Yes!” Peter punches the air with his fist. “Okay, so it’ll go like this: you two sit at opposite ends of the table, Nat and I act as the official mediators.”

“I’m sorry, I was under the impression that this was gonna be more of a casual chat?”

“With you two?” Nat shakes her head as she sits opposite Peter. “That would never work.”

“It would have,” Tony argues. “We could’ve had tea. Maybe some finger sandwiches. Hell, we could’ve made it an old fashioned family picnic. Invited the team, my folks—oh wait, that’s not possible, because his folks killed them.”

Peter knows it’s not just to be petulant; he wants to keep the ball rolling on him for as long as possible, maybe even rile Nat up enough that she leaves.

But that’s not gonna fly, today.

“Mr Rogers,” Peter says, “please be seated.”

Steve throws him a somewhat bemused glance but obliges. He looks at Tony, who won’t look at him anymore. His eyes are on Peter and Peter alone.

That’s cool. He can deal with that.

Peter clears his throat. He reaches into his pocket and procures a pair of reading glasses with no actual prescription and dons them.

“I’m sorry,” Nat laughs, “what?”

“It completes the aesthetic,” Peter defends. “Shut up. Let me have this.”
“Are you sure you two are the best ones to be doing this job?” Tony asks them.

Nat shrugs. “We’re the ones who want it done the most, so yeah.”

“Besides, I have experience.”

Tony sends him a disbelieving look. “Experience?”

“Two years of debate team, plus I know you both and if there’s one thing you hate it’s embarrassing yourself in front of other people. That’s what Nat is here for, seeing as she’s super judgemental and all.”

“Excuse me?”

“Don’t act like you aren’t flattered.”

Nat shakes her head and looks away, but he doesn't need to see her face to know that she’s hiding a twisted smirk. Peter looks between Steve, who’s now slouched over in his chair with his hands clasped on the table, and Tony, who sits with a rigidly perfect posture, eyes hard and cold and guarded.

“So, uh, who wants to go first?”

Steve’s eyes flit up anxiously, like he’s checking to see if Tony’s raised his hand or something. When he realises that’s not gonna happen, he clears his throat and runs a hand through his hair. “Well, it’s uh, it’s been a while for me. It’s not exactly… fresh like I’m sure it is for you, but I still—”

“You know what I don’t get,” Tony starts in, “is why you thought physical force was the way to handle someone who was grieving.”

“You were going after Buck, Tony—”
“That’s irrelevant, this is about me and you—”

“Okay!” Peter claps his hands. “That’s not how this is gonna work. You guys are gonna take turns. You’ll each get a couple of minutes to say your piece, and then you can either choose to reply to what was said, or raise your own counterpoint—”

“Jesus, Petya,” Nat rolls her eyes, “don’t tell me you were captain of that dorky debate club.”

“MJ was captain,” Peter says, and then sheepishly, “I may or may not have served in a sort of, uh, lapdog capacity. But that’s not what this is about. This is about getting the two of you to resolve your issues so that we can have a good, old fashioned family Christmas, or so help me god.”

“I just don’t see how this is gonna get anywhere if Rogers can’t admit he was at fault.”

“And I don’t see how it’ll get anywhere if you can’t, either,” Steve snaps back.

Tony bristles. “Don’t use my arguments against me.”

“Not even if you’re being massively hypocritical?”

“He killed my parents.”

“He was brainwashed.”

“I understand that, but regardless, I was in a heightened emotional state and rather than removing your little Bucky from the situation, you decided to attack me. Guess we know that when it comes down to it, he means just a little bit more to you, huh?”

“That’s what this is about?” Nat cuts in, eyes wide. “You’re jealous?!”

“This isn’t about jealously,” Tony snaps, before Peter can say anything, “this is about betrayal.”
“Tony, I know I made rash decisions that day, but in my defense, so did you. You’d just found out that two people you loved had been murdered and then wanted to do the same to someone that I—”

Steve’s breath hitches. “We both made mistakes. I made mistakes, and I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Tony. I messed up and I know that, but I don’t… I already lost you twice over. I can’t… not again. I can’t.”

While Tony considers Steve’s words, Peter and Nat have a silent conversation.

Okay but the breath hitching—

I know, I caught that—

—do you think?—

—I don’t know—

“What is this?” Tony asks, startling them both. “With the facial expressions? What’s that about?”

“Nothing,” they say together.

Tony squints. Then he takes a deep breath. Looks at Steve right in the eye. “I wasn’t close with my father. He was, for all intents and purposes, an abusive, narcissistic, neglectful piece of shit. Regardless, he was my dad. For twenty years I thought he’d died in a car accident on the side of the road, and no matter how much he hurt me as a kid, the idea of him dying that way… that hurt the most. And my mom? Jesus, what a force to be reckoned with. Didn’t have a bitter bone in her body, and by god, you didn’t want to cross her. I thought that she had died on impact. That’s what they told me. She didn’t feel anything, it was instantaneous. Guess that’s what they tell everybody, but I was stupid enough to believe it.

“She didn’t die instantaneously though, did she, Steve? She was choked to death. And I get it, it wasn’t him. He was a vessel at HYDRA’s disposal, I know. But until you have to watch a parent die right in front of you? Until you see how scared your mother is to go, until you see her terrified for the first time in your life, you don’t get to walk in here and tell me I made mistakes. I didn’t. I don’t regret anything I said or did that day.”

Tony stands. He buttons his waistcoat. “I wouldn’t have killed him. I’ve thought about it a lot, and I know that for certain. I was holding back on him, and I was holding back on you.”
And just like that, he’s gone.

For all of a minute they sit in a stunned silence. Then Steve stands abruptly and walks out without another word.

Nat finally closes her mouth. “You’re showing me that tape.”

“I can’t.”

“Oh bullshit, Petya. Don’t hit me with the father-son loyalty card—”

“I destroyed it, Nat.”

She blinks. Then she sags in her chair and sighs. “That’s probably for the best.”

Peter nods to himself, even though there are days, like today for instance, where he thinks maybe she might be wrong about that. He traces meaningless patterns on the tabletop. “He had to analyse Steve’s fighting patterns there and then. He’d never... he’d never done it before.”

“And...?”

“You know him. He prepares for everything. He probably has a bomb shelter ready in every state across the map. He never thought he would have to fight Steve. He never thought there would be a day when he’d need to know how to dodge his punches, how to hit him back.”

Nat scrubs a hand down her face. “Well there goes our plan, huh?”

All she gets in reply is a dismal shrug.

Nat kicks his shin under the table. “Peter?”
“That stuff he said about his parents,” Peter mutters, “I… I met Howard. When we went back for the stones, I met him, and… he seemed so excited. He said there was nothing he wouldn’t do for Tony. How do you go from *that* to…”

“What, are you afraid it’s gonna happen with you and—?”

“No, I just… I hate that he comes from that. I hate that *I* come from that. He deserved better, you know?”

Nat hums. Then she rounds the table to wrap her arms around his shoulders from behind. “He has the rest of his life, little spinner. So do you. Don’t waste it.”

It just sort of seems to keep happening by mistake. Tony walks off to his half-finished lab (or storms, rather) and winds up sulking for a few minutes before he finally works up the courage to ask FRIDAY, “Rogers still on the compound?”

“Yes, Boss,” FRIDAY replies. “He’s outside in what used to be the commons area.”

Tony bites his lip. “Pull up the footage.”

It’s not like he thinks Steve is going to vandalise the property or anything. Tony is just… curious. Much to his surprise, the first voice he hears is Peter’s.

“I knew you dabbled.”

Rogers looks up from his resting place against the outside wall. There’s an unlit joint hanging from his lips, to Tony’s surprise, and he figures Steve had probably been debating internally whether or not it was morally right to smoke it.

“That went pretty bad, huh?”
Peter nods. He joins Steve. It’s more than a little disturbing, watching his kid light a joint with practised ease. “I hadn’t realised he was still so…”

“Upset?”

“Whatever you wanna call it. I figured maybe if you could both say your side—”

“I don’t have a side,” Steve says. “That’s what I wish he’d realise. Tony is my brother and Bucky is…”

“Your boyfriend?”

“What?! No. No, that’s not—”

Peter exhales. “People are gay, Steven. It’s okay.”

“But I’m—we’re really not—”

Yeah, and I’m not Tony Stark’s biological son.”

Tony’s heart skips a beat. He squeezes the rubber stress ball in his grip, but keeps watching.

“Exactly!” Steve says.

Peter doesn’t look away. He doesn’t blink. He holds the joint about half an inch from his lips and waits for Steve to get what he’s saying.

“Wait, are you serious?!!”

“Are you gay?”
“Sort of, but that’s not nearly as mind-blowing as what you’re telling me right now, Queens.”

The footage shows Peter grinning. Tony, meanwhile, can only stare slightly slack jawed. “Sort of gay?” He mutters to himself. “What does that mean?”

“What, you worried you missed an opportunity, Shell Head?” Tony rounds and finds Nat in the doorway to the lab. She slinks over and perches beside him. “This is pretty low, you have to admit.”

Tony clears his throat. “I was just—”

“Eavesdropping on your son.”

“No, I wasn’t—” Tony stops. “My son? Pardon? How do you mean?”

“That oblivious act needs work.”

“It’s not an act—”

“Are you seriously trying to claim surprise at the fact that I know? Come on. This is me we’re talking about.”

“He told you, didn’t he.”

Her shoulders slump. “The biggest failure of my career, I swear. How could I not have seen it? He’s basically your carbon copy and I never even noticed. It’s disgusting.”

Tony doesn’t know what to make of that. Really, he doesn’t know what to make of any of this. Steve likes guys, which is perfectly fine if unexpected; his idiot son smokes weed, which isn’t unexpected at all but also not perfectly fine; his idiot son and idiot surrogate sister are spider spies together and apparently tell each other everything like five year old best friends.
It’s… it’s a lot.

“Tony,” Nat says softly, eyes on the screen again. “Back it up, you missed the best bit.”

FRIDAY follows her command, which is really just rude, but within seven seconds Tony forgets to be irritated at all.

“You might not have a side, but I do. He’s my dad. If I have to choose, it’s him. Always.”

Tony’s heart must be lodged in his throat. That must be why it’s so hard to swallow. He feels, for the first time since returning from death, a part of himself sink back into place. Even if it’s ease on a molecular scale, it’s something.

It’s Peter. Always.

“Hey, Romanoff?”

“Yeah?”

“Could you, uh, give me a minute?”

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Nat nod. Then her hand is in his, squeezing just a little as if to say without saying at all, it’s okay.

Then he’s alone, watching through security cam footage as Steve Rogers shakes his son’s hand, gets on a motorcycle, and drives away.

Tony clears his throat. “Hey, FRI? Call Steve Rogers.”

“Calling Spangles,” she says, and oh, he never did change that, did he? “Straight to voicemail.”
“That’s alright, we both know he’s too responsible to talk on the phone while driving,” Tony says, and it’s exactly why he’d called him now. “Just let me have him.”

“Of course.”

There is a small silence. Tony takes a deep breath.

“On second thought, resentment is corrosive. 6-4. Save the date. Oh, and uh, you can go ahead and stop by for Christmas. No ugly sweaters, no costumes—but y’know, if you wanna show up dressed like Santa with Buckaroo as your little elf, so be it. And make sure to bring presents for both of my kids, not just the one you have cutesy nicknames with, got it?” He nods. “End call.”

“I have an early Christmas present for you.”

“It’s not a present if it involves me dragging my ass to Mumbai at nine in the morning.”

“Well, technically it would be six in the afternoon in Mumbai. Also, why Mumbai?”

Peter squints. “I’ve heard things.”

“What kinds of things?”

“Things I don’t want to concern myself with during the holiday season, Natasha.”

Nat rolls her eyes, flopping into the chair opposite him. They’re alone in the dining area of the Tower, which is where Peter has been living (mostly, excluding weekends with May) since November.

“You can’t just take breaks.”
Peter sets his tablet down. “Okay that right there just says a whole lot about your mindset and honestly? Please see a therapist.”

Nat pouts. “Pretty please? At least look at the files.”

Peter glares at the manila envelope on the table. Reluctantly he grabs it and begins to scan the papers inside: they depict a summary of rogue villains who have banded together and formed some kind of underground training business. They’re kidnapping little kids and indoctrinating them into their murder-is-fun propaganda bullshit.

There are pictures. Photographic evidence of what’s labelled as *Initiation*.

A little girl standing over the body of another, smaller kid who’s limbs are barely distinguishable from the gore they’ve been turned into.

Peter’s stomach turns. He pushes away his fruit and drops the file. “No.”

“I don’t know what that word means.”

“It means, I’m decompressing.”

“What do you have to decompress from?”

“Oh, gee, Nattie, I don’t know, maybe that gigantic battle where I almost died? Or could it be your death I’m still carrying around? Maybe *that’s* what’s keeping me up at all hours of the night.”

“Hey, easy, Petya,” Nat says, but he’s tense and breathing hard and it’s true, he’s barely been sleeping. Most nights he wakes up hanging upside down from the ceiling like a dungeon bat; he thinks it might be his body’s way of waking itself up from the bad dreams, with the rush of blood to his head and the band of tension around his skull.

Nat puts her hand on his shoulder. “I was only kidding. You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to.”
Peter realises, belatedly, that his nails are cutting into his palms. He slowly unfurls his hands and tries not to stare at the red raw moons imprinted into his skin.

“What about MJ?”

“She has finals.”

Peter nods. Right. He’d forgotten that. God, she’s been doing her best to give him space and while he’s grateful for it, he really misses her.

She’d taken the letter way better than he had. Instead of freaking out or getting mad at him like he’d feared, she’d asked him point blank what the fuck about it he found so problematic he had to keep it a secret. Don’t you want this Peter? Isn’t he already basically your dad?

“Peter?”

“I’m good.” He stands and picks up his used utensils. “I’ll think about it, okay?”

Nat nods slowly. “It’s really okay to turn me down every once in a while, you know. I can just ask Barnes or something. It’s just…”

“You adore and miss me?”

Her lip quirks up. “Something like that.”

It’s not like the don’t see each other multiple times a week or anything. It’s just different. It’s like time has been divided into three parts: before, after, and the interlude. They had found cohesion, comradeship in each other during a period where the world stood still and held its breath in terror, and now that it is turning again, they have to find their balance, pick themselves up after falling mid-pirouette.

Peter smiles. “Don’t rule me out just yet, Romanoff.”
Peter wakes up in the middle of the night, seven hours before his departure to Chicago.

It had been the same dream.

A red wash sky, rust-coloured dirt. The taste of ash and blood in his mouth. The soundlessness of space. Pressure building in his chest, behind his eyes, like any second he might explode. Hunger pains, phantom, ghosts from a time long ago when everything stretched out for infinity and the black was endless and the stars were other suns.

Tony, in his arms. Tony grabbing him, asking him if he’s okay, if he feels alright; Tony stumbling, eyes wide, fearful, clutching at Peter, begging him to take care of Pepper—

“No!”

“Hey, hey, hey, woah,” whispers a voice. Hands on his shoulders, solid and warm and real. Grainy darkness, the scent of coffee and motor oil and expensive cologne. “Easy, kiddo.”

Peter can’t, won’t stop himself from grabbing for Tony. Like a scared little kid he just clings to him, chest heaving and hot tears streaming down his cheeks. He shakes. “Dad.”

For a microsecond, Tony stiffens.

Then he hugs Peter back. It’s as easy as breathing. His fingers run through the hair at the nape of Peter’s neck and it’s soothing, good, wonderful. “What was it, baby?”

Peter just can’t get a grip on himself no matter how hard he tries. “It’s always you,” he sobs. “You’re with me and then you’re falling apart and I can’t save you no matter how hard I try, and I felt so awful every second of every day, and everything hurt and I knew I was gonna die so I just thought—I thought if I did it on my own terms—”

“Woah woah, back up,” Tony leans away and no, god, that’s so much worse. That’s cold and space
and no more heart beating against his own. “Peter, what are you talking about?”

*Day 14.* He’s never told anyone about it before, not even Pepper or Nat. Only Nebula knows, and she’s lightyears away or more.


Peter can’t even say it. It’s so awful, so horrible. It might be the worst thing he’s ever tried to do.

Tony seems to gauge that. “Okay,” he breathes. “Okay, hold on a sec. Lie down for me, would you, kiddo?”

Peter listens. He can’t think to do anything else and he’s glad for the direction. He wipes his cheeks, but it doesn’t do any good because he’s still crying, he can’t *stop*, he just feels guilty and small and stupid and so, so fucking ashamed.

But then Tony lies down next to him. He wraps one arm around Peter’s shoulder and puts his other hand over Peter’s heart. “Calm down,” he whispers. “Just breathe for me. In and out, real slow and easy.”

Peter does. It helps a little. In the very least he’s not wracked with sobs.

Tony lays his scratchy, warm cheek against Peter’s forehead. “That’s so good. Take your time. Don’t worry about little old me, I was awake anyways.”

Peter feels safe, at least, with his head buried in the crook of Tony’s neck, encased in warmth. It’s not nothing, it’s not endless black, it’s the impression of golden light from the hallway overhead, it’s Tony’s shirt clutched in his fists, it’s their breathing, their pulses, their heartbeats.

Five minutes passes. It might as well be an infinity.

And then, “We were dead in the water,” Peter whispers. “It had been two weeks. That’s… that’s a long time for anyone to go without much food or water. Usually you’d be dead by then. And with… with my enhancements it was *so much worse.* It was like my body was tearing itself apart from the
inside. It hurt, like, really bad.”

Tony doesn’t even laugh at his ridiculous oversimplification of the obvious. “So you…?”

“I tried to kill myself.”

It sounds… it sounds awful. Peter has never once uttered the words out loud. He’s tried to think of it as little as possible. Even now the memories are so hazy he’s sure he must have blocked out the worst of it.

“I didn’t… I didn’t want to,” Peter says, because he needs that to be known. There wasn’t an ounce of his being ready to be done, to be gone. “It just… it seemed less painful than starving, but it—it hurt —”

“Okay,” Tony whispers, and hugs him impossibly close, presses two kisses and then three to the crown of Peter’s head, “alright, it’s okay. I understand.”

Maybe it is. Maybe it isn’t. Peter doesn’t know what to believe himself and so he decides to trust, to lean, to rely.

“D-Dad?”

Peter can feel his breathing hitch.

“Yeah, baby?”

“I missed you so much,” Peter whispers. “Every single day.”

“I know, kiddo—”

“No, you don’t,” Peter finally leans back a little so that he can look at Tony, so he can meet his eyes as well as he can through the layers of shadow around them; “sometimes I would forget. For a few minutes or even a couple of hours I’d forget and when I remembered it was like you’d died all over
“Peter,” Tony says, softly, sadly, “god, I wish you would’ve let yourself forget. I hate the idea of you carrying that around with you.”

“But I—”

“No, hey, listen. I want you to know three things. The first is that I-I’m not mad, Peter. I could never be mad at you for this, or resentful, or bitter. I’m just proud of you. God, you don’t even know how much. It blows my mind you came from me.” He thumbs a tear from Peter’s cheek. “Two: I love you so much. There’s nothing you could do or say that would ever make me stop. If you murder someone, go ahead and call me and I’ll help you drag the body across the floor.”

At Peter’s weak, almost nonexistent smile, he forges ahead. “I’m always gonna be here for you, okay? Even if you think I’ll be upset, I want you to talk to me. I want you to know you can tell me anything. Got it?”

Peter nods. It’s a small, shaky thing, but Tony accepts it. He plants another kiss to Peter’s forehead. “Can you tell me… do you still feel that way?”

“No,” Peter says quickly, “no, it really wasn’t like that, it was just…”

“A last resort?”

“Basically. Yeah.”

Tony absorbs that. Peter takes in his furrowed brow, his small frown, and feels a sick wave of dread.

But then Tony runs his hand through Peter’s hair again and it all goes away. “Alright. Okay. What can I do?”

Peter doesn’t speak. His only answer is to burrow against Tony’s side and close his eyes. Be here, is what he’s trying to say. Stay.
Tony stays.

They lay in silence for a long time. Peter presses his ear against the centre of Tony’s chest, right where the arc reactor used to be, and closes his eyes. He falls into a sleepy daze, somewhere between awake and dreaming.

Hundreds and hundreds of feet below, the city is still a storm of honking horns, yelling pedestrians, slow moving traffic. It’s comforting, familiar, easy to tune out as background noise against the steady beat of his father’s heart.

Then a shadow graces the doorway.

“Petey?” croaks a small voice.

Peter raises his head at the same time that Tony does and they both glimpse Morgan in the doorway, standing with tear stained cheeks. For a second, Peter is terrified, because all he can think is what if she heard?

But then she stumbles further into the room with a congested sniffle.

“What’s wrong, Mo?”

“Don’t feel good. Threw up.”

Peter looks up to find that Tony is staring at him, somewhere between conflicted and resigned. “This one’s on me,” he says quietly. He slips out of Peter’s arms, much to his dismay.

“But what about Petey?”

“Petey’s gotta sleep,” Tony says. He scoops Morgan up as smoothly as possible.
“No, I’m…” Peter sits up. “I-I’ll help.”

Tony watches him questioningly as Peter rises from the bed. He looks torn, but when his gaze falls to Morgan again—all flushed and snot-nosed and miserable—there’s a flash of fear. Peter realises the only reason he’s not telling him to get his ass back into bed is that he’s worried he’ll mess up with her.

So they split vomit clean up duty. Peter does the sheets while Tony cleans Morgan, an exhaustive process of tying her hair back, soothing her while she cries between each bout of throw up, and trying to make her laugh so that she feels better if even for only half a second.

Peter watches them from the bedroom: Morgan in Tony’s lap, his chin resting on her head, the toilet bowl waiting in front of them. She seems to be feeling a little better by now, and weirdly enough it makes Peter feel better too. It’s nice to know he’s not the only one having a rough night, but a huge part of him would rather be alone in that.

More than anything though, it’s just jarring to see. If someone had told Peter a year ago what he’d be looking at right now, he would have cried with relief.

As it is, he just smiles.

“You good, Brownie Bite?”

Morgan nods. She still looks pale and stuffy, but he sincerely doubts there’s much of anything left for her to toss up anymore.

“How ‘bout we try sleeping?” Tony suggests, and looks up at Peter. “You good with that?”

He shrugs. “Might as well.”

“I don’t wanna be alone,” Morgan says quickly. “I know I’m all germy, but please—”

“Hey, that’s cool, Mongoose,” Peter assures her. “I don’t mind, do you?”
“Absolutely not,” Tony says, and kisses Morgan’s cheek just to prove it. “We’ll huddle for warmth. Perfect night for it.”

Morgan looks like she might cry from relief. Or maybe that’s just her state right now, as it usually is when she’s sick; constantly bordering on the edge of tears, sluggish and clingy and bleary-eyed.

They sprawl out on Peter’s bed because it’s big enough to accommodate the three of them. Morgan curls up on Tony’s stomach and Peter wraps an arm around the both of them. He rests his head on Tony’s shoulder, grateful when his father pulls him a little closer.

Sleep comes easier. It is dreamless, light.

He wakes up to the smell of lemons and lavender.

“Pep? ’time is it?”

“Six,” she whispers, leaning over him with a small smile. Her eyes drift to Tony and Morgan. They’re spooning and Peter’s totally been pushed off to the side, but he can’t say that he minds. “So this is why I woke up alone.”

“I’m sorry you had to find out about our No Pepper Parties like this.”

She tuts. “Don’t be mean, I made you breakfast.”

“You did?”

“Well, I put cereal on the counter and got you a bowl.”

“Oh gee, thanks.”
Pepper smirks. “I also already poured the milk.”


He makes his fingers into a cross and skirts around her, which gets her to snort with barely stifled laughter. She gives him a little push. “Come on, get going or you’ll miss your flight. Nat is waiting in the kitchen.”

“Don’t rush my awakening, you’ll just make me grouchy.”

“You don’t get grouchy, you get pouty,” she corrects.

Peter enters the kitchen alone and finds that Nat is, indeed, waiting for him. She’s perched on the countertop with her legs crossed.

And she’s eating his cereal.

Peter stares at the spot where it’s supposed to be.

“This is arachnophobia.”

Nat chokes. She takes a minute to chew and recover, and then glares at him without real malice. “That’s the closest anyone’s ever come to killing me.”

“Need I remind you that you literally died.”

“That doesn’t count,” Nat tells him. “I did that to myself.”

“Please,” Peter holds up a hand and wanders over to the coffee pot, “no more of your twisted logistics. It’s too early to jump through mental hoops trying to keep track of what you constitute as fucked up.”
Nat grins and slips off the counter. “Are you having caffeine?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Nothing. If you do that whole leg-bouncing thing, though, I might have to stab you.”

“My leg will bounce no matter what. It’s a plane. I hate planes.”

“What if I tranquillised you? Would that help?”

Peter stares. He keeps staring, unblinkingly, as he pours his coffee. Finally he says, “What the fuck.”

Nat laughs again.

“Were you just gonna leave me without saying goodbye, or what?”

Peter turns around. Tony is standing with raised eyebrows, all expectant and ruffled from sleep. It takes no further pressing for Peter to cross the kitchen. He’s enveloped by his father’s hug.

“You sure you’re good to go?”

Peter nods, even though it feels like his lungs are being crushed beneath the weight of all of his fear, his anxiety. Not at what’s to come for him, but what will happen here while he is gone. He knows it’s stupid. He knows Tony and Pepper can handle themselves.

It’s just… hard.

Still, he says, “I’ll be fine.”
“Alright.” Tony kisses his temple. “Don’t do anything I’d do—”

“And don’t do anything you wouldn’t do,” Peter smiles. “Little grey area, I remember.”

Tony sighs. “I wish I could go with you.”

“If you did, Pepper would kill you.”

“I know. But kid, I swear to god, if you’re dying and you don’t call me, I’ll kill you.”

“Front row seats for my death, got it.”

Tony shakes his head. “I hate retirement.”

In the end, Tony and Pepper send them off quietly. Pepper ruffles his hair, warns him not to be stupid, and instructs him to call both her and May every night while he’s gone.

Before they leave, Peter doubles back to give them both one more hug.

“I’ll be back before Christmas.”

As it turns out, Nat doesn’t actually need to use a tranquilliser on him; their flight is cancelled, as are all others for the whole week due to bad weather.

“So what are we gonna do?”

“Screw it.” Nat grunts after three hours of trudging from terminal to terminal, bags in tow. “This is all Tony’s fault. I can’t believe he scheduled the quinjet to be repaired next month.”
“Rent a car.”

“To—to Chicago?! Nat, that’s like, a twelve hour drive.”

“Yeah.”

“In the middle of a blizzard. You want to drive to Chicago in the *middle of a blizzard.*”

“You got a better idea?”

He doesn’t. As a consequence, an hour later they stand in front of the last car available in the lot. It’s dented and old and most certainly won’t help them blend in.

“You want to drive to Chicago in the middle of a blizzard in a *pick up truck*?”

Nat sighs. “Just get in the car.”

The first night traffic is so slow they only make it as far as Ohio. They have to rent a motel room because it’s the only place with vacancy.

“Who’s idea was it to travel during the holidays, again?”

“Shut up.”

“I’m just saying—”

Nat throws her pillow at him.
That night, May calls him.

It feels late, but it’s really only eight. Peter slips out of the room as Nat sleeps, careful not to make too much noise because he knows if he so much as breathes too loud, she’ll start awake.

“Hey, May.”

Her name is a puff of frozen air, white and spiralling to the stars. He hopes she can hear everything in it, like how much he misses her, how sorry he is for not being able to stay with her this weekend.

“Hi, kiddo. I just got off work and thought I’d see how everything was going?”

“Slowly,” he says, leaning against the wall. “We haven’t even made it to Chicago yet.”

“You’re not staying in some dingy motel with bedbugs, are you?”

“Well, it is dingy. I’m sure if there are bedbugs, they’ll do everything they can to avoid being squashed by Natasha Romanoff.”

May laughs a little. The sound is like a sunrise.

“I miss you,” he says, at the same time she does.

“Old habits really do die hard, huh?”

Peter smiles to himself as he sinks down to the ground. He pulls his jacket tighter around himself to ward off the frigid winter winds, takes a deep breath, and plunges. “May, when I get back, there’s something really important we need to talk about.”

There’s a small pause. Then, “Mind telling me what that is? You know it freaks me out when you’re vague. Don’t be vague with me.”
“It’s not something I wanna tell you over the phone. It’s not… I mean, I don’t think it’s bad, but I don’t know how you’ll react, and—”

“Peter, take a second.”

“Right.”

“Is it something dangerous? Something that involves you getting hurt or blown up or whatever?”

“No. No, nothing like that.”

“Alright. Then I can wait.”

Peter’s shoulders sag with something like relief. “I’ll see you soon, okay? I larb you.”

“I larb you too, Peter Parker, and don’t you forget it.”

A day later and they’re parked around the corner from a candy shop. It’s how the group—called White Snake, probably some offshoot of HYDRA or AQUARIUS—is luring the kids into their ring; it’s beware of men in white vans with sweets but amplified by ten.

“God, look at them.”

“I know.”

“Absolute scumbags.”

“You’re right and you should say it,” Peter tells her around a mouthful of food.
Nat snorts. She watches them for a few more minutes.

Then: “How do I look?”

“It’s so obvious you’re in a disguise. You might as well be wearing one of those things with the glasses and the fake nose and the moustache—”

“Oh, shut up.”

He grins. The truth is, she’ll blend in just fine with her mousy brown wig and stained suede jacket. He doubts anyone will give her a second glance. “Knock ’em dead.”

“Alright, I’m gonna go,” she makes air quotes, “spill my coffee.”

“You do that. I’ll be here with my disgusting, second best deep dish pizza.”

“God, Americans are weird. Why do bother with so many stupid internal conflicts? What, are your external ones not good enough or something?”

“I know. The worst part is I think I might actually like this better.”

Nat rolls her eyes, scoops up the tiny spider-shaped tracker, and slips out of the car. Peter watches her cross the street and then proceeds to lose her in the bustling crowd of Chicagoans. Peter isn’t too worried. They’re connected via comms and he’s able to track her easily.

He takes another bite of pizza.

“Gross. Nothing has the right to taste this good.”
“Status?”

Peter glances over at the laptop to his right. It shows a steadily moving red dot heading west, just like it has for the past ten minutes. “Still on the L-train.”

Nat nods. She’s been sorting through their weapons stock obsessively like some of the guns are going to get up and run away. Over and over, she reloads them, flicks the safety from on to off. She even goes so far as to take a few apart and put them back together.

Peter looks down at his phone. His text thread with MJ is disgustingly barren and has been for weeks. He’s told himself a thousand times over that it’s not something he needs to worry about, it’s just because they’re both busy. She’s graduating this spring, finals are kicking her ass, and he’s twelve hours out in Illinois.

She hates Illinois.

His fingers hover over the keypad. A dozen corny messages are typed and then erased. Finally he settles for:

*Does the name Pavlov ring a bell?*

Her response is almost instantaneous. *You’re an idiot.*

*(wheeze)*

*Don’t think referencing Buzzfeed Unsolved will win you any favors*

*okay i’m sorry but uh*

*I love you*

*...I know :)*
“What are you grinning down at your phone for?”

“What? Nothing.” Peter tucks it away just for good measure and as he does, his eyes catch on the computer. “Nat, I think we have a location.”

“The plan?”

“Is terrible.”

“That’s what you always say.”

“Because they’re *always* terrible.”

Nat gives him a look. She nods to his web shooters. “Just block off every exit as fast as you can except the main one. We’ll flood them into one hall and take them out that way.”

“And the children with murderous tendencies?”

“Let’s just hope some of them realise what a screwed up situation they were in and help us out.”

Peter’s face twists up. “I’m not sure that’s how brainwashing works—”

White Snake have set up shop in some top secret abandoned military base on the outskirts of Chicago, a place Peter hadn’t even known had existed but that Nat hadn’t looked to phased hearing about.

At first it goes pretty smoothly. Peter dismantles their security cameras and takes out their details as quickly and quietly as possible. He webs them up and disarms them.
Ten minutes in and no booby traps.

Peter creates a series of blockades in front of every exit. He clears halls and rooms and tunes out Nat’s quips as she takes out far more guards than him without, he’s sure, even breaking a sweat.

Then Peter gets to level two.

And he finds the kids.

In Amsterdam, their conditions had been rough, but okay. Five by five cells with toilets, beds and blankets, and a window to see out of.

The kids in Chicago are all clustered together in groups. They’re wearing dirty, rumpled clothes and sleeping on broken down cardboard boxes in large rooms that smell of cigarette smoke and human excrement. It’s like a city for the homeless, but this is their home. This is how they are being forced to live, what they have been told that they deserve.

The first group he finds are the youngest kids. They’re probably around four to seven, with tear stained cheeks and wide eyes that glint in the dark.

“Hi,” Peter says, to the first one to stand—a young girl that’s gotta be older than the others and clearly doesn’t belong in here. Her fists are balled and she moves protectively over the little kids. Her hair is chopped and blonde and ragged. “I’m Peter Parker, I’m here to help you.”

“Help us?”

“Yeah,” Peter nods. “I’ll take you out of here, get you back to your families. Have you ever heard of SpiderMan?”

One of the toddler’s heads perks up. The girl glares, wary. “Is this a test?”

Peter’s heart just breaks. He gets down on his knees in front of her and holds out his hand. “I
promise it’s not. I won’t hurt you. Will you hurt me?”

She looks him up and down. Scans the room, the faces of all of the others, and then turns back to him. Her smaller hand shakes his own. “I won’t hurt you, Peter Parker. I’m Gwen Stacy.”

Peter figures Gwen’s gotta be about twelve, tops, but she talks like a seasoned New York post woman who’s seen some shit.

“Follow me,” she says.

“Uh, absolutely not,” Peter says. “Tell me where to go, but I take the lead, okay, kid?”

Gwen Stacy rolls her eyes. “We have to find Miles,” she says. “They took him somewhere with the boys. I think they’re on level three.”

“Is Miles your brother?”

“No, but he’s… they experimented on us both together. Used the same thing.”

“And what was that, exactly?”

Gwen eyes him. She clears her throat and mumbles something.

“Didn’t catch that.”

“A radioactive spider.”

Peter stops in his tracks. He turns to her slowly, trying to jump through a series of mental hoops so he can wrap his head around that as quickly as possible, given that they’re about to die and currently leading over a dozen little kids through the halls of a murder fortress.
“Alright,” he pinches his brow, “okay, so we’re putting a pin in that for now. Level three, you said?”

It doesn’t take them very long to find where they were keeping the boys, particularly because the boys aren’t there anymore. The door has been busted off its hinges, out into the hall rather than into the room.

“Super strength?” Peter guesses.

Gwen shoots him a duh look. “We’ve been waiting to bust the kids out for forever.”

“And are any of them like… us?”

Something sparks in Gwen’s eyes at being included in the us. If she’s being honest about her abilities, then Peter can’t really think of another word for it.

“Just me and Miles. We were their guinea pigs.”

Peter absorbs that as his comm buzzes. “Peter,” Nat says, “I need you to get down here. There’s something you need to see.”

“Is it a kid kicking ass?”

“Oh, yeah. How’d you guess?”

“That’ll be Miles. Keep an eye on him for me, would you? I’ll be down in a sec.”

“Well don’t you just make friends everywhere.”
When reach the main floor, all of the fighting has been pretty much handled. He assumes most of it was Nat, but there are a few guys who don’t look battered enough to have been taken down by her hand.

Still, it’s impressive, if a little unnerving.

“Woah,” Gwen breathes. “They’re like, all dead.”

“Not dead,” Peter corrects, “just out of it. I’ve already had my AI notify the police, so they’ll be in here pretty quick to cart these guys off. They’ll never bother you again, I promise.”

Something like relief flashes in her eyes, but then she scowls. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

Peter smiles. “I don’t.”

“Petya,” Nat calls, walking over. At her side is a scrawny looking kid with scrapes all over his face, bruises under his eyes, and blood on his cheek. “This is the one.”

Peter nods. He looks him up and down. “Miles, right?”

Miles’ eyes flit to Gwen with a mild surprise. Then he nods. “Uh, Morales.”

“Stacy tells me you were bit by a radioactive spider?”

His eyes get even bigger. “Uh, yeah, but—”

Nat looks between them. “Hold on, what?!”

“Yeah,” says Peter, “guess the spidey squad just got a little bigger.”
He holds out his hand for Miles to shake. With wide eyes, he does so, and the instant their hands connect an electric current runs through Peter’s arm, all through his body. “Ow, what the—?”

“Oh my god, oh my god,” Miles stammers, “I’m so sorry, that happens sometimes when I’m nervous!”

“You electrocute people?!”

“It’s my stingers, they—” his shoulders slump. “I’m still getting the hang of controlling it. Are you hurt?”

Peter flexes his hand and finds that while his grip falters, it doesn’t hurt. He just feels numb. The worrying thing is the smell of burnt hair and latex, which has Peter tapping his comm. “Karen, can you hear me?”

“Yes, but most of my operating systems are down now. I’m afraid I won’t be of much use to you until they can be repaired.”

Peter sighs. “Well, shit.”

Like he’d predicted, the police get there shortly. There are dozens of them, all on hand ready to take the kids to safety. Peter is relieved. In no way was he particularly eager to relive the experience of hauling a truck-full of kids forty miles.

But then Gwen pulls him aside. “I’m not from here. Chicago I mean. I’m from New York.”

Peter honestly can’t claim surprise. It’s where Oscorp is located, after all, so she and Miles must have had some proximity to it before they’d been carted off here. He wonders if they’d had to undergo the effects of the mutation in transit and feels sick at the thought, remembering vividly the way he’d thought he was dying.

“You want us to take you back to your parents?”
She swallows. Looks down at her feet. “See the thing is… they’re um, not around anymore. I was snapped and they died while I was dust particles or whatever.”

“Oh,” Peter says. “I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, well, I know that you guys have that compound where you train and stuff—”

“Gwen, I don’t think that’s such a good idea—”

“What’s not a good idea?”

Peter jumps, startled by Nat’s ever-stealthy approach. “God, don’t sneak up on me when I’m on high alert.”

Nat smirks. “So, what’s the bad idea?”

He nods at Gwen. “She’s… she doesn’t have family. She’s enhanced. Normally I’d say the compound is the best place for her, but it’s still—”

“Did somebody say the compound?!?” demands Miles Morales, bouncing up and down on the heels of his feet and looking for all the world like someone has just announced they’re about to take him to Disney Land. “Like the Avengers compound?! But I thought Thanos totally destroyed that?!?”

“He did,” Peter says, trying his best to keep patient despite the chaos around him, despite Nat’s teasing look and Gwen’s panicked heartbeat. “We’ve been trying to rebuild it. I’m just not sure if there’s room—”

“Sure there’s room,” Nat says. “We added a whole new wing.”

“I also don’t know if I want them being around all of that right now.”
“So you’d rather I live in a dumpster?” asks Gwen dryly.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying—”

“Actually, it is what you’re saying. Like, short of this, I have no other options. I definitely can’t wind up in some crappy foster home because y’know, I can like walk on walks and see in the dark and stuff—”

“You can see in the dark?” Peter, Miles, and Nat ask together.

She blushes. “Uh, yeah. Whatever. Anyway, it’s this or a cardboard box.”

“Or you could stay with me and my uncle?”

Peter’s head whips around and his eyes land on Miles. “Your parents?”

Miles rubs the back of his neck awkwardly, looking away under Peter’s scrutiny. “It’s like Gwen’s folks. They, uh… they didn’t make it through the snap. My dad was killed on duty and my mom… anyway, my uncle is probably worried sick about me so…”

God, there is something so soul-crushingly familiar about that, so heart achingly wrong and unfair and unjust.

“Okay,” Peter says. “Alright, New York it is. Come on, let’s head back to the hotel.”

Within a couple of hours Gwen Stacy has showered and changed into spare clothes of Nat’s, and perched on Peter’s bed.

“Excuse.”
“You’re excused,” she replies, without looking up from the cheap tabloid magazine she’d swiped from the gift shop.

“Come on, spinnerette,” Nat prompts, “you can sleep with me. Miles and Peter will share.”

“But this bed is way more comfortable.”

“Fine,” Nat slips off her mattress, “we’ll both sleep on this one.”

Gwen grins. “Cool. Hey, what do you think of the name White Widow?”

In the middle of the night, Miles Morales rolls over and tucks under Peter’s arm.

Peter stiffens. Then he looks over at the kid—the incredibly small, thin, frail looking kid with his too-long hair and peaceful expression.

He’s relaxed, probably for the first time in ages. Peter wonders if it has something to do with the fact that he’s sleeping in a hotel room with Spider Man and the Black Widow. He hopes it’s not, because he seriously doesn’t know how to handle that kind of pressure.

Miles snores a little.

Peter squints, grins, and closes his eyes.

The traffic is moving at a snail pace. Once again, Peter is hauling kids in the back of a truck, only this time he can hear them perfectly and they will not shut up.

“This music sucks,” Gwen complains, for the thousandth time. “Can’t you play, like, NSYNC or something?”
“You’re twelve years old,” Peter says, startled, “how do you even know about NSYNC?!”

“I’m fourteen!”

“And you’re also incredibly short, I never would’ve guessed that.”

Gwen slouches in her seat. Beside her, Miles snorts. “You just need to like, go with the flow.”

“Oh, the flow? The flow? What flow, Morales?! We’ve been driving for forty minutes and we’ve travelled eight miles!”

“Precisely,” Miles smiles, “be slow. Calm down.”

“Oh, screw you.”

“I have to pee.”

It’s been three hours and they’re finally moving, finally making progress toward getting home. It’s also only eleven hours until Christmas Eve, and Peter will be damned if they miss it.

But Miles has to pee, so he pulls off the road.

“Here?” Miles demands.

“Dude, I have no idea where the nearest rest stop is. This is gonna have to do. And Gwen, give him your jacket, please?”

Her face wrinkles up. “What, so he can get his backsplash on it?”
Miles sputters. “*Gross! I know how to aim!*”

“Uh, sure. That’s what *all* men say.”

“And you know so much about my peeing habits—”

“This conversation *cannot* be happening right now,” Peter mutters to Nat, who grins at him.

“How do you think I felt, babysitting you and MJ all the time?”

“Oh please, we were perfectly behaved. This though? This is going to give me an aneurysm.”

“Are you two whispering about us?!” Gwen demands.

Peter looks back at the both of them. They’re scowling at him and Nat now, like *they’re* the ones being disruptive. Peter swipes a hand down his face and sighs, but it does little to relieve his frustration. “Gwen, he needs your jacket because it’s like minus thirty and spiders can’t thermoregulate. Now, I don’t know about all of your abilities, but I’m not taking chances here. There will be no Morales-sicle in the back of my truck. Got it?”

Gwen grunts. Reluctantly she unzips her coat and hands it to Miles, who doubles up and then slips outside.

Nat is staring at him.

“What?”

“*Your* truck?”

He shrugs. “It’s kind of growing on me. Whatever. Stop looking at me.”
They wait. Gwen blows bubbles with the gum she must have swiped earlier and really, they’re absolutely going to have to have a conversation about that at some point, he can’t be bringing a thief back to the compound.

Miles returns, wide eyed and out of breath.

“That was so cool! You see those elks in that field?! I could hear them breathing! And when my pee came out it was so cold it steamed —”

“Ugh, gross!” Gwen shrieks. “No one needed to know that! Ever! Oh my god! Do I really have to sit back here with him?!”

“Yes,” Peter and Nat say together.

He turns the keys in the ignition.

It doesn’t start.

“Oh come on! I pay you a compliment and this is how you repay me?!”

Nat bursts into laughter. Peter rounds on her. “Oh, this is funny to you?! Do you realise how close we’re cutting it?! I have a dead phone and a truck that won’t start and two toddlers in my back seat —”

“— we’re teenagers —”

“Which is worse,” Peter says hotly.

“Peter,” Nat says, “take a minute.” Then she’s reaching over to touch his shoulder and no, no that’s so much worse, the feeling frayed against his skin and burns like acid and fuck, he can’t breathe, he can’t breathe.
Peter jerks the car door open and stumbles onto the dirt road. He leans against the car door, clutching at his heart. God, is that what this is? Is he having a heart attack—?

“Relax,” Nat says, close but not touching. “Just breathe.”

Breathing. Right. He’s been breathing since the day he was born. He can do that, right? It’s not even something that he’s supposed to be conscious of. It’s one of the functions of his autonomic nervous system; his neurotransmitters are just going haywire, that’s what this is. He’s just glitching.

For whatever reason, it helps, bringing himself down to his base elements, the eleven building blocks, calcium makes up 1.5% of his makeup and he is just a cluster of cells and everything will be okay.

“Am I breathing?”

“A little better,” Nat tells him. “Can I touch you?”

“Not yet.”

From the corner of his eye he catches her nod. Peter rubs at his aching, strained chest. He stares out at the sprawling snow covered fields, the glistening icicles hanging from barren oak tree branches, the grey sky shrouding a pale afternoon sun.

“We’re not gonna make it back in time.”

“That’s hardly something you need to be freaking out about.”

“No, it is,” Peter says, “because it’s Christmas. It’s our first Christmas since—”

He stops himself. Clarity unbeetles her brow, widens her eyes slightly.

“Oh, Petya.”
“I can’t be gone. I can’t be… I already missed Morgan’s birthday for this, okay? She’s five now. She’s five and I missed that dismantling some minor terrorist group and now it’s almost Christmas and I have to be there. I have to be there so I can tell May the truth and tell MJ I’m sorry for being the world’s worst boyfriend and—”

“Okay,” Nat shakes her head, “no. Listen. Nobody is mad at you, do you understand? I know for a fact that MJ isn’t. And May… I don’t know what to say about May, actually, seeing as I barely know her. But if there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that I don’t have to be your family to be your family.”

“I just feel like… I did all of this to get her back and now I barely see her. I feel like maybe I replaced her with Pepper without realising it and I think we’re both thinking it but neither of us are saying it, and it’s like, I can’t just not be around Pepper. She’s my mom, you know? She’s the mother of my baby sister. But May… May is home. I don’t know. I don’t know how to balance it all. I just feel like I’m being stretched in a thousand different directions and there’s just not enough of me to go around.”

Nat watches him for a moment. Then she sinks down onto her knees right beside him. “No one is expecting anything of you, Peter. No one is assuming you’re gonna have all the answers, that you’ll have everything figured out. I promise.”

“Then why does it feel that way?”

“Because that’s the kind of pressure you’re putting on yourself. Just ease up, okay? I promise it’ll make your life ten times better.”

Peter bites his lip. He narrows his eyes at her. “I’ll ease up if you ease up.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you, with your missions and your constant training despite the fact that a month ago you were still dead—”

“Yeah, but it’s not like I remember being dead.”
“Listen, I’m not trying to make you relive the experience, okay? I just want you to acknowledge that you’re pushing yourself way past your limit to accommodate for, what, your sacrifice? Your death? Do you think people think less of you for it?”

Nat purses her lips. “I… god, I don’t know. Maybe.”

“You’re not the only person who died and came back. Do you think less of any of those people?”

“Well, no, but—”

“No buts.”

“But—”

“No.”

Nat sighs. She glares. Then her lips quirk up and she socks him in the shoulder. “You’ve really blossomed, you know that? Used to be just me analysing your behavior.”

“Are you gonna cry?”

“No,” she grins, “I’m gonna see if we can still use your suit’s AI to call a tow truck.”

“That,” Peter blinks, “is an incredible idea. Can’t believe I didn’t think of it sooner.”

It takes two hours for the tow truck to get there, so the four of them huddle in the back of the truck to keep warm. Peter manages to modify his suit’s heater so that it expels warmth rather than insulates heat, but they still end up with chattering teeth and freezing cold hands.

Gwen won’t stop staring at him. It takes five minutes for him to realise that she and Miles must have
heard every word.

Right. Super hearing.

It sort of makes him uncomfortable, realising two little kids now know way too much about his personal life. They’d also seen him start to have a panic attack, which definitely lowered his cool levels by a few notches.

“We’re going to have to rent another car,” Nat tells him, yelling over the noise in the shop.

“Yeah right. It’s the day before Christmas. You think they’re gonna have something more reliable than the piece of shit that just died on us?”

It turns out, they do, but only marginally.

The four of them pile into a beat up Ford Pinto and make east.

“He’s late.”

“He is.”

“He’s not picking up his phone.”

“No, he’s not.”

“Well why are you not freaking out?!"

Pepper sets the cookbook down. She gives him a look. “Because this happens sometimes, Tony. Believe me, I’ve been dealing with late superheroes for a long time. Now would you please go check on Morgan?”

Sometimes he still forgets, and he knows that’s terrible; already Morgan is half his whole world and Peter is the other, but sometimes the fear for his idiotic, reckless spider-baby outweighs everything else.

Because Peter has no self preservation. Because Peter is already so grown up and with every passing second he grows more and changes—god, he’s changed so much from the awkward, wide-eyed teenager Tony had met all those years ago.

“Tony.”

“Going!”

Morgan’s room is dimly lit even with her blinds open. The sky is dark, clouds grey and swelling to black, waiting to unleash flurries of snow at the soonest opportunity.

His daughter—god, that’s still weird—is curled up on her bed clutching the weirdest stuffed animal Tony’s ever seen, some fish-bear abomination. Her eyes are red-rimmed as she stares at her TV, which plays a colourful Disney movie. He thinks it might be Bambi but he’s not sure.

“Hey, kiddo.”

Morgan looks up. She blinks blearily with eyes that match his perfectly in shade. It’s scary and yet it’s also adorable, the whole sleepy, sick kid thing.

“Daddy,” she croaks. Tony doesn’t think he’ll ever get used to hearing that and he doesn’t think he’ll ever tire of it, either.

He perches at the edge of her bed and feels her forehead. He’s gotten a little better at gauging what’s bad over the years, between sick spider babies and also regular, old fashioned ones. Tony’s probably checked Morgan’s about a thousand times over the last four days.
“Petey?” she asks.

Tony sighs, feeling her cheeks too just to be sure. “No such luck.”

Morgan makes a tired, miserable moaning sound. She sinks against her pillows and scrunches up her face like she might cry. “You and me both,” he tells her.

“He missed my birthday.”

“He did,” Tony agrees. “But I was here, remember?”

It hasn’t exactly been the most memorable affair. She’d spent it working through a fever, shivering and throwing up and crying in the bathtub. But Tony had done his best to help her. Seeing her like that broke him in a way he didn’t know he could break; something deep on the inside had fissured and ached.

Morgan sniffles. “’want Petey.”

Yeah, it’s not exactly a surprise. Tony doesn’t know if he’s exactly resentful over it so much as frustrated, because he too, very much wants to see his son, and it would be nice to have someone on hand that actually knows what they’re doing in regards to Morgan, what with Pepper being so tied up with Christmas dinner and all. He’s mostly worked through the cutting feelings that come along with the knowledge that when she is sick, scared, lonely, she goes to Peter instead.

It’s a good thing, he tells himself. She has someone she trusts, has someone to rely on.

He just wishes it could be him, too.

But hey, it never will be if he just gives up, right?

So Tony reaches out and brushes her hair from his eyes. It’s fine and dark and slightly damp from the sweat of her fever. Morgan squints up at him, her face half hidden behind her stuffed animal toy.
“I know you miss him. I miss him too.”

Morgan shifts. “Don’t like it when he goes.”

“Yeah? Same here. All I can think about is when he’s gonna be back.”

She perks up a little. “Really?”

“Really. But how about, until he does come back, you and me hang out? How’s that sound?”

Morgan considers it. Shrugs. “Okay.”

Tony squashes down the small victory he feels. Morgan edges over to make room for him on the little bed, but Tony ends up pulling her into his arms and kissing the top of her head. “Hey Morgan?”

“Mmm?”

“You know I love you, right?”

Morgan looks up at him. There is something in her eyes; not quite surprise, not fear, just a certain kind of shyness. “But you’re Iron Man.”

“And that means I can’t love my kiddo?”

“No,” she says, and then frowns. “I don’t know. You’re a superhero and I’m just…”

“Just the coolest five year old on the planet? Uh, yeah, I agree. If anything, I can’t believe you’re hanging out with me.”

Morgan’s nose wrinkles up. “No way.”
“Way.”

“But I’m all yucky.”

“Doesn’t bother me. I love your yucky.”

Morgan’s giggle is small, but it’s something. Then it’s everything when her head falls to rest against his shoulder, small and smelling of strawberry kids’ shampoo.

Together, they wait.

“You brought a pie?”

Bucky raises his head and finds Sam, who slips into the elevator with him and Steve.

“Correction: I made a pie.”

“Made,” Sam repeats, disbelieving. “Like, baked? With your own two hands?”

“Yes.”

“And you didn’t blow up your house?”

“Apartment,” Bucky corrects, “and no.”

Sam snorts. “Lemme guess, you’re living in Brooklyn? What, are you two sharing a place or something?”
Bucky exchanges a look with Steve, who just shrugs. Neither of them have exactly decided about how open they’re gonna be about this whole… thing. Mostly because it’s still so new.

Y’know, only been going on for almost ninety years.

“Yeah, we’re sharing,” Steve says for him. “Rent’s gone way up since my day, so…”

It’s the most ridiculous excuse Bucky has ever heard. He could punch the idiot. He really could.

“What, you don’t make enough with this gig?”

There it is. God, he will punch Steve.

Later. In the safety of their own home.

“It’s just easier,” they say together. Sam stares for a minute with a furrowed brow and then nods slowly. He looks them both up and down, and Bucky can’t blame him. He does look fantastic. The jacket is doing wonders, winter is great because he can wear gloves to cover his metal arm. Really, he should be the picture of confidence.

But he’s not.

Because he’s about to enter the home of the son of only one of the men he killed. One of the many, many men. Many women. Maybe people.

Bucky doesn’t even know. He doesn’t have a tally. No one’s ever asked, and if they did, he’d never be able to tell them.

How many lives. How much blood. How many souls snuffed out with bullets and bare fists. Maybe in some dark corner of his mind there are answers, or maybe his whole brain is in the dark. Maybe Bucky is the light part and the rest is a black mess of arson, murder, screaming and pain and crying and little girls with wide eyes staring up at him in fear, with reverence, with wonder.
“Buck?”

Steve is staring. He is staring because he always knows. Maybe he can hear Bucky’s heartbeat start to pick up, or maybe it’s just some sixth sense he’s developed over the years. Who knows.

Bucky isn’t about to complain.

“I’m good,” he says.

The elevator doors slide open.

He doesn’t want to look at Bucky Barnes.

He doesn’t want to look, but he finds he can’t stop.

Bucky Barnes sits close to Steve, but not in an obvious way. To anyone who didn’t know, Tony suspects it might actually look like he was keeping to himself.

Occasionally someone will make a joke and the smallest smile will form. Other times, he’ll roll his eyes. Most of the time however, he stares at his lap, down the neck of his beer bottle, or at whoever it is that’s speaking.

They’re all sprawled out in the living room and it almost feels like old times, only the absence of Nat is gaping and for Tony, equally is the absence of Peter. Maybe most of them feel that way too, with the way they keep looking over their shoulders at the elevator like they’ll come back just from sheer force of will.

As it is, Tony continuously checks his watch over and over. Not for the time, but for any alerts, for any changes in Karen’s system which still reads MALFUNCTIONING - CAPACITY: 46%
The trackers aren’t working. The long-range call system is down. The footage is inaccessible. Karen is a skeleton of a system right now and Tony is itching to put on a suit and go out and find his son.

(His son, god, why does it have to hit him at such odd moments that Peter is his, he came from him. Tony is half responsible for his existence and he still can’t wrap his head around it.)

He can’t do that, though, because he doesn’t even know where to go.

It’s ridiculously frustrating.

So he busies himself in other ways. He helps Pepper in the kitchen as much as she’ll let him, but that mostly results in sore knuckles from being slapped on the hand so many times. He checks on Morgan and debates whether or not to bring her out. The problem isn’t just her illness, he knows the others won’t care all that much; it’s mostly to do with the murderer of his parents sitting in his living room sneaking sips of hot chocolate from Steve’s reindeer shaped mug.

And it’s Steve, with his quiet smiles and booming laughter and uneasy shifts whenever he catches Tony staring.

He’d predicted that it wouldn’t be easy.

That’s not exactly true.

It’s like stepping through a portal, or a time machine. It’s slipping into a prior era, when every night was like this one; super powered beings sprawled across couches, watching corny Christmas movies, waiting on dinner.

It’s disorienting, to say the least.

May shows up at about seven. Every head in the room rounds on the doors and shoulders fall when it’s not who they expect, but Tony and Pepper still manage to greet her smoothly.

“Okay,” Pepper announces. “Dinner is done. I’m keeping it warm for another hour and then I’ll have no choice but to serve it.”
Tony follows her back into the kitchen. May trails after.

“Is it time to panic yet?”

“I usually wait until day two,” Pepper says, “and I’ve never actually had reason to worry. Remember Tony, he’s with Nat.”

“Nat isn’t invincible, Pep.”

“She comes close.”

He sighs. Runs a hand down his face and then through his hair and turns to face May, who is looking between the two of them with a furrowed brow.

“He said he had something important to tell me when he called,” she informs them. “Either of you know what that’s about?”

Tony feels cold. They’d discussed, briefly, about who they were going to tell and when. In the end, Tony had left it up to Peter.

“I, uh,” Tony clears his throat. “That’s definitely something that should wait on him.”

“Is it bad?” she squints. “We all know he lies about stuff like this, and he downplays when he’s hurting, and he hides the fact that he’s not okay. He’s been overworking himself lately. You’ve caught that, right?”

“Oh course,” he and Pepper say together.

Tony wonders if it’s both of them lying or just him.

May sighs and leans against the counter. “Well, I’ll wait. But I swear, if another day passes and—”
The elevator chimes.

Then, like the sun cresting the horizon, Tony hears Peter’s voice.

“No running!”

“I wasn’t running, I was fast walking.”

Tony doesn’t recognise the voice of the girl speaking, nor does he know who she is as he, Pepper, and May round the corner. She’s short, blonde, and wiry. She stands with Peter and Nat and some other kid.

Tony doesn’t have a mind for them. He barely spares them a second glance as he heads straight for Peter and pulls him into his arms.

“Thank god.”

“Oh, uh, hi,” Peter says, and his surprised tone is an echo of the little kid Tony once knew, the one that’s still rattling around inside this sarcastic legal adult who will always and forever be just a kid to Tony. “You guys were worried, weren’t you?”

“Oh, please,” Tony brushes him off, “not at all. You’re only over a day late.”

Peter blushes and rubs the back of his neck. “Yeah, well, our car broke down, and then we got stuck in traffic, and then our back up car was stolen, and then we had to take a greyhound the rest of the way. It was a complete nightmare. Also, we picked up a couple of strays.”

Tony finally bothers to really look at the wide eyed kids in his living room. “Oh my god,” the boy whispers. “You’re… you’re Iron Man.”

“You do realise kidnapping is illegal, Peter?”
“It’s not kidnapping if you wanna come,” the blonde girl argues. She hasn’t blinked once.

“Gwen’s got no place else to go,” Peter tells him quietly, “and Miles… we’re working on tracking down his uncle. The number for his apartment doesn’t work anymore and according to his landlord, he moved. It’s cool if they stay tonight, right?”

“Of course,” Pepper says. She leans up and presses a kiss to his cheek. “Dinner’s on the table in five. Peter, you have a stalker.”

The stalker turns out to be Morgan. She’s peeking her head around the corner and when they spot her, she squeaks and runs over. “Petey!”

“Hey, Mongoose,” Peter greets, scooping her up. Morgan sniffs miserably in response and nuzzles against his neck. “Still not feeling too hot?”

“Mm-mm.”

“Alright,” Tony says, because he doesn’t like that the rest have all moved on from greeting Nat and are waiting on them to join the group, “how’s the hunger on a scale of one to ten? You feeling like eating or do you think sleep is the way to go, kiddo?”

Morgan wipes her cheek, and Tony realises she had started to cry. Over Peter or just because she feels like garbage, he doesn’t know, but on instinct he’s reaching out to help her wipe away the tears.

“Sleep,” she croaks. “Feel poopy.”

“Bedroom it is.”

Morgan reaches for him. “Come?”

It might just be the best Christmas gift he’s ever gotten; her tiny hand extended toward him, her eyes big and brown and pleading, just like Peter’s when he’s scared or upset. The both of them, they’re his gift. They’re all he needs.
“Of course, Morguna.”

Peter carries her. Tony walks beside them and does his best to shield them from view without really realising that’s what he’s doing.

Peter deposits Morgan on the bed. Then he reaches for a tissue. “C’mon, you know the drill. Blow.”

“But I hate it,” she whines, voice nasally.

“Trust me, you’ll feel better.”

Begrudgingly, she blows out of her nose and onto the tissue. “Yuck,” she says.

Peter nods absently, more focused on cleaning her face. “That it is, but it’s better than a sinus infection, right?”

“No.”

Peter snorts. He tosses the tissue away and pushes her back against her paisley patterned pillows. “You sure you don’t want anything to eat? Not even soup?”

Morgan shakes her head. “No.”

“So we’re down to monosyllabic speech already?”

Morgan grunts.

“No speech at all?”
Peter rolls his eyes at Tony, and then stops, because he must see the look on Tony’s face. He imagines it’s all shades of sentimental and sappy and gross, but fuck if it isn’t something seeing them together like this.

It’s crazy to him, really. Waking up and finding out five years have come and gone, that in the blink of an eye he’s gained this?

Peter holds out his hand. Tony takes it, allows himself to be pulled down so he’s kneeling beside Morgan’s kiddie bed.

“Tell me a story,” Morgan demands of them.

Peter makes a show of thinking. “Once upon a time, Morgan went to bed when she was actually supposed to and Santa came and brought her way too many presents because she’s spoiled.”

Morgan wipes her eye. “M’not spoiled. Tell him, daddy.”

“You’re absolutely right,” Tony agrees, and kisses her forehead. It makes her smile. “Not spoiled at all.”

“This is the definition of spoiling,” Peter points out dryly. “I can’t believe what I’m witnessing.”

“Oh, what, are you jealous?”

“Jealous? I accused you of spoiling, not favouritism—”

Tony cuts him off with an obnoxious kiss to his cheek, one that makes Morgan giggle and Peter snort. “Semantics,” he says. “Now do me a favour and get some sleep, okay, kiddo?”

Morgan hums dismally. “Okay.”

Peter adds his own quick kiss to the pile and then slips out of Morgan’s room with Tony. He closes the door as softly as possible.

Then he turns to Tony. Throws his arms around him.

“I missed you.”

Tony gratefully hugs him back and for a minute, he just lets himself hold his son, the only one he has, the only one he will ever need. The one who risked his life time and time again to save Tony’s, the one who invented time travel to bring him back, the one that he loves unconditionally, all-consuming.

“I missed you too.”

______________________________

After dinner, when all of the others have left, when Harley and his sister and mother have retreated to their rooms on the lower floor, when Rhodey has hugged him goodbye and Steve has held out his hand to shake and the sun has long set; after all of this, they sit May down in the living room.

“Already I’m nervous,” she tells them. “God, have you seen yourselves? I feel like a little kid being sat down by her parents.”

Peter huffs and joins her on the couch. He feels better being closer to her, anyway.

It doesn’t make it any easier though.

“There’s something—”

“That you need to tell me,” May nods sagely. “I gathered that, baby.”
“It’s um…” he takes a deep breath. “Did my mom ever say anything to you about me not—not being biologically… Richard’s?”

May stills. Peter swears for a second she just stops breathing.

“That’s not funny.”

“It’s not a joke.”

“Peter,” May grabs his hand, “seriously, what on Earth gave you that idea?!”

“There was a letter. In your things, remember? It was addressed to me, it said I wasn’t supposed to open it before I was eighteen—”

“I know the letter. I never read it. You’re telling me that inside it said you weren’t… you weren’t Richard’s?”


“But how could—” May stands. She runs a hand through her hair, aggravated. “How is that even possible? I mean, did Richard know? Did she… was she cheating? Do you know who your… your *biological* father is?!”

Peter can’t think of anything to do but look at Tony.

Tony who looks right back.

They both look at May.

It dawns on her. Maybe slowly, or maybe the world is just moving in slow motion. Her shoulders drop. Her mouth goes slack. Her face loses color.
“No,” she whispers. “No, no, that’s not—”

“They broke up for a bit after they got engaged,” Peter says, because he knows there are a thousand missing pieces he needs to help her fill. “Mom and Tony met at some dorky science convention—”

“It was an awards ceremony,” Tony cuts in.

“Oh, don’t do that,” May says. “Don’t start making jokes. Don’t…” She covers her face with her hands. “What the fuck.”

“Listen, I know it’s a lot to take in—”

“A lot to take in?! God, you think? How—how long have you known about this? How could you possibly even—?!”

Peter’s hands flex. He pulls the letter out of his back pocket, because even now, he still carries it everywhere he goes. There’s even a small pocket worked into every one of his suits for it to fit. He hands it to May.

She takes it. Unfolds it with shaking hands and scans the contents while they all wait in silence. Peter tries to ignore the swooping feeling in his stomach every time her breath hitches or her hands fly up to wipe at her eyes.

“We also did a paternity test,” Tony informs her, when she’s finally lowered the wrinkled and well-read papers. “It was positive, of course. I, uh, I was just as surprised as you are.”

“Oh, I sincerely doubt that.”

Tony frowns. “How do you mean?”
“You seriously expect me to believe you didn’t know about this?! That you just, what, happened to find him by *chance*? Do you have *any* idea how unbelievable that is?”

“May, I can assure you that—”

“You can’t assure me of *jack shit*, Stark.”

Tony takes a deep breath. He glances at Pepper and then at Peter. “I really didn’t know. If I had, I would have endeavoured to be involved in his life—”

“Wouldn’t have happened.”


“Of course I’m freaking out! You expect me *not* to?! This is—this is *ridiculous*, Peter!”

“Is it?”

She stops. Stares. Takes a steadying breath and then re-joins them on the couch. Peter takes her hand the minute she’s close enough.

“You have no idea how sorry I am for keeping this from you. If it makes you feel any better, I didn’t tell Pepper until like, last month.”

“It was pretty anticlimactic, though, considering I already knew,” Pepper says dryly.

May raises her head briefly from where she’s holding her forehead in her hand. “His jeans?”

“He’s not very good at keeping secrets.”

“No, you’re right. He’s terrible.”
“Oh, come on. I’m not that bad.”

“They’re right. You’re terrible, kid.”

Peter mock glares at Tony. The good humor doesn’t last though. He returns his attention to May, who is still staring wide-eyed at the rug beneath their feet. “God, I can’t believe this. No, you know what? I can’t believe I didn’t see it sooner. This is just…” she scrubs at her face. “It’s too much.”

Peter looks away. “I know it’s a lot, but I want you to know it doesn’t change what you are to me. I mean, we weren’t blood before, you know? You’re still my aunt. Right?”

May sniffs. She squeezes his hand. “Of course.”

Just like that his heart settles back into his chest. Peter hadn’t even realised how erratically it had been beating. He hadn’t realised how terrified he was of her being mad at him over this, pushing him away over this.

Because after all, this means he isn’t Ben’s nephew. Not really. It means whatever connection they’d had in terms of family had been a lie all along, and now they are simply tied together by heartstrings.

“How about I make us some coffee,” Pepper suggests. “We can talk about this some more. May, would you like to stay over?”

May looks up. There is immeasurable gratitude shining in her eyes with Pepper’s words. “I’d love that, thank you.”

MJ jumps at the sound of something—or rather, someone—landing on her fire escape.

Well, not her fire escape. It’s really Pepper’s. She’s been letting MJ stay in the apartment since after the battle because of exam season; seeing as mostly everyone’s cleared out to the tower, it offers her a quiet place to study. May is the only person who’s actually residing here with her, but she’d just
texted a few hours ago saying she wouldn’t be coming home.

So MJ is alone tonight. And despite the fact that she knows she can kick ass, she knows the security on this building is tight, the noise still makes her jump out of her skin.

MJ storms over. “Jesus,” she hisses. “I know you can be stealthier than that. What if I was sleeping?”

“Your light is on.”

“Sometimes I fall asleep with it on.”

Peter shrugs. “I’d come in and turn it off for you.”

MJ sighs. Her boyfriend is an idiot, but it’s cold, so she steps aside to let him climb into the room. It’s not exactly her space, just a cream-painted guest room with all of her shit sprawled everywhere in an organised form of chaos.

“Shouldn’t you be at the tower?”

“I snuck out,” he says. “Wanted to see you.”

“Cute.”

“Isn’t it?”

He sits on her bed. MJ stares at him. It’s been like, a week since they’ve actually talked in person. It’s been even longer than that since they’ve really talked, about them, about anything of actual substance.

A part of her has been stewing in bitterness. The other just misses him. Incredibly, terribly, achingly.
She’d stepped off to give him space right after finding out about his… about Tony Stark; a) it was mind blowingly strange and she’s still not really over it, and b) she’d had a hard time being around him and being around May, torn up with the secret.

If he’s here, and if May’s staying at the tower, it means…

“Did you tell her?”

“Yeah,” Peter says, making himself at home on her bed, kicking off his sneakers in the process and patting the mattress to his left. “She took it… well, she took it. I think she still has a lot to sort through, though.”

MJ raises her eyebrows. Then she climbs over him to recline against her pillows. They both stare at the ceiling.

“Are you mad at me?”

His question, whispered and shaking, startles her. “No,” MJ says, grabbing his hand. “God, no, Peter.”

He rolls onto his side and so she does the same. MJ clutches at his sweater, which is dorky and snowflake patterned but warm and soft and familiar. He wears it every year on Christmas.

“Why does it feel like you’re slipping away?”

MJ feels her eyes burn. “I’m not. I mean, I don’t mean to. I promise, I’m not trying to shut you out.”

Peter cups her cheek, thumbing the tear away as it falls, hot and searing. God, she always forgets. She lets herself get swept up in school work and her stupid day job stacking books at a dusty shop no one ever even enters; she loses herself in combat training and sketching and mock therapy sessions with Professor Gonzales. She forgets what it feels like to be loved by him so easily and then it all just comes crashing down on her at once, like the drop in a roller coaster. It’s exhilarating, freeing, terrifying.
MJ rests her forehead against his own after kissing him softly, slowly.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. “I don’t mean to do shit like this, I just… sometimes I forget people actually give a fuck whether or not I’m around, you know?”

“Don’t say that. Please don’t say that.”

“I don’t mean it like—” she shakes her head. “I just get lost. I know it sucks you have to keep pulling me back in, but I don’t mean to do it. I really don’t.”

“It’s okay. I don’t mind.”

“But what if you—”

His lips are soft against her forehead, and then again on her cheek, and the tip of her nose. “I won’t. Not ever.”

She knows he means it, and that makes her feel safe. It makes her feel safe to think forever, to think always, to think I love you, to think if you asked me right now, I would say yes.

But he doesn’t ask. It’s not because they aren’t there yet; they’ve been there for a long time. Maybe since the first loser, or maybe since that night when he came to her battered and bloody and handed her his heart, or even since the night when he’d come to her and found her bleeding and bruised.

He doesn’t ask, and she doesn’t mind.

Peter wraps his arms around her and she curls into his side.

“Merry Christmas, MJ.”

MJ smiles. “Merry Christmas, Peter.”
She falls asleep to the sound of Frank Sinatra, dim through the radio speakers, muffled with static; *through the years we all will be together, if the fates allow...*

Chapter End Notes

EEEEEK we are ONE AWAY from the end wowie

you guys are the absolute best readers and I love you all endlessly <3

End Notes

this story is,,,m’baby so if u have thoughts pls,,,lmk

(also follow my tumblr: @peter-stank)

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