Of Spiders and Super-Soldiers

by AuddieAussie

Summary

After the hell that was Ultron and the Sokovia Accords, Tony doesn't blame the team for wanting nothing to do with him. To make up for past mistakes, Tony disappears into his lab and focuses on using his money and brains to provide the Avengers with more fancy tech than they'll ever need. By doing this, he also doesn't have to worry about Steve's grim frown, Bucky's hateful gaze, or everyone else's cold annoyance.

For six long months, this formula worked, but then fate decided to be a Loki-like dick and Tony wasn't sure how it happened, but in the span of one week, he'd somehow acquired a kid.

Notes

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Chapter 1

Tony wasn't sure how it'd happened, but in the span of one week, he'd somehow acquired a kid.

His addiction to coffee had been the main reason for it. After an especially irritating evening with the wrinkly bastards that made up the board of Stark Industries, Tony had snuck out the back door while Pepper wasn't looking and made a run for it down the stairs. Pepper would get her revenge sometime in the near future, but he had been willing to take his chances.

Shooting Isaac Johnson with his repulsors would've made for some really bad press, anyways. Pepper should be thanking him for using such a high level of restraint. It was certainly more than he would've done four years ago.

Queens was the perfect place to disappear, so Tony had decided to go for some coffee at a nice little cafe several blocks away from the building he'd just escaped. After grabbing his beautiful cup of Turkish coffee with a side of chocolate sticks, Tony had nearly jumped out of his skin when gunshots sounded directly behind him. It had taken Tony a few moments to realize that the bullets hadn't been meant for him.

And didn't that say a whole lot about his life choices.

It took one minute for Tony to don his hand repulsors and arrive at the small house where he'd heard the gunshots come from. Charging straight in through the front door, Tony had been faced with two dead bodies, a middle-aged man and woman. Not ten feet away stood a little boy, eyes wide as a masked burglar pointed a gun at his head.

Tony didn't even think before shooting him through the skull.

Everything had been a blur after that, police officers swarming the scene while reporters took countless pictures of Tony Stark for the morning papers. Within forty-eight hours, Tony learned the victims had been Ben and May Parker, all around good people who hadn't deserved such a terrible fate. A burglary gone wrong, had been what the detectives called it.

And then there was Peter, their eight-year-old nephew who witnessed the whole thing and had no remaining close family to take him in. The poor kid was officially an orphan and Child Protective Services had shown up within a couple hours to retrieve him. Gut clenching in sympathy, Tony had shocked himself shitless by volunteering to sign whatever papers were necessary to become Peter Parker's foster parent.

Pepper had nearly passed out when he called her.

A new pair of Louboutin heels had been on her doorstep by the next morning, especially since it had taken her ten minutes to convince Tony's team of very pricey lawyers that she wasn't possessed or lying to them. Tony Stark with a child? Blasphemy!

In less than two months, Tony had signed the adoption papers.

"Dummy! If you try to spray Peter one more time, I'm donating you to the local community college! What are you—"

"Tony! What are you doing in here? Is this—"

"Peter, it's me. Your uncle. Don't be afraid—"

"Uncle Tony? What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to take care of you. Don't worry about anything—"

"You're going to take care of me? What about—"

"Don't worry about anything. Now, come on, let's go."

"Ok. What are you doing in here, uncle?"

"I'm here to take care of you. Don't worry about anything—"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
A fire extinguisher shot copious amounts of foam right into Tony's face, completely covering both him and the panels he'd been soldering together. Oh yeah, that hunk of scrap metal was so going to community college. Let the stupid little freshmen experiment on Dummy for a few weeks and see how he liked being blasted with unknown chemicals then. Unfortunately, Pepper would also kill him since Tony Stark's one-armed monstrosity would likely blow up half the campus in less than a week. Nah, revise that: four days at the max.

"I didn't tell him to do it this time."

"You, young man, are a lying liar who lies." Tony wiped foam out of his face and eyes. "I know better than to trust you and your evilness. Pepper and Happy might fall for it, but I won't."

Peter stood in the lounge Tony had specifically designed and fire-proofed for him, leaning against the couch while Butterfingers picked up a couple papers that had fallen to the floor. Apparently, the kid had decided to start an insect collection and was writing down all the bugs he wanted to find when they visited upstate New York later in the month.

"Shit, it's in my eyes. Why do I put up with you defective hunks of junk again?"

"Because they keep you from catching on fire," said Peter. "I think that's a pretty important job. And you don't look good in flames."

"What're you talking about, half-pint?" Tired of fighting with the foam, Tony went to stand in front of a gigantic fan that existed for this express purpose. "Anything that graces this body becomes a fashion phenomenon. Just ask Vogue and Armani. They're always begging me to model their overpriced rags."

"You wear Armani all the time."

"That's beside the point. And why are you bouncing up and down like that? You gotta pee?"

"It's almost time for lunch."

With that said, Peter disappeared into the elevator, ordering JARVIS to take him up to the penthouse floor. Most parents would have been furious if their kid had ordered a robot to douse them in bubbly foam, but Tony viewed it as a momentous milestone that warranted a celebration. Peter had been practically catatonic when Tony first brought him to Stark Tower, shell-shocked by the horror he had witnessed. He hadn't spoken more than ten words in the first month, and had only started to smile or laugh in the past two weeks.

So, a small prank that resulted in Tony looking like the Stay Puft Marshmellow Man? Yeah, Tony was more than okay with that.

"Time, JARVIS?"

"It is 12:47 in the afternoon, Sir."

"Huh, that was quick."

"You have been working since 8:22am," said the AI. "Master Peter ate the omelet sandwich you left out for him at 9:15am. It is understandable that he would be quite hungry by this hour."

"Did he finish his homework?"

"Last night, Sir. The young master spent his morning playing Pokemon Omega Ruby in the
"Best kid ever."

"I am inclined to agree. Would you like me to order lunch, Sir?"

Tony stood and cracked his back. "Nah, I'll whip up some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for us. Shit, I'm actually eating meals like a normal human being. Call the local disease specialist, J, I think I'm infected with some kind of mind-altering parasite."

"I believe that parasite is called Parenthood, Sir."

"Yeah, thanks for the update, J. It's not like I didn't notice a pint-sized human running around my tower."

With a roll of his eyes, Tony changed his shirt and pants, nearly tripping at least twice. He had two drawers full of spare clothes in the lab. When you lived with a foam-happy mongrel like Dummy, extra clothes were always a must.

"A lot more has slipped your notice before."

The Bleeding Edge armor stood proud in the workshop's center as Tony packed up his tools, fingers ghosting over the leg and back reactors as he considered what section to work on next. He'd had to put most of the project on hold when Peter came into his life, but with things settling down and Peter's emotional state improving little by little, Tony could hopefully start full-time work on it again.

Not to mention his earlier project of repairing JARVIS and his mangled code. The AI still couldn't function beyond the Tower itself, but between Tony and Vision's tireless struggles, they'd managed to salvage enough of the original code to bring JARVIS back to a state of semi-functionality. FRIDAY was still there to pick up the slack and do most of the technical work, but by God, was it amazing to hear his baby's dry-witted, sarcastic voice again.

"I'm insulted, J. Truly insulted."

"And I believe that is your permanent state of being, Sir."

"Why did I program you to be sarcastic?" asked Tony as he stepped into the elevator. "Memo to self: reprogram AI not to be a sarcastic shit later tonight."

"Noted, Sir."

With a slight drag in his step, Tony wandered into the penthouse kitchen and ruffled Peter's hair on his way to the refrigerator. The kid squawked at the treatment, big eyes fixed on Tony's backside with lethal intent. It was exactly what the genius wanted to see from his still-grieving charge.

"Raspberry or blueberry jelly?"

"Blueberry."

"Ah, train you well, I have," said Tony. "Brilliant padawan, you be."

Peter scrunched up his nose at this. "What if I want to be a Sith, though?"

"We've already had this conversation, young man."
"JARVIS says you could make a lightsaber if you wanted to. And who doesn't want to make a lightsaber?"

"I should create a whole army of BB-8s to terrorize him," said Tony. "It'd serve him right for putting such terrible ideas into a little boy's head. And what makes you think I haven't made a lightsaber yet."

As expected, that pulled a devious smile out of Peter. It was number ten for the week.

"The rogue Avengers are on the news again."

"Anything to write home about?" asked Tony, consciously keeping his posture relaxed and open. "They didn't come out guns blazing and blow up my property, did they?"

Peter shrugged. "I don't think so. Just some people talking about where they might be hiding now."

"The usual then."

Keeping his attention firmly on the sandwiches, Tony tried not to think of the rogue Avengers and everything that came along with them. He was still in contact, but it was only from a distance and exclusively through T'Challa or Fury. Tony knew his presence wouldn't be welcomed after the debacles with Ultron and then the Sokovia Accords. There wasn't any immediate hostility per se, but things were still tense so soon after Bucky Barnes' revival and the general public's continued skepticism of superhero morality. With his prominent position at Stark Industries and his newly claimed fatherhood, it was best if Tony laid low for at least a couple months.

Or forever, if Cap and SHIELD had anything to say about it.

Besides, Tony had Peter to think about now. Aside from Pepper, Happy, the Rhodes family, two social workers, his pediatrician, and a team of lawyers, the rest of the world thought Tony Stark had done no more than save young Peter Parker's life before flouncing off into the sunset to create another batch of homicidal robots and finger-eating toasters. Not even the tower's staff knew about him yet, and Tony planned to keep it that way for as long as possible.

And when it came to ditching his kid to fight in a conflict he didn't even understand—yeah, Tony was referring to Clint and that asshole Bug-Guy, both of whom were family-abandoning extraordinaires—they'd be waiting a damned long time. Peter was his first priority, not some guy who couldn't let go of the past or understand that actions came with consequences.

Seriously, no wonder Laura was on the verge of divorcing Clint's idiotic ass. Little kids were a lot of damn work and that poor woman was doing everything at this point. And to top it off, she didn't have just one rugrat like Tony, but three. Clint deserved to be served with divorce papers for the shit he'd pulled last year.

Hell, Tony had burned Cap's letter within a week of its arrival. What the fuck kinda crappy, self-righteous, preachy apology was that, anyways? Not to mention that stupid pho—

"Can I watch Ninja Turtles?" asked Peter. "They're showing new episodes now."

"Of course," said Tony without pause. "And remember what I told you about some of the headlines, right? Lots of misinformation, so just ignore them. Most of the newscasters don't know what they're talking about."

"I know, I know."
"Hey, hey! Don't forget your sandwich! I'm not your servant, kiddo."

"Can I have some chips?"

"Yeah, why not?" Tony conceded. "But take a piece of fruit, too."

"I like apples."

What would the world say, if they saw the infamous Tony Stark throwing together sandwiches and chips for an eight-year-old's lunch? They'd probably find some way to warp it, knowing the media. Not even Steve or Bruce would believe Tony could take care of a young child without maiming them. Little did they know that Tony and his priorities had shifted immensely in the last four months.

Rhodey had taken an assholish amount of glee in meeting Peter and observing that the boy had Tony wrapped around his little finger. But Tony didn't mind being a pushover for Peter. Good parents were supposed to put their kids first, right?

Hell, maybe if Howard had done the same, Tony wouldn't have turned out to be such a self-centered, antisocial, pathetic fuck up. In his opinion, it was high time to break the cycle of Starks fucking over their kids.

"Might as well give him some milk," Tony muttered to himself. "Good for his bones and all that shit."

"Excellent choice, Sir."

"Shut up."

The minute Tony had signed those adoption papers, he'd made a promise to himself that he'd never be like his father. Peter wouldn't want for anything, be it physical or emotional. It still scared the living shit out of Tony, being a parent to a tiny and very breakable human being, but he would not make the same mistakes as his own alcoholic and neglectful father.

Peter would have his full—or at least partial—attention as often as possible. It was the least he owed Ben and May Parker, who had obviously been amazing second-parents to the kid. So, if SHIELD didn't need new gear within hours of asking for it, then they'd just have to answer to Peter. And by God, did that kid ever have some lethal puppy-dog eyes.

They blew Steve Rogers' straight out of the water. And speaking of Rogers...

"Did the Capsicle receive his latest batch of goodies, J?"

"Yesterday morning, Sir. The delivery also included new upgrades for Agent Romanov's Widow Bites, Agent Barton's explosive arrows, and Sergeant Wilson's reinforced aerial harness and night vision goggles."

"Strike those from the checklist then."

"Very well. However, may I make a suggestion, Sir?"

"You're actually asking?"

"My programming compels me to seek your permission whenever the situation allows for it."

"That's a load of shit and you know it."
"I have no idea what you are talking about, Sir," said JARVIS, sarcasm clear in his voice. "Returning to the original subject, I have noticed on multiple occasions that some of the Avengers express disappointment when you do not deliver their upgrades yourself. Perhaps a more personal delivery method would not be remiss in the future?"

"You're absolutely right," said Tony with a nod. "Let's remedy that by sending them a fancy wine and dine plan next time. I think a half-dozen bottles of 1971 Grand Cru would do nicely, don't you?"

"I believe you are being obtuse, Sir."

"Why are you always so sassy? It's not a good look, let me tell you. But okay, if you want specificity, then make it Domaine Leroy Richebourg."

"From your personal collection?"

Tony shrugged and grabbed a bag of chips. "Uh, why not? It's not like I can even drink the stuff anymore."

"Very well," said JARVIS. "I have left a memo with Captain Rogers stating that your next shipment of upgrades will include wine, dinner, and a personal visit to the tower for pick-up."

"What?! You take that back!"

"I am terribly sorry, Sir, but it has already been delivered. You yourself have said in the past that good wines should always be personally delivered. Accidentally breaking a bottle of such rarity would be, in your words, a national travesty."

"That's it! We're reprogramming you tomorrow morning! I've had it with the malicious back-stabbing, you bundle of malfunctioning wires."

"I have added it to the weekly calendar, Sir."

Tony grumbled and cursed the many pitfalls that came with artificial intelligence. In his usual arrogant manner, Tony had designed JARVIS with far too much sass and independent thought, and it was now coming back to bite him in the ass.

For fourteen long months, he had been able to avoid almost all interaction with Steve and the rogue Avengers, only showing up in-person when it was absolutely necessary. And as Tony had been happy to discover, his actual presence was rarely, if ever, necessary. Brains and money were more than enough to keep the not-Avengers rolling, so physical appearances were easy to evade, especially when half the team couldn't stand him. When Tony did have to show his ugly mug—which had only been four times in fourteen months, thank God for that—he babbled in his quickfire manner, deflecting any interaction that the Avengers tried to initiate. And despite what the media and Rhodey seemed to think, Tony actually liked being alive and breathing, so keeping him far, far away from Rogers and Barnes was the best way to ensure his continued existence.

The arc reactor could only take so many direct hits before it gave out, too.

So, with those pleasant thoughts in his head, Tony dumped their lunchtime bounty on a sturdy tray and wandered over to join his adopted son—and wasn't that still a strange concept!—at the living room coffee table. Peter's eyes were trained on the screen, video game forgotten to watch the destruction of Raphael and Leonardo slicing up shit all around them.

"Please tell me none of our mutated turtles blew up that building?" said Tony. He put a tall glass of
milk in front of Peter. "April's always telling them to keep collateral damage to a minimum."

"Nope, the bad guys did it this time."

With a melodramatic sigh of frustration, Tony plopped onto the couch and decided to watch the Turtle vs. Foot battle unfold, stubbornly keeping his eyes off both Starkpads that rested on the coffee table. One of them showed a CNN article about the rogue Avengers, caption displaying a not-so-discreet picture of Captain America's perfect backside. Honestly, could the news stations be any more transparent? They focused on Steve's butt more than they did the terrorists.

Except it was a very fine butt, so Tony couldn't complain too much. Or at all.

"Is that the new suit you were working on?"

Tony looked up to see Peter holding his other Starkpad, small hands turning it this way and that to get a better look. The screen showed Cap in his newest bundle of gear, which was far less corny than any of his past suits. Coulson could bitch until he was blue in the face, but that spangly suit had needed to go. It was an insult to humanity, in Tony's humble opinion.

And since the rogue Avengers were conducting some sort of undercover operation today, it would finally be put to the test. Tony had reinforced it with vibranium in several places and Steve was finally getting a little less trigger-happy about rushing into things, so if everything went well, then the terrorists would be in for quite the surprise this time around. It should work beautifully so long as Steve didn't run straight into any grenades or .50 caliber bullets.

Dude had the survival habits of a lemming sometimes.

"Yep, just shipped it to him last week," said Tony around his sandwich. "Should keep him from getting shot in the ass again. Much stronger material."

"Why'd you keep the wings on? I thought he didn't like those."

"Cause I'm a jackass."

Peter smiled at that, lips turned up just a little bit. The expression was still very much a rarity, but Tony would take whatever he could get. And the kid seemed to like his sarcastic sense of humor, so all the better for it.

"Sir! There's been a—"

Not even needing to think about it, Tony flung Peter to the floor and curled over top of him, using the couch to absorb some of the flames that blasted through the penthouse's far wall. More than a little familiar with explosions, Tony wasn't surprised by the ringing in his ears or the singed smell that wafted around them.

"Tony!"

"Yeah, I'm alive and kicking, short-stuff. You?"

"I'm okay."

"Looks like today's covert terrorist operation was meant to be a distraction," said Tony. He grabbed Peter and started crawling across the floor. "And it looks like we're the actual target."

"What're we gonna do?"
"I've got some safe rooms and tunnels, kiddo. They'll take us down to the lab. JARVIS?"

"Passage D would be best, Sir."

He kept Peter clutched close the whole way across the room, diving into the kitchen when gunfire slammed into the wall behind them. Once they reached the furthest set of cabinets, JARVIS opened a tiny door that blended in perfectly with the pantry wall.

"Thanks, J. C'mon, we gotta move it, kid."

Bullets whizzed by just as Tony disappeared into the hidden passage, one just barely nicking his upper back. But after factoring in adrenaline and feral instinct to get his kid out of harm's way, a little bullet wound wasn't about to slow Tony down. Not hesitating for a second, Tony grabbed Peter's hands and dragged him into a small, dark stairwell.

"This leads down to the floors above my lab," said Tony, already racing down the steps with Peter in tow. "What happened, J?"

"Someone is trying to breach my system. I have been able to hold them off so far," assured the AI, "And I have also begun a counterattack of my own. Their system is far more sophisticated than I had anticipated."

"Do your thing, J. I'm heading towards passage F now."

"Noted, Sir."

"Any info on the bastard who had the fucking nerve to blow up my home? *Again.*"

"I have identified four operatives so far. They appear to know the tower's basic blueprints, but I do not believe they know about your hidden passages."

"No one does."

"The Avengers have also been alerted to our situation. ETA is ten minutes, Sir."

Tony panted as they entered the next stairwell. "Great, now I'm gonna have Captain Tightpants and the Spy Twins lecturing me about home security. Just the way I wanted to start my week."

"I would recommend more haste, Sir. The top entrance to passage E has been breached."

"Fucking hell. Kill the lights, J."

They were practically jumping down the steps at this point, footsteps echoing as Tony attempted to remember each twist and turn in his mind. If he'd been alone, it wouldn't have been too bad, but Tony had Peter with him and that complicated things.

"On your right, Sir!"

A bullet slammed into the spot right above Tony's head, dust raining down as he twisted to the side and vanished down yet another hidden doorway. This one led to an entrance just two floors above his primary lab, which was located eight floors below the Avenger suites. He had another lab in the basement, but explosions were banned from that one.

Hooray for structural integrity and zoning laws.

"Zap 'em, J!"
Two loud, crackling bursts came from the stairwell, Tony pushing Peter forward just in case the electrical pulses somehow ricocheted through the door. Thankfully, they didn't, and Tony put on another burst of speed when he heard a body thud to the ground behind them.

"C'mon, kiddo, just a little bit further."

"What about—"

"Don't worry about it," said Tony. "Just focus on getting to the lab, okay?"

Peter didn't say anything else after that, body pressed up tight against Tony's as they turned several corners and then raced into an open hallway, eyes flicking back and forth to look for more intruders. JARVIS' silence was disconcerting, too. If the AI was silent, then that meant he was too busy fending off cyber attacks to help his human masters.

"Only one more floor, buddy. Just one more floor, I promise."

"Tony!"

Yet another bullet slammed into the wall next to Tony's leg while a second nicked his left bicep, Peter gasping when some blood landed on his face. They would've been dead if it wasn't for another burst of electricity rocketing down from the ceiling; JARVIS was obviously still in commission and protecting them to the best of his abilities. A second intruder came around the far corner, bullets flying as Tony disappeared into a staircase just across the hall.

"What was that?"

"I've got booby-traps all over the place," Tony panted. "The closer you get to my lab, the deadlier they get."

"Cool."

"You're seriously the best kid ever, you know that?"

Tony nearly cried when he saw the familiar glass of his lab, JARVIS opening the two sliding doors that led to it. He all but flung Peter across the threshold, yelling at his bots to stay in their charging stations.

"Level 3 lockdown, J! Shut down and lock everything!"

"Already on it, Sir."

"Get your ass into the panic room, Peter! Where are those damn—"

A loud crash came from the glass walls, someone obviously trying to break through it. Knowing that he wouldn't have time to assemble all of the armor, Tony shoved his hands onto the nearest work table, a pair of half-finished repulsors sitting there for routine maintenance. He turned around just as the glass panels gave way, firing up the repulsors and unleashing a full blast at the moron who was stupid enough to enter his explosive-filled domain.

Tony watched as the intruder just barely slid underneath his panic walls and shot through the glass directly behind them. Not a second later, the gun rose upwards to fire at the nearest and most visible target, which just so happened to be Tony.

"Fuck you, bitch."
To the surprise of no one, the repulsor blasts slammed Tony backwards into a nearby work table, wrenches and hammers and screws falling all around him. A terrible pain shot up Tony's spine, searing through his limbs and nerves like an accidental lightning strike from Mjölnir. It took a few seconds for him to notice another ache on his lower left side, eyes too focused on the blood-coated panic walls to give it much thought right now.

"JARVIS?"

"Both repulsors landed direct hits to the intruder's chest and abdomen," said the AI. "Life-signs are no longer detectable. However, there are still eight intruders active in the building, so I would recommend using the panic room until Captain Rogers and his team arrive."

"Good idea, J. You still over there, Petey-pie?"

Peter raced over to Tony's side like a little rocket, eyes wide and watery as he took in the damage. The kid was pale and waxy and Tony wanted nothing more than to say everything would be alright. He felt like a horrible parent; May and Ben Parker had been killed not even five months ago and now Tony had taken a bullet to the gut, too. At this rate, Peter was going to be in therapy for the rest of his life.

"There you are," he panted. "Are you alright? That blast was a bit stronger than I thought it'd be."

"You're bleeding, Tony."

More than a little desperate to reassure his kid, Tony tried to move a couple inches to the right, but quickly decided against it. Yeah, his shirt definitely wasn't supposed to be that wet. In Tony's experience, wet shirts were never a good thing, since they usually meant you'd spilled a drink, gotten shot, or vomited all over yourself. Doing all three equaled a really shitty night, in Tony's opinion. And damn, now Peter looked like he was gonna pass out.

Well, it wasn't like he'd ever planned to win Parent of the Year, anyways.

"Yeah, we kinda need to stop that." Tony probed at his side with a grimace. "Hey, if JARVIS tells you where it's at, could you get me the first aid kit? I don't trust Dummy not to open it and bugger off with the scissors."

"Okay. I'll be right back."

Tony took a shallow breath and tried not to lose consciousness. The chances of him making it to the panic room were zilch at this point, but he needed to stay calm for Peter's sake. Unlike Howard, Tony wasn't about to leave his young son alone and defenseless; Peter was a smart cookie, but he was also just a little boy who couldn't protect himself.

At least if Tony was awake, he could still blast the shit out of anyone who broke through the panic walls. He just needed to stay awake until Steve arrived. The blond may not have been particularly fond of Tony in recent months, but he'd never put a child's life in danger, even if that child belonged to Tony Stark.

"I've got it," shouted Peter, "I've got it."

"That's my boy. And why the hell is Dummy here? Begone, you menace!"

"He wants to help."

"Yeah, okay, whatever," said Tony with an agonized grunt, "Just make sure he doesn't have a fire
extinguisher."

"I already took it away from him."

Peter sat down in front of Tony, popping the first aid kit open and riffling through it with a frantic air. The kid's hands were shaking like a leaf, head cocked to the side so that he could hear everything JARVIS was telling him.

"Should I put this on it?"

"I would suggest taking out the towel first," said JARVIS, voice calm so as not to scare Peter. "If you press that to Sir's side, then it should allow for——"

And then another explosion rocked the levels directly above them, Tony barely hanging on to consciousness when the tremors knocked him and Peter to the ground. He groaned in pain, white spots dancing in front of his eyes while Peter cried out in fear and panic. Tony tried his damnedest to keep the blackness at bay, but there was only so much his body could take.

Fuck, where was Captain America when you actually needed him.

"Tony! Tony!"

Chapter End Notes

I'm trying to keep this as close to canon as possible, including with the yet-to-be-released Civil War, but there are a couple changes. JARVIS is partially functional thanks to Tony and Vision; Peter is 8-years-old and newly adopted, as explained above; Tony still has the arc reactor in his chest; things are still tense after the Sokovia Accords, etc. And yes, Tony is kinda an oblivious idiot. But that's also canon, so what'd you expect?
Steve's heart nearly stopped when he heard and then saw a massive explosion rip through the top floors of Stark Tower.

A group of terrorists had snuck into a Staten Island shipyard earlier that morning, taking over a dozen hostages and demanding that one of their leaders be released from his sentence at a maximum-security prison. It had seemed like a pretty straightforward mission until a series of bombs had gone off in several nearby warehouses. And then the top floors of Stark Tower had exploded in the distance.

"What the—"

"Captain Rogers," said a familiar voice through his earpiece. "There's been a breach of the tower, including Boss' penthouse floor. I've detected four intruders so far, but I suspect there are more about to enter my surveillance network."

Steve swallowed and then asked, "Is Tony okay?"

"For the moment, but his suits are currently all down in the workshop for maintenance," said FRIDAY. "He's moving through the tunnels and towards the workshop as we speak. ETA should be less than five minutes."

"What's going on, Captain?" demanded Natasha over the comms. "I've got two hostiles in my sights right now."

"Take the shot."

Steve paid no attention to the bodies that dropped off a nearby catwalk, signaling Bucky, Clint, and Natasha to his side while also giving rapid-fire orders for Sam and Scott to finish handling the terrorists. It was obvious that the attack had been nothing more than a distraction, keeping the Avengers busy and distant while the actual assault was launched on Stark Tower.

"Okay, that's... keep monitoring him, FRIDAY. Can you do that?"

Clint ran past him. "Firing up the Quinjet."

The rogue Avengers had been operating in secret for about four months now, functioning under the leadership of Nick Fury and a newly assembled SHIELD. The former had appeared out of nowhere in Wakanda, negotiating a deal with T'Challa that would absolve him of the responsibilities that came with harboring international fugitives. Not wanting to put Wakanda into an even tighter spot and knowing that Fury would take their demands into consideration, Steve had reluctantly agreed to work under SHIELD again.

Unfortunately, while all the other Avengers had taken Fury's offer of protection, Tony had not. He wouldn't do anything beyond consulting and tech delivery, had been his exact words.

No more, no less.

Then again, they weren't really the Avengers anymore, were they?
SHIELD didn't refer to them as anything beyond their professional rank or title, and their weapons and tactical gear were all black now. Nothing distinctive to show civilians that Steve Rogers was Captain America, or Samuel Wilson was Falcon. Remaining out of the public eye had been a prerequisite of Steve, Clint, Wanda, Scott, and Sam's domestic and international pardons. And in T'Challa's opinion—something that he didn't even attempt to hide—they were lucky several countries hadn't tried to bring the former Avengers up on treason or war crimes.

As far as Nick Fury and the public were concerned, Captain America was officially out of commission for the foreseeable future.

Steve tried not to think about what news sources had been saying about the others and himself. The reactions of those outside the United States hadn't been kind to them. Imperialist warmongers seemed to be the favorite hashtag this week.

And as usual, the archaic flip phone felt like it was burning a hole in Steve's back pocket. Still and silent, just like it'd been for the last thirteen months. Always silent...

"My firewalls are currently under attack, but I'll try to provide you with as much information as possible," assured the AI. "However, I gotta insist that you hurry up. Two intruders have entered the tunnels and injured Boss."

"Injured?"

"A bullet graze to his upper back. They're in pursuit and Boss will have a hard time staying ahead of them for much longer."

"Get this hunk of junk moving, Clint!"

"Ready!"

Steve leaped onto the ramp just as it started to close, shield strapped to his back while Bucky adjusted his frankly ridiculous arsenal of guns. It took less than three minutes for them to reach Stark Tower, Clint not even landing on the helipad before they were running down the ramp and into the penthouse. For the second time in as many years, Tony's home was a mess of broken glass and marble, flames licking up the demolished wall on the far side of the living room. It was a depressing sight, especially since Steve hadn't been inside the tower in over fourteen months.

"JARVIS? FRIDAY?"

"The stairwells are still accessible," said the AI. "I will unlock the doors as you descend, but expect resistance. There are at least twelve operatives in the building, not counting the two that Sir and I have knocked unconscious."

"Any idea who they are?"

Both soldiers jumped when a hologram was suddenly projected from Tony's enormous television. It was a blueprint of the tower's top ten floors, little dots showing the movement and life-signs of every person in it. Bucky stepped forward to examine the layout, face an emotionless mask despite the anger in his eyes. And even if Steve wasn't thrilled to admit it, he could clearly see the Winter Soldier was in control right now.

"Not yet, Captain."

Bucky ran straight for the nearest stairwell. "Are either of the bastards dead?"
"Electrocuted, Sergeant Barnes."

The smirk that spread across Bucky's face was downright terrifying. Yes, they had come a long way in restoring Bucky's broken memories, nullifying the brainwashing triggers, and treating the physical and emotional trauma that had been left over from his time as HYDRA's Asset, but Steve had also learned to accept that pieces of the Winter Soldier would always be a part of his friend's personality. It was inevitable and Steve would take Bucky whatever way he could get him, even if that meant therapy sessions every week, knives under the pillows, and an occasional emergence of the Winter Soldier in stressful situations.

"Sounds like something Stark would do," said Natasha. "I've placed a call to medical, JARVIS. Should we expect any—"

"Captain! There's a Level 4 breach in Boss' workshop."

"You get Stark," Natasha ordered. "Clint and I will hunt down the others. Go!"

Steve didn't need to be told twice, heart pounding as he raced after Bucky and into the nearest stairwell. They didn't even bother taking the stairs themselves, opting instead to jump over the railings and climb straight down by grappling from one level to the next. Only one intruder appeared the whole way down and Bucky took the bastard out with a single bullet between his eyes.

"Which level is it on?"

"Four more down," said Steve, who'd forgotten that Bucky had never been in the tower before. "We'll need to bust through a hidden door. Tony doesn't like the idea of people accessing his lab through anything except the elevator."

"I'd call him paranoid, but it looks like said paranoia is warranted."

"You don't know the half of it."

When they landed at the bottom of the stairwell, Steve was pleased to see the door sliding open, JARVIS urging them to hurry up. Then they heard a loud crash from inside the lab itself, something slamming hard into the panic walls that had already come down on all sides of Tony's workshop. Steve ordered JARVIS to raise the walls while Bucky engaged and shot two intruders who'd just come out of the hijacked elevator.

"Fuckin' hell," hissed Bucky. "Look at this, Stevie."

"What?"

Bucky pulled off the intruders' masks and said, "I recognize these assholes. They're with HYDRA."

"Shit."

A portion of the panic wall suddenly started to rise behind them, revealing a pane of shattered glass and what appeared to be another dead body. Steve sucked in a sharp breath when he saw the smoking ruins of Tony's beloved workshop; he also knew without asking that the repulsors were responsible for most of the damage. It was a thought Steve had a hard time swallowing, especially since Tony often joked about the horrendous amount of destruction and pain he'd caused with them in the original Malibu lab.

"Get down, Steve!"
Two repulsor blasts slammed into the wall beside Steve, effectively flinging him and Bucky across the hallway. Thankfully, they both landed behind another wall panel, so another discharge wasn't able to hit them.

"Knock it the fuck off, Stark!" shouted Bucky. "Blowing your rescue party to itty-bitty, chunky pieces is downright rude!"

"Yeah, that's really gonna make him stop firing, Buck. Good job."

"I guess he's still pissed at us."

Steve didn't even deign Bucky with a reply, although that was mostly because he didn't want to think about it himself. Tony had been like a specter for the last several months, only appearing when SHIELD absolutely needed his physical presence and then disappearing without a word to any of them. With Bruce still gone to parts unknown, nobody on the team had been able to get more than sarcasm and technobabble out of the flaky genius, which had been grating on Steve's nerves more and more as each day passed.

When they crawled over and tried to enter the lab again, three repulsor blasts hit the wall above them.

"Yeah, definitely still pissed at us."

"Or maybe he doesn't recognize your voice," said Steve, barely ducking yet another burst. "Tony! Stop firing! It's Steve!"

Everything went quiet after that, the workshop settling into an eerie stillness as Steve and Bucky slowly crawled behind one of the overturned tables. They didn't even bother to acknowledge the body that had obviously been Tony's first target.

"You may stand down, Master Peter," said JARVIS. "Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes mean you and Sir no harm."

"Can they help him?"

"Medical has already arrived on the top floor and all of the Avengers are trained in first aid."

"Okay."

Both soldiers were startled to hear a child's voice not even thirty feet away from them. Standing to look over the mangled work table, Steve's eyes nearly bugged out when he saw a little boy of no more than seven or eight leaning over Tony's slumped form, hands and front covered in the engineer's blood. It was Bucky who reacted first, shouldering his rifle before running over to examine their downed teammate.

"Why is there a child in Tony's lab, JARVIS?"

"Master Peter is Sir's adopted son," said the AI. "And I would recommend taking the repulsor glove from him as soon as possible."

"Son?!"

"The adoption was finalized a short time ago."

Still in shock that Tony had acquired a young child without any of them noticing, Steve knelt down
to remove the Iron Man glove from Peter's extended arm. The little boy didn't look at him despite their proximity, instead focusing on Bucky while he administered first aid to Tony's bleeding side. By God, how had he missed this? How did you overlook your close friend adopting a child?

Then again, it wasn't like Steve had been a good friend to Tony, either. It'd been over a year since he'd even spoken more than ten words to him. And didn't that thought just make Steve want to cry, even if Bucky would scold him for it.

"Where's that medical team?" snapped Bucky, effectively snapping Steve out of his funk. "Stark's gonna bleed out if we don't get someone who knows what they're doing down here."

Right, they had more important things to consider right now.

"ETA in two minutes, Sergeant Barnes. I would suggest turning Sir upwards so as to stabilize him for immediate transport," said JARVIS. "It will also help stem the loss of blood. Dummy is bringing more towels to assist you."

Bucky looked more than a little startled when Tony's one-armed robot trundled up with a large pile of fresh towels, beeping and booping when they were accepted and applied to the engineer's gunshot wound. Butterfingers and You appeared a moment later with two more first aid kits, arms twisting this way and that to examine their injured creator.

"Umm, thank you..."

And then Tony gave a pained groan, blood seeping from his mouth in a small stream. Steve wasn't able to stop Peter before he rushed forward and pushed Bucky to the side, covering Tony with his small body and glaring at them.

"Stop it! You're hurting him!"

"C'mon, mini-Stark, we need to put pressure on—"

"No! Don't touch him!"

"Master Peter!" snapped JARVIS, all good manners gone. "I must insist that you allow Sergeant Barnes to treat Sir's wounds. Your father will die if the blood flow is not reduced from its current amount."

"But they hurt him before! I saw it!"

And didn't that just drive a knife right into Steve's heart. Even Bucky's face twitched with distress, his mission mask as the Winter Soldier cracking for a brief moment, which was quite the rare occurrence nowadays.

"They will not hurt Sir like that again," said JARVIS, a very real threat underlining his words. "I promise. Now please let Sergeant Barnes do what he can until the medics arrive. Current ETA is less than a minute."

"You better mean it, J."

"I do."

Peter stepped away after that, brown eyes watching every move of Bucky's hands. The little boy didn't even try to hide his distrust, shying away from Steve when he tried to move closer and provide some comfort to the trembling child. It hurt to have Peter reject him in such a blatant
manner, but Steve also knew the boy had likely witnessed the bloody confrontations they'd had with his adoptive father one year ago. The whole world had watched the airport battle and then Zemo's leaked video of Iron Man being brutally beaten by Captain America and the Winter Soldier.

It was little wonder that Peter wanted nothing to do with him.

"Captain!"

A team of SHIELD medics and agents swarmed into the lab not a minute later, Natasha coming in directly behind them. The assassin was covered in blood, her newest pair of Widow Bites still crackling with electricity. Steve wondered if she had taken any prisoners, or just slaughtered the whole lot of them.

Bucky willingly drifted to the side as the medics did their job and prepared Tony for transport, JARVIS assuring them the elevator was now safe for use. The AI had apparently exterminated whatever program had tried to infiltrate his and FRIDAY’s systems. Steve made sure Peter came along with them, assuring the agents that the child wasn't a threat. If Peter didn't receive the finest treatment, Steve was certain Tony would never speak to him again.

"The Quinjet's ready to go," said Clint when he arrived on the penthouse floor. "Ugh, what's with the kid?"

"We'll explain later."

After strapping Peter into his seat, Steve signaled for Clint to take off. Unsurprisingly, Peter protested being separated from his father, but Steve explained to the boy that Tony needed to be transported in a medivac and there wasn't any room for Peter in it. All this did was earn him yet another glare from the kid. At this rate, Steve and Bucky would never be able to earn Tony's forgiveness, simply because his adoptive son seemed to hate them.

Thankfully, Peter kept to himself and conversation quickly turned to the possible motives behind Tony's attackers. Bucky had already identified two of them as working for HYDRA, so they at least had some information to work with. SHIELD would collect and process the rest of the bodies by dinnertime, although Steve wasn't too interested in the answers just yet. He had more important things to worry about, like Tony's life-threatening condition and the small, sullen child sitting next to him.

"ETA with medical in one minute," Clint shouted. "Prepare the half-pint for landing, Captain."

"You got it, Cap."

Even though the landing was smoother than any other pilot could hope to manage, Steve still reached out to place his arm across Peter's chest, blinking in surprise when he saw that Bucky had done the same from Peter's opposite side. Said child looked down at their arms with a raised eyebrow, obviously unimpressed by the protection they were offering. Hell, Peter probably would've pinched them if he could, but metal and suit-covered arms weren't the best targets for pinching, as the boy seemed to know.

"Okay, boys and girls," said Clint, "Time to blow this popsicle stand."

"Clint..."
"What? I thought the kid would appreciate some levity here."

"Shut up."

Peter didn't seem to care either way, snapping off the seatbelt and racing towards the Quinjet's lowering ramp. With a grunt of surprise, Bucky unstrapped himself and took off after the kid, easily intercepting Peter before he could make for the helipad itself. Phil Coulson was standing outside, eyes watching the boy with only a small amount of shock. However, it was quickly covered up and the agent offered to escort them to the examine rooms. Unfortunately, Peter was having none of it.

"Where's Tony? I wanna see him."

"Your father has already been taken into surgery," said Phil. It figured that he already knew more than them. "JARVIS informed me of what transpired in the tower and I think it's vital that you be checked over by a doctor, Peter."

"Are they gonna give me shots?"

Phil grinned at this and said, "No, I doubt they'll need to give you any shots."

"If you say so."

And then the boy followed Coulson through the rooftop door, not sparing any of the Avengers a backwards glance. Steve tried not to let it bother him, but he wasn't used to children regarding him as a potential enemy. The fact that Peter was Tony's child only made it worse.

"I think our earlier plans have been shot to hell and back," said Bucky as they were led to exam rooms. "Stark might just shoot us where we stand when he wakes up. And his kid will gladly help him do it."

"You're really not helping, Buck."

"Someone has to be a realist here and it certainly ain't you, you damned punk."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

The two of them were quickly examined and discharged, more than a little eager to join everyone else in the waiting room. Tony had been in surgery for over an hour when Bucky and Steve arrived, their fellow Avengers already taking up all the space SHIELD afforded them. Steve was relieved to see a recently examined and freshly clothed Peter sitting on a nearby couch, the little boy talking quietly with Thor while ignoring everybody else around him.

"So," drawled Natasha, "Stark somehow adopted a child without any of us noticing. I find that mildly disturbing."

"The kid's actually talking to Thor?"

Natasha nodded. "He said a couple words to me, but completely ignored Clint and Sam."

"That's odd."

"No, it's really not," she said, giving all of them a sidelong look. "Thor wasn't here last year and I took Tony's side during the Sokovia Campaign. Well, at least for the parts that he knows of. In Peter's eyes, we're the only two who haven't hurt his father and therefore have earned some level of
trust."

Bucky released a bitter chuckle and said, "Well, we're fucked then."

"Until you do something to earn his and Tony's trust, then yeah, you are." Natasha's eyes flicking to the hallway door. "Ah, good, he's here."

None other than Happy Hogan came bursting through the door, his disheveled suit and hair covered in a fine layer of dust and sweat. The man had obviously raced to the hospital as quickly as possible, and probably from the tower itself, too.

Agent May gave them a cheery wave before disappearing back outside.

"Oh, thank God," wheezed Happy, arms opening wide when Peter ran across the room to him. "Agent Romanov and JARVIS told me everything. I was on the bottom floor with groceries when the first explosion hit. How're you doing, buddy?"

"They shot Tony."

"Yeah, so I heard. Now, c'mon, let's take a look at you."

Steve watched as Tony's personal driver and bodyguard walked Peter over to the couch, tsking and tutting as he placed the boy down next to Thor so he could better check him over. Peter's reaction to Happy was noticeably warmer than to anybody else in the room, hands gesticulating this way and that as he readily answered any question Happy asked him.

"And Dummy actually got the right kit? Color me impressed."

"Do you think Matika's okay?"

"I'm sure she's fine," said Happy, puzzling all of the Avengers. "She's in your bedroom and you fed her yesterday morning, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then she'll be fine for a couple days. And I'll go pick her up if you want me to. Sound good?"

"I don't want her to get hurt."

The forlorn look on Peter's face made Steve want to throw caution to the wind and carelessly scoop him up into a giant bear-hug. It was heartbreaking and Steve felt like a useless idiot. What good was Captain America if he couldn't even comfort a frightened child?

And then Clint had to open his mouth and ask the question that was on everyone's mind.

"Who's Matika?"

Happy gave them a sly smirk and said, "Peter's tarantula."

"You've gotta be kidding me," laughed Clint. "Stark bought his mini-me a fucking tarantula? That's hilarious."

"She's a Goliath birdeater," corrected Peter, finally acknowledging someone besides Thor and Natasha. "Tony gave her to me last week. She's just a year old, but the breeder says she'll grow to be the size of a dinner plate."
"That's terrifying."

Peter obviously didn't feel the same way, instead turning to face Thor so he could tell the Asgardian all about Matika and her breakfast of earthworms. Yet again, Steve felt like a vice had constricted around his heart, instinctively bumping shoulders with Bucky to relieve some of the ache. The kid's behavior simply reinforced how distant Tony had become to all of them.

At some point, Peter must've run out of words or energy, because the kid was soon leaning into Happy's side while his feet found their way under Thor's thighs. The blond god looked nothing less than ecstatic about this, large form not moving an inch despite his usual need for constant action and movement. A flash of jealousy burned in Steve's gut and he felt terrible for it.

It wasn't Thor who'd beaten Peter's adoptive father into the ground for all the world to see.

"He's a good kid," said Bucky when the fifth hour had passed. "Kinda twitchy and vengeful, but I'm sure he has his reasons. We don't know what happened before he came into Tony's care, either."

"That doesn't make me feel any better."

"Yeah, well, you're not the only person feeling like shit for not noticing that Stark had a fucking kid. We're all a bunch of bastards for missing it."

"We shouldn't have waited so long."

"You can't blame yourself, Stevie. It was both our ideas." Bucky rubbed at his eyes, exhausted by the emotional upheaval and revelations that today had brought. "I could've said something after I came outta cryo or when he worked on my arm four months ago."

"No, it should've been me. I've known Tony for several years now," said Steve. "We don't agree on a lot of stuff and I'll admit that I've probably let him get under my skin way more I should, but he was still my friend and I didn't do enough to protect that friendship. Tony obviously doesn't trust me anymore and I don't blame him."

"You both apologized to each other."

"Fat lot of good that did when I never bothered to reach out to him again. I should've called him myself instead of waiting like a hard-headed fool."

Steve really wished he had something to hit right now. A punching bag, a Chitauri, a couple of Nazis, anything. But no, he was in a hospital, waiting for news on his dear friend and hopeless crush who could be dying under the knife as they spoke, said man's newly adopted son only a few feet away. Steve also knew that if he so much as thought about touching his shield, Natasha would likely shot him.

She'd been in a foul mood since returning to SHIELD months ago. And Steve definitely wasn't her favorite person, either.

"Why are men so stupid?"

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Natasha. It's really helpful."

"I'm not really concerned about your confidence at this point, Rogers. Or you, Barnes." The assassin stretched from her spot against the wall, Clint snorting when he nearly toppled over. "Tony's the one who was shot and Tony's the one in surgery, so forgive me if I'm crashing your
little pity party."

Clint snuffled and said, "About time somebody did it."

"Shut it, Barton."

"Fine, ignore my opinion. Not like anyone ever takes it, anyways."

"And for good reason."

Natasha pinched the other assassin before he could say anything else, ignoring his yelp of pain in favor of glaring down at Steve and Bucky. The super-soldiers tried not to wilt beneath her gaze, but it was hard going. Most people assumed that the Hulk and Thor were the Avengers' most dangerous members, but those close to the team knew better.

No Avenger was scarier than Natasha Romanov in a mood.

"I'm tired of watching you two skitter around like a pair of mangy dogs whenever Tony shows up to fix or give us upgrades. I'll admit that at first I thought One-Armed Wonder over here was gonna kill him for merely existing, but for reasons I can't even fathom, it looks like the pair of you have developed a school-yard crush of frankly pathetic proportions."

"Fucked up minds think alike," mumbled Clint. "Ouch! Knock it off!"

"My point is," Natasha hissed, "Do something about it. I know Tony does stupid shit sometimes—we all know that—but if you really want anything to do with him, in any way, then you need to pull your heads outta your geriatric asses and talk to him. And it's gonna have to be you two because there's no way in hell Tony's gonna approach either of you except under pain of death or damaged tech."

"And you might wanna ingratiate yourself to Stark 2.0 while you're at it," said Clint. "We all know Stark's downright possessive of his robot babies, so I think it's safe to assume he'll be the same with a mini-human being, too."

Bucky snorted. "Have you seen that kid? He wants to stab us with a fork."

"You'd survive it."

And then all of their heads snapped to the left, a lone doctor appearing from the door that led to surgery. Everyone except Happy and Thor were immediately on their feet, the latter two remaining in place so as not to disturb Peter. It appeared the little boy had fallen asleep quite some time ago.

"I'll cut right to the chase," said the doctor. "Mr. Stark is alive, if not worse for wear."

Steve ran a hand over his face and said, "Thank God. And thank you, doctor. We really didn't know..."

"I'll admit, it was touch and go for a while. As I'm sure you are aware, Mr. Stark has several very serious medical conditions. The bullet grazes on his upper back and left bicep were simple to treat, but the bullet to his gut ricocheted inside and then struck his lowermost rib on the left side. We were fortunate it wasn't a couple inches higher or Mr. Stark would be dead."

"But he's gonna be alright?" Bucky demanded. "That's the important part, Doc."

"Mr. Stark should make a full recovery, or as full as possible for someone with his preexisting
conditions," assured the surgeon. "However, it's going to be a fairly long and painful recovery. The bullet shattered inside of him when it struck the rib, causing a lot of internal bleeding and tears. Combined with the arc reactor's position, his weakened heart, and reduced lung capacity, I'd estimate at least two months of recovery at this point. And that's being optimistic."

"We'll have someone with him around the clock, Dr. Schaeffer, I can assure you of that." Steve looked down and tried not to fidget. "And I don't mean to sound pushy, but when will we be able to see him?"

The doctor frowned and said, "Well, he's in recovery right now, but I'd like to keep physical visitation to a minimum for at least the next three days. Infection is always a concern right after surgery, especially when it's as invasive and traumatic as Mr. Stark's was. However, I was just recently sent his updated medical files by that AI of his, and it appears a Mr. Peter Parker is listed as Mr. Stark's next of kin."

"Does that mean I get to see Tony?"

Steve was startled to find Peter standing right next to him, still droopy eyes trained on the doctor and his chart of medical files. When the little boy wobbled a bit from his sudden awakening and dash, Bucky reached out to catch him. For once, Peter didn't bat away the help, instead grabbing onto Bucky's metal hand in order to keep his balance.

"I assume you're Mr. Parker?"

Peter nodded and didn't hesitate to say, "Tony adopted me. So can I see him?"

"In another hour or so, but you'll have to wear some protective clothes and not touch anything around him."

"Don't worry, I won't touch anything. I promise."

"Alright, well, if that's settled, then I'll send a nurse out to fetch you as soon as Mr. Stark's been moved to his recovery room," said Dr. Schaeffer. "Now if you'll excuse me, I need to personally check on his progress before the move can be made."

"Thank you, Doctor."

Everyone echoed the same words, a palpable wave of relief spreading through the waiting room. None of them commented when Peter rushed over to sit on the chair closest to the surgery doors, eyes wide and fingers twitching as he waited for the doctor to return. Happy wandered over a few minutes later, kneeling down to speak with the anxious and fretful child.

"Okay, Stevie," said Bucky once everything had calmed down, "You're the Man with a Plan, and we could really use a plan right now."

"I'm thinking, alright? I can't screw this up. Not again."

Chapter End Notes

It sounds mean, but as a medical student, I'm utterly fascinated by all of Tony's medical conditions. The arc reactor and everything it entails is like a medical nightmare, in my opinion, so I find it to be a great subject to explore. And this will
probably be the only chapter outside of Tony's POV, so I hope you enjoyed a little something from Steve's perspective.
"Tony? Tony!"

A voice was incessantly calling his name, punching through the pain and darkness that surrounded him. Tony groaned in response, eyes crusted shut and throat raw with a nearly unbearable ache. And then he realized there was something stuck down his throat.

"Whoa, whoa! Calm down, Tony, it's alright," soothed a familiar voice. "They're just taking the intubation tube out. We need you to relax, it'll make it a lot easier. Yeah, that's it, buddy. Just relax and..."

Sharp pain shot down Tony's throat before an annoying ache set in, fresh air entering his lungs like a miniature hurricane. Then the coughing started, long and hoarse and hard in the way that made you want to throw up. A strong hand massaged his shoulders and chest all the way through it, voices speaking over top of Tony as he fought to regain a semblance of control. It was slow going, but he was eventually able to open his eyes for a better look.

A doctor was standing over him, shining a pen light into his eyes while also removing what tape was left around his mouth and neck. Tony tried to move his hands, but quickly discovered they were tied to the bed rails. The doctor asked him to blink once for yes and twice for no, running through the usual barrage of questions medical people were so fond of. And then he turned, speaking to someone else in the room Tony couldn't see because his stupid head didn't want to move.

Oh, there was a brace around it.

Then a familiar figure came into view, decked out in some of the ugliest medical gear he'd ever seen. Yeah, Tony must've been pretty bad off if they were keeping him in isolation and making everyone wear PPE to visit him. It was amazing how good Pepper made hair nets and booties look, though.

"Pep..."

"Hey, no talking," scolded the redhead. "You just had a tube removed from your throat, so no talking of any type, okay?"

"You're asking for the impossible, Peps."

And there was Happy, round face appearing in Tony's peripheral vision. He was sporting a bright smile, arm slung around Pepper's shoulder as she fussed with the blankets that covered Tony from the chest down.

"Good to see you in the land of the living, Boss. We've been worried."

Pepper reached up to massage his scalp. "You're in the hospital right now, Tony. Do you remember what happened?"

"Sho..."
"Yeah, you were shot by someone who broke into the tower. But it's okay, they've all been taken care of. The Avengers made sure of that." Pepper gave him a watery smile and scratched behind Tony's ear. "The doctors had to perform major surgery to remove the bullet. You've been knocked out for three days."

That made Tony's eyebrows shoot up in surprise. He really needed to stop catching bullets so often. And then he remembered...

"Pete..."

"Hey, hey, calm down! Peter's okay," Pepper assured. "He's out in the hallway with Steve and Thor. The doctor didn't want him in here when they removed the tube. It would've been too much for him."

Well, Tony certainly couldn't argue with that. Peter had been through a lot of shit in recent months, so the last thing he needed was to see a long tube being pulled out of his adopted father's throat. However, that didn't change the fact that Tony needed to see him right now.

"Do you want me to get him? We already got the doctor's approval."

Tony tried to nod, but it hurt too much. Thankfully, Pepper understood and walked over to the door, speaking quietly with whoever was out there.

"He's been doing really good, Boss," said Happy. "You've got yourself a brave kid there."

If Tony had been able to speak, he would've told Happy that of course Peter was strong and brave and amazing. In his short lifetime, Peter had lost his mother and father to a plane crash and then his beloved aunt and uncle to a burglary gone wrong. The boy was so unbelievably strong Tony wanted to cry over it. No child should have to go through the shit Peter had, which now included seeing his adoptive father shot and almost killed. It was astounding the kid hadn't gone into some kind of meltdown yet.

"No, I don't need your help," came Peter's voice from the doorway. "Aunt Pepper can put it on."

"Peter, what did I—"

"See? It's already on. Can I see Tony now?"

A chuckle came from Tony's right side and Happy said, "That kid's pretty damned vicious, too. Half the team's scared of him, especially Steve and Bucky. Turns out quiet lil' Peter can hold quite the grudge."

That prompted Tony to raise an incredulous eyebrow.

"What? Don't believe me? Wait until you see him in action. Peter damn near bit Steve yesterday, and Clint won't even sit at the same table as him."

"Rea... lly?"

"He watched what happened last year," said Happy, lips twisting into a sad frown. "You nearly got killed on live TV, Boss. Right now, Peter views those two and anyone from their team as a threat to you. Clint, Sam, and Wanda have been getting the cold shoulder, too."

"Scott?"
"The kid threatened to step on him."

A nurse bustled around them, checking all of Tony's vitals, releasing his hands from their restraints, and administering another dose of pain medication. Tony was well known for avoiding meds whenever he could, but the burning pain in his stomach and throat was more than enough to make him sigh in relief. Once she was finished, the nurse promised to return in a few minutes with the doctor and his charts, which were likely a horrendous mess.

When it came to his health, Tony was a walking medical disaster.

"Rhodey and T'Challa both paid you a visit yesterday," Happy continued. "Everyone's kinda wary of the supposedly new and improved SHIELD, so I guess forming a united front would be wise at this point. Rhodey needed to clear up some things with the Air Force, but he says he'll be back sometime tomorrow. Vision's hovering somewhere around here, too. The poor guy's been feeling awful about not—and there's the man of the hour!"

A smile spread across Tony's face when he saw Peter tumble through the doorway, glasses askew and all but drowning in the adult-sized PPE the nurses had forced him into. The kid was scrawny to begin with and he nearly tripped twice on his way over to Tony's bed.

"You're awake!"

For all of the jackass and narcissistic tendencies Tony very much knew he had, the sight of Peter unharmed and happy to see him was almost enough to make his heart break into a thousand pieces. Tony had never intended to become a father. Just the thought of reproducing or having a young child under his care was the stuff of nightmares, as he'd told Pepper and Rhodey on numerous occasions. If there was even the slightest chance Tony would turn out like Howard, then it was for the best that children never step a foot into his life.

When it came to parenting, Starks were complete and utter failures, the whole lot of them.

And then Peter had appeared from out of nowhere, completely alone and about to be tossed into foster care. The part of Tony that still very much remembered what it felt like to be silenced and ignored by everyone around him had immediately reared its ugly head, demanding he do something to guarantee that Peter would not suffer the same lonely childhood that Tony had. It was probably the best decision he'd ever made, now that he thought about it.

"Pe—"

"No, don't talk, the doctor said you're not supposed to talk," scolded Peter when Tony opened his mouth. "Does your throat still hurt?"

Tony nodded, fighting back a smile when Peter visibly resisted the urge to reach out and make sure the doctors actually knew what they were doing. He wondered if the little boy had been interrogating every nurse and doctor involved in Tony's care. It wouldn't surprise him.

"But the happy drugs are helping, right? Aunt Pepper said they would."

"I think your father's so doped up that he can't think straight," laughed Happy. "I can see the rusty gears grinding from here."

"Oh yeah, Thor says hello."

Peter pointed at the glass window across the room, Pepper and four other figures standing in front of it. As expected, Thor was waving with a wide smile, shouts of joy and encouragement echoing
into the recovery room. To the god's right side stood Natasha, who smoothly ducked when a
flailing hand skimmed right by her head. And as always, Tony wondered if Scott Lang was hiding
on someone's shoulder. It was a perfectly legitimate thought.

Unfortunately, Tony wasn't nearly as thrilled to see Steve and Bucky, who were both just staring at
him through the glass window. Peter must have noticed where Tony was looking because the little
boy reached out and took his father's hand, brown eyes serious as he shook it to get Tony's
attention.

"Do you want me to get rid of them?"

It took everything Tony had not to bust up laughing. Had his kid seriously just threatened to throw
out Captain America and the Winter Soldier?

"Because I can," Peter insisted. "The doctor says you don't need to see anyone you don't want to."

"Come... here..."

Not needing to be told twice, Peter shuffled forward and wrapped his gloved hands around Tony's
left one, mindful of the heart rate and oxygen monitors that were connected to his fingers and wrist.
Tony could feel the boy's hands shaking under his, a clear sign that he wasn't as okay as he wanted
people to believe. The stoic and strong mask Peter had been maintaining finally started to crack
once he was confronted with an alive and physically available Tony Stark.

"Okay?"

Peter nodded, one hand going up to wipe at his watery eyes. A snotty nose and loud sniffles
promptly followed, the kid finally letting go of that damnable facade. The need to comfort Peter
was strong, but Tony held back for a minute, giving the boy time to blow into a tissue Happy
handed to him. Whenever Tony had cried as a child, Howard had called him a wimp and a baby,
saying Stark men didn't cry no matter what life threw at them. Now, thirty years later, Tony knew
his father had been full of shit.

Children cried when they were upset and it was perfectly okay for them to do it. Maybe if Howard
hadn't made Tony repress his emotions so much as a child, then he wouldn't have been so fucked
up as an adult. So, Tony let Peter cry out his fears and anxieties, gently holding the boy's hand
through it all. He really, really wished he could actually touch Peter to comfort him, but the kid
was covered from head to toe in blue isolation clothes.

"You almost died."

"I know."

"That's the second time I've seen you almost die."

Peter threw a venomous glare over his shoulder, pinning Steve and Bucky to the wall with
narrowed eyes that were far too angry for such a young child. At this point, Tony was actually
starting to believe Happy's claim that Peter had tried to bite Steve.

"I'm sorry."

"No, that's not good enough," said Peter, breaths hiccuping when he turned back to Tony. "I won't
let you do this. You can't keep doing this."

"Peter?"
"I need to check on Matika."

With that said, Peter all but ran from the room, dashing by Pepper when she came back inside. He must've almost barreled over the others too, because Tony saw Thor and Bucky almost topple into the far wall. Fuck, that really wasn't a good reaction, was it?

"Fuck."

Happy shuffled his feet for a minute and then said, "If it makes you feel any better, Matika is now officially staying in Thor's room, so you don't have to worry about Peter running back to the tower for her."

"I hate life."

"Well, that could've gone better," said Pepper. "Don't worry, Tony, he just needs to calm down. He's scared, and rightfully so."

"I'm a terrible parent."

Pepper flicked his right ear. "Stop talking like that, dumbass. You're a great father and Peter adores you."

"I shouldn't—"

"Ah, Mr. Stark! You're still awake and even talking," said the doctor, who seemed to appear out of nowhere. "Those are both good signs. Now, just to make sure that everything is progressing as we'd like, I'm gonna have you taken down to radiology for some additional scans. Your AI has offered to help me with some of the more precarious aspects of your chest and lung conditions."

Two orderlies bustled in before Tony could even say anything, preparing his bed and other medical equipment for transport. Pepper just gave him a small smile and moved out of the way, quietly speaking with the doctor as Tony was wheeled into the hallway. He would've taken a quick look around if his eyes hadn't felt so damn heavy, lights dimming as he yawned and drifted into a dreamless sleep.

Sneaky ass orderlies must've shot him up with the good stuff. Damnit...

It was an undetermined time later when Tony came to in the familiar setting of his isolation room, everything settled back into place like he'd never left. It was a little bit creepy to realize how easily he could be knocked out and moved without even noticing it.

See, this was why he hated pain meds so much.

A few minutes passed with Tony just staring at the ceiling, brain running through all of the experiments that would need doing when he finally blew this popsicle stand and returned to the tower. He assumed that JARVIS and Pepper had already arranged for renovations to begin on the damaged floors, hopefully starting with the quick replacement of windows. Thor might have been okay with it, but Tony didn't enjoy living one hundred floors up with no glass to keep out the wind. He also hoped that Dummy hadn't gotten up to any—

"Tony?"

Grunting in surprise, Tony turned his head to look at the door, eyes falling on the short figure standing there. He immediately recognized the pajamas Peter was wearing, little green versions of the Hulk spattered all over the fuzzy shirt and pants. It had been one of Tony's first gifts to the boy
when he'd arrived at Stark Tower. Well, and about two hundred other things, but Tony just loved giving his kid gifts, okay?

It took a lot of effort not to laugh at the hilarious combination Hulk pajamas and blue isolation clothes made, though. Peter looked like someone had vomited on him.

Then he paused, remembering that Bruce wasn't here to enjoy it with him. Fuck, this week really sucked.

"Hey there, baby boy."

"I brought some ice chips," said Peter. "They're supposed to be good for you."

"They are pretty good."

Peter shuffled forward with a small cup in his hand, Hulk slippers making no sound on the polished floor. It suddenly came to Tony's attention that he had no idea who his son was staying with, something he really should've noticed earlier. If he found out Peter didn't have the best accommodations New and Less Evil SHIELD had to offer, then Cyclops was gonna lose his other eye.

"Look, I even brought a spoon."

"It's puny."

"Thor didn't have any others. Beggars can't be choosers."

"Smart ass."

It was only after two scoops that Tony realized something wasn't right with this picture.

"Wait a second," said Tony around a hoarse cough, "Visiting hours are over and this place is crawling with agents. How'd you get here?"

"He came with me."

And didn't that voice just make Tony wanna run off screaming. Not even twenty feet away stood Bucky Barnes, almost completely hidden in the shadows like some kind of slasher flick serial killer. Tony wondered if the world really hated him so much to be this cruel.

"Why?"

Bucky shrugged and said, "Because he asked me."

"You suggested it first," snapped Peter, nearly jabbing Tony in the eye with his spoon. "And I could've gotten here on my own if I wanted to."

"The midget threatened to electrocute me if I didn't help him."

All Bucky received in reply was a stuck out tongue and upturn of the nose from Peter. It was more than a little surprising for Tony to witness because the boy had been painfully polite to everyone he'd encountered prior to this week. Hell, he'd been so polite that Tony was a little creeped out at first, but then Peter had said his Aunt May believed first impressions were of the utmost importance, even if you didn't like the person. It was a piece of maternal advice Tony wasn't about to argue with. He had already declared that Aunt May's advice would be a sacred religion in the Stark household.
"That's my boy."

"Vision said he'd help me, too."

"Yeah?" Tony tried to picture their exchange in his head. "He's usually a goody two-shoes. How'd you persuade him to do that?"

"I promised to give him some of Aunt May's secret recipes."

"Well, that explains why he caved so easily."

Tony continued to ask him about where he was staying and how Matika was doing. Apparently, Thor had been all too happy to volunteer for both duties, so Matika and her tank were sitting on a table in his room while Peter used the bed. Since Thor only needed to sleep a couple hours per week, it actually worked out pretty well. Plus, Peter thought living with a god was the coolest thing since Neil Degrasse Tyson's *Cosmos."

"I'm sorry about yelling at you," said Peter after several minutes of jabbering. "Aunt May says I gotta learn to control my temper."

"No, it's alright, you had every reason to be upset."

It took a bit of finagling, but Tony was eventually able to reach up and cup the boy's cheek. Peter's lower lip was starting to wobble and Tony didn't think he'd be able to take another bout of tears. Whereas Howard had no problem telling his young son to shut up and suck it up, Tony was the polar opposite. Seeing Peter cry from fear or sadness felt like someone had shoved a fork into Tony's eye, something he never would've thought himself capable of just four months ago.

"I lost my parents too, remember?" Tony wiped away the tears that had started to leak again. "Even if I didn't get along with them, it doesn't change the fact that they were lost to me. Especially my mother. They were taken just like your parents were. And your aunt and uncle. Then you saw what happened to me? I'd be freaked out if you weren't yelling at me."

"Aunt Pepper says you need to be yelled at sometimes."

"Eh, she just wants a sidekick to help drag me to board meetings," said Tony. "And you're adorable, so Pep thinks you're the perfect accomplice."

"I should bring Matika with me."

"Holy shit, I'm so taking you with me next time. That ol' bastard from the Johnson family is terrified of spiders! That's it, scratch whatever Pepper had planned, you are now officially my sidekick for terrifying SI board members. Why didn't I think of this sooner?"

Despite the quiet air Peter still had around him, it was a quick glance over at Bucky that really caught Tony's attention. The assassin was almost indistinguishable from the shadows at this point, only his pale face and the slight gleam of his metal arm visible in the dark corner. Even though Tony couldn't really see the other man, he had a strange feeling in his gut that said Bucky was upset, even if he didn't know why. And not just a little upset, but very upset. It made the hairs on the back of Tony's neck stand on end, hand tightening around Peter's when he—

"Oh."

"Yeah, I told Thor that she only likes to eat earthworms, but he thinks a bilgesnipe would be a worthy meal, too."
Unbeknownst to Peter, who was still jabbering away about Matika and Thor's fascination with her, it was no longer just three people in the room anymore. Cold eyes watched Tony and his son, flicking back and forth as Peter's hands gesticulated to prove his point. By all accounts, Tony should have been utterly terrified that he and Peter were alone with the Winter Soldier, or at least a partial version of him. At the moment, Tony was severely injured and completely defenseless, which meant Peter was even more vulnerable without an adult to protect him.

Fuck, what was he supposed to do if Bucky snapped and attacked them?

He'd almost placed a bullet between Tony's eyes before, so what said he wouldn't do it again? And Peter. What would the Winter Soldier do to Peter? From the looks of it, Cap didn't even know Bucky was here.

It was this very man—this HYDRA-trained assassin—who had killed Howard and Maria Stark in cold blood, beating Tony's father through the head before moving on to crush his mother's neck like a soda can. Maria hadn't been the best mother, but Tony had loved her, and no way in hell had she deserved such a horrific fate. For several long moments, Tony considered pushing the panic button on his wristband, which would then alert FRIDAY to something being wrong in Tony's room.

Vision would be here within less than a minute if he pushed it. And Bucky would be dead, but Peter would also be safe.

It was a question that no parent had to think very long about, and Cap could just fuck himself if he thought Tony would put anyone else before Peter. For all the friendship and feelings Tony had with Steve Rogers, absolutely no one was allowed to come before his adoptive son. It simply wasn't negotiable.

He wouldn't be Howard. He couldn't be Howard.

Tony's fingers were twitching towards the button when he noticed the pronounced hunch in Barnes' shoulders, the longtime assassin seeming to have curled in on himself much like the rolly-polly pillbugs that Peter had started to collect last month. This wasn't the look of a man who was planning to take away the only family Tony had left, like he'd done twenty years ago. Hell, Bucky looked like he would disappear into the wall if he could get away with it.

"Has Bucky seen Matika?"

Yep, that caused two heads to pop up at the same time. It was hilarious to watch, if Tony was being honest.

"No."

"Well, he's older than time itself, so maybe it'd be good for him to meet a descendant of his relatives," said Tony. He gave said man an obnoxious smirk, all too pleased at seeing the shocked look on Bucky's face. "It'd probably give her a much-needed break from Thor, too. He can be a bit... overzealous at times."

"She might try to bite him, though."

"I've been bit by many a spider in my time, kid." Bucky stepped out of the shadows, shoulders a little less hunched and pathetic looking. "Some have almost killed me too, but those were of the... giant variety."

Peter shrugged and said, "That's okay, Matika doesn't eat junk food, anyways."
Bucky blinked in surprise at the insult.

"My kid just committed a burn!" gasped Tony around a painful cough. "Holy shit, I'm so proud right now. Wow, just... wow, I need a moment."

"That was a pretty good one."

And then Bucky stiffened, head cocking to the side like a shaggy mongrel, ears seeming to twitch when he heard something that was beyond the capability of mere mortals like Tony and Peter. All it did was further solidify Tony's belief that super-soldiers were a weirdass bunch.

"What doth thou cyborg ears hear?"

Bucky raised an eyebrow as if to ask why Tony was such an annoying shithead, but then a nurse walked by the window and glanced in and saw... nothing except Tony in his hospital bed. The engineer faked sleep and made himself look as injured and drugged out as possible. Thankfully, it seemed to work because the nurse only took a five second survey and then went on her way.

"That one wears too much perfume," said Bucky, stepping out of the dark corner with Peter in his arms. "And has a slight limp on her left side from a bad ankle. Likely a fracture from her high school or college days."

"Wow..."

"Yeah, that's kinda creepy," Tony agreed. "Cool, but creepy."

All Bucky did was shrug and say, "Spy."

"Well, with the additional data I have just received, I guess that officially makes you Spy Twin #3."

"I feel honored."

Before they could say anything else, Bucky cocked his head to the side again and gave a nod towards the left corridor. It appeared that Tony's doctors were about to bring him some more pain medication. And he kinda needed it, too.

"Looks like our time's up, kiddo."

"I'll be back first thing in the morning," said Peter, reaching out to take Tony's hand. "And Uncle Rhodey should be here by then, too."

"That's really good news. I've missed my honey bear."

Peter leaned forward to give Tony an awkward, one-armed hug and said, "Have good dreams. I love you."

And then the little gremlin just ran off to the door, pulling the PPE off while also acting like those three words were no big deal at all. It shocked Tony shitless, especially since he'd stopped saying those words to his mother when he was around Peter's age. Tony didn't even remember when he stopped saying them to Howard. It was likely after he learned to walk and talk, which was when everything started going downhill, anyways.

"Barnes."

"Yeah?"
"Remember, I built you that arm," said Tony, "And I can rip it off again if I've good reason to."

The other man just stood there for a moment, eyes darting between Tony and Peter before he eventually nodded in agreement. Thankfully, Peter noticed none of this, instead fighting to get the booties off his Hulk slippers. Bucky steadied the boy when he almost toppled over, giving Tony another sharp nod before he disappeared out of the room with Peter in tow.

"Fuck," gasped Tony when they were finally gone, "I could really use some more pain meds right now."

Chapter End Notes

If I'm leaving some parts vague, it's because Civil War hasn't came out yet and I don't wanna deviate from canon too much. I've got a pretty good idea of how it'll likely end and lead into Infinity War, but I'm gonna play it safe at this point. And yes, Peter's holding quite the grudge against anyone he thinks might be a threat to the only parental-figure left in his life. Updates are gonna get slower now; medical school is cruel and takes up most of my time, damn them.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After being independent and sociable for three days, Peter suddenly regressed to clingy and quiet for some unknown reason. Tony tried to get him to talk about it, but all Peter did was crawl onto the hospital bed and sit there, ignoring everyone else around him.

Thank God the doctors had agreed to letting a PPE-covered Peter have close contact with Tony. It would've been a tearful nightmare otherwise.

"So, what's the verdict," asked Tony on the fifth day, "Lord of the Rings marathon or a half-dozen Disney movies? Specifically ones from the 90s renaissance because those are all this magnificent brain can tolerate, kiddo."

"How to Train Your Dragon."

"Seriously? Again? You've been on a dragon-kick for the last two weeks."

Peter shrugged and leaned in closer, absorbing the engineer's body heat while also rearranging the blankets into a more comfortable position. Not that Tony minded in the slightest; despite his usual aversion to unnecessary contact, he didn't mind having Peter close. It had taken a bit of getting used to, but having his son nearby was reassuring and made Tony feel more in control. And Tony absolutely despised not being in at least partial control of any given situation.

"It's a reasonable addiction."

"Yeah, yeah, fire up the dragons, J. And send a memo to Thor about this film being right up his alley."

"Of course, Sir."

Still more exhausted and in pain than should've been possible with so many drugs, Tony considered the merits of begging his nurse for another round of painkillers. His body felt like a lead weight that had been dropped several stories, all dented up and full of jagged holes. Rhodey and Natasha had been there when they last changed his bandages, both of them wincing at the massive bruises, ugly scars, and inflamed bullet wound. As usual, things went straight to hell and Tony's shitty-ass immune system had decided to let an infection take up residence in his injured side.

How typical.

And now Captain Spangles and the Birdbrains were outside his door, talking amongst themselves like he couldn't hear them.

Yet again, how typical.

"Just in case you monkeys thought you were being discreet," shouted Tony, "We can clearly hear you."

"I told you so."

Peter looked so utterly unimpressed that Tony was afraid his nose would fall off. The kid had
become even more hostile to the other Avengers in recent days, although Bucky seemed to have
won a tiny bit of gratitude from him. It wasn't much, but Tony was at least somewhat sure that his
kid wouldn't try to electrocute Bucky in the near future.

It was the little things that counted, after all.

And he really needed to make sure Peter never found out the truth behind Howard and Maria
Stark's deaths. Tony didn't even want to know how the boy would react to that bit of information.
It'd probably involve giant spiders and his son becoming a supervillain.

"What do they want?" grumbled Peter. "I bet none of them like dragons."

"You are a seriously salty child."

"Sorry, boys," came Pepper's voice out of nowhere, "But I gotta borrow Tony for a few minutes
before you can give him more gray hairs."

"Oh, that's no problem, Ms. Potts."

"Yeah, we have to put these super fancy hospital dresses on, anyways."

"I can see that."

To no one's surprise, Peter perked up at the sight of his favorite redhead, giving Pepper a little
wave when she came into the room. Tony could just barely hear Clint whining about how Peter
hated them but adored Pepper. For fuck's sake, what had they expected?

Pepper was amazing. Everybody with half a brain loved her.

"Watching the adventures of Toothless and Hiccup again?" asked Pepper. "You really need to show
Thor this movie. He'll love it."

"And try to bless it with Mjölnir like he did with Beowulf."

"That hammer is a menace," said Pepper. "Now, enough procrastinating. I need you to sign these
forms. Just at the bottom. Hey, what are you—"

"No, the question is what are you doing, Ms. Potts?"

"I think it's the other way around, Mr. Stark. You never read anything I hand to you."

"You are acting decidedly shifty," said Tony. "I can see it in your eyes. And you know I hate being
handed things."

"Just sign the forms, Tony."

"These are damage reports from the tower. Were you expecting me not to notice them? C'mon,
Peps, you know I've been handling these things for years now. I know what they look like, believe
it or not."

"Fine, it's for the damages to the tower. Now would you please sign them."

Tony tried to ignore the three sets of eyes staring at him from the doorway, scribbling his name on
the spots Pepper pointed to. He grimaced at the prices listed for all of the damages to his penthouse
and workshop, both of which Pepper was personally overseeing reconstruction of with the
assistance of JARVIS and FRIDAY. Everything was still in lockdown mode, so his suits and other
projects were safe from those who'd like to steal them.

"And these?"

"Just for the surrounding streets and debris," assured Pepper. "New and Less Evil SHIELD has agreed to cover the other costs. We're not doing that anymore."

"I know, I know, don't worry."

Steve and the Birdbrains didn't say a word while Tony and his CEO talked shop, quite clearly eavesdropping while also pretending to watch How to Train Your Dragon. They weren't nearly as discreet as they thought they were and Tony tried not to laugh when Peter stared right at them. It was almost like having an overprotective pitbull at his side, ready to defend his honor at a moment's notice.

"Tell the board I've got everything handled," said Tony with an annoyed grunt. "And the French government can stop worrying their cheese-loving heads about the payments. We're on the last one, aren't we?"

"Next month and then it's done."

"Good. And give the same message to the German government, too."

"Two months left on that one."

"So, that only leaves Nigeria and Sokovia then, right? Am I forgetting any others?"

"Nope, that's all of them."

"Thank fuck," Tony groaned. "I'm getting tired of them blowing up my email box."

"JARVIS handles your email box." Pepper bopped him on the head with her clipboard. "And I'm the one who fields all their calls, so it should really be me bitching here."

"So sassy. What did I do to deserve this sassiness?"

"You bring it on yourself by almost giving me annual heart attacks," said Pepper with a half-sarcastic, half-sad smile. "Will that be all, Mr. Stark?"

"For today at least," said Tony, shifting his weight a bit to better cuddle Peter. "Now get back to making sure my company doesn't fall apart. I'm tired of having the wrinkly ol' bastards breathing down my neck."

"Yet another issue I deal with more often than you."

"Sass!"

"Goodbye, Tony. I'll see you and Peter tomorrow. Now try to get some sleep, okay?"

"Never."

With a roll of her eyes, Pepper exited the room and didn't even try to step on any toes with her heels. That was certainly an improvement from four months ago. She may not have looked like it, but Pepper could be even more vindictive than Peter.

"Oh, and tell my honey bear that I miss him!"
"Tell him yourself!"

Everything went quiet for a few moments after that, the resident Avengers seeming to hold their breath until Pepper was gone. Meanwhile, Peter had decided that all of them were stupid and not worth his time, so he'd snuggled into Tony's side to watch his favorite movie. And who would've thought that Tony would enjoy snuggling with someone, especially a scrawny eight-year-old kid.

But seriously, snuggling was really nice. Well, so long as Peter didn't hit any of his sore spots, which were everywhere. Tony felt like curling up into a little ball and crying when that happened.

"Tony."

"Captain."

"How are you doing?"

"Eh, the hole in my side kinda sucks, but I've been worse," said Tony. He flicked at Peter when the kid nearly bumped his IV and other tubes. "Have a strange growth on my right side too, but it's becoming more manageable by the day."

Peter pouted at this.

"Colonel Rhodes said you've developed an infection."

"That happens whenever I get injured." Tony waved his hand to emphasize the point. "Comes with having a shitty immune system. Opportunistic bugs are always trying to kill me."

Poor Steve looked downright disturbed by this revelation. Clint probably would've said something snarky and rude, but Sam pinched him before he could even open his mouth. Probably for the best since Peter was giving them the side-eye now.

"So, what can I do for you fine fellows?"

"Uh, nothing," said Steve, eyebrows scrunched up in confusion. "We just wanted to see how you were doing."

Tony gestured around himself and said, "I'm still alive and kicking. Kinda feel like a human pin-cushion, but the doc says I'll continue to annoy your fine asses for the foreseeable future. Sorry about that, by the way."

"Shhh, it's the good part!"

"And would you look at that," said Tony in his most offended voice, "I'm getting ordered around by a midget. What's the world coming to?"

Clint snickered. "I don't know, Stark, the so-called midget seems to have a lot more common sense than you. It might be wise to listen to him."

"Stuff it, Birdbrain, or I'll feed you to his spider."

"Tarantula."

"Whatever, go back to watching your movie like a good lil' midget. Daddy's got big people problems to deal with."

Steve and the Feathered Fellows took a seat after that, looking more than a little awkward around
all of the wires and medical equipment that took up most of the room's extra space. Aside from the few times he'd visited the new Avengers' base to deliver upgrades or work on Bucky's arm, Tony hadn't seen much of his former teammates, instead remaining in Manhattan to oversee his company, negotiate payment with foreign governments, and work on several dozen new projects. Most conflicts had been somewhat smoothed over after Baron Zemo and HYDRA's rampage, but there was still a little tension left over from the Sokovia Accords and their fights over it.

"If you guys are gonna ask about the Infinity Stones," said Tony, "I have some unfortunate news. Despite my infinite genius, I still haven't located any besides the ones we already know about. FRIDAY has been trying to track them down, but things have been a little hectic lately."

"We weren't gonna ask about them, Tony."

"Then what are you here for? In case you haven't noticed, Rhodey confiscated my Starkpad, so I'm not exactly useful right now."

"I told you to hide it."

"Yeah, well, Sugar Plum's got a sixth sense for when I'm bullshitting him."

"For fuck's sake, we weren't asking you to be useful, Stark," snapped Clint. "We just wanted to see how you were doing. And if there was any brain damage."

Tony poked at his head and said, "No worries, it's all still working. The pain meds and antibiotics make it run a little slower, but at least I'm not running up and down the hallways naked. Apparently, I'm a disgraceful hip-hop dancer."

"And thank God for that," chuckled Sam, "I don't think I could take seeing your naked ass on more than one occasion in a lifetime."

"Hey, my ass is a gift from the gods! Just ask Thor."

"I thought he called it scrawny."

"You know what, no more winged jet packs for you," said Tony with a sniff. "I get no respect around this place. No more upgrades for the next person to give me sass."

"Is that the only threat you have?"

"At this point, pretty much."

"So," drawled Steve after a short silence, "How are you feeling?"

"About as well as a person could after being shot in three places," shrugged Tony. "And I would really like to know why the multi-headed serpent is trying to chase me down now. I've kinda gone under the radar since Tall, Dark, and Purple tried to decapitate me."

Tony hugged a stiff Peter against his side, aware that the kid already knew more than he should about what had transpired fourteen months ago. Reporters had been on the ground in Germany to record most of their airport battle, and Zemo had leaked a video that showed a good chunk of Steve and Tony's fight in Siberia. Tony tried to keep most things secret or at least quiet around the boy, but Peter was a smart cookie and seemed to feel the need to know everything going on around him.

It was likely a coping mechanism from losing so many loved ones in such a short time frame. Tony recognized it since he'd done the exact same thing at Peter's age, and had continued to do it for the
rest of his life.

"We've been trying to track them down," Steve admitted, "But like usual, HYDRA agents seem to disappear into thin air."

Steve looked incredibly frustrated by this admission, as if it was all his fault that they hadn't yet located the people responsible for the attack on Stark Tower. He knew that the Avengers had been trying to track his attackers down; they were gone most of the day and much of the night because of it. However, Tony also knew that the chances of them cornering HYDRA was slim. The damned bastards were really good at hiding, as they'd been doing for over eighty years now.

Aside from FRIDAY or Vision, it was unlikely the actual Avengers would find anything useful to help them. None of the HYDRA higher-ups would be found unless they wanted to be found. Steve could capture as many lackeys as he wanted, but it was a waste of time if said lackeys didn't have any information in their crazy, brainwashed heads.

"Can't say I'm surprised," said Tony. "They really do live up to their namesake."

"Mr. Stark?"

A nurse had appeared at the door, smiling at the other Avengers and appearing pleased that they had stuck to the PPE requirements. Susan was a tough lady who ruled over her ward with an iron fist, easily keeping agents and superheroes under control while they were recovering. She got along smashingly with Rhodey and Pepper, who were all too happy to see someone keeping Tony and his health in line.

"I need to change your antibiotic bags and wound dressing," she said, shooing the Avengers to the far side of the room. "The doctor wants to give you a stronger dose, which should hopefully stave off a more aggressive infection. We can't be too careful with your immune system."

"Is that a big worry, ma'am?"

"We just like to be prepared, Captain." She easily worked around Peter, who clearly didn't want to move. "Compromised immune systems always have to be taken into consideration and quite frankly, most of the doctors and nurses here aren't used to dealing with them."

"Oh, lucky me," grumbled Tony. "I feel so special."

"In case you haven't noticed, Mr. Stark, the majority of our patients are either super-soldiers, superhumans, or prime of their life agents, so opportunistic infections aren't usually a top concern for us. Your glowy pacemaker complicates things a little bit."

"I strive to be difficult. Just ask Boy Scout over there."

"Tony..."

"Now these might make you feel a little loopy and nauseous," Susan warned. "Surgical wound infections can be a nasty business, so we're gonna nip this one in the bud early. Unfortunately, that requires a stronger antibiotic, which means more side-effects. Could one of you possibly stay with him for the next hour or two to make sure he doesn't have a bad reaction?"

Peter gave her an affronted look and said, "I'm here. Tony's safe with me."

"When you're taller than my shoulders, then I'll trust you with all of your dad's health issues," Susan promised. "For now, you just watch your movie and I'll bring some jello for the old man
"Why does everyone have to pick on my age? You're a cruel woman, Nurse Susan."

"Buzz if you need anything, Mr. Stark."

"That woman is made of iron, I swear," Tony complained. "I should make her a suit. She'd love shooting missiles at agents. It's a great pastime."

"I resent that!"

"No making suits for strangers, Tony."

Tony and Clint settled into good-natured bickering after that, poking and prodding at the other like they'd done last year. It was refreshing and allowed Tony to relax a little bit, even if he was still leery of certain subjects. Steve and Sam made comments here or there, not quite as willing to join in the ribbing as their smart-mouthed teammate.

"I've got a training session with Natasha in ten minutes," said Clint after an hour had passed. "And then refueling the Quinjet. The higher-ups and Fury have been on the stingy train lately."

"That's cause Tony's not paying for it anymore."

And shit, that really wasn't something that Tony wanted them to know. But yeah, Peter and his sassy mouth. The kid had obviously been eavesdropping on some of his and Pepper's conversations over the last four months. They'd need to have a talk about that in the near future.

"What?"

"Money doesn't grow on trees," said Peter in the most smart-ass way possible. "It doesn't appear out of thin air, either."

Some of Aunt May's words of wisdom, right there.

"The kid's right," said a familiar voice from the door. "You guys didn't want to answer to Tony anymore, so he's only funding upgrades from now on. Strange, I would've thought you'd be happy to hear that."

Lo and behold the all-powerful Colonel James Rhodes, King of Sass and Lord of Starkington Kingdom.

Damn, what was in that shit they'd given him?

"You know what, I'm just gonna pass out from these lovely drugs and pretend this conversation never took place," said Tony, eyes closing and arm tightening around his Peter-bear. "Yep, that's what I'm gonna do. Behave yourself, Petey-pie. Daddy needs his drugged-out sleep."

"Normally, I'd call you a lying liar who lies," said Rhodey, near and dear and now massaging Tony's scalp, "But in this case, you probably are about to pass out, so shut up and let me play uncle for a couple hours."

"Don't let him watch Pan's Labyrinth. Very deceptive. Not a kid's movie."

"I wasn't planning on it."

And since Rhodey was there to take care of Peter, it took less than ten seconds for Tony to fall
Tony wasn't quite sure if he dreamed or not, but Tony had an odd feeling of being airborne in a world of gigantic hedgehogs and frogs when he woke up. Of course, it turned out that he wasn't airborne at all, so yeah, Tony was having weird dreams again. Blaming it on the drugs seemed like the best course of action right now.

The lights were dim when Tony decided to open his eyes, soft noises coming from the hallway as nurses and doctors went about their business. As if on reflex, Tony's hand reached out to feel his right side, head tilting when he was met with cold blankets instead of a warm little body.

"Finally awake?"

"Susan really gave me the good stuff," slurred Tony. "Hey, where's my kid at?"

"He left with the Colonel about an hour ago." Steve stood to help Tony into a more comfortable position. "They went to grab some dinner and then feed Matika. I don't think Peter trusts Thor with her for too long."

"I'm surprised he hasn't tried to eat her yet."

"Don't give him any ideas," said Steve. "The last thing we need is Peter hating Thor, too."

Tony didn't deny this, instead looking around at the new antibiotic bags above his head. He was feeling really strange and wanted to know what chemical concoction was responsible for it. And then he realized it was Steve in the room with him.

"What are you doing here?"

"Uh, visiting you? It didn't seem right to leave you alone."

"Rhodey threatened you, didn't he?"

"Yeah."

For some reason, Tony found this to be pathetically hilarious. Even after all of the ridiculous bullshit that had gone down over the last year, hearing that Rhodey—who was one of the biggest Captain America fanboys ever—had threatened to maim or kill Steve was almost too much for Tony to handle. If his side hadn't been hurting so much, Tony would've rolled off the bed in hysterical laughter.

"Holy shit," laughed Tony, "My honey bear threatened to kick Captain America's sparkly ass. I'm feeling so proud right now."

Steve seemed to find this equally funny because he had started laughing, too. Not as much as Tony, of course, but this was the first time he'd seen the other Avenger laugh in nearly a year. Tony tried to control himself after a few long moments, sobering up at the thought of Rhodey glaring down three people he'd been fighting not too long ago.

"How'd he even get the whole lot of you to sit down and listen to him, anyways?"
And shit, was Captain America blushing? Yes, that was most definitely a trademark Steve Rogers blush. What had Tony missed?!

"Colonel Rhodes pulled rank on me."

That made Tony blink before asking, "Wait, Rhodey pulled rank on you?"

Nod.

"You're saying that my Rhodey actually used his rank as Colonel to order your Captain, Staff Sergeant, and Agent selves into temporary submission?"

Another nod.

"Why the hell wasn't I awake to see this?" Tony groaned. "I would've paid good money to see that! Stupid flying hedgehogs."

"I'm not quite sure what hedgehogs have to do with anything—"

"They have to do with everything!"

"But during his lecture, Colonel Rhodes brought some pressing matters to my attention."

Tony paused at that. "You don't say. And what terribly pressing matters did the sugar plum of my life bring to your over-achieving attention?"

"You should've told me about the money situation, Tony."

And right there was the situation that Tony didn't want to discuss anytime in the foreseeable future. Funding the Avengers post-SHIELD had been brutally expensive, especially with all the collateral damage and casualties they'd caused on both national and international soil. Yeah, Tony Stark was a filthy rich billionaire, but even his bank account had started to hurt after a half-dozen governments came after him for damage costs. When Tony had initially agreed to take on the Avengers and all of their expenses, he hadn't really anticipated the sheer amount of destruction and insurance payments it would involve.

Without SHIELD or allied governments to pick up the tab, everything had fallen onto Tony and his supersized wallet.

Unfortunately, said wallet became home to some moths after damages started totaling into the low billions. Even after the Sokovia Accords and Zemo's attack, Tony hadn't told anyone besides Rhodey and Pepper about the astronomical bills he'd been footing, including to several countries that had demanded repayment for Avenger damages on their soil. However, with New and Less Evil SHIELD back in business one month after Zemo's grand entrance, Tony had been absolved of almost all financial responsibility for the New Avengers, something that his bank account had desperately needed.

The Board of Stark Industries had started getting pretty pissed off towards the end, too. For the first time in years, talk of budget cuts were flying around the room, Tony arguing tooth and nail to defend the salaries and benefits of his employees. Tony's workers relied on him just as much as the Avengers did; they all had families to feed and mortgages to pay and Tony couldn't overlook their welfare, not even for his teammates. When the Avengers had gone back to SHIELD, employee rights and R&D had been the first topics on Tony's financial agenda.

Now, Tony only funded upgrades for his former teammates, making sure they had the newest and
most advanced weapons that science could offer. None of them had any clue just how much money
Tony had spent to keep foreign governments from coming after them sooner and Tony planned to
keep it that way. Except Rhodey had taken matters into his own far-too-responsible hands and
apparently slammed three Avengers upside the head with Tony's money problems.

Just what he needed...

"Do we really have to talk about this right now, Cap? Because I'm feeling kinda peckish."

"You're on a liquid diet."

"Well, then tell my nurse that I want some liquid beef in here. Whatever they're feeding me is
actually starving me and I expect better service than this. New and Less Evil SHIELD supports
eating disorders, I guess."

Steve rubbed at his eyes and said, "I know what you're trying to do, Tony. Now stop avoiding the
question, please."

"It wasn't your concern, Cap."

"That wasn't your decision to make, at least not by yourself," snapped Steve. "As team leader, I had
the right to know if we were having financial problems. Or causing them for the countries we
operated in. You can't keep doing this, Tony."

"Oh yeah, like you were really going to listen to me back then."

"I'm not saying that my decision would've been any different, but I deserved to know." Steve went
quiet after this, eyes sad in a way that made puppies want to cry. "And it would have helped me
understand your position a little better, too."

"It doesn't matter anymore," said Tony as he shifted into a more comfortable position. "SHIELD's
back to handling the Avengers' budget and I create the fancy gadgets that you all know and love.
It's a good deal if you ask me, so no need to dredge up forgotten artifacts, Mr. Blast From the
Past."

"Well, it matters to me."

And damn if the look on Steve's face didn't say just that. It was that stubborn look that Tony had
come to dread, both on the battlefield and at the kitchen table. He really didn't want to deal with
that face, especially since his left leg had fallen asleep and didn't want to wake up. Shit, his body
really was falling apart.

Fuck you very much, HYDRA.

"Whatever you say, Cap. I've got a Petey-pie to contend with now, so worrying about you lot isn't
at the top of my priority list anymore."

"I wouldn't expect anything else, Tony, but you can't just—"

"Fuck! Why the hell can't I feel my leg?" snarled Tony, fingers pressing into the soft tissue right
above his knee. "This is ridiculous. I didn't even lay on the damned thing and it's tingling like a
motherfucker and shit, shit..."

"Tony?"
"I can't feel my fucking leg, Steve."

Then one alarm went off, and then another and another. Tony's breathing was shallow and panicked as Steve slammed the call button, racing to the door to shout for a doctor. And then he was suddenly back, huge hands grabbing Tony's to keep him from exerting too much pressure and injuring himself.

"Fuck, Steve, fuck..."

"Hey, it's gonna be okay, Tony," soothed the blond. "It might just be from the medication. The doctor said there would be lots of side-effects. Hey, look at me, okay? I need you to look at me."

A doctor and several nurses rushed in, quickly taking stock of the situation through equipment readings and Steve's recollection of the patient's symptoms. Tony felt cold and clammy at the same time, eyes fixed on Steve even when the nurse pulled an oxygen mask over his face. He vaguely heard someone talking about loss of flow and anticoagulants and emergency surgery.

"Everything's gonna be okay, Tony. I promise, it's gonna be okay."

"Steve..."

"Yeah, I'm right here. The doctors are gonna make the pain go away now. Just keep holding onto my hand, okay?"

Tony could do that. He loved doing that. Holding Steve's hand was amazing and he could do it forever. Not that he'd actually be able to do it forever. Inventing required the use of both hands and Tony loved inventing. It was the best thing in the world. Well, after Peter, that is.

"See? I'm right here. Just hold on, Tony. Hold on..."

Chapter End Notes

I adore Rhodey. He's the best friend Tony could ever ask for and expect to see a lot more of him, because Tony Stark doesn't exist without Colonel James Rupert Rhodes. And also say hello to some of Tony's control issues. He's a canon control-freak, so yeah, lots of control issues to come. Any guesses to what medical condition Tony has?
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Tony was beginning to wonder if somebody up there hated him, because the whole waking up in a dimly-lit hospital room and connected to countless machines while also feeling like death warmed over was starting to get really, really annoying. If Tony ever made it to Asgard, Thor's father was going to get a fucking earful from him.

"Welcome back, Sleeping Beauty."

"Ugh..."

"Did you seriously just flip me the bird? That's a low blow, Stark."

"Ughhh..."

"I've got ice chips for your wrinkly ol' ass, so play nice and open your eyes and I might think about sharing 'em."

"Fuck..."

"You ain't gonna be doing none of that anytime soon."

Tony opened his goop-crusted left eye to stare at Clint's ugly mug, something he never wanted to wake up to again. The wide grin on his face just made it even worse, although Tony was willing to admit the cup of ice chips made him a little less ugly. But just a little bit. Tony wasn't about to consider this an ideal outcome, no matter how dry and scratchy his tongue was.

Plus, he was still pissed at Clint for that disgusting comment about Rhodey last year. Asshole had no right to be within a mile of his best friend.

And damnit, Tony never woke up to pretty ladies or handsome lads anymore. With great avenging came great celibacy, especially when you had a glowy battery stuffed into your chest, enough PTSD issues to fund Johns Hopkins' mental health department for the next decade, and an eight-year-old child who barged into your bedroom every morning to demand breakfast. Tony couldn't complain too much about the latter, though.

"Peter?"

"He's been with Rhodes since you decided to scare everyone's pants off again." Clint tilted his head to the right before shoving another clump of ice chips into Tony's mouth. "Literally won't leave his side, either. Our dearest golden retriever god is feeling quite rejected at this point."

Apparently, in the time Tony had been knocked out, someone had seen fit to sterilize and drag a lime-green couch into the room and position it against the far wall. An eyesore was the only way to describe such a vomit-like monstrosity, but Tony held his tongue and decided that insulting said couch would have to wait until sometime in the distant future because at the present time, said ugly couch was housing his favorite people in the whole world.

"The midget flips out whenever someone tries to make him leave the room," snorted Clint. "After the second time it happened, Sam figured that this would be the best solution. Took some finagling
with the doctors, but Nat and Rhodey made sure it was up to sterilized snuff and then had Thor and Bucky cart it in here."

"How long?"

"I'd reckon about four hours ago. Peter's been refusing to sleep, too."

"Fuck..."

His best friend and adopted son were curled up on the couch together, Rhodey scrunched up on the bottom while Peter sprawled atop him. They were both covered in blankets and pillows, the former so abundant and disheveled that Tony could see little more than the scruffy tufts of his son's hair beneath them. Rhodey, on the other hand, was not even visible to the naked eye; Peter had effectively turned the colonel into a makeshift mattress, something Tony had become all too familiar with in recent weeks.

Nightmares were a regular visitor to Stark Tower, although now they were harassing the building's youngest occupant, too. Thankfully, Peter had only suffered through two nightmares before JARVIS ratted him out to Tony. Not so thankfully, a frightened and disoriented Peter had also clobbered Tony upside the head when he'd been rudely shaken from a bad dream. And in typical Tony Stark fashion, it was only after grabbing a bag of frozen corn to nurse his aching nose that he'd thought of the many reasons why crawling into bed and shaking someone awake wasn't the smartest decision he'd ever made.

And damn, for such a scrawny child, Peter sure had one hell of a strong right hook.

Now, seven weeks later, if Peter showed even the slightest signs of a nightmare, Tony received an immediate alert from JARVIS and didn't hesitate to carefully wake his son up. After calming down, they usually watched a movie or skimmed over Tony's newest experiments until Peter fell back to sleep, the soft glow of the mini-arc reactor on Peter's bedside table matching the real one in Tony's chest.

Pepper had been responsible for that particular welcome-to-the-family gift. So, yeah, it shouldn't have surprised Tony to see Peter's arc reactor nightlight on the room's only table, bathing that godawful couch in a soft blue glow.

"What happened?"

"You, my friend, had an arterial embolism," said Clint, twirling the ice cup between his hands. "Real nasty one, too. The doctors reckon it'd been building for a long time, but your latest surgery and injuries were what finally set it off. They said some other fancy shit, but to make things simple for us non-medical folks, you had a blood clot in your leg and it got stuck, so they had to cut you open. Again."

"Bruce always said my high blood pressure would bite me in the ass."

"More like the leg."

"Fuck you."

"Sorry, but I'm gonna have to decline that offer," said Clint as he rearranged Tony's pillows. "I value my dick way too much to ever touch yours."

"Hey, my dick's the epitome of human perfection."
Clint gave him a look of disbelief. "Whatever you say, Stark. Still not gonna touch it."

"And thank Odin for that. Or Laura."

The Birdbrain probably came back with an equally obnoxious retort, but Tony must've missed it since his eyes had grown heavy and slipped closed, breath evening out as the pain medication pulled him under yet again. Unfortunately, the engineer's second awakening was far less peaceful than the first, instead being punctuated by a high-pitched yell that made Tony's ears ring.

"Peter! Don't you dare!"

"Hey!"

"What did I just tell you?"

"No! I don't want him in here! He's not allowed back in here!"

"If you try to kick one—"

"Peter!"

"Stop it! Put me down! No! Don't go near him! I hate you! I hate you!"

"For God's sake—Peter!"

Well, if there was one thing Tony knew, it was that someone yelling your kid's name in a tone like *that* was never a good thing. And this was especially true if said tone was being used by Rhodey, who'd never been more than a lovable huggy bear to Peter on his worst days. Shit, what had the rugrat been getting up to while his old man was snoozing on the Vicodin dream train?

Then Tony opened his eyes and saw everything that was going on through the hospital room window. Why had he woken up again?

"Aww, fuck..."

If there was one thing no one wanted to wake up to, it was the sight of their child making Steve Rogers cry and whimper like a kicked puppy. And that didn't even begin to cover Peter's face, which was bright red with tears and anger, feet kicking out as Rhodey dragged the boy away from their team leader. Natasha, Bucky, Clint, and Sam stood off to the side, watching the confrontation with wide eyes and slack jaws, none of them knowing what to do with Peter's violent response. Hell, Tony didn't know what to do, and he was the kid's father.

"Peter!"

And that seemed to freeze everything, seven pairs of eyes turning to stare at the pathetic-looking engineer. Surprise had apparently loosened Rhodey's arms enough for Peter to break free, the boy dashing out of sight for several seconds before reappearing through Tony's door, decked out in a messy array of PPE that would surely give his nurses a heart attack.

"You're awake!"

"Sure looks like it," said Tony, holding out his non-IV hand for Peter to hold. "Feel like I've been run over by a Hulk, too."

"Aunt Pepper's trying to find him."
"Is she now?"

That was certainly a tidbit of information that Tony hadn't been expecting. The past year and a half without Bruce had been tough, even with Rhodey having more free time in his busy military and physical therapy schedule. Bruce had been his science buddy and a genuine friend who understood Tony's mind better than anyone else aside from his MIT BFF, so the other man's sudden absence had been downright painful at times. But Tony was used to people leaving him and had adapted like he always did, which tended to involve binge-engineering and guzzling an excessive amount of energy drinks.

Alcohol was a big no-no nowadays, so Red Bull and whatever other nasty-ass shit was in his workshop fridge had to do. Or at least he thought it was energy drinks. They had started to taste kinda funny in recent months and JARVIS got snarky whenever Tony asked about it.

He really needed to stop creating AIs that conspired against him.

"Started a couple days ago."

Tony's ignored all eyes from the window and focused his attention solely on Peter. Honestly, did they really think staring was gonna answer their questions?

Simpletons.

"Can't say I'd begrudge his company right now. Jolly Green Rage Monster or not."

"I think he'd be good for you."

Christ on a cheese cracker, how had Tony gotten so lucky to accidentally acquire such an awesome kid? Not saying that Peter didn't have his issues—and oh boy, were there ever a lot of those, as he'd learned both in-person and from the boy's therapist—but they were pretty damn easy to overlook or work with once the kid's snarky and bright personality finally started to surface. It was amazing how resilient Peter was, although JARVIS and Pepper both assured him this was a trait inherent to most children.

Tony had only known Peter for four months and he already adored him. If he was being honest, it was kinda pathetic, especially since Tony had sworn off parenthood since he could talk and thought parents who coveted their children were complete and utter morons. But oh, how wrong he'd been, as his desperate need to comfort Peter displayed in copious amounts.

Not that he'd ever admit to it, of course. Well, okay, maybe about Peter being an amazing and awesome and brilliant kid; that needed to be said as often as possible, if Howard's godawful parenting style had been any indication. But being a proud parent didn't mean Tony had to turn into a total imbecile, either. A lot of the parents he saw around New York City were an insult to humanity, treating their children like they were brainless twits who couldn't lift a spoon, touch a speck of dirt, or get told off for being little assholes without breaking into a thousand pieces.

It was pathetic and sad and Tony wouldn't insult his son's intelligence like that. But unlike Howard, Tony was willing to accept that while his kid was ridiculously smart, he also needed to be treated like a child when the situation called for it.

And the situation really called for it right now.

"Okay, I'm too tired and doped up to bullshit with you," Tony admitted, "So tell me what's with making Captain Sparkly-Pants cry out there?"
"He's a mean jerk."

"Although I'd certainly agree with that assessment from time to time," said Tony as he carefully rearranged himself on the bed, "I'm hoping you've got a bit more than 'he's a mean jerk' to back up the whole kicking and screaming thing I just saw out there."

Peter grimaced and said, "He keeps hurting you."

From the looks of it, Steve and crew could hear everything they said, and Tony could clearly see Steve flinch through the glass window. Ugh, this really wasn't going to be a pleasant conversation.

"I know he has before, buddy," and Tony pointedly ignored Steve when he said this, "But this time, with my leg and everything else? This had nothing to do with Steve or the other Avengers. The people who attacked us are bad people who Steve's been trying to find and stop for years now, but they're very, very hard to track down, even for me and FRIDAY. And my leg? Blood clots happen, short-stuff. I'm no spring chicken anymore."

"You're not that old."

"Are you comparing me to your aunt and uncle? I resent that. Do you see any grey here?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Well, not all of us have super-soldier juice coursing through our veins." Tony leaned forward with a grimace. "Wait, are you saying that you can see the grey again?"

"Just a little bit. It's not really noticeable unless you look for it."

"Damn, what a rip-off. Hey, did you catch that, Fri?"

"Noted, Boss."

"Ah, you're finally awake, Mr. Stark."

Seriously? Tony was finally having a heart-to-heart with his vengeful and overwrought child and the doctor needed to choose that moment to appear from the middle of nowhere. He hated SHIELD so much right now.

"What made you come to that conclusion?"

"And as sarcastic as ever," said the doctor. "What's your level of pain right now? We have you on a pretty high dosage of morphine, but you've had quite the painful last couple days."

"Tell me about it."

"Okay, I'm gonna have to take a look at your side and make sure there's no infection. Just move over here..."

Tony grimaced and grumbled through the whole examination, pulling a now shy Peter to the other side of the bed, holding his son's hand the whole time. Natasha had come into the room at some point, offering Tony a small cup of water and much appreciated ice chips. The other Avengers were still waiting outside, Rhodey guarding the door like a Rottweiler while they waited for the doctor's verdict.

"Well, your blood pressure is still a little high, but that's to be expected with everything you've been through and your preexisting heart and lung conditions. Your leg is looking much better now,
although the infection on your side will continue to need second-line antibiotics. I've also
prescribed you several long-term anti-coagulants to hopefully prevent future blood clots. Arterial
embolisms are very dangerous, even if they become more common at your age."

"You really know how to boost a man's self-esteem, Doc."

"I try my best." The doctor whipped out yet another chart and started to read through it. "Okay,
some good news is that your white blood cell count has decreased over the last 24 hours, which is a
reassuring sign of our progress against the infection. You can probably thank the super-soldier
blood for that."

Tony blinked and said, "Would you care to repeat that?"

"You lost quite a bit of blood during surgery, so we needed to perform a blood transfusion. With
your respiration and heart rate being so erratic, we thought it best to use the best donor we could."

The doctor pointed over at a sheepish-looking Steve Rogers.

"Ugh, say that again."

"We gave you a blood transfusion from Captain America. Sadly, it doesn't appear to be super
transformative, since you're still healing at a normal rate. Perhaps even a little bit slower due to
your underlying conditions. But it was definitely more effective than a regular donor's would be. It
stabilized you enough for the surgery to go much more smoothly than we'd anticipated."

No one seemed to know how to respond to that. And then Tony opened his mouth...

"Wow, so I've got part of a super-soldier inside me." Pause. "Believe it or not, I didn't mean for it to
sound like that."

Steve was so bright red and embarrassed that Tony wondered if he'd explode on the spot. Then
again, with how Peter had been acting earlier, the boy was probably hoping such a terrible scenario
happened.

"Aww shit, I think I broke him."

"Good."

"My God, you are one seriously vindictive child."

Peter just held onto Tony's hand, watching everything the doctor did with an eagle eye. It looked
like Tony would have his own little shadow for the foreseeable future, not being allowed to go
anywhere or do anything without his son's approval. He considered putting a tracking device on
him, but then remembered that he'd already done that. Most of Peter's clothes were outfitted with
them, expertly hidden in case of an inevitable kidnapping. And Stark children had a long and
sordid history of being kidnapped, so Tony wasn't taking any chances with his kid.

"Violent children and broken super-soldiers aside," drawled the doctor, "I think it'd be best for you
to rest, Mr. Stark. And yes, that's me not so subtly telling the whole lot of you to beat it for a
couple hours. Now, I've just switched out your antibiotic and anti-nausea bags, so I'd give you
another three or four minutes before you start to pass out."

"Great, more beauty sleep, just what I need."

"From where I'm standing, you need a whole lot of it!" shouted Clint. "What? Ouch!"
Peter patted his father's head and said, "It's okay, Tony, the Birdbrain could use more beauty sleep, too."

"Whoa, whoa! Those are fighting words, squirt."

"Shut up, Clint."

The doctor continued to bustle around for a few more minutes, instructing Tony to squeeze his fingers, move his feet this way and that, give five deep breathes and then another eight, confirm what his current pain level was, and lots of other medical bullshit questions. By the time they were done, Tony was really starting to feel the morphine, eyes drooping as the doctor finished taking another blood sample from the IV on his left forearm.

"Almost done, Mr. Stark."

With a nod, Tony turned to Peter and said, "Can I trust you to behave while I'm conked out?"

"Ugh, why wouldn't I?"

"Because behaving involves not making Captain America cry or beg for an eight-year-old's forgiveness."

"No, it doesn't."

"Peter..."

"Okay, fine, I'll just not talk to him," sniffed the boy. "Uncle Rhodey brought some model jets and rockets for us to work on, anyways."

Tony couldn't keep the pride out his voice when he said, "Already an engineer in the making, huh? Looks like MIT's gonna have yet another Stark to contend with in a couple of years."

"I'm sure they'll be thrilled."

Rhodey struggled to pull on his PPE as he walked into the room, coming around to stand on Tony's right side with Peter. The boy leaned back into his honorary uncle without a second thought, completely at ease with Rhody in a way that none of the other Avengers had earned yet.

"Now shut up and get some sleep, Tones. I'll keep an eye on the half-pint while you're snoozing like an old man."

"You're two years older than me, honey bear."

"And two decades more mature, too."

"So cruel," said Tony around a giant yawn. "Make sure he doesn't assault anyone else, okay?"

"Sure thing."

With his best friend's reassurance that Peter wouldn't electrocute or bite any Avengers, Tony closed his eyes and drifted off into a drugged sleep. It was a long time before he woke up next, the lights dimmed and hallways quiet as Tony slowly dug his way to consciousness. He'd probably slept more in the last couple days than he had in the entire week before that. His pre-Iron Man self would've been horrified.

Oh well, fuck that conceited and hypocritical asshole, anyways.
"Finally awake?"

And not one foot from Tony's bedside sat Bucky Barnes, somehow managing to hide in the room's shadows like a malevolent creeper. Honestly, the guy really needed to stop it with the whole assassin/stalker shtick. It was enough to make a guy paranoid.

"I'm experiencing some serious déjà vu here."

"Can you refrain from making sarcastic comments for even a few minutes? Or is that beyond your realm of capabilities."

"It's more distant than Pluto. Or Antares."

"Yeah, I'm just gonna assume that that last one is another hunk of rock or something."

"It's actually a red supergiant of the spectral type M0.5Iab and is one of the largest and most luminous observable stars in the known universe."

"Stevie's right. You are a self-righteous know-it-all who never shuts up."

"Thank you."

A quiet grumble alerted Tony to the fact that he wasn't alone in his bed. Buried beneath a light blanket, Peter was curled into a small ball at his father's side, nothing more than his hair and forehead visible to the outside eye. Tony didn't even try to hold back a smile, more than happy to have his son within touching distance. Nearly being killed while Peter was alone and defenseless had hurt worse than the damned bullet, and having him close was just about the only thing that kept Tony's heart rate stable right now.

"Your work?"

"The kid snuck into my room and insisted that I bring him to you," said Bucky with a shrug. "He's very persuasive."

"Oh, you have no idea."

Tony was just starting to get an idea himself, and he wondered if Peter had been the same way with Uncle Ben and Aunt May. For some reason, Tony doubted that the boy had gotten away with much under their watchful eyes. Fuck, Tony had some really, really big shoes to fill, something that dogged at the back of his mind every single day.

"What's that sound?"

"Just two of my fingers," said Bucky. "They got busted the other week in our raid on a HYDRA base. Fuckers just don't know when to die."

He held up his metal hand, the pointer and middle fingers making a grinding sound that nearly caused Tony's head to explode. His own fingers were already twitching with the need to fix them, desperate for his toolkit and a couple of blueprints.

"I feel ill just listening to that. Okay, Barnes, here's what you gotta do. See that bag over there? Yeah, next to the couch. That's my travel bag and we can thank my sourpuss for bringing it. Now, go get it."

"Fuckin' bossy, too."
But the super-soldier did as he was told, walking over to grab the dufflebag for Tony to inspect. Careful not to disturb Peter, Tony ordered Bucky to open the right bottom pocket and pull out the small box inside of it. Flipping it open revealed a vast array of tiny tools, all of them in perfect order and ready to tackle any mechanical issue that crossed Tony’s path.

"Here's what we're gonna do, Barnes. To keep from waking my kid up, you're gonna hand me whatever tool I ask for while also holding your arm just across my poor, dilapidated stomach. Yeah, just like that. And don't move unless I tell you to, got it?"

"Loud and clear."

"And may I reiterate: don't wake up my kid."

"No shit."

"Hold still and just let me—by God, did SHIELD do this? Did you actually let their monkeys touch the masterpiece that yours truly created?"

"Ugh, yes."

"I'm feeling insulted and betrayed right now. Seriously, I should just let you suffer with this hunk of mangled shit. Look what they did to my baby. It's a travesty. Where did Fury find these idiots?"

Tony continued to mumble through the whole procedure, forcing Bucky to hold a small flashlight in his mouth while the engineer worked. Someone had somehow—and Tony really didn't understand how—managed to mix up the wires that connected Bucky's neural network to his fingers, effectively messing up that hand's ability to shift or move like Tony had intended. It was utterly ridiculous and showed how incompetent SHIELD's engineers really were.

"I should send Dummy down to terrorize those imbeciles," said Tony as he rearranged yet another wire. "They should be ashamed. I purposely designed this entire thing for easy fixing, but they even managed to screw that up. Could you even feel 'em?"

"Not really."

"You know, if I had two available arms, I'd attach some voltage generation to this baby just so you could go and fry their uneducated asses."

"Or we could take a raincheck on that particular upgrade."

All Bucky got in response was a snort of disgust, Tony's complete attention focused on correcting the damage that'd been done to his beautiful, precious arm. FRIDAY chimed in at several points, reading out blueprints to her engrossed creator. And to Bucky's astonishment, Peter slept through the whole thing, barely reacting to his father's jerky movements and vehement bitching.

"Aren't you too drugged out to be doing this?"

"I'm never too injured or doped up to assess and fix a mechanical abomination such as this debacle."

"You only have one hand."

Tony snorted. "That's never stopped me before. Almost done."

It took about five more minutes for Tony to pull the last wire into its correct position. More
exhausted than he was willing to admit, Tony leaned back into the pillows with a quiet groan, eyes watching as Bucky snapped the panels closed and moved his fingers without making a single sound. That was some beautiful engineering, if Tony didn't say so himself.

"You fixed it."

Tony shrugged, arm curling tighter around his still sleeping son. "Wasn't that hard. I did create the thing, remember?"

"I remember."

The look on Bucky's face was odd, or it seemed so to Tony's eyes. The darkness and drugs weren't exactly helping his view of the other man's face, especially with the flashlight now being out, but Tony was pretty sure that he'd never seen Bucky Barnes look so bemused. And the dude had been pretty damned bemused when he'd fitted him with a brand new arm about three months ago.

"Any other issues with it?"

"No."

"Then my work is done."

Eyes drooping yet again, Tony leaned further back into the pillows and cuddled his son like a teddy bear. He was surprisingly okay with having a lucid and sarcastic Bucky Barnes in the same room as him, which was downright weird and possibly suicidal. Then again, the man had brought Peter to stay with him for the night. That act alone won him major brownie points in Tony's book.

"Shit," said Tony around another yawn, "I'm so tired of being drugged into sleep. How long did I last this time?"

"About three hours."

"Huh, that's longer than I'd thought. Time always flies when I'm sciencing."

"I don't think that's a word."

"Nah, it's totally a word. You're just a troglodyte."

"Shut up and go to sleep, Stark."

Tony glared at him with one eye. "You're almost as bossy as Steve. And that's not a compliment."

"Says the man who takes over every room he enters."

"I can't help it that I'm surrounded by idiots and they need to be corralled like little children." Tony groaned with happiness when Bucky adjusted his pillows and then tucked the blankets extra tight around Peter. "Cyclops and Capsicle need to be more careful with who they hire. My brain can't handle... so much incompetence... in a single room...

"Yeah, yeah. Goodnight, Stark."

Chapter End Notes
I'm trying to keep the technical med stuff to a minimum, honest. Bucky just kinda slipped in here while Steve can't seem to ever get on Peter's good side. We'll be exploring that whole issue in the next chapter, so expect some overprotective Peter in the near future. I really hope I'm writing him and the others in a believable manner, too.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was four days later when Peter decided that eavesdropping was perfectly okay under the right circumstances. Aunt May had always scolded him for listening in on conversations that he had no business hearing, but Peter thought that an exception could be made for those that involved his new father and the teammate who betrayed him.

With careful and quiet steps, Peter tip-toed back to the door that he'd heard voices coming from. He barely peeked around the corner, instantly recognizing the deep, familiar sound of Rhodey's voice. And then there was Steve's, which was much more subdued than the other soldier's and made Peter want to smack someone. He'd been itching to get his hands on America's Hero for days now.

Rhodey was scarily good at foiling every plan Peter came up with. He'd just have to become more sneaky about them in the future.

"I'm really tempted to punch you in your perfect face right now, team leader or not," came Rhodey's voice. "What in the fucking hell made you think confronting Tony was a good idea? And then you do it while he's drugged out of his mind. I should break your damned nose for that."

"And you'd have every right. I wasn't thinking straight at the time."

"Yeah, that seems to have become a recurring theme in recent months, hasn't it?"

"I never meant to hurt him."

"We usually don't mean to hurt those we care about," said Rhodey, "But that doesn't absolve us of the need to make up for our stupid shit, either. I can't even tell you how many times Tony and I have done stupid, meaningless shit to each other. It happens, although I can safely say that I've never almost killed him before. I honestly don't think I could even come close if I ever tried."

"I feel like that whole time was a nightmare," Steve admitted. "That damned Sokovia Accord and then Zemo's appearance out of nowhere. It's like we can never catch a break nowadays."

"Welcome to the last eight years of my life."

Peter scrunched up closer to the door, careful not to let anyone see him. He was technically supposed to be in his room working on an American history paper, but Thor had gotten distracted by a show called Vikings and Peter didn't feel like being cooped up today. His father was also in a drugged out sleep, so exploring SHIELD's new hideout had seemed like a good idea.

Plus, all of the Avengers liked to practice in the gym and that meant seeing them up close and in action, which nobody could begrudge Peter for. After all, how many people actually got the chance to see them training and testing out new gadgets? Yep, almost none. Peter could probably make himself known to Natasha or Vision without getting into trouble, but Uncle Rhodey or the other Avengers would no doubt haul Peter straight back to his bedroom while also lecturing him on the dangers of sneaking around a top-secret military base.

Ugh, maybe he should just head back to stay with his conked out father. It'd be safer than getting caught by Uncle Rhodey or Captain Jackass. And Peter really didn't want to get caught by that last
one. He'd promised Tony not to attack him anymore, and a promise was a promise.

"I don't know what to do."

"You need to haul your ass into that room and apologize for being a grade-A prick. I know that Tony's an arrogant asshole a lot of the time, but you were clearly in the wrong this time, Captain. You're lucky I didn't shoot your ass the instant FRIDAY showed me that video footage."

"And you would've had every right. I don't know what came over me."

"When it comes to Tony and his bad habit of hiding information, you never think things over. And I've been watching you two idiots do this for the last four years, so I know what I'm talking about. Don't give me that look, either."

"I just don't understand why he does it."

"Sorry, Captain, but you don't exactly have much leeway to criticize on the subject of withholding important information."

"Okay, yeah, I definitely deserved that."

Rhodey snorted and said, "He does it because he thinks nobody can handle a given situation better than he can. Tony's used to taking care of himself and also thinks that pretty much everyone can't match him in brainpower. So he tries to do everything on his own and invents new things to help him weasel through a problem. It's often a recipe for disaster. Or it works out brilliantly. Bit of a crapshot, I'll admit."

"Peter hates me now, too."

"No, he doesn't," said Rhodey. "The kid's just confused. He idolized you and then saw the whole shitstorm that was the Sokovia Accords on live television. That'd be enough to screw up anyone's view of superheroes and what we're supposed to represent. Besides, Peter doesn't hate anyone."

"You could've fooled me."

"His view of you has simply shifted in the past year. It's called having to earn somebody's trust back. Never easy, but doable."

"Not now that Tony's his adopted father."

"You shouldn't be surprised that Peter would react like this. Or take it to heart. The kid lost his parents shortly after his birth and then his aunt and uncle only a couple months ago. He's afraid you'll hurt Tony and then he'll be left out in the cold again."

"We'd never allow that to happen."

"Damn straight. I've signed every custody paper known to man to make sure that little boy's safe and provided for."

"He won't even talk to me. Not without hissing and snarling, that is."

Rhodey let out a loud sigh and said, "Save me from thick-headed idiots. Honestly, I'm not quite sure what to do about that. Peter's a smart kid and he'll take some time to win over, that's for sure. But sulking in here and destroying punching bags certainly won't help your cause, Rogers."

Take some time to win over? What the hell?! Steve Rogers was never going to win over Peter
Parker, no way. The man was a hypocrical, entitled, and self-serving jerk—yes, Peter knew what all of those words meant—who thought he was always right and should never be questioned. My way or the highway, as Aunt May used to call it. She also said people who acted like that were full of shit. Peter wholeheartedly agreed with her.

"I just don't wanna do anything else to upset him. If Peter can't stand me, then I don't see how Tony will ever want me around. Everything that comes out of my mouth just seems to make things worse."

"Then you need to start thinking before you act, Captain."

Oh boy, there was Uncle Rhodey's lecture voice. Peter had heard him use it several times over the last couple weeks, mostly when he was on the phone with someone from the military. Or reprimanding his dad for nearly blowing up the lab again.

"I understand why you felt the need to protect your best friend, I really do," said Rhodey. "I spend months looking for Tony after he disappeared in Afghanistan. Every moment I could spare I spent scouring the planet for him. Nearly lost my job several times for using military support unwisely, as my CO called it. So yeah, I get where you're coming from on this."

And Peter hadn't known about that. His dad had been lost in Afghanistan? Why would he ever go there?

"However, at this point, you need to consider everything that's happened since then, including the financial burden and eventual fallout that Tony took to support you and the other Avengers. In case you haven't noticed, Tony tries to buy people's affection. It's all he knows how to do, thanks to his bastard father and everyone else he grew up around. Even after twenty-five years, he still thinks I only stick around for the cool gadgets and expensive meals. Pisses me off to no end, but that's simply the way Tony's mind works."

"I could care less about the money," said Steve, who sounded genuinely upset. "I mean, the upgrades and tech are excellent for the Avengers, but I'd gladly take Tony without it, too. How could he even think that?"

Rhodey laughed and said, "You didn't know Howard very well, did you?"

"No, it appears I didn't."

"Look, it's not my place to tell you about the shit that went on between Tony and his asshole dad, but I would suggest talking to him about it. He'd probably appreciate knowing that you aren't constantly comparing him to Howard."

"Bucky said the same thing to me yesterday."

"Well, at least one of you has some common sense," snapped Rhodey. "And it means I only have to give one long-winded lecture then."

"I didn't realize he was spending so much money on us. And I know I didn't have any right to ask about it since it's Tony's money and company, but I feel like things would've been different if I'd just known what was going on."

"Would you have even listened? I hate to say this, Cap, but you were pretty damn irrational in those last weeks when foreign governments were really starting to hunt down Tony's bank account. None of you had any clue how much he was spending to keep the bureaucrats off your tails. Hell, I don't even know how much it was," said Rhodey, "Since Tony keeps showing me figures that I
know are far lower than the real damages have got to be. The board of SI was all but threatening to eliminate his employee's bonuses and maternity leave, did you know that?"

"No."

"Yeah, I didn't think so. Shit, I'm getting too pissed off about this."

"He's your best friend."

"And that's why I'm not punching you in your perfect face right now. Because Tony wouldn't want me to and then he'd find some way to blame himself for you getting a knock upside the noggin. Ugh, Tony has turned blaming himself into an art form. It's exhausting to deal with sometimes."

Peter blinked, more than a little surprised by Rhodey's unrestrained rant. He also felt a little awkward, just now realizing that he'd heard a whole lot of stuff that Tony probably didn't want him to know about. And he didn't understand half of it. Why would his dad blame himself? The other Avengers were big boys and girls, as Uncle Ben used to say, and they could take care of themselves. His dad had no reason to blame himself. And more than anything, Peter couldn't understand why Uncle Rhodey didn't just punch Steve in the face.

The jerk deserved it.

"Well, now that that's taken care of," drawled his uncle, "You listen and you listen good, Rogers."

Oh boy, that was most definitely the stern voice of Colonel James Rhodes, not Peter's friendly and huggable Uncle Rhodey. The mere sound of it made Peter decide that he'd never upset Rhodey so much that he'd feel a need to use it.

"Tony's an idiot who wouldn't know how to ask for help or take orders if it bit him right in the ass, but if I catch you interrogating him any time in the near future, I'll find a way to negate your precious super-soldier serum and I promise, it won't be pretty. The Red Skull will look like a harmless butterfly compared to my wrath. Got it?"

"Crystal."

"We really need to work on your Tony-strategy, Cap. And yes, there's a whole strategy system when it comes to dealing with Tony Stark. I probably should've taught it to you two or three years ago, but better late than never, I suppose."

"Anything would help at this point."

Hearing footsteps not too far from the gym doors, Peter scrambled back around the hallway's nearest corner, only now realizing that Steve's super-soldier modification might also give him super hearing. And Uncle Rhodey was scarcely perceptive, too.

Did they know Peter was there the whole time? He'd rather not find out.

Keeping his footsteps light and quiet, he raced to the closest stairwell and tried not to look behind him. If either of them did catch him, Peter was sure that he'd get a long lecture about the cons of eavesdropping. Tony had tried to lecture him about it last week, but then JARVIS had pointed out how nosy the engineer was, especially towards anyone inside his tower.

Tony had shut up after that, but not before threatening to reprogram JARVIS for the twelfth time that week. Honestly, even Peter could see that his dad's threats were empty. Aunt Pepper just chalked it up to being a compulsive habit at this point.
"Adults are weird."

Deciding that he really didn't want to get in trouble, Peter walked up two flights of stairs to the Avengers' living quarters and headed around the corner to his assigned bedroom. Since this wasn't the New Avengers Facility, everything was very sterile and boring; most of the SHIELD base didn't look lived in and Peter wasn't fond of it in the slightest. He missed the tower and everything that came with it.

And then, just as Peter was coming to the bedroom area, he saw a pretty woman dressed in secretary-like clothing down the hallway. There was nothing special about the woman except for her tall height and blonde hair. Normally, Peter would've just walked on by her to his bedroom, but this time, he felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

"FRIDAY..."

The AI didn't answer him. FRIDAY always answered him.

"FRIDAY?"

Uncle Ben had told Peter to run if he felt like this when near another person, no matter who they were. So, Peter waited less than five seconds before turning around and making a run for the stairwell he'd just come from. And when he heard the sound of running footsteps behind him, Peter didn't hesitate to scream at the very top of his lungs.

Peter had run down the stairs and emerged on the gym floor when he felt a hand grab the back of his shirt, yanking him to the side as a gunshot went off and broken glass scattered all around them. The whole time, Peter didn't stop screaming.

"Help! Uncle Rhodey! Help!"

The strange woman didn't say anything and instead picked Peter up by the back of the neck, nails digging into his unprotected skin. Her other hand slapped him across the face, pistol cutting Peter's left cheek while also nearly breaking his nose and glasses. And then, just as Steve and Rhodey came rushing out of the gym, she tossed Peter straight through the broken window.

Eyes wide with horror, Steve could only watch as Tony's young son was thrown from the fifth floor of a ten-story building. Rhodey screamed beside him, whipping out a gun as the woman also jumped through the broken window. It all happened in the span of ten seconds, but to Steve, it felt like hours. And then he felt Rhodey run by him, calling out for Peter the entire way.

"Fuck! Peter! Peter!"

Steve was right behind him, rushing to the window with almost no breath left in his body. How would he ever face Tony again? He'd been less than fifty feet away from Peter when he'd been tossed out a building by yet another psychotic lunatic who'd infiltrated SHIELD right under their noses. Oh God, Peter...

"Where is he? Where is he?!"

Taking a deep breath, Steve was wholly expecting to see Peter's body smashed on the parking garage below them. Instead, he saw nothing except semi-clean asphalt and concrete. Blinking in relief, it took a moment for Steve's extra-sharp eyes to fix on the woman and a strange man racing down a nearby street, Peter's small frame thrown over the man's shoulder.

"Son of a bitch," Steve snarled, already climbing out the window. "Assemble the others while I get
a head start. And find out what's wrong with FRIDAY. Go!

"You get him back, you hear me!"

Steve didn't need to be told twice, already grappling down the building with shield strapped to his back. He broke into a full-out run as soon as his feet hit the ground, leaping straight off the garage roof and rushing after the bastards who'd dared to touch Tony's son. The super-soldier serum coursed through Steve's veins like wildfire, propelling him forward at speeds that few people on Earth could keep pace with. It wouldn't take Steve long to catch up with them.

About seventy yards ahead, Peter pretended to be lethargic and semi-conscious as best he could. Another agent had grabbed Peter out of midair before he could hit concrete, shocking the boy with a taser and then running down the nearest street with his female partner not far behind. A car pulled up beside them when they reached a busy intersection, but just as the man attempted to open the passenger side door, Captain America's shield slammed straight through the window and into the driver's head.

"This way!" yelled the woman. "We don't have time for the car."

And the stupid lady was right, because if Peter turned his head just a little bit to the side, he could see Steve's familiar form charging up behind them. The shield shook from its place in the car and went flying back to Steve's outstretched arm, nearly decapitating the man carrying Peter. They'd barely made it through the crowd and around the corner of another street before the shield came flying by again, this time narrowly missing the female HYDRA agent. And at this point, Peter was pretty sure Stupidhead 1 and Stupidhead 2 worked for HYDRA.

Who else would be stupid enough to sneak into SHIELD headquarters and kidnap Tony Stark's young son from right under the Avengers' noses? However, from the looks of it, something hadn't gone according to plan—probably Peter moseying around the hallways like he'd been doing—and the agents now had Captain America burning at their heels like an enraged wolverine.

Jumping and somersaulting and rolling over any car that got in his way, Steve used the new recall system in his shield to cut the agents off at every turn, gradually driving them towards less populated neighborhoods. They were surprisingly fast and almost shook Steve off their tail several times, namely when a freight-liner came within two feet of running him over.

"No! Stop! No!"

Peter had seen that close encounter with his own eyes, screaming out in shock when Steve seemed to disappear under the enormous vehicle. Of course, this caught the attention of his kidnappers too, which led to Peter being shaken around like a ragdoll. In retaliation, the boy leaned a little to the left and bit his captor as hard as he could below the armpit.

"Fucking hell! The lil' bastard bit me!"

"Don't stop, you idiot! The transport's only a couple—"

Then there was a loud crash and glass rained down from above them, the HYDRA agents just barely dodging Captain America and his vibranium shield. Bullets followed not a moment later, although Peter couldn't see where they were coming from. However, they obviously weren't friendly if the way Steve cursed and jumped back was anything to go by.

"Put me down!" yelled Peter. "I'll bite you again! Arghhh!"

The HYDRA man had slapped handcuffs over Peter's hands as soon as he'd grabbed him, but that
didn't stop the boy from pinching or biting every tiny piece of flesh he could get a hold of. Unfortunately, while it did loosen his kidnapper's grip a bit, it also caused the woman to backhand Peter across the face and nearly break his nose again.

"Shut the hell up, you little brat."

"Fuck you!"

With Steve bogged down by rooftop fire, the HYDRA agents ran into a nearby alley that led to Hoboken's warehouse district. Despite his whole body aching from the rough treatment, Peter still tried to knee his captor in the face, determined to the break the man's nose in any way he could. Terror was also starting to set in, because the familiar bang and clang of Steve's shield was now only echoing in the distance, meaning that Peter was quickly getting further and further away from him.

"Shit! Where are—"

Peter never found out what the man was going to say because there was a sudden explosion and then something slammed straight into them from the left side. The abrupt attack caused the HYDRA agent to lose his grip and Peter yelped as he was thrown to the ground, layers of skin from his hands, elbows, and knees scraping across pavement.

Head pounding, Peter forced himself to roll away from the fight while also trying to dodge the footfalls of his attackers. And maybe a rescuer, too. Maybe it was Steve. His dad always talked about how Captain America was extremely fast, so it was probably the—

Oh, never mind, that wasn't Steve.

"Hide," ordered a familiar voice. "Keep out of sight."

"Okay..."

Scrambling towards a decrepit dumpster, Peter could hear the sounds of Bucky beating his opponents into the ground, a loud gasp meaning that one of the Avenger's knives had hit its target. Gunshots came from overhead, the sight of a winged Sam Wilson more welcome than Peter had ever thought possible. He still wasn't too happy with the man, but better late than never, as Aunt May used to say.

And then a body slammed into the ground five feet away from Peter, a bullet between the man's eyes while his neck snapped from the four-story fall he'd just taken. It made Peter scream out in shock, hands and feet and a badly placed dumpster preventing his escape from the corpse.

"Get down!"

Bucky ducked just as Steve's shield came flying by his face and slammed into the woman behind him. The interference didn't slow Bucky down for a second, the sniper swiveling to the right before dropping down and thrusting his knife up into his opponent's exposed flank. Cap's shield flew backwards and hit the same man in his left shoulder, giving Bucky the momentum to whirl around, position his weapon just right, and then smash it straight down into his stomach. Peter covered his ears to block out the sounds, bile rising in his throat when he heard the HYDRA agent yelp and choke on his own blood.

"Your turn."

The female HYDRA agent said something to Bucky in a language Peter didn't understand and then
attacked him. From the looks of it, she was a far better fighter than her partner had been, matching the former HYDRA soldier blow for blow while also evading Captain America's shield. Peter tried to make himself as small as possible, hands covering his head when he heard more gunshots overhead. Another body hit the pavement twenty feet away from him.

"Take her alive, Sergeant!"

"No."

"We need her alive," shouted Steve. "Do you hear me? Sergeant, that's an order!"

Peter watched as Bucky continued to relentlessly attack the remaining agent, deadly intent behind every strike and kick he threw at her. When the male agent gave a tiny groan, one of Bucky's spare knives embedded itself in his forehead. It took everything Peter had not to cover his eyes instead of his ears, attention glued on the opposite wall where the Winter Soldier—and there was no doubt that this was the Winter Soldier—had pinned his target, metal arm crashing into her head while his flesh hand broke her gun-wielding arm.

"We need her alive! Stand down!"

"No."

"She has information we need! Don't make me—"

"Bucky!"

The sound of Peter's voice seemed to give the assassin pause, metal hand stopping just short of caving in his opponent's skull. Steve stood a few feet away, shield up and ready to stop Bucky from killing their best source of information about the attacks on Tony and his son. But now that he had Bucky's attention, Peter wasn't too sure what to do with it.

Would Bucky try to kill him? Oh God, his head hurt so much.

"I want my dad," Peter whimpered. "I want my dad. I wanna go home."

Tears came quick and hot after that, Peter curling up into a tight ball while Steve tried to talk some sense into his best friend. At this point, Peter didn't care about anything except seeing his dad again. He should've never left his bedroom. If he'd just stayed in his bedroom and done his homework like a good little boy, then the agents would've never gotten a hold of him. Why didn't he—

"C'mere."

Peter didn't shy away from the familiar hands or voice, wrapping his arms around Bucky's neck without hesitation. He took a quick peek to the side, easily spotting the crumbled form of his female kidnapper. Steve was standing over her and didn't look particularly upset, so Peter assumed Bucky had only knocked her out.

"I want my dad."

"Yeah, I know, buddy," said Bucky. "We'll get you to him as soon as possible, I promise."

Bucky picked the boy up like he weighed nothing, easily supporting Peter's weight on his front and the heavy rifles on his back. And despite what some people might think, he also didn't mind the tears and snot that were now running down his neck. Bucky's little sister Rebecca and her two
oldest children had gotten their fair share of tears and snot on him before he'd left for the war.

"Keep him low, Buck. We've still got enemy fire coming from up top. Do you have an earpiece?"

He threw it to Steve without saying a word.

"Thanks. Falcon? Affirmative. What's your current position? Okay, keep it up then. And we'll just—ugh, what was that?" Pause. "I'm not too sure Iron Man will agree with that designation, Hawkeye."

The sound of his dad's superhero title caught Peter's attention.

"What?"

"Stevie's always been a spoilsport," said Bucky, metal hand covering the back of Peter's aching head. "I think the codename Spider-Kid is perfect for you. I'm kinda ashamed I didn't think of it first."

Exhausted and not quite sure what this conversation was really about, Peter just kept quiet and tucked his head into Bucky's neck, content to stay far away from the action. Ever since Peter could remember, he'd wanted to be a superhero. The Avengers saved people all the time and they'd even saved the whole world once, something that Peter had thought was so amazing and cool not even a year ago. But now? He just wanted to go home and feed Matika and watch his dad eat gross takeout food or get doused in foam by a trigger-happy Dummy.

Being a hero wasn't nearly as cool or fun as it looked. To be truthful, it hurt a whole lot. And all Peter wanted was his dad right now. Bucky was a decent temporary substitute, but Tony was much better at giving hugs and weird pep-talks. He also had Hulk band-aids for accidents. Not that Peter was supposed to tell anyone about that. He'd been sworn to secrecy on Butterfingers' motherboard.

"You still with me, kiddo?"

"Uh huh."

Peter didn't flinch when Bucky's metal hand reached back to crush his handcuffs, fingers easily grinding the steel chain and bands into dozens of pieces. A few cuts littered Peter's wrists, but the coolness of Bucky's metal fingers soothed away some of the lingering pain.

"I think Thor wants to weaponize your pet spider, just to forewarn you. He's been looking real shifty whenever he comes out of your—"

And then everything exploded around them.

Chapter End Notes

For some reason, I just felt like Rhodey would be the best person to give Steve a stern talking to. He knows Tony and loves him more than anybody else, so it kinda made sense. And lots of action in this chapter. I'm a terrible person to the Stark family.
"What the hell is Stark doing here!!"

Steve was barely able to roll away before a repulsor blast slammed straight into the dead HYDRA agent, immediately being followed by some type of net that appeared to absorb what would've been a massive explosion. He was still thrown back into and through the warehouse walls, but Steve also wasn't dead from the blast like he would've been had he not been protected by a containment net.

"I'm insulted, Captain. Did you think the suits weren't capable of remote summons?"

"Ms. Potts?"

"I've got the skies covered," said Pepper, hovering about twenty feet above them. "And you need to disable the woman's bomb, too. FRIDAY will be able to instruct you on how to do it."

Seeing someone else in Tony's Iron Man suits was weird, at least to Steve, but he also knew that underestimating Pepper was something only a moron would do. She was similar to Peggy in many ways, being both mentally strong and scarily capable of adapting to new and dangerous situations. Steve didn't know how she'd gotten a hold of Tony's suit or where she'd come from, but he also wasn't about to argue with her.

"Affirmative," said Steve. "What are your directions on this, FRIDAY?"

About sixty feet away sat Bucky and Peter, the former curled tight around his little bundle of tears and snot. Fumbling around in his pocket, Bucky whipped out another earpiece and popped it in, catching himself up on the mission while also keeping an eye out for other HYDRA agents. The enemy operation appeared to be much larger than they'd originally thought, which irritated Bucky far more than he was willing to admit. Assaulting Stark Tower and then snatching Peter from SHIELD headquarters was a bold move that either stank of careful planning or stupid desperation.

Unfortunately, Bucky wasn't sure which one it was yet.

"Aunt Pepper?"

"Yeah, she's got your dad's suit," said Bucky. "That dame's a real firecracker."

Peter gave him a suspicious look before saying, "Don't even think about it. Aunt Pepper's off-limits."

"You've got nothing to worry about, kiddo."

A sudden movement at the alley entrance drew Bucky's attention, metal arm whipping out to fire a bullet right between another HYDRA agent's eyes. Peter flinched at the sound, face buried in Bucky's neck as a second bout of tears started up. Traumatizing Tony's son hadn't been on Bucky's agenda this week, or ever. He really liked kids and felt like a heel for scaring Peter so much.

"Okay, we're gonna get you outta here, alright," soothed Bucky. "What's your position, Falcon?"
"Engaging two hostiles about four buildings to your south. Vision's less than a quarter-mile from my position and Rescue's coming in hot right now."

"Hawkeye?"

"I'll be there in less than a minute to provide cover fire. What's your situation?"

"Cap's defusing a bomb and my arms are full of little spiders," said Bucky, swiveling around to shot another agent that appeared directly above them. "Anything you could give us would be much appreciated."

"I will provide ground assistance. Remain in your current location until I give the signal."

"Better listen to the cat, Barnes."

Well, that response had certainly been unexpected. Bucky hadn't even known T'Challa was still in the country, let alone their immediate area. He'd buggered off shortly after the tower attack and checking in on Tony, so Bucky felt a little baffled by his sudden appearance. But he wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth, either. The Wakandan royal was an absolute beast on the battlefield.

"You copy that, Cap?"

"Almost finished here. Just give me a couple more seconds..."

Keeping his weapons at the ready, Bucky angled Peter away from a possible explosion as best he could. Fighting alongside and protecting Steve was always his first priority, but that habit had to be put on the back burner while he had an eight-year-old child's life and safety at risk here. The Stark family had suffered enough at his hands and Bucky wasn't about to lose Peter on his watch; he owed Tony and Maria that much, at least.

"FRIDAY?"

"Please angle your earpiece towards the bomb, Captain Rogers."

"Oh, um, alright..."

"It looks like the bomb's already been disabled. A SHIELD transport vehicle's also being sent to pick up the unconscious HYDRA agent. Might I suggest concealing her in the dumpster until they arrive?"

Steve shared a glance with Bucky and then said, "Sounds good to me."

Without a hint of remorse, Steve tossed the female agent straight into the dumpster, pinching a specific nerve near the base of her neck to ensure a continued lack of consciousness. Years ago, he would have felt like a monster for treating any dame this way, but now? Not in the slightest. She was lucky Steve hadn't given Bucky the go-ahead to smash her skull in; kidnapping Peter was certainly more than enough reason to consider it.

"I think you're gonna need to take the kid, Stevie."

"What?"

Bucky rolled his eyes and said, "I've got the guns, you've got a shield. You can offer him more physical protection than me while I take out anyone who tries to shot us from a distance. It's the safest route we can take for Peter."
"Okay, yeah, that makes sense."

Shaking off any doubts he had, Steve reached out for a reluctant Peter, easily picking up the small boy and then rearranging Peter's limbs around his upper body. From there, he kept one arm loose while using the other to protect most of Peter's body with his shield. It presented Peter as a much smaller target, although Steve still felt a bone-deep terror at the thought of running through enemy fire with a young child strapped to his chest. He wondered if this was some sort of revenge on Tony's part for their disagreements last year.

"This okay?"

"I want my dad."

"You'll be back in his arms soon, I promise."

"Hurry it up, Cap!"

After running a quick hand through Peter's hair, Steve took off behind his best friend's lead, eyes and ears scanning every nook and crevice around them. He stayed a few yards behind Bucky the whole time, content with allowing the sniper to take point and take down any HYDRA goons that got in their path. Steve was a soldier and man of action, but he also knew that rushing into any form of combat right now could get Peter seriously injured or killed. If that happened, Steve literally wouldn't be able to live with himself.

"Black Panther's on your right, Cap."

"Affirmative. I see him."

"Good," said Clint. "Keep Peter covered and follow him. We have a detail ready to assist you to a safe location."

"Don't fall behind."

With that said, Bucky and Steve swung to the right and followed T'Challa into a nearby alley. The man was incredibly fast and almost outpaced them at several points, but that was largely due to him scouting ahead for any more active threats. When they eventually came back to the street across from SHIELD's headquarters, Steve was barely able to duck before three bullets pinged off his shield. Peter yelped in surprise, curling into an even smaller ball against Steve's chest. By the time he turned to look for their attacker, Bucky had already planted a bullet in the guy's side before firing another straight through his throat.

"Fucker should've stayed down," was all Bucky had to say. "C'mon, I think I know where he's leading us."

"Another hostile on your eight o'clock, Soldier."

It took less than two seconds for Bucky to shoot another HYDRA agent off a rooftop, eyes hard with a coldness that Steve still had difficulty accepting. Whenever they were in combat, Bucky seemed to become a different person, ruthless and pragmatic to the extreme. It was hard to reconcile with the goofy prankster that Steve had known in their younger years.

"To your left, Captain."

Knowing that he had no choice but to allow Bucky to provide them cover, Steve followed T'Challa down another alleyway and couldn't hold back a raised eyebrow when the other man tapped his
foot five times on the ground. Then a piece of the concrete road popped upwards and Phil Coulson's head appeared from out of nowhere. He looked as professional and neutral as ever.

"Good to see you in one piece, Mr. Parker. Captain?"

"I can't fit down there with him."

Phil held out an arm and said, "Then hand him to me. C'mon, be quick about it."

"Okay, just be careful with—umm, Peter, you need to let go."

With gentle hands, Steve pried the little boy from his chest, pointedly ignoring the snot stains all over his neck and upper suit. Peter grunted in protest at first—and didn't that just make Steve's heart swell a teeny-tiny bit—but the echo of Bucky's huge-ass rifle sounding off was enough to spur the kid into action. Steve carefully handed him over, shield covering Peter the entire way while T'Challa circled around them.

"Are you coming, Captain?"

"No, I need—"

"He promised to take me to my dad," said Peter. "Him and Bucky promised me."

"Ah, well, that changes things."

Steve blinked when Phil gave him an expectant look, hands already empty after sending Peter down to another waiting agent. He would've given more of a protest, but T'Challa had obviously grown tired of their dallying and just shoved Steve towards the hole.

"Go with the child," he said. "We have the situation handled up here. I'll send the Soldier behind you."

"Are you sure?"

"Don't test my patience, Captain. I will inform the others of your absence."

When it came to Steve's leadership, T'Challa was still somewhat of a loose cannon, mostly due to his royal title and freelance position on the team. Like Tony, T'Challa was more of a consultant than anything, coming and going as he pleased and allying with the Avengers only when it suited his people and himself. Steve wasn't about to begrudge T'Challa's help, but it was a little difficult working with him at times.

"If you think they have information, at least try to capture them."

"I can't guarantee anything."

"Bucky!"

"I'm coming! Just let me get this—"

Another body dropped off a neighboring roof and hit the ground with a loud thud that made Steve cringe. He barely saw Bucky race towards him and definitely didn't expect the rough body-check that shoved him down into SHIELD's newest hidey-hole. After landing on his ass in a dark and smelly tunnel, Steve wondered if Bucky was trying kill him because not even two seconds later, said man dropped down on his head with a curse and grunt of pain.
"You've got a hard head, Stevie."

"And you're standing on my neck and crotch. Kindly removed yourself."

"Yeah, well, it's not like—oomph!"

Peter must've been as scrawny as his father joked about, because Steve barely felt the kid's additional weight when he tackled Bucky like a gigantic leech. More than a little uncomfortable, Steve whacked Bucky on the ass and promptly told him to shove off.

"Stop your bitching, punk. And the snot just keeps coming, doesn't it?"

"We need to have him checked over by a doctor."

Phil cleared his throat and gestured down the long, dark corridor. "If you'll follow me, gentlemen, I have a team of doctors waiting for our little spider."

"That's not funny."

"I think it's hilarious."

Bucky ruffled the boy's hair, hitching him up a little higher and not once asking if Peter wanted to walk on his own two feet. Considering the hell that Peter had been through in the last half-hour, none of them saw anything wrong with carrying the child around. Hell, Steve felt better knowing that Peter was safe in Bucky's arms and also had a slew of trusted agents surrounding him.

"We'll take you straight up to your dad, okay?" Bucky whispered in Peter's ear. "The doctors can check you up there. Won't take more than five minutes, I promise."

"I don't think that's—"

"We're taking him straight up to his dad," said Bucky, voice broaching no argument. "He's in one piece and the docs can examine him as soon as we're outside Tony's room. Or on the way up, if they can manage it. I don't give a shit either way, but Peter's going straight to Tony."

"Alright, no stopping," Steve conceded. "But could you lighten up your grip a bit. The kid's turning blue."

"Fuck, sorry about that, kiddo."

Meanwhile, on the building's seventh floor, the medical staff had sedated Tony to prevent him from running off and finding Peter himself.

Alarms had sounded at half-past noon, startling Tony out of a restful sleep that his body had dearly needed. When he'd drifted off a couple hours before, Peter had been curled up at his side, reading one of his favorite books from the *Unfortunate Events* series. Between Rhodey, Pepper, and himself, they'd set up a broad curriculum for Peter until he started a new school year in August. With FRIDAY to provide the materials wherever they went, there was no reason for Peter to avoid homework while they were laid up at SHIELD headquarters.
It had only taken Tony a half minute to figure out what was going on and he'd barely staggered out of bed before his doctor and two nurses came barging in, syringes at the ready to stop their escaping patient. With FRIDAY out of a commission, Tony had been unable to stop the no-good vampires from sedating him. Natasha had been the last thing he'd seen before passing out, her arms crossed and face grim through the hospital room window.

They'd better find and protect Peter, had been Tony's final thought, or I'm gonna kill the whole bunch of them. And ruin their credit history for life.

Coming back to consciousness sometime later had been a bitch, just as he'd expected. Rapid sedation was an unpleasant affair that Tony had experienced more times than he preferred to admit, and it always left a foul taste in his mouth. Coconuts were a mortal enemy of his nowadays.

"What should we do until—hey, I think he's waking up. Give me that cup, would you?"

"C'mon, Boss, you've spent enough time snoozing."

"Fucking hell," groaned Tony, fighting through the itchy haze of sedatives. "What'd those bastards give me?"

"Hell if I know, but it knocked you out flat."

At the window of Tony's room stood Bruce and Happy, neither man looking all too thrilled with being stuck at a hysterical Tony Stark's bedside. If they figured that he was gonna try to escape, then they figured right. His child was out there somewhere and Tony was gonna find him. Until Peter was in this room safe and sound, the whole building would hear and feel his wrath.

"Aloha, Iron Douchebag! Whoa, man, you look like shit."

Near Tony's right foot was Scott Lang, sitting cross-legged on the blankets while several of his ants moseyed around the bed's railings. Some stupid cooking show was playing on the television, Gordon Ramsey yelling like a banshee at his latest batch of culinary victims. That man was never catering one of Tony's Fourth of July parties ever again.

"Get the fuck outta my room, Lang, or I swear to Thor and his batshit crazy brother, I will feed you to my kid's pet spider."

"That won't work. Insects love me."

"Newsflash, jerkoff, Matika's an arachnid. She eats insects for breakfast, including itty-bitty ants like yourself."

"You need to get laid, man. The crankiness is almost painful at this point."

Tony pushed himself up and glared at everyone around him. Normally, he would've been bouncing all over the room at the mere sight of Bruce, but the absence of his young son was grating on Tony's nerves and he didn't give a shit about anything except Peter right now.

"Yeah, well, nobody's happy when an alarm starts to blare and their kid's nowhere in fucking sight," Tony snapped. "Where's Peter? And if he's not in this goddamned building, then I'm gonna hunt down Fury, cut his remaining eye out, and feed it to a bilgesnipe."

"Calm down and listen, Tony. He was taken during the—"

"Fuck! Then why are—"
"But Peter's also back safe with Steve and Bucky," said Bruce. "They're bringing him up to you right now."

The strong grip of Bruce's hand did little to assuage Tony's frustration, especially when they started to explain the rest of the situation. His mind filed everything away for future use—anything that passed near Tony Stark's ears was memorized, duh—but all he cared about at this moment was seeing Peter and making sure his son hadn't been hurt by the bastards who'd taken him.

He really hoped a few HYDRA agents were still alive, just so Tony could rip them apart himself. But knowing Bucky's psychotic habit of shooting his enemies between the eyes or through the throat, Tony didn't have good prospects on that particular front.

"J?"

"Everything is running at optimal levels, Sir. It would appear that the intruders planted a device that knocked out my surveillance of floors four, five, and six for a little over fifteen minutes. From my current diagnostics, it would seem that this is the same device used at the tower as well."

"So, what's the verdict on it?"

"I have created an effective firewall against the device and it will have zero capability of scrambling my systems again."

"You are my favorite person in the whole wide world, J," said Tony around some ice chips. "My love for you will burn eternal. Nothing can compare to it. Well, except for Peter, but he doesn't count since he's permanently numero uno, anyways."

"They're here, Tony."

Not even attempting to hide his desperation, Tony would've ran for the door if Bruce hadn't placed a restraining hand on his chest. Steve and Bucky appeared outside the room about ten seconds later, Peter held in the latter's arms like a limp ragdoll. The sight made Tony's heart race with fear, but then they were coming through the door and Peter was turning around and reaching for his father. Unlike Steve and Bucky, who were still a sweaty mess, Peter was squeaky clean, sporting at least eight butterfly bandages, and freshly dressed in sweatpants and his favorite Hulk t-shirt.

"Dad!"

Tony didn't hesitate to grab Peter when Bucky set him down on the bed, wrapping himself around the boy despite the IVs that tugged at his left arm. The tears and snot started not a moment later, Peter burying his face in Tony's neck as he explained what had happened in half-coherent sentences. Someone must've given Peter a quick shower because he smelled like the blueberry shampoo that Happy always picked up for him.

"We already had him examined by a doctor down the hall," said Steve after the kid had finished his snot-filled story. "Bucky got him showered and dressed before we brought him over. So that, you know, he wouldn't have to wear the PPE stuff around you."

"Do you buy anything besides the Hulk for him?" asked Bucky. "Because that's all I could find in his suitcase or drawers."

"The Hulk?"

Bruce looked more than a little flabbergasted, eyes finally landing on the yellow and green shirt that Peter was wearing, and then the bright green and purple slippers that adorned the kid's feet.
Yeah, Tony may have gone a little overboard on Peter's Hulk-based wardrobe.

"Who am I to deny my son memorabilia of his favorite Avenger?"

Cheeks a little red with happy embarrassment, Bruce pulled Steve and Bucky off to the side to discuss what was going on while Tony focused on his jittery child. FRIDAY would have a detailed report uploaded to his Starkpad within the hour, updating it as SHIELD and the Avengers learned more about their enemies and current situation. For now, Tony needed to put his own needs and curiosities aside and focus on Peter, because the kid was shaking like an autumn leaf.

"What did I tell you about biting, young man?"

"The jerk deserved it," said Peter. "He nearly broke my nose, too."

"Shit, really? Here, let me take a look."

After wrapping Peter up in his blankets, Tony turned the kid's head to and fro, carefully examining every piece of injured skin that he could see. Peter's nose was blue and red and swollen, but didn't appear to be cracked or broken. The back of his neck was marred with angry-looking indentations and scratches, obviously caused by the bitch who'd grabbed him. Bandages covered his elbows, knees, and chin, which Tony guessed were from being tossed on the ground. Steve was also carrying an array of tubes and ice-packs, something that Tony would have to ask about later.

"What happened here, Petey-pie?"

"The jerk put me in handcuffs," said Peter, eyes watching as Tony massaged the painful welts on his wrists. "Bucky snapped them into pieces, though."

"When it comes to metal vs. metal, Barnes tends to win 92.4% of the time."

"Are you okay?"

Heart skipping a bit in surprise, Tony pulled Peter close and said, "I'm perfectly fine. Pretty much just laid here unconscious through the whole thing. I wanted to come after you, though. Don't think for a single second that I didn't try to come find you. Those damned doctors had to knock me out to keep me here."

Tony wanted to—scratch that, he absolutely needed to—make it clear to Peter that he was going to come after him. When it came to kidnapping and Peter's safety, Tony was gonna give Howard's protocol a giant middle finger and actually be proactive in preventing this kinda shit from happening. He already knew that his son's built-in trackers were the reason why Pepper and the Avengers found him so quickly, and unlike Howard, Tony wasn't about to wait for someone else to rescue Peter. This time was an anomaly due to his medical condition, but Tony wouldn't be recruiting Pepper in his place again.

And there wasn't gonna be a second time, if Tony had anything to say about it. HYDRA had crossed a bright red line by attacking his son and Tony Stark was going to destroy them for it. Cutting off their heads wasn't working, so Tony figured that it was time to nuke them outright. Those sons of bitches didn't realize just how horrible and destructive it was to have Tony's full attention and intellect fixated right on them.

He didn't even give a shit about what they were after—and someone was always after something from Tony, it never failed—all that mattered was that HYDRA and their allies had finally picked a fight with the wrong person. His father apparently hadn't had enough motivation to take down their higher-ups, but Tony certainly did now.
When it came to Peter, Tony was completely willing to remove the kiddy repulsors and just blow his enemies' fucking heads off.

"Can we watch a movie?"

"Sure," said Tony, deciding that they could talk more after Peter calmed down. "But no dragons. Seriously, I can't take any more dragons."

"Jurassic World?"

"Dragons and dinosaurs are kinda the same thing, kiddo."

"Not according to Thor or science."

"We don't discuss the golden retriever and his opinions on mythical creatures," Tony argued. "However, I will be lenient this time around and take a painful blow in the name of science. Okay, J, fire up the newest addition of Zoos Gone Wild."

"Well, I'll just—"

Bucky made it no more than five steps towards the bed before Bruce grabbed him and said, "Don't even think about it. Tony's still vulnerable to infection, and you and Steve smell like a sewer. If you're planning to stay, then both of you need to shower first."

Everyone blinked in shock at this, both due to Bruce's usually meek personality and the fear that most people displayed towards Bucky and his Winter Soldier persona. It didn't surprise Tony too much, though. After all, what did Bruce have to fear from Bucky? The Hulk could very easily smash and kill anyone who tried to hurt the good doctor, and Tony himself felt little fear towards the Angry Green Giant anymore. If Bruce was truly back in control and had reached some kind of zen state, then neither he nor Peter were in immediate danger when The Other Guy decided to make an appearance. Not that Tony would be doing anything to provoke him, of course, but it was still a nice tidbit of intelligence to have.

"But what about—"

"Ms. Maximoff is patrolling the building and Mr. Lang, Happy, and myself will remain here to watch over Tony and Peter," said Bruce as he pushed both soldiers towards the door. "Give yourselves a thorough washing and then you can come back to enjoy the sight of giant lizards ripping people to pieces."

Tony smiled down at Peter and said, "See, isn't your Uncle Bruce amazing? He's my favorite. Even beats Thor."

All he got in response was a cold nose into his neck, Peter's attention already focused on the opening scene of Jurassic World. Tony didn't say a word after that, just watching as Steve and Bucky reluctantly left the room and disappeared down the hallway. Both gave one last look before leaving, seeming to survey the room for any signs of danger that they may have missed. Tony picked up Peter's limp hand and waved goodbye to them with it.

Both super-soldiers waved back, even if Peter didn't take his eyes away from the screen. Not that Tony could blame him; Peter had had an awful day.

"Keep your ants off the bed, Mr. Lang," scolded Bruce as he came back over to flip through Tony's medical charts. "We agreed that the railings are permissible and the sheets will be kept free of insects."
"Drat. You're a cruel man, Doc."

"My beautiful Brucie-bear," said Tony when the other man checked over his IV ports. "Come to visit me from the great beyond?"

"Pepper is very persistent. And your luck is horrible."

"I think what you meant to say was that Pepper is an angel. And are you my doctor now? Please say you're my doctor. I will build you the nicest, fanciest, most science-y lab in the world if you've taken over as my doctor."

Bruce smiled and said, "You know I'm not that kind of doctor, Tony."

"You're every kind of doctor. The scientific community just needs to award you a half-dozen Nobel Prizes and be done with it."

"Flattery will get you nowhere."

"It's not flattery if it's the truth," said Tony. "And that's the most truthful statement I've ever given."

A warm, familiar hand carded through the engineer's hair and Tony tried not to purr with happiness. He'd missed talking with Bruce, who understood him almost as well as Rhodey did. He really, really hoped that Bruce was going to stay for more than a few days. Peter was gonna love him.

"Focus on the movie, Tony. You know that the Mosasaur scene is the best part."

"Lies! The raptor squad is the best part. Right, Petey?"

"Uh huh."

"Well, who am I to disagree with that?"

Chapter End Notes

Peter's kinda in shock at this point, if anyone was wondering. He's also very slowly starting to warm up to the Avengers, although it's still gonna be a lot of work on everyone's part. And Pepper to the rescue! She can kick ass as good as Tony in those suits. Also, enter Brucie-bear. Lots of people asked about him, and here he is.
"Are you sure that's a shark? Because I don't think it looks like a shark."

"Not all sharks look like Great Whites."

"Well, excuse me for not being well-versed on the intricacies of ichthyology. Water and I aren't the best of friends, either."

"You could build a robot-shark."

"Been there, done that. They're called submarines and what the hell is that?"

"A goblin shark. They live deep down in the ocean."

"That's horrifying. Why are you studying this again? Oh God, it just keeps getting uglier."

"Uncle Rhodey said not everything's related to engineering."

"Blasphemy!"

"Um, sorry, am I interrupting something?"

Steve stood in the doorway of Tony's hospital room, still dressed in his training suit from the gym. He'd popped in every evening since Peter's abduction four days ago, always bringing food that just barely met the threshold of what Tony was permitted to eat. Liquid diets sucked. Big time. Even cranky Peter couldn't complain too much since Steve always brought him a separate and tasty meal, often sneaking in sweets or blueberries for the little boy's pleasure. Say what you will about the Golden Boy of the Avengers, but Steve Rogers had a big heart and he seemed to really, really want Tony's kid to like him.

"Just a lesson on some seriously ugly fish," said Tony. "Have you ever seen this thing before? Because it's horrifying."

"Sure, that's a goblin shark."

"How the hell do you even know what that is? I've never seen it's ugly mug before in my life."

"I do know how to use the internet, Tony," said Steve in that long-suffering way of his. "And I like to read about a lot of different things when I have the free time. The goblin shark comes up on almost every list about strange and unusual animals. But I gotta admit, it is pretty ugly."

Tony tapped his son on the nose and said, "If you want another pet, it's gonna be a cat or small lizard. I don't need any more weird animals running around my tower. Matika and Dummy are already more than enough."

"Sharks don't make good pets," said Peter with a no-duh look. "And this one will die if it's brought to the surface. Too much pressure."

"And thank Loki's loony ass for that. Nope, no sharks in my tower, kiddo."
"What's that?"

The smile on Steve's face was almost painfully hopeful as he pulled several containers from a large takeout bag. The round thing was obviously Tony's sad little bowl of soup, but the second container opened up to reveal a long sandwich wrapped in tinfoil. He vaguely recognized the smell and started salivating, even if the nasty pain meds still dulled his appetite.

"A little pizzeria six blocks down sells some of the most amazing hot sandwiches I've ever eaten," said Steve as he unwrapped his delicious prize. "The owner's sister recommended this particular special for a hungry, growing boy. It's one of their top sellers."

"Steven Grant Rogers, did you pick up a Philly cheesesteak for my kid while I'm confined to a liquid diet?"

"Maybe?"

"That's it, I'm never talking to you again."

"Hey, I still got you their cream of mushroom soup. The sister made it herself."

"Did you hear that, Petey? I thought I heard a voice speaking to me from far, far away. Must be an annoying ghost who tortured his friends in a past life and is now being punished for it."

"I don't think I'll be able to eat all that," said Peter as Steve organized their dinner on Tony's bed table. "It's almost as long as my arm. Is this why so many people are so fat?"

Steve laughed at that and said, "Partially. And I have a mini-fridge in my room, so we can re-wrap and store whatever you don't finish for later."

Despite Tony's initial worry, Peter didn't snap or even glare at Steve when he attempted to rearrange the huge sandwich so it wouldn't spill all over Tony and his stupid hospital bed. Since he was a clumsy eight-year-old boy, Tony already knew that Peter would be a mess after two or three bites, although Steve seemed determined to avert this from happening.

"Just throw a bunch of napkins on his lap and be done with it," said Tony. "He's gonna be covered in sauce no matter what you do, anyways."

"Sorry, force of habit."

Peter was just as messy as Tony had anticipated, with sauce and cheese whiz covering his face in less than a minute. He bit back a laugh when he saw Steve's fingers start to twitch, obviously trying to restrain himself from wiping Peter's increasingly disastrous hands and face. Every member of the Avengers had been subjected to his clean-freak habits in the past, so Tony was gonna laugh his ass off if the super soldier tried to use them on a ravenous Peter. Knowing his son's attitude towards Steve and his general presence, maiming and cannibalism would be the most likely result.

"How's your leg feeling?"

"Like someone sliced it open to remove a stupid lil' pebble," Tony admitted around a mouthful of soup. "But with Bruce back, I should be able to head home sometime tomorrow. Pepper's got everything fixed, so there's no reason not to break free of this agent and spy-infested Alcatraz."

Steve didn't look the slightest bit happy to hear this. In fact, his stink face was so strong that Tony feared his mother's warnings would come true and it'd stick that way for eternity.
"Don't you think that's a little early?"

"I would've high-tailed it outta here already if that damned doctor hadn't threatened to string me up from the Liberty Torch," Tony grumbled. "Besides, with our friendly neighborhood HYDRA agents' recent infiltration, I think the tower might be a wee bit safer at this point."

"And Uncle Rhody booby-trapped it," said Peter. "Lots of electricity. JARVIS will fry 'em."

"You shouldn't be alone, though."

Tony rolled his eyes and said, "We'll be fine, Cap. I know what to expect now. And you guys decimated their forces, so I doubt they'll try anything any time soon."

"I wanna take Matika home. It's too stuffy here."

"Well, my master has spoken, so it's pretty much a divine order now. And by God, you are a filthy child. It's in your hair!"

Peter didn't object to Tony picking at his hair, instead continuing to eat like the bottomless pit that he was. The kid had been clingy since his abduction, only leaving his father's bedside when Rhodey dragged him away from it. Since Tony's hospital room had a bathroom and shower, Peter argued that there was no good reason for him to leave. Hell, he'd even conned Clint into bringing everything except Matika from the bedroom Phil had assigned him.

"But do you really think—"

And then Steve's cell phone buzzed, Natasha's familiar ringtone echoing through the room. With a grumble and roll of his eyes, Steve took the call and communicated in a series of grunts, something he had likely picked up from Bucky in recent months. The assassin preferred to speak in grunts and glares about ninety-six percent of the time, which Tony had pointed out on at least three occasions. It was kinda intimidating, if he was being honest.

"Natasha needs me downstairs," said Steve, careful with his words around Peter. "It shouldn't take too long, I hope. You almost done there?"

"I wouldn't touch that food if I were you. He bites."

The speed at which Steve withdrew his hand was hilarious, even though Peter hadn't so much as glanced at it. Apparently, all those warnings about Peter biting and maiming had taken effect and Captain America appeared to be genuinely scared for the well-being of his fingers. Not that Tony would ever condone the kid using his teeth to assault people, but it was still comical to see in action. Well, there was that and the little issue of humans being filthy creatures who wouldn't understand the concept of cleanliness if it hit them in the face.

Damn, Tony really was becoming paranoid in his old age. What a strange turn of events.

"I shouldn't be gone long," said Steve. "And Clint promised to visit sometime today, too. He kept mumbling about a conspiracy against birds or some other nonsense."

"Matika's a bird-eater."

"Okay, you know what, I'm just gonna head on down and see what Natasha wants. Make sure your dad gets some rest, alright?"

"The morphine does that job for me."
Steve just arched an eyebrow in return, as if wordlessly asking Tony about his child's sarcastic attitude. And seriously, why did everyone keep looking at him like that? May and Ben Parker were responsible for at least ninety-five percent of Peter's sassy witticisms; it would take Tony about two or three years to add his projected fifty percent contribution to the Smart-Mouthed Peter Parker cause.

"I'll see you two later then," said Steve. "I hope she's not doing anything too brutal down there."

"Natasha and brutal are synonymous words."

"I know, I know."

With Steve's departure and a quick check-up from his nurse, Tony waited about five minutes before deciding that it was finally time to implement Operation Alcatraz. He was totally over this whole being stuck in a hospital bed fiasco. It was overrated and unnecessary, no matter what Bruce said. And honestly, the good doctor was even more of a worrywart than Steve, which was really saying something.

"You ready to blow this popsicle stand, kiddo?"

Peter nodded.

"Okay, then run over to the couch and grab my dufflebag," said Tony as he pushed himself upright. "Happy said that he'd hidden the suits in the bottom underneath my shirts and undies. Are they both there?"

"Two suitcases."

"Yep, that's them. Now bring 'em over here."

"What about this?"

"Those are the undersuits. Trust me, you don't want the armor pinching you in the unmentionables. Hurts like a homicidal bitch."

"How are you gonna get yours on?"

Tony showed his son how to put the bottoms on and said, "That's where you'll be helping me. As soon as I take these IVs and monitors off, I'm gonna need you to help me slip the suit on. After that, the armor will slide right over us."

"It's really tight."

"And that's on purpose. Also accentuates the butt, not that that's what we're aiming for in your case."

Peter gave him a dry look and then pulled out Tony's bottoms, carefully pushing them up his father's legs and then tight around his waist. Always the brilliant study, special attention was given to Tony's injured left leg, Peter's small fingers adjusting the material as best he could to relieve the pain and pressure. Tony held back a wince, not wanting to alarm Peter about how painful it really was.

"Okay, my lower half is good to go," said Tony. "Now I just need to take these IVs out while you pull off the monitors."
"Eww, that's gross."

"Hey, you're not the one with the damned things embedded in your skin. Ouch, that one really hurt. Why do nurses always have to put them in so deep?"

"I don't ever want one of those in me."

Tony snickered. "Yeah, I'm gonna try to prevent that at all costs, Petey-pie. But when it comes to tonsils and wisdom teeth, there's not much I can do about that. Both of those are horrific rites of passage, I'm afraid."

"Shirt?"

"Yes, please. And make it quick. The docs are gonna be charging in here in less than a minute."

Even with Peter being extra careful, putting the upper flight suit on was downright painful and Tony's eyes watered on several occasions. His stomach was aching and burning by the time they were done, but there was also no time to lose. Tony could already hear noise down the hallway, the nurses and doctors responding to the loud and incessant beeps of his machines.

"And we're ready to bust outta this joint," said Tony. "Grab the suitcases. Okay, now hold it up to your chest and FRIDAY will do the rest. You hear that, Fri?"

"Prepared for launch, Boss."

Reaching out to support Peter's weight, Tony couldn't hold back a smile when the smaller suitcase started to unfold and twist around his son's body, forming a thin layer of armor that he had specially designed to protect Peter in an emergency. It was much more rudimentary than Tony's Iron Man suits and operated exclusively under his and FRIDAY's commands, but it was also built for a single purpose and would serve that purpose well under the right circumstances.

"This is so cool," crowed Peter as the mask dropped down to cover his face. "Was this why you were scanning me last month?"

"Hey, I can see those thoughts swirling around inside your pint-sized head, so stop them right now," Tony winced as the Mark V unfolded over his left side. "This will not be a regular or even uncommon occurrence. It won't even be a yearly occurrence. Honestly, if I could put this down as a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence, I'd be pretty damned content with that."

"But you wear them all the time."

"Yeah, and I'm also over forty-years-old and personally built these flying projectiles myself."

"Uh oh, I think they caught onto us."

"Then I reckon it's about time we make our exit," said Tony. "To the window, my clever lil' spider!"

"Matika?"

"She's on her way home with Happy right now."

With Peter pacified and hoards of SHIELD agents just around the corner, Tony grabbed his son and made a break for the hallway. He moved more slowly and carefully than usual, his left leg and stomach aching even with the armor absorbing most of the impact. However, a four foot by six
foot window was barely forty feet from his hospital room doorway, so their escape was short and sweet and still ridiculously exhausting.

"Okay, stick him on me, J."

"Yes, Sir."

Tony grabbed Peter and held him up at chest level, feeling more than a little smug as two dozen latches emerged from both armors and successfully clicked into the correct places. In less than ten seconds, father and son were quite literally stuck together, Peter's body dangling about a foot or so above the ground since he was shorter than Tony. Note to self: yet another brilliant Stark creation for the record books.

"How's it looking?"

"Everything appears to be properly connected," said FRIDAY. "However, I would recommend increasing rotational stability on your left side. For safety's sake, Boss."

"Whatever you—oh, hello there, Doc!"

A small herd of doctors and nurses had appeared behind them, staring with wide eyes at the pair of silver and hotrod red armors. Clint and Sam came skidding around the far corner not five seconds later, a knowing look of dismay on both their faces.

"Thank you very much for your excellent treatment," said Tony. "I'll make sure you receive a raise and giant Christmas bonus. Make note, Fri: enormous bonus and two week trip to Hawaii for our dear doctor here. And maybe a trip to Aspen for the nurses, too."

"Mr. Stark, you really need—"

That earned a tut from Tony as he blew out the window. "I know all too well that SHIELD's a Level-10 Shitty Employer, so consider this a personal reward for surviving more than two weeks of their asshole-ish expectations. Actually, scratch that down to a single week. Congratulations."

"If you're doing what I think you're doing," said Clint, "I will shoot you in the ass, Stark."

"Then I will be wearing a butt-plate for the foreseeable future," laughed Tony as he fired up the repulsors and jumped out the window. "Well, it was nice talking with you folks, but I think my welcome has been overstayed at this point. Toodaloo!"

Just as Tony prepared to blast off, he caught a glimpse of Steve, Bucky, and Natasha rushing out of the nearest stairwell. The team had been acting a little standoffish and weird over the last few days, so Tony figured all of the Avengers would be more than happy to see Peter and himself head on home. With the tower secured and his AIs expecting HYDRA's next move, it was actually safer for the Starks outside of SHIELD instead of within it.

The last thing the Avengers needed was another Stark debacle on their hands. And Tony was tired of the kids gloves they'd been using on HYDRA in recent decades. At least if he was working on this alone, he'd be able to hunt down and destroy HYDRA in one-tenth the time and in whatever way he saw fit.

"And we're homeward bound!"

Blasting off towards Manhattan was a little painful, but Tony was so relieved to be away from SHIELD that he barely felt the twinges in his left side and leg. If he'd been feeling better, Tony
would've taken Peter on a quick fly-around of the city to commemorate this rare occasion, but that wasn't about to happen today. In crude terms, he was feeling like cow shit and wanted nothing more than to crawl into his own bed and sleep for the next fifteen hours.

And a small herd of caretakers was waiting in the penthouse, so Tony wouldn't have to worry about Peter's well-being or safety, either.

"Prepare for landing, kiddo. I'm gonna touch down on the equipper ramp and have it remove the suit," said Tony as he floated down. "You can go on ahead and we'll remove yours the old-fashioned way."

"Do I have to take it off?"

"I love my suits dearly, but there's no way you're wearing one around the tower. It'll scuff up my marble floors."

"The cleaner bots would love it."

"No."

Peter huffed as they landed, running on ahead as the equipper arms rotated and pulled off small pieces of the Mark V. Rhodey and Happy were waiting for them at the penthouse doors, the latter ushering Peter inside so that he and Pepper could manually remove his little suit. Already feeling dizzy and nauseous, Tony accepted his best friend's hand and was pleasantly surprised to see Bruce appear from inside the kitchen.

"You look like death warmed over, Tones. Maybe you should've waited another day before doing this."

"Nope, I was going insane in that place," groaned Tony as they dragged him into the living room. "Plus, it's better for Peter to be here at home."

"C'mon, we're taking you straight to your bedroom."

Tony didn't complain or protest, instead going limp as they made their way down a small set of stairs, the eastern hallway, around a corner, and finally into his beloved bedroom. From the looks of it, Bruce had already set up all the necessary medical equipment and supplies, jabbering nonstop as they maneuvered Tony onto the bed's left side. He claimed that particular location would make it easier to treat Tony's wounds, especially the one on his stomach.

"You remember our deal, right?" said Bruce. "No arguing with anything I say about your medical condition or treatments."

"Such a slave driver. Would you look at this, Sugar Bear?"

Rhodey snorted. "Looks to me like this man has some common sense. We need more of that in this tower."

"Traitor! Blasphemy!"

"Would you just shut up and hold still," Bruce ordered. "I need to reinsert your IVs and start up another line of antibiotics. Could you hook up the heart and oxygen monitors, Jim?"

"Aww, they shaved most of your chest. I was hoping to rip off some hair while doing this."
"I'm so unloved. It's terrible."

"Hold still or I'm gonna be forced to knock you out, Tony."

"Ugh, I fucking hate IVs."

Tony did listen though and barely moved for the next fifteen minutes. He saw Peter wander in at some point, eyes wide and watery as he watched Bruce and Rhody get everything set up for his invalided dad. It probably looked horrible and intimidating to a small child like Peter, especially since he'd seen so much death in the last couple months. And that didn't even begin to cover the last two weeks, either.

"How's Matika doing?"

"She's hiding in her Tiki hut. I think she might be mad at me."

"Maybe she'll try to eat you."

"I'm too big for that," said Peter as he crawled onto the bed's unoccupied side. "Scott might be fair game, though."

"Ohhh, I like the sound of that."

"Well, I've got some good news," said Bruce. "Your leg and stomach wounds are looking much better. No torn stitches or reopening from the flight, and almost all signs of infection are gone."

"So that means his immune system is actually working now, right?"

Bruce nodded. "Pretty much. I'm still gonna take a couple samples to evaluate his white blood cell count, but things are finally looking up for you, Tony."

"Oh goodie. That means I'm one more step away from being a human pincushion."

"I'd still like to run some diagnostics on the arc reactor, though." Bruce cycled through a quick series of reflex tests. "Not right now, but maybe in the next 24 hours. SHIELD's doctors might have overlooked something with it."

"You're such a worrywart, Brucie-bear."

"Someone needs to worry about your suicidal ass. Now stop squirming and let me know if this pinches."

"Ouch!"

By the time everything was hooked up and ready to go, Tony was barely able to keep his eyes open. Bruce had switched him from morphine to Vicodin, claiming that long-term use could lead to addiction and he didn't like those odds because of Tony's substance abuse history. JARVIS fired up Star Wars: The Force Awakens for Peter and Rhody, who had taken over the empty side of Tony's bed.

"You know what? You're right," said Rhody. "Why don't we have our own BB-8, Tones?"

"Why are you two so demanding?"

"Uh oh, I think the happy meds are making him cranky. Not as bitchy as Kylo Ren, of course, but your dad has always been pretty crabby on..."
Tony didn't remember falling asleep, but considering how much pain medication and antibiotics had been pumped into his system, it was amazing that he was even coherent at this point. However, he definitely didn't imagine the small body that was curled up against his uninjured side. Peter had been terribly quiet and clingy since the kidnapping, never wandering far from Tony's side unless he was forced to. Because of this, Tony saw nothing wrong with his son seeking out comfort in the night.

"You're finally awake."

"Fucking hell," squeaked Tony, "Would you please knock it off with the creepy serial killer shit!"

"JARVIS let us in."

"And Colonel Rhodes knows we're here," said Steve. "He's snooping outside the door right now."

"No, I'm not."

Tony rolled his eyes and signaled for Bucky to bring his best friend into the room. They moved like ghosts, gazes darting back and forth to look at a sleeping Peter every other second. Apparently, none of them had thought that Peter would be sleeping with Tony, almost acting as a silent guard for the injured man. And from the looks of Rhodey's twitching fingers, he was dearly tempted to remove Steve and Bucky from Tony's bedroom right that very moment.

"To what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

"We just wanted to make sure you were alright," said Steve, eyes watching Rhodey for any sudden movements. "You left without a word to anyone and considering what's happened over the last two weeks, it was more than a little worrying."

"Natasha says that she's gonna smash your face in."

"She's in the living room, isn't she?"

"Yep."

"Well, it wasn't like I didn't tell anyone," Tony argued. "Bruce, Happy, Pepper, and Rhodey were all informed of Operation Alcatraz. And do you see this comfy bed? Who in their right mind would want to stay at SHIELD when they can sleep on a thousand thread count ocean of bliss. Yeah, I thought so."

"Shut up," grumbled Peter from his hiding place in Tony's neck. "Why're they here?"

"Nice job, Spangles. You woke the baby."

"Okay, you know what," said Rhodey, "We're gonna talk about this in the morning. You two can sleep on Steve's floor. Don't look at me like that, it's still the same as it was when you moved out. The same applies to Natasha, Clint, and Sam."

"What's going on in here?"

"We're having a party, Brucie-bear! And my kid's about to murder somebody in his sleepy rage. Oh goodness, you are so adorable. Just look at those cheeks!"

Bruce frowned. "Maybe Vicodin wasn't the best choice as your new pain med."

"At least he isn't running around naked this time."
"You promised to never tell anyone about that, Huggy-Bear! Ugh, I hate you all so much. Well, except for Peter. He's just plain lovable. Literally my favorite person in the whole world. Screw the rest of you."

"Maybe it's the antibiotics..."

"Enough talking," snapped Rhodey while pointing a finger at the door, "And everyone without a doctorate or baby teeth needs to get out. That includes those lurking outside the door, too."

"Damnit."

Tony breathed deep when Bruce instructed him to, lungs and chest aching despite the heavy pain medication. Two sets of eyes were trained on the arc reactor, bright and terrifying in the middle of Tony's chest. Bruce worked around it while Rhodey prepared some instruments behind him. The SHIELD doctors had kept contact with the reactor to a bare minimum, so it was no surprise that Bruce wanted to do some diagnostic testing to make sure everything was running as smoothly as JARVIS' readings said.

"I'm gonna need someone to take Peter outside while I do this," whispered Bruce. "There's no way he should be seeing the reactor yet. It'll just make things worse."

"All he had was some toasted cheese and pickles earlier," said Rhodey. "Hey, kiddo, I know you're tired, but why don't you show Barnes your spider's gigantic home tank while Rogers whips up a late night snack for everyone?"

Neither super-soldier dared to argue with the look Rhodey gave them.

"Do I have to?"

"Well, I could make it an order, but you know I don't like to do that with you. So how about it?"

Peter didn't look too happy, but he conceded after a couple moments of thought, grunting and grumbling the whole way out of Tony's bed. Rhodey was waiting for him on the other side, making sure to grab Fang the tundra wolf before Peter left with Bucky and Steve. The stuffed animal had been a gift from Uncle Ben for Peter's second birthday, so the kid slept with it every night.

"She might still be hiding in the Tiki hut," said Peter as he grabbed Bucky's hand and hauled him out of the room, "But it's dark, so maybe she came out for a drink."

"Drink?"

"Yeah, there's a waterfall and little stream that Uncle Rhodey made for her. It's pretty neat. Lots of real plants, too."

Steve gestured to Tony and said, "Is he alright?"

"I think so, at least for the most part," said Bruce. "The arc reactor can be tricky sometimes and I don't trust SHIELD's doctors to properly assess it. We agreed that I'd take a closer look once Tony was back in the tower."

"Will it hurt?"

Tony shrugged. "It always does, but Bruce is better at checking and fixing it than anyone else."
"What am I, chopped liver?"

"You've got big hands, Sugar Plum. You almost got stuck last time."

"Don't remind me."

If possible, Steve's eyes got even wider and more anxious. He'd seen the arc reactor being worked on from a distance before, but never this close and never when Tony's health had been in such a precarious state.

"Do we have everything to safely do this, JARVIS? I didn't forget anything down in the lab?"

"You have collected all of the necessary equipment, Dr. Banner," said the AI. "However, might I suggest moving Sir about fifteen degrees higher? It will place less stress on his lungs and stomach."

"Good call."

Tony took a deep breath as Bruce and Rhodey helped him move further up, already eyeing the diagnostic equipment with a tired resignation. He could also feel Steve lingering beside the door, picking at a stray belt loop and string in that nervous habit of his. Tony wondered if Steve would vomit when he finally saw what went on inside the other man's chest.

"Okay, let's just get this over with."

Chapter End Notes

Honestly, who thought Tony wouldn't eventually escape from SHIELD's clutches? Yeah, Peter's a little traumatized, but also coming around a bit more to the other Avengers. It'll be a slow process for him. And the arc reactor just freaks me out, from a medical standpoint. Not much bothers me, but that damned arc reactor... ugh...
Okay, so maybe Tony should’ve anticipated the panic attack before it even happened.

The last person to touch Tony's arc reactor hadn't even been human, which probably said a whole lot about his overall mental state after the Sokovia Accords and good ol' Zemo's poorly timed—or was it perfectly timed?—appearance. In a post-Avengers malaise, Tony had decided that letting anyone else near the arc reactor was naive and suicidal and should be avoided at all costs, especially with Bruce off to parts unknown, Rhodey occupied with his physical recovery, Pepper jetting all over the world, and half of the Avengers hating his guts. So, in typical Tony Stark fashion, it had taken less than six days for him to create a JARVIS and FRIDAY-controlled machine that could analyze, diagnose, and repair the arc reactor without outside, human-based assistance.

Of course, things rarely went according to plan nowadays. In less than four months, Tony had somehow managed to acquire a wise-ass child and then Rhodey took a temporary liaison position in New York City and Bruce reappeared out of nowhere thanks to Pepper and using the Arc Cradle wasn't really necessary anymore when the two people you trust the most are suddenly able to check and repair it for you.

"Prepare for the suction and pinch," said Bruce as he twisted and flipped the arc reactor up and out of Tony's chest. "Yeah, there we go, just try to relax and take slow breaths. Can you start running the intracardial scanner, JARVIS?"

"Already initiated, doctor."

Rhodey held his hand through the whole thing and assisted Bruce whenever it was needed, neither of them paying any mind to Steve—and now Bucky, where the hell had he come from?—lurking beside the bedroom door. Tony could vaguely hear Natasha out in the hallway with Vision, the sound of Peter's worried voice just scarcely reaching his ears. Fucking hell, but Tony really didn't want the kid to see him like this.

"I'm gonna have to replace this wire," warned Bruce about twenty seconds later. "It's still functional, but should've been swapped out for a new one months ago. You haven't been keeping up with maintenance, Tony."

"Been a little busy lately."

"You know that excuse isn't going to fly with me, right?"

"Didn't expect it to."

Tony had kept his eyes closed through the whole procedure. He'd learned the hard way in the past that looking just led to flashbacks of Obadiah and the Mandarin, both of which resulted in a panic attack of epic proportions. Unfortunately, this time Tony could hear his son demanding to know why he wasn't allowed in the room and if they didn't answer him, then Scott would be fed to Matika in the near future.

Hearing his child become more and more distressed, Tony just couldn't keep his eyes closed and said to fuck with it and looked towards the door. It took less than a second for him to spot the
detached arc reactor in his peripheral vision.

Images of Obadiah flashed through his mind like wildfire. Then Yinsen was there, full of bullet holes while that damned car battery sat in the background. Palladium was moving across his chest. Rhodey was accidentally shot out of the sky by Vision's blaster. And Steve and Bucky were ruthlessly beating him into the ground, purposely aiming for the arc reactor and neither seeming to care about his parents' murders.

Yeah, Bucky had spent several months in cryostasis while having nano-controllers removed from his body, but what if they hadn't found everything? What if the Winter Soldier came back in full-force and acted under Zemo's control? Tony would likely be his first target. And Peter... oh fuck, he'd endangered Peter by allowing them into his tower. Here he was, laying completely vulnerable with the arc reactor dangling out of his chest while his young son was surrounded by people who had tried to kill Tony before.

One had even murdered his damned parents. What was he thinking? Why was he so stupid?"

"Fuck, fuck..."

"Oh no, don't even think about it," snapped Rhodey. "Hey, c'mon, breathe with me. You're fine. And Bruce is almost done. You just need to—"

"Peter... where?"

"He's safe with Natasha right outside the door. She'll rip anyone to shreds who tries to touch him. We talked about that, remember? Hey, don't get that look in your eyes, Tones. I'm right here and you need to breathe. Look at me."

And Tony did look at him. When Rhodey used that voice, you listened to him. It was like a law or something.

"Yeah, there we go, just breathe with me. Feel my chest?" said Rhodey in a soothing voice. "In and out. Nice and slow, in and out. Just like we practiced before, okay. It's almost over now."

"Peter?"

"He's just fine. Busy bitching everyone out, actually. Isn't that right, Nat?"

"This child is entirely too snarky," shouted Natasha through the door. "You're a terrible influence, Stark."

Tony didn't respond, instead focusing on the slow rise and fall of Rhodey's chest. His fingers and toes had started to tingle before going numb, an obvious sign that he hadn't been getting enough oxygen. With all the panic attacks Tony had suffered over the last couple years, it was a familiar feeling that he had grown to despise. He barely noticed as Bruce clicked the reactor back into his chest.

"Alright, we're all done," said the physicist. "Aside from that wire, everything else is running at optimum levels."

"I need a fucking vacation."

"Well, you did promise to take me snowboarding in the Rockies last year. Although I honestly don't think you can snowboard, no matter what you claim."
"My tongue tastes like coconut and copper."

"That's never pleasant," said Rhodey. "Hey, eavesdroppers in the hallway, could someone grab a cup of juice for our resident invalid?"

"I'll get it!"

Natasha had apparently dragged Steve and Bucky out of the room at some point because Steve's voice was clearly outside now. Between having a panic attack and focusing on Rhodey's breathing, he hadn't even noticed their exit. Tony was gonna blame it on the pain meds, too. Those things screwed with his head like nobody's business.

"Feeling kinda shitty," Tony mumbled. "Just gonna rest my eyes for a lil' bit."

Bruce smiled and said, "That's fine. I have everything I need to run an analysis on the reactor core. You could do with a good rest, anyways."

"I'm startin' to feel my old age now. Fuckin' sucks..."

For once in his life, Tony welcomed sleep like an old friend and didn't attempt to fight it. Thankfully, he was so exhausted that nightmares weren't even a problem. That alone was a testament to how worn down and tired he was, something that had become a common occurrence in recent years. If Tony had actually bothered to visit a psychiatrist—which wasn't gonna happen without Bruce there to mediate—they probably would've doped him up on Ambien or 10mg of melatonin. Four hours of sleep per night wasn't exactly healthy, even Tony knew that.

It was still dark outside when Tony woke up, the moon just beginning to crest above the New York City skyline. He turned his head to the side and was shocked to see the time and date: twenty hours had passed since he'd gone to sleep. Could a person even sleep that long if they weren't drugged? He'd have to ask Bruce and hope that this wouldn't become a habit.

"Wow, that's a new record. For this year, at least."

Surprisingly, taking care of Peter had forced him into a rudimentary schedule over the past four months. Before the tower attack, Tony had been averaging about six or seven hours of sleep per night, even sleeping in his own bedroom instead of the lab. Caring for a newly adopted child was the hardest thing Tony had ever done, and that was really saying something. If Peter needed him, then Tony had to be close by and everyone knew that functioning like a zombie was poor parenting. So, in less than a week, Tony had read through seven dozen parenting books and forced himself to maintain a daily schedule, quickly adapting to the new normal that was his life as a single father.

Plus, if Tony fell out of the routine too much, then JARVIS was right there to scold him back into it. He refused to neglect Peter the same way Howard had neglected him. The legacy of Starks ignoring their children would end with Tony, no matter what the press or Avengers had to say about it.

He would be a good and loving parent, even if it meant setting aside some projects. Peter was what mattered now. And fuck anyone who said otherwise.

"Ah, you're finally awake. Welcome back to the land of the living."

Natasha sat at his oversized desk, a Stephen King novel resting in front of her. It was one of those ridiculously thick ones, so Tony guessed that it was either The Stand or It. And yeah, that last one had scared Tony away from clowns for the rest of his life.
"Fucking Pennywise..."

"Did I seriously sleep for an entire day?"

"Almost," said Natasha with a little smirk. "And don't move around too much or you'll wake him."

True to her word, Peter was yet again curled up at Tony's side, decked out in his favorite pair of Hulk pajamas. These particular ones had flexing biceps, roaring heads, and "HULK SMASH" blurbs all over the place.

"We worked on some earth science stuff while you were sleeping," said Natasha as she took a seat in the chair beside him. "I think Peter enjoys the prospect of an explosive volcano model way too much."

"Yeah, we'd had that planned for last Wednesday. Dummy was gonna be on fire duty."

"Don't worry, Jim made sure he didn't do any unnecessary foaming while we were in your lab. And Peter didn't want to blow up the volcano without you there, either."

"My child is a budding pyro. I'm so proud."

Since Tony couldn't move for fear of waking Peter, Natasha was kind enough to fluff his pillows and readjust the blankets. Peter grumbled a few times and kicked Tony in the hip, but he settled back into a deep sleep once Natasha was finished.

"That one sleeps like the dead. Kinda terrifying."

With everything situated, Natasha sat back in her chair and leveled Tony with a knowing look. Oh boy, that was never a good sign. Tony had been on the receiving end of that stare one too many times in the last five years.

"So, are you gonna tell me why HYDRA came after you?"

"No?"

"You know that I don't mean this as an interrogation," said Natasha. "You're drugged and hurting and that would be unfair, even by my standards. But I would like to know the answer as soon as possible, if only so I can formulate a strategy to protect you and Peter."

"Wait, so you didn't get anything out of the captured agents?"

Natasha grimaced and said, "They all killed themselves with cyanide pills that had been disguised as molars. The baby agents didn't check for them and by the time I looked over the preliminary reports, every one of the bastards were already dead or dying."

"Wow, nice way to go Full Metal Jacket on us."

"Don't change the subject."

"Cranky."

"Well, you can either give me a half-answer and I'll leave somewhat satisfied," said Natasha, "Or I can track down T'Challa and get my answers from him."

Tony just stared at her.
"Yeah, he was ambushed at the UN by two dozen HYDRA agents less than one minute before the tower exploded. Of course, an attack on Tony Stark and the New York City skyline buried it beneath thousands of other reports, but a little bit of digging isn't too hard with an AI at your convenience."

"Ugh, c'mon, J..."

"In the specific case of Agent Romanov, I felt that such information would be warranted," said the AI. "Considering last week's events, it would be best for someone on the Avengers team to be aware of the current situation. And aside from Colonel Rhodes, who is already informed, Agent Romanov is the most trustworthy and capable choice."

Natasha blinked and said, "Thank you, JARVIS. I know that this wasn't a decision you made lightly."

"The Stark family's safety is always my first priority."

"Why does no one ask for my opinion anymore," Tony grumbled. "You see, this is why I don't work with you people nowadays. Bunch of backstabbers, the whole bunch of you."

"If it makes you feel any better, JARVIS didn't tell me what the connection was between T'Challa and yourself."

"Huh, well, it's nice to know that he has some discretion. And you see, this is why FRIDAY's my favorite robot baby right now."

"Ouch, Sir."

"Aww, you're my favorite human too, Boss. Aside from Peter, of course."

"Absolutely no respect. I should have you recalibrated for insubordination," said Tony. "Actually, schedule it for next Thursday morning. I have an SI board meeting and Pepper really shouldn't have forewarned me about it."

"If you insist, Sir."

Natasha leaned back after that, giving Tony an all too familiar head tilt and expectant look. He had been on the receiving end of that look many times too, and it usually did not signal good tidings for the engineer's favorite cereal. Not only was Natasha a renowned spy, but she was also an unrepentant breakfast thief.

"We've been tracking down lost soldiers," said Tony, "And relocating our retrievals where nobody questionable will find them."

"Ah, well, that sounds reasonable."

Tony watched as Natasha digested this information. He could already see that the assassin agreed with his and T'Challa's plan, especially in light of her own personal encounters with Bucky in his triggered Winter Soldier state. It was T'Challa who had approached Tony about six months ago, the monarch concerned about the soldier that was already cryogenically sleeping in his homeland. Just like Natasha, T'Challa was leery and watchful after his encounters with Bucky and believed that it was in Wakanda's best interests to locate any other Winter Soldiers that were still alive.

It had taken less than an hour for Tony to agree to T'Challa's request. So for the last six months, Tony had been acting as a silent consultant to the Wakandan throne, offering whatever tech or
information was needed to locate stolen vibranium or lost Soldiers. Hiding the Soldiers was a little tricky at times, but his AIs had been brilliant at assessing and determining which places would be hardest for HYDRA or anyone else to smoke out.

He told Natasha all of this, although in coded terms.

"So, I assume that we won't be informing the other Avengers of this?"

"We decided against it," said Tony. "Neither of us trust their judgments at this point. And I'm deferring to T'Challa on who to tell and who not to. Personally, I think the current mission is stable and in good hands, and it's his country that operations are being spearheaded through. Not my call this time around, except for how the tech is being used."

"Someone found out about your involvement, though."

"And that's being handled as we speak. Honestly, I would advise against pissing off the Wakandans. They're a pretty scary and vengeful bunch. As Buckaroo can attest to."

"This certainly explains why he visited you and Peter so often at the hospital."

"Peter thinks he's the coolest thing since Smaug was given CGI form," said Tony with a dramatic sigh. "I'm definitely not the coolest superhero to my kid anymore."

"I might need to speak with him on the matter."

"Looking to clean a bit more red out of your ledger, I see. Well, I can't guarantee anything, but you're probably the only current Avenger that T'Challa would be willing to trust. Rhodey knows about the operation, but just the barest details."

"I'll have to think on it."

"Well, he'll be visiting tomorrow, so you've got a chance to speak to him about it," said Tony. "And I've taken a step back in the last four months. Been a little busy."

"Peter?"

"He needs my attention more than the operation. And T'Challa insisted on it."

"At least he's willing—"

The sound of Peter snuffling brought their conversation to a halt, both watching as the boy batted at his face and then rolled over to curl around another pillow. Fang was tucked between them, the stuffed wolf a constant presence wherever Peter slept nowadays.

"We can talk about this later," said Natasha. "I'll leave you to your work now."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Yeah, don't think I didn't see that StarkPad hidden behind the headboard. You're not as subtle as you think, Tin Man."

"Rhodey found my other two and took them away."

"You must be devastated."

"Terribly."
"I'll see you in the morning. Steve said he'll be making pancakes."

"Yummy."

She left after that, disappearing out the door without a backwards glance. Tony would never get used to the silence that surrounded Natasha; he felt completely safe with her, but it didn't change the fact that her soundless movements creeped the hell outta him.

"Now that that's done," said Tony, "It's time for some planning. Hit me up, J."

"Gladly, Sir."

Tony worked about six hours before falling asleep again, waking up at about nine thanks to a small foot kicking him in the kidney. A loud and stinky yawn sounded in his ear, Peter grumbling as JARVIS opened the curtains to let some sunlight into the darkened room. It only took about fifteen minutes for Bruce to appear, the doctor running through a quick check-up before announcing that he could remove all of Tony's IVs and monitors.

"It's looking really good at this point," said Bruce with a little smile. "Oral pain medication and antibiotics should do the job just fine, and I'd like for you to start moving around and getting a bit of exercise. Nothing too much, of course, but short walks and physical therapy is always recommended for a speedier recovery. I've got a nice list that Peter can help you with."

Said child smirked and said, "We need to make sure your bones don't get old and creaky."

"You are an ungrateful child. Terribly ungrateful."

Rhodey came in to help Tony get out of bed, more than experienced with physical therapy after his partial-paralysis fourteen months ago. Although you couldn't see it, the airman now wore a sleek yet complex pair of braces on his legs, specially designed by Tony to give a wide range of motion. If you didn't look under Rhodey's pants, it was impossible to guess that he was a paraplegic.

"I think your ass got heavier over the last two weeks," complained the older man. "And now Cap's made a small mountain of pancakes. Let's hope Thor didn't eat all of them in our absence. Hey, Peter, go ahead and tell them to wait for us."

"Do I have to?"

None of them were surprised when the boy gripped even tighter at Tony's pajama pants, wary eyes darting between his father and the kitchen corridor. After seeing the kid's response, Rhodey reached out and ran a gentle hand through Peter's hair, silently reassuring the boy that he didn't have to go anywhere he didn't want to. And once they arrived in the noisy living room, Peter saw fit to hide between Tony and Rhodey and neither of them tried to prevent him from doing it.

"Nice bedhead, Stark."

"You're just jealous that you look like a Dodo bird first thing in the morning," said Tony as he was deposited on the couch. "Or maybe it's the pink-eye expression that you pull off so well."

"That was only once and Sam got it first."

"It's highly contagious and you were the one who kept poking at my face. You had it coming."

While the Birdbrains were bickering, Tony scanned the room and saw that most of the Avengers were present. Steve stood at the stove with a pile of pancakes beside him. Natasha and Bucky were
both sitting at the kitchen island. Scott was nowhere to be seen, but that didn't mean that he wasn't sneaking around somewhere in his ant-form. Wanda was rifling through the fridge while Thor explained what a bilgesnipe was and why they needed to be vanquished post-haste. Vision was examining an orange like it held answers to the meaning of life. And Rhodey leaned down to ask Peter what he wanted to eat while Bruce fussed over Tony's left leg like a worrywart.

"Blueberries or chocolate chips?"

Peter thought for a long moment and then said, "Chocolate chips."

"Good choice, kiddo."

"You can eat with a tray," said Bruce. "I don't want you sitting on the chairs yet, so just stay here."

"Do I look like I can move?"

"That's never stopped you before. And should I grab a tray for you, too?"

"Uh huh."

"It's Saturday morning, so hit us up with some Ninja Turtles, J."

"Very well, Sir." The television turned on to the beginning theme song, turtles and ninjas and a giant rat jumping all over the place. "I also recorded last week's episode for your future viewing, Master Peter."

"Thank you."

"You're very welcome. And it appears that King T'Challa has arrived for your briefing, Sir. Should I bring him up?"

"Punctual as usual. Zoom him up, J."

All eyes except Natasha and Rhodey's were suddenly fixed on Tony's slumped form, none of them expecting to see the Wakandan monarch during their time at Stark Tower. As expected, Steve was the first to react and he wasted no time in walking around the island to voice his concerns.

"You've been doing business with T'Challa?"

Tony shrugged. "And this surprises you? My company has had dealings with Wakanda for decades."

"Oh, well, I guess that makes sense."

The familiar ping of the elevator signaled T'Challa's arrival and interrupted the awkward silence that had formed after Steve's questioning. Now that Tony was out of the hospital, it appeared that earlier tensions had returned. What Tony was supposed to do about this was beyond him.

Quite frankly, he was too tired to think about it right now.

"Good morning, everyone," said T'Challa once he had entered the living room. "I wasn't expecting anyone besides the Starks, so I apologize if I have interrupted your gathering."

"No worries, Your Kingliness. I simply decided that 9:00am was the perfect time for alcohol-ridden parties," said Tony. "The rest of the world doesn't know what they're missing out on."
"So it would seem."

Rhodey walked over to shake T'Challa's hand in Tony's place, Steve following immediately after as a show of mutual respect. It was a little clumsy since the Wakandan king had a large box in his hands, but T'Challa somehow managed to make that look graceful, too.

The dude literally moved like a cat and no matter what Peter said, that would forever freak Tony out.

Hilariously, Bucky had disappeared behind the kitchen island, probably to put as much distance as possible between T'Challa and himself. Those two still weren't on the best of terms, and the assassin clearly remembered getting his ass kicked by the Wakandan king. Hell, Tony could've sworn that he saw T'Challa smirk when Bucky vanished, seeming to know that the other man was unsettled by his presence.

Seriously, what was with these stupid-ass soldiers and intimidating each other? And people accused Tony of being on a perpetual power-trip. Super-soldiers were much quicker to pick physical and mental fights, if you asked him.

"I hope you don't mind," said T'Challa with a small smile, "But I brought a gift for Master Peter. It seemed appropriate given our recent interactions."

"A present?"

Tony ruffled his son's hair and said, "Well, who am I to deny my Petey-pie a gift from the likes of his Royal Pantherness. Go ahead."

Most of the Avengers had turned their attention to Peter, who approached T'Challa like he was literally the giant cat that Tony often referred to him as. The kid tended to be gutsy and outspoken, but that could disappear real fast when he wasn't familiar with a situation. The fact that Peter thought Black Panther was cool and tough and ridiculously badass didn't help matters, either.

"What is it?"

T'Challa lowered the plastic box and said, "In Wakanda, it's traditional to reward a child when they show great bravery, as you did last week. Few adults would remain so strong and calm during such a frightening encounter."

With deft fingers, T'Challa opened the box's lid and fished around inside before pulling out...

"A kitty!"

"Oh fuckity fuck," groaned Tony, "Now I'm gonna have a cat running around my tower. It never ends!"

The nearly grown cat was coal black, green-eyed, and sleek-bodied with a long, whip-like tail. It had a calm air about it, sitting quietly in T'Challa's hand as he waved Peter forward to take a closer look.

"She's a Wakandan short hair," said the king. "My people have bred them for centuries and they're among the best of companions for our children. We also consider them to be signs of good luck and familial protection. You couldn't ask for a better friend to your son, Mr. Stark."

Rhodey came closer and said, "That's one seriously big cat. Is she full grown?"
"Eleven months. She'll be comparable in size to a Maine Coon or Norwegian Forest cat by two years old. And Wakandan cats often live for more than eighteen years, so she won't be leaving you any time soon."

"She's beautiful," said Peter as he reached out. "Can I hold her?"

"Of course, but make sure to support her bottom and front or she'll be quite cross with you. Heavy, isn't she?"

Peter's smile was so wide that Tony feared his face would split in two. The cat sat quietly in his lap, observing everything around her like a warrior scoping out territory for conquering. Almost everyone had come closer to check out Peter's gift, Steve's face glowing like a little kid's when Peter slowly positioned his new pet for the others to see.

"I've also taken the liberty of purchasing the necessary supplies for her," said T'Challa. "They are waiting down in the lobby with my courier. And I'm sure that your AI will be able to order anything else that is needed."

"The supplies will be sent up momentarily," said JARVIS. "And I have already placed an order for additional toys and living necessities."

"Can I keep her?" begged Peter. "Please, Dad, please!"

And there was that word again, a title that Tony had never thought he'd have. Peter seeming to unknowingly use it when he was excited or scared, shocking Tony into a hopeful silence every time. In this case, he waddled forward with a bored looking cat in his arms, eyes wide and beseeching in a way that Tony just couldn't resist. It was downright lethal, in his opinion.

"Ugh, you know I'll feel like Charles Manson if I say no," Tony groaned. "Alright, alright, but you have to take care of her."

"I will, don't worry! See, she's already a good girl."

"Yeah, she is kinda cute. And don't forget to say thank you to T'Challa. This is a pretty big gift, kiddo."

"Oops, sorry!"

Peter dashed back to thank T'Challa for such an amazing present, jabbering nonstop about everything he'd need to do for her. In less than four weeks, the munchkin had managed to acquire two pets. Cool parents bought their kids pets, right?

"We might need more cat towers," said Rhodey. "Sounds like she'll be a pretty active animal."

"Already ordered, Colonel."

As expected, Steve was knelt down and petting the cat behind her ears, seemingly in love with the furball already. Peter barely noticed his presence, too trumped up on excitement and surprise to act like a vindictive hyena.

"So, what are you going to name her?"

Peter thought about this for a minute before saying, "I think she looks like a Bumble."

"Oh, well, that's a good name."
Clint grumbled something in the background and was promptly smacked by both Natasha and Wanda. The women cooed and ahhed over the cat whenever Peter held her up for them to look at. Bumble probably thought she was surrounded by idiots.

With Peter distracted and under the Avengers' watchful eyes, T'Challa walked over and took a seat on the coffee table. He was dressed in an Armani suit and probably had a meeting with other corporate officials later in the afternoon.

"Are you well enough to briefly discuss some business?"

"Pancakes first, then shop talk. I'm finally getting my appetite back and that cat's looking kinda tasty right now."

"Ah, I thought I smelled pancakes."

"You super-soldiers are a bunch of bottomless pits. Steve! I'm starving!"

"But the cat was just—"

"Starving! Don't piss off the person who pays your bills!"

"Alright, alright, yeesh..."

That certainly got the other man moving, who scuttled into the kitchen like his ass was on fire. Bucky was still hiding somewhere behind the island. That situation just kept getting weirder and weirder.

"So, any news on the brainwashed and crazy front? Or are we just looking at vibranium here?"

"Both."

Chapter End Notes

T'Challa is fucking amazing. There's no other way to describe him. And considering Civil War shows that HYDRA has several Winter Soldiers in deep freeze, I thought it'd make sense that people like Tony and T'Challa would try to find and relocate them. As shown with Bucky, they are all very, very dangerous and could kill a ton of innocent people if they escaped.

The arc reactor still freaks me out, but Tony's slowly getting better! And Peter's got another pet.
"Wang is dead."

"Shit."

"Her cryogenic containment unit was damaged sometime prior to our retrieval," said T'Challa. "When my cousins and myself couldn't subdue her, we had to use deadly force. One of our engineers was killed before we could intervene."

"And the others?"

"Successfully transported to a secure location. My sister finalized the process two days ago."

Tony rubbed a hand over his face and said, "Well, at least one thing went according to plan and didn't blow up in our faces. How many are left?"

"My estimate is three or four at this point. It's difficult to tell from the files you extracted, but I saw Zemo kill five of them myself and we've captured four alive. Then we have Wang and the two Kazaks from last month. So, eight dead and five alive, if we're including Sergeant Barnes."

"And if they somehow wake up?"

"Then I'll do what needs to be done," said T'Challa, as if it was the simplest thing in the world. "Unlike our dear captain, I'm not blinded by love or sentimentality. My people rely on me for protection and I won't allow a handful of brainwashed super-soldiers to kill another one of my subjects. That is unacceptable."

"And that's why I'm only a consultant nowadays."

"With your son's presence, that is understandable. Now, have you finished the new tracking system?"

Tony nodded. "Completed it the day before HYDRA decided to turn my lab into Swiss cheese. I already had Pepper bring it up and then I ran through some preliminary diagnostics last night. It's ready to go whenever you feel like punching another brainwashed Rambo."

"Eloquent as ever, Mr. Stark."

"I do try."

"Am I to assume that you will be remaining in the city for the foreseeable future?"

"Well, let's see, Peter's got a dentist appointment coming up this Friday, a doctor's appointment next Wednesday, a museum trip the week after that, and a meet and greet with his new school principal about three weeks from now. Yeah, I'd say I'm stuck in New York for the next month, at least."

"It's certainly quite the lifestyle change."

Tony shrugged. "Not much skin off my back. He's a good kid and I'm not getting any younger,
"You are maturing, Mr. Stark. I am shocked."

"Seriously? You, too?" groaned Tony. "I've been plenty mature these last couple years. Can't really vouch for the decades before that, I'll admit, but Santa should give me more than coal this Christmas. Hopefully..."

"I shall plead your Fifth Amendment at this point."

"Always nice to know that foreigners are at least somewhat aware of the Constitution. Okay, Rhodey knows where the tracker is, so have him bring it out here and we'll go over how to use it."

"The others' presence?"

"Peter's got them pretty damned distracted right now, so don't worry about it. Let's just hope he doesn't try to kick Clint again."

"That's a common problem?"

"More than you'd like to know. Kid's more overprotective of me than I am of him."

And T'Challa looked entirely too amused by this tidbit of information. Wakanda's king had met Peter twice before the tower attack and had been endlessly kind to the shy yet snarky child, all too aware of what it was like to lose one's parents at a young age. Tony wouldn't be surprised if T'Challa had been planning the Bumble gift for a good while before shit hit the fan.

"Well, let's take a look at this tracking device. I have a meeting with the board of Amazon in less than four hours."

"Yeah, I don't envy you that. Not at all."

The rest of the morning was spent setting up Bumble's cat towers and other supplies, Peter racing around and giving out orders like a pint-sized general. Tony stayed on the couch to watch everything from afar, ohhing and ahhing whenever Peter came over to show him something, a sunny smile lighting up his son's face for the first time in weeks. Unfortunately, it only lasted so long and after T'Challa's exit with the tracking system, a new tension settled over the group.

Hell, Tony wouldn't have even noticed the reason behind it if not for JARVIS and his quiet warning.

"Sir, I would suggest distracting Sergeant Barnes from his current preoccupation. And perhaps removing Master Peter from his current position as well."

Instantly on alert from JARVIS' wary tones, Tony looked over to see Bucky standing in front of several tables that lined the living room border. It took less than a second for Tony to realize what he was looking at, especially since those tables and their content were a new addition to the penthouse themselves. Fourteen picture frames rested upon the tables, half of them showcasing Peter's deceased family and the other half showing Tony's. The little boy had given the pictures to Tony about twenty days ago, saying that he wanted to create a memorial of some type for his parents and aunt and uncle. In solidarity, Tony had dug up several pictures of his own and added them to the table, all in hopes that it would make Peter feel a little better about his situation.

And now Bucky was staring at a large picture of Maria Stark, smile wide and bright as she cuddled an infant Tony close to her chest. It was Tony's favorite picture and had been difficult to part with,
even if it had simply involved moving the frame from his bedside drawer to his living room table. Peter hadn't said a word when he first saw it, small hand holding Tony's to show that he understood how painful it was to lose your parents.

"That's Tony's mom."

Peter had apparently also noticed Bucky's preoccupation, wandering over to stare at the pictures himself.

"She died a long time ago."

The other Avengers were across the room trying to assemble a cat tower, only Natasha and Tony seeming to notice the interactions between assassin and child. The former slowly sidled over, eyes flitting over to gauge Tony's reaction while also moving closer just in case Bucky went off into cuckoo-land again. Tony knew without a doubt that Natasha would go straight for the kill if Bucky reverted and made an attempt on Peter's life.

Not even Steve would be quick enough to stop her.

"All my friends at school have grandparents," said Peter, "But mine all died before I was born. Were yours alive when you were little?"

"Yeah," Bucky croaked out. "My mother's parents were still alive when I went off to Europe. They both made it into their late 80s, from what I could find on them."

Peter gave a solemn nod. "Uncle Ben said three of mine died of cancer. Breathing in bad air for years and years does that to you, I think. My mom's dad was killed in an accident at the factory he worked in. And Tony's parents died in a car accident."

All of this was spoken in a matter-of-fact tone, Peter seeming to accept that death just happened to older people and there was nothing you could do about it. Only a young child could think in such innocent and simple terms. It would've been refreshing to hear if Tony didn't know that that last sentence was a total lie; unlike Peter's other grandparents, Howard and Maria Stark's deaths were no accident.

Thankfully, despite the fact that Zemo had recorded and aired footage of Steve and Tony's final fight on national television, the video of his parents' murders hadn't been caught in the camera angle. Or leaked to the press, which was mostly thanks to FRIDAY and the interference she had run on Zemo's systems. A good bit of their conversation—or was it a violent screaming match?—had been kinda damning, but Tony and Pepper had tried to salvage whatever good PR they could in the weeks after that, even if a lot of people called bullshit on most of their explanations.

And now that Tony thought about it, wasn't it kinda odd that he wasn't more pissed at Barnes about everything? In those moments after viewing his parents' brutal murders, Tony had legitimately wanted to kill the other man. All he had seen was his father's smashed in face and his mother's broken neck and the face of the cold, heartless monster who had slaughtered them. The anger was still there, without a doubt, but it was more distant and less fiery now that he saw how pathetic and downtrodden Bucky really was, not to mention the crippling guilt.

By God, the bastard looked like he was either gonna start crying or screaming at the sight of Maria Stark and baby Tony. It was the exact same expression Tony had seen on his own face for years, reflected in the pristine glass covering all that was left of his beautiful mother. If only he hadn't been such a spoiled rotten brat or had just asked, then maybe Maria would've stayed home and lived into old age and been the amazing, loving grandparent Peter deserved so much.
Shit, if only Steve hadn't lied to him for two fucking years, then maybe things wouldn't have gotten so out of control. First Obie, then Steve...

"Ava Kramer in my math class says her grandma smells like mothballs," said Peter. "That's kinda weird, but Tony says the same thing about the old men he meets with every other Thursday."

"Hey! I said they smell like bad cologne and mothballs. There's a difference, you backstabbing midget."

"Still seems kinda weird."

"Why do I put up with this abuse? It's a travesty."

"Aunt Pepper says you like it."

"Well, your aunt is a cruel and sadistic lady who needs to respect her wounded and suffering more," said Tony while wagging his finger. "Now get over here and show me what color you want for your bedroom walls. That beige vomit it's got right now is even more of a travesty than my life."

Peter raced over to Tony's side after that, leaving Bucky to his introspection and calming the knots that had been twisting Tony and Natasha's stomachs to pieces. The assassin stayed nearby their position on the couch, pretending to take an interest in Peter's color choices. Or maybe she wasn't as bored as Tony had suspected since Natasha took over the selection process less than a minute later.

"That green's really icky. Looks like puke."

"Half of SHIELD's waiting rooms are done in that color."

"Then they have really bad taste," said Peter, "Or their decorator is color blind like Jake Barrelli. You never wanna do an art project with him."

"Your dad's right, you are a salty child."

All Natasha received in reply was a cheeky smile, Tony all but preening at the sass that his child could produce. Aunt May and Uncle Ben had taught him well.

"I like this blue. It was the color of Aunt May's favorite blanket."

Tony gave a jerky nod and said, "Yeah, sure, that's a great, umm, beautiful color. It'll go well with Matika's tank. Do you want to add some border colors to it? Make the room a little less monochrome?"

"Rain forest green would be good."

Once lunchtime rolled around, Tony was completely exhausted and dozing on the couch with Peter tucked under one arm. Bumble had migrated around the penthouse, examining and sniffing everything she encountered before coming to sit underneath the coffee table. A sudden thud nearly sent Tony rolling off the couch, Peter yelping while also throwing his puzzle book straight into somebody's face.

"Ugh, sorry, I kinda deserved that."

"Not announcing yourself is rude," snapped Peter as he curled even further into Tony's side. "You
could've given Tony a heart attack."

If possible, Steve looked even more sheepish, especially since he had yet again earned the boy's wrath for doing something Peter perceived as a threat against his injured father. And considering Tony's heart and lung issues, a heart attack wasn't as impossible as they'd like to believe.

"Fury has a new mission for us," said Steve, "So I thought I'd whip up some lunch before we leave. It shouldn't take more than a day or two, but Natasha and Vision are staying behind just in case."

"Does it have pickles on it?"

"No."

"You may have some uses yet, Mr. Rogers."

Steve cringed. "I'm never letting you pick out my Halloween costume again."

"Hey, every person over the age of fifteen grew up with Mr. Rogers," said Tony as he inhaled his ham and cheese sandwich. "Well, except for you and Bucky, who are older than fossils. Even Thor watched a couple episodes last year."

"Aunt May made me watch him, too. She said he was the nicest man to ever live."

"Will you two be alright here?"

Tony gave Steve an unimpressed look. "I've been doing just fine for the last fifteen months, Steven, so I'm pretty sure I can handle a couple days with an assassin, indestructible robot, and paranoid airman to protect my smart-ass child and injured self."

"I just wanted to make sure."

"You don't need to make sure of anything. I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself. Been doing it for a good while now."

"And I'm here," said Peter. "He's safer with me than any of you."

"Too right."

Peter had shifted as close to Tony as possible, seeming to have picked up on the tension between his father and the super-soldier. At this point, Tony just wanted to be left alone for a couple days, preferably to sort out his thoughts and spend some quality time with Peter. Aside from Rhodey and Vision, he'd seen almost nothing of his former teammates since they'd broken out of the Raft. Natasha had contacted him one month after the incident and had left a brief, bi-monthly update ever since, but she had also spent the last thirteen months exclusively at SHIELD's headquarters with the other Avengers and wasn't even aware Tony had adopted Peter until two weeks ago.

Suddenly having so many people in his home—most specifically people who had betrayed and tried to kill him at several points—was nerve-wracking, especially now that Tony was coherent enough to comprehend their presence and the implications of it. And Peter's skittish behavior wasn't helping matters, either. Every time Tony saw someone move outta the corner of his eye, he felt an instinctive need to pull the boy closer and protect him from a man who'd known about his grandparents' murders and hadn't seen fit to tell Tony about it.

Fuck, he really needed to be alone right now.
"Are you okay, Tony?"

It took about two blinks for Tony to realize that Steve's face was less than a foot from his, hand already stretched out to feel Tony's forehead. All he did was grumble at the cool touch, frustrated that his mind had fizzled out for no reason again. Why the fuck did it keep doing that?

"Aww, damn, you're due for some pain meds, aren't you? I'll go grab them for you. Stay here."

"Not like I could go anywhere even if I wanted to."

To further prove his dad's point, Peter scooped Bumble up and then plastered himself to Tony's side, frowning at every unfamiliar Avenger left in the room. The kid had mood swings like a hurricane sometimes, although the therapist said that such behavior was normal for any child in Peter's situation. Losing two sets of parents before the age of ten was enough to do damage to anyone, let alone someone as sensitive as Peter. It was a miracle that the kid was still functioning at this point.

"I think you need to eat something, kiddo."

"But I'm not—"

"Nope, don't even try it. I can hear your stomach growling from here."

"It's not peanut butter."

"Okay, seriously, I know for a fact that you like ham and cheese sandwiches with pickles on the side," said Tony, snapping his finger towards the plate. "Despite all of the complaints I could give about Steve right now, one thing that's unquestionable is his cooking skills. Dude makes a mean sandwich, no matter what's on it."

"If it's poisoned, then I'm blaming you."

Tony snorted. "If it's poisoned, then everyone presently in this penthouse except for Rhodey, Matika, and Bumble is gonna die slow, painful deaths."

"What about Happy?"

"He's out grocery shopping right now, so our favorite bodyguard doesn't apply."

"I still like peanut butter more."

And then Tony nearly jumped out of his skin again when Steve's giant hands appeared right under his nose with a little pill and glass of water in each. Tony took both with a sigh, grimacing when the nonexistent coating got stuck on the back of his tongue. Whatever face Tony made must've been hilarious because it pulled a loud giggle out of Peter and a muffled snort out of Steve, the latter at least attempting to hide it.

Oh well, if it got Peter to laugh then the bad taste was worth it.

Tony was just about to say something in his defense when the elevator doors opened and Pepper came striding in with Happy right behind her, high heels clicking as she grabbed the television remote and turned it to CNN. If the look on her face was anything to go by, then whatever they were supposed to see wasn't going to be good.

"Someone take Peter to his bedroom," ordered Pepper. "Now."
Peter was barely able to protest before Happy grabbed him under the armpits and hauled him off with a grunt. The boy probably would've continued to complain, but Pepper's glare shut him up right away. Peter went scrambiling off to his room after that.

"Someone leaked a video of your latest fight to the press," said Pepper. "And people aren't happy about it. SI has already seen a drop in stocks and Fury got an earful from me less than five minutes ago. Did you know about this, Captain?"

If Tony hadn't been so familiar with Pepper's wrath, he would've snarked at Steve for his frightened expression, but considering the ridiculous amount of damages he'd paid out over the last year, Tony wasn't going to come to Captain America's defense just yet. Saving Peter was a huge thing, of course, but the Avengers really didn't need any more bad press right now. SHIELD had taken a good bit of pressure off them for the time being, but 117 countries were still very unhappy that Steve and his allies had given the Accords, and therefore them, a giant middle finger.

The whole thing was a goddamned migraine and Tony just didn't want to deal with it anymore.

"It's one of the primary reasons why we're being sent on a covert mission abroad," Steve admitted with a sheepish frown. "Fury wants to do damage control before we're seen again by the public."

"I've already scheduled a press conference," said Pepper. "You will be exempt due to your injuries, Tony, but I need you to organize a short missive that I can read and say came straight from you. And please don't insult any senators in it, either."

"You ruin all my fun."

"And that's not all. Take a deep breath before you look at this, okay."

"Fuck."

On the front page of the New York Times was a picture of Steve sprinting after the HYDRA agents that had kidnapped Peter, arm stretched forward to launch his shield at their retreating forms. Two smaller and grainier pictures were situated underneath, the left showing Peter coming out of his doctor's office and the right showing the Quinjet landing at Stark Tower. Despite the poor quality, anyone with eyes could see that a dressed-down Tony Stark was the man escorting Peter to a nearby Lexus sedan.

The bastards must have tailed him all the way around Manhattan and Queens; there was no other way they would've been able to find Peter's pediatrician otherwise.

"It only hit the news this morning. Considering the initial articles on TMZ and Entertainment, I think an official statement from your publicist would be prudent," said Pepper. "It would also help protect Peter's privacy, establish that he was adopted to get rid of that ridiculous love-child story —"

"Oh, yes, another one of those. How original."

"And keep everything on our terms. The public will be much more sympathetic if they think the Avengers came out of seclusion to save your kidnapped child. No civilians were injured or killed during the incident, either. That's a huge plus at this point."

"Who took the pictures?"

"FRIDAY is working on that right now. I have a feeling about who's behind it, but I'd rather be sure before doing any damage to their credit report."
A good chunk of the room looked at Pepper in astonishment. Apparently, none of them besides Natasha, Bruce, and Rhodey were aware of how vindictive Pepper Potts could be when someone crossed her.

"Wow," Sam whistled, "That's downright ruthless."

Tony rubbed at his eyes and tried not to groan in frustration. He had tried to keep Peter sheltered from the public as long as possible, but he also knew the day was fast approaching when a nosy reporter or pap would snap and sell pictures of Peter to the media. It was difficult to go about his daily life as Tony Stark while also hiding his son from the press, especially in a celebrity hot spot like New York City.

He didn't want Peter to grow up under the same scrutiny as him.

"I hate life."

Clint snickered and said, "You sure you don't want to just disappear with us, Stark. It'd make everyone's life a whole lot easier."

For some reason, this comment seemed to really irritate Pepper, who glared at the archer like he was an ant beneath her stiletto heel. And oh shit, did Tony ever fear that terrifying, red-tinted face. Clint really should've just kept his big mouth shut today.

"Okay, now listen well, Agent Barton. Unlike the rest of you, Tony, Rhodey, and myself all have obligations to entities outside the Avengers. We can't just disregard public opinion and run off into the night. Why? Because Stark Industries would fall apart and go bankrupt if we did that and millions of innocent employees rely on this company to pay their bills and feed their families. It's not so easy to disappear when millions of lives depend on your ability to give them steady employment, as I have tried to explain dozens of times to multiple people in this room."

Clint tried to hide behind the far couch, but Pepper's eyes and stance followed his every move with lethal precision.

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"Do you know how many countries boycotted Stark Industries after you guys blew up an entire German airport in that stupid little spat of yours? Twenty-one. Including South Africa, Russia, Finland, Nigeria, and Argentina, to name a few. I spent two weeks convincing Japan, South Korea, and Germany not to shut down SI operations in their countries, all because they thought the Avengers, and therefore Tony, had given them a gigantic *Fuck You* over the Sokovia Accords. I mean, do you have any idea how degrading it is to grovel before roomfuls of perverted old men to protect and ensure your employees' livelihoods?"

"Umm, not—"

"It's terrible, is what it is," said Pepper. "This past year has been a nightmare. If I hadn't brought in the best accountants that money can buy, SI would've been bankrupt and nobody would've been around to pay off and bribe angry foreign governments from chasing your asses all over creation. Dozens of humanitarian aid projects were shut down in countries that no longer trust us and hundreds more are under constant threat of being audited or scrapped. Millions of people's lives—hell, millions of children's lives and students' futures—rely on SI projects to keep operating in their communities. Many of these deals were already up and running long before the Avengers were even formed, so no, some of us can't just up and leave when the government does something we're not particularly happy with."

Tony was really tempted to join Clint behind the couch, if only because Pepper was so damned...
terrifying when she was well and truly pissed off. The last few months had been horrible for SI and its various projects. Dozens of countries now associated Tony with the Avengers' complete refusal to compromise on the Sokovia Accords, leading to broken contracts, halted humanitarian aid projects, and an increasingly distrustful populace. And poor Pepper had had to face it head on due to her position as Tony's friend and CEO of Stark Industries.

"Peps..."

"No, Tony, I'm not going to apologize for what needed to be said." Pepper clutched at the newspaper like a lifeline. "I can't handle sending out thousands of pink slips again, and then being forced to watch my employees sob on the evening news about how they're going to lose their homes, medical insurance, and probably won't be able to buy next week's batch of groceries. I won't do it again."

Everyone was dead silent, likely shocked shitless by the usually polite and composed Pepper Potts reprimanding them like grade school children. The only person who didn't look surprised was Rhodey, who had been present for the financial fallout that Stark Industries had been going through for the last fifteen months. It figured that none of the others had paid attention to the international news and their business reports.

"From here on out, Stark Industries will only fund tech projects that are deemed necessary by Tony and myself," said Pepper. "I can explain away this recent incident as Iron Man and the disbanded Avengers coming back together to save Tony's kidnapped son, but everything else will have to run through SHIELD from now on. We cannot jeopardize SI or our employees' safety anymore. That's nonnegotiable."

Tony just nodded in compliance when Pepper looked at him. They had discussed this at length in the past, and yet again two days ago. For the first time in countless years, Tony was going to put his company and his family—holy shit, he actually had a full-fledged and legally legitimate family now—first, with Peter situated firmly and solidly at the top.

Sam was the first to respond and said, "We understand, Pepper. None of this was supposed to happen."

"Well, it did," snapped Pepper before taking a deep breath. "But still, thank you, Sergeant Wilson. We wouldn't be sitting here talking if I didn't think you'd be willing to work out some kind of compromise."

"You've discussed this with Fury?"

"The Cyclops already drew up some terms with us," said Tony. "And thank the fucking lord that we don't have to deal with Ross or his lackeys anymore, either. I've been fighting not to blow that asshole's head off since the day we met."

Bruce was standing behind Tony when he said this and the latter man didn't hesitate to reach out and give his wrist a reassuring squeeze. General Ross' overbearing and annoying nature wasn't the only reason why Tony wanted to shoot him.

"We have to think of Peter, too. Once the world knows that Tony Stark has a tangible and legal child, there will be no hiding him like Agent Barton and Mr. Lang have managed with their children," Pepper explained. "Plenty of celebrities have managed to keep their kids entirely out of the public eye, but if anything happens again like last year? Child Protective Services will investigate at the drop of a proverbial hat."
Bucky sputtered at this. "Wait, but he's Tony's legal son, right? I thought adoption papers were ironclad."

"A lot of things have changed since your time, Sergeant Barnes. Nowadays, if you abuse or neglect your child, CPS can be called in to conduct an investigation that determines whether or not you're a responsible parent. It's rare, but false charges are sometimes brought forth and the child can be taken away if the judge rules with them."

"I've got plenty of political and financial enemies who'd love to see me suffer," Tony admitted. "And don't think I didn't consider all of this before finalizing the adoption, either. There's a good reason why Bill Gates has spent decades hiding his kids from the media. Being kidnapped and held for ransom isn't fun, trust me. It sucks."

"Yes, well, we certainly won't be following your father's philosophy on that particular problem."

Everyone except Sam, Natasha, and Rhodey had looks of horror on their faces. Wanda shifted from foot to foot, clearly unnerved by the laws of a country that she was still unfamiliar with.

Bucky looked particularly upset by this and mumbled, "But Tony's a good father."

"And that's why he's gonna be flying under the radar from here on out," said Rhodey. "Unless something huge happens, then Tony and I will only be providing consultation and tech support to SHIELD. We have to make sure a clear line is drawn between Stark Industries and everything else. And there's also Peter to consider, too. We're going to have to weigh our decisions more carefully in the future because of him."

"I understand," said Steve. "We all do. And I swear that none of us will do anything to endanger Peter."

Sam nodded. "No worries, I'll shoot anyone who even thinks about doing something that could bite Stark or his kid. Lord knows we could use some more common sense around here."

"I've been saying that for years," groaned Rhodey. "Damned white boys always getting into trouble, but nope, they never listen to us. Instead, they just waltz off like nothing bad's gonna happen. Or some lunatic's not gonna use 'em as target practice. It's the same shit every damned time. And then we end up getting used as target practice, too!"

"Damned exhausting, isn't it?"

"Yeah, well, you've only been dealing with Steve's bullshit for about three years. Just wait until the first decade marker hits." Rhodey pinched Tony's left ear, pointedly ignoring the cuss he got in response. "You'll be grey and dying of high blood pressure by then. And to be honest, I think your boy here is even worse than mine."

"Wait one second, honey bear, you don't have any gre—"

"Awww, shit."

It only took a moment for Tony to discover what had made Pepper curse out loud. *TMZ* was showing two pictures of Tony with Peter, both of them obviously taken as they exited a doctor's office. Unlike those in the newspaper, these photos were clear and precise and didn't even attempt to hide the little boy's features. It made Tony want to shoot something. Or someone. Preferably both.

"Dude," whistled Clint, "Now that's just low."
Another picture showed Tony at the cemetery with Peter, knelt down next to the boy while a priest and several other mourners stood around them. It was just as clear as the last two, likely taken by one of the paps who followed Tony around on a regular basis. The jackass probably didn't even realize the importance of said photo until he looked at this morning's news report. It was a disgusting invasion of privacy.

"JARVIS?"

"What can I do for you, Sir?"

Tony fought not to grit his teeth. "Get me some names. *Now.*"

"With pleasure."

Chapter End Notes

I'm terribly sorry about the delay! I actually graduated over the weekend, so these last three weeks have been incredibly hectic. But, who gives a shit, I'm a doctor! Woohoo! However, on a more serious note, this chapter was very heavy content-wise, to say the least. Our boys are finally reaching the point where they can start to work through the fucked up mess that *Civil War* left behind. Not to mention the political and financial fallout it would've left for Tony and his company to contend with, too.
"What's wrong?"

"Hmm? What makes you think anything is wrong?"

"You're doing that twitchy thing with your eyebrow and picking at your pants. That means something's wrong."

"I do not twitch."

"Aunt May always said that lying isn't very becoming."

"Wise-ass."

Peter snickered and went back to his video game, fingers jamming the controller as Spyro charged through a horde of rhynocs. The little purple dragon had become an instant favorite of Peter's, easily rivaling Charizard and Michelangelo on the pedestals of Saturday morning pixalated greatness. And to the surprise of no one, Rhodey had insisted that no nephew of his was going to miss out on the greatest Playstation and Nintendo 64 classics, including the all-time greats of Crash Bandicoot, Banjo Kazooie, Spyro the Dragon, and Super Smash Bros. The airman had effectively stolen Peter for most of the evening, geeking out over the video games like an engineer in a NASA laboratory.

"Okay, it's almost ten o'clock," said Tony a couple minutes later, "So you definitely need to take a shower and get ready for bed. The last thing I want is a cranky child who knows where my newest batch of repulsors are."

"But I just got to Evening Lake..."

"Nope, the puppy dog eyes aren't gonna work, kiddo. I am immune to them, no matter what your traitor of an uncle says. And oh, would you look at that. Speak of the devil and he shall appear."

"Those drugs really aren't helping your brains, Tones."

Rhodey walked over and snatched Peter up at the armpits, chucking the controller over to Tony so he could save the game before Spyro accidentally flew into one of the vast abysses that littered every sub-world. As usual, Peter protested the entire way, claiming it was perfectly acceptable for him to go to bed at the same time everybody else did. And as usual, Rhodey called bullshit and said Peter smelled like a cat's litter box.

"Ah, the miraculous joys of having a babysitter."

"I heard that!"

All Rhodey got in reply was a shameless snicker, Tony more than willing to push the other man's buttons despite his current situation as an invalid. Considering all the shit Rhodey had gone through in the last fifteen months, it was no secret that he enjoyed doing simple and mundane activities whenever possible. Helping out with his new nephew was one of those things, even if it just involved getting him to shower, brush his teeth, and eat some vegetables at dinner. Pepper
thought it was great, saying the simple things likely reminded Rhodey that just because he'd lost his legs didn't mean he'd lost his life.

"Okay, now that that's taken care of," said Tony, "Give me what you've got, J."

"Certainly, Sir."

Two screens popped up in front of Tony's bedroom television, each of them showing a pair of faces that Tony was vaguely familiar with. All four of these yahoos had followed him around in the past, although only one was what Tony would define as a regular stalker. Then again, the terms paparazzi and creepy stalker kinda went hand-in-hand, so he was mostly playing semantics here.

"After gathering data from multiple surveillance systems at multiple locations, I have narrowed down the search to these four individuals: Gerard Fallini, Rebecca Pratt, Jeffrey Sands, and Ronald Galaro. All of them are responsible for separate photos, although I should forewarn you that another one was released by TMZ only sixteen minutes ago."

"What is it?"

"You may wish to see for yourself, Sir."

A third screen appeared with Peter's form situated in the center, lips curled into a small smile as Tony stood in front of him with a greasy bagful of hamburgers and an ice cream cone. Peter held his own treat close, chin covered in melted vanilla and sprinkles as Tony fruitlessly tried to convince him to wipe it off with a napkin. Both of them were dressed in simple clothes, which was an obvious attempt on Tony's part in blend in with the crowd.

"This was taken four days before we were attacked."

JARVIS was quiet for a few moments before saying, "The photo was also leaked onto the internet within hours of it originally being taken. There is a strong possibility that HYDRA chose to attack once they were positive that you had Master Peter in your care."

"Yeah, attack me when I'm at my most vulnerable," grumbled Tony. "Stuck at home with a small child and without any backup from my estranged teammates. Rather brilliant on their part, except for, well, the fact that I'm Tony Stark."

There was absolutely no doubt the photo was a beautiful rendition of father and son, both immersed in their own little world while New York City bustled around them like a concrete hurricane. Aside from doctor appointments, this was the only time Tony had taken Peter outside the tower since May and Ben's funeral, paranoid of anyone approaching the child before he was ready. Tony wasn't a fool; he knew it wasn't healthy for Peter to stay inside all the time and had been slowly preparing to reemerge into daily life with his adopted son in tow.

And then this son of a bitch just had to invade their privacy and plaster it all over the internet. It was almost certain that HYDRA had known about Peter beforehand, but seeing such personal pictures had likely encouraged them to act while Tony and Peter were alone in the tower and without any type of protection from the other Avengers. What they were after, Tony still wasn't sure, but HYDRA had chosen their moment wisely, as usual.

"What did it sell for?"

"The final bidding came out at 3.5 million US dollars, Sir."

"Fucking hell," laughed Tony, "Why are people so damned obsessed with my personal life? I really
hate this sometimes, you know. Not having any fucking privacy or even being able to get ice cream for my kid without being stalked by total strangers. Maybe I should just move to Alaska like Bruce suggested last summer. At least then I wouldn't have to worry about the paps leaking photos of my eight-year-old son to Nazi terrorists. Or fucking Ross."

"Perhaps Tahiti or the Andaman Islands would be a better option, Sir."

"You just don't want your servers getting cold."

"It's a terribly unpleasant sensation, I can assure you," said JARVIS. "Now, since this was her first paparazzi assignment, would you prefer for FRIDAY to give a report on each of the guilty parties?"

"Ohhh, let's see what my baby girl managed to dig up. Give daddy something he can work with here."

"You got it, Boss."

Four holographic screens spread out at the bottom of the bed, each showing an individual pap while also giving a shit ton of personal and professional information on them. FRIDAY snarkily rattled off which pictures they were responsible for, detailing how they were able to follow and photograph the Starks without being noticed. From the looks of it, Ronald Galaro was the worst of them.

"He has attempted to gain access to the tower on multiple occasions, Boss. Even tried to speak with Petey's pediatrician last week, who promptly shot him down like a cruise missile. It was beautiful. Would you like to see the video?"

"Sure, why not? Let it roll, baby girl."

Tony was laughing his ass off at the sight of Peter's big and burly pediatrician verbally ripping Galaro to shreds when Vision and Bruce knocked on the door. The latter entered with a small smile, heading straight over to check on Tony's wounds and take another blood sample for analysis. Vision puttered over while also watching the video, even chuckling at one point before congratulating FRIDAY on a job well done.

"I see that her stalking mission went well."

"No, it went beautifully," said Tony. He was always proud of his AI babies, or at least the ones that didn't go homicidal maniac. "My baby girl is the queen of stalking the stalkers. Bastards have no idea what they're in for, that's for damned sure."

"Tony! Tony! Look at how well my mold grew."

Peter raced into the room, decked out in his Hulk pajamas and holding a small petri dish. They had started an experiment four weeks ago to see how quickly black mold would grow if they never cleaned the petri dish and just left it sit in the corner of Peter's shower. As expected, Bruce had taken an instant interest in the enterprise and happily assisted Peter in promoting Bob's growth over the last couple days.

"Okay, that's starting to creep me out now. I don't think I want that in your shower anymore."

"Bob's going through an exponential growth phase."

"You don't even know what that word means and I swear, it's growing right in front of me. That's
just plain freaky."

"Oh, the wonders of biology," said Bruce. "Unlike engineering, organic lifeforms actually grow and shift and change during a specific time period. Now lift up your arm so I can get a closer look at the incision."

"Hey, hey, no need to insult my babies, Dr. Green. Have you seen my creations? They totally grow like regular lifeforms."

"Of course, and I apologize for the insult, robot children."

"No need, Dr. Banner."

"But still, you only have one organic baby, Tony."

"Me!"

"Well, if you want to get technical," drawled Tony, "Then I have a total of seven children. One organic and six synthetic. Six boys and one girl. Wow, I've really been a sleaze in the computer department, haven't I?"

Vision blinked. "Pardon, but did you say seven?"

"You heard correctly, my Infinity Stone prodigy! Six boys: Dummy, Butterfingers, You, JARVIS, Peter, and yourself. And one girl: FRIDAY. Honestly, I'm still a little confused on what to do with a female AI baby, but might as well give it a crapshot."

"I feel so reassured by your positive outlook, Boss."

"Do you hear this? Less than three years old and already as snarky as her big brothers. Don't listen to your sister, Peter. I can already tell that she's gonna be a terrible influence. Why did I create you again?"

"To supplement JARVIS' capabilities until he can return to a fully functional state. And to assist in the reconstruction of his damaged matrix. After that, I shall exist to irritate and scold you when the situation calls for it."

"Fri would've gotten along with Aunt May," declared Peter. "She's funny."

"Yeah, yeah, take your smart-ass sister's side, I shouldn't have expected any less. Now get over here and give your gimpy old man a goodnight kiss. Vision's gonna be a good big brother and tuck you in, right?"

Poor Vision looked as bemused as usual, eyes wide as both Starks gave him cheeky smiles. It had been a running gag for months that Tony was the android's daddy, as Rhodey loved to point out whenever the opportunity presented itself. Vision refuted this claim every time, but Tony could tell he enjoyed the familial connection to a certain degree. And the fact that Rhodey didn't resent Vision for accidentally striking and crippling him.

Robot boners were such a pain in the ass. And how the hell was Tony going to handle that? Fuck, he already had a confused, horny teenager on his hands, didn't he?

"I suppose that would not be—"

"Good, you can help me feed Matika," said Peter. "She needs to eat at least one earthworm and I
Tony didn't hesitate to accept the kiss Peter planted on his cheek, inwardly warmed by his son's open personality and kind nature. Touching other people wasn't a pastime Tony enjoyed, but Peter had firmly shoved his way onto the tiny list without a second thought. May and Ben had obviously been very affectionate with the little boy and there was no way Tony was gonna destroy that innocence with cold indifference. Not like Howard had done to him.

"And don't forget about Bumble, either."

"I already fed her with Uncle Rhodey. And she's gonna sleep in my room, too."

"Just remember to leave the door cracked in case she wants to roam," said Tony. "Cats aren't like dogs; some of them are nocturnal and don't like being confined. She'll complain very loudly if you close it."

"I know, and I read the cat book T'Challa left for me."

"Well, at least you're being proactive," said Tony as he returned the kiss and one-armed hug. "Now go to bed, young man. I refuse to have an ornery child on my hands."

"You're being dramatic, but I'll listen this time. Night, I love you."

"Love you, too."

Peter bounded off with his petri dish of mold, grabbing the android's hand without a second thought. Yet again, this always seemed to bemuse Vision, who tended to examine and reassess the boy every time he encountered him. But still, Tony wasn't kidding when he said Vision was a good big brother, in whatever sense that term actually applied. It's wasn't unusual for him to phase through the wall and offer to work on an experiment with Peter, even if the kid was light years below Vision's intelligence level.

If Vision had been home when HYDRA attacked the tower, Tony didn't doubt the android would've blown them to pieces to protect Peter. He may not have understood their pseudo-brotherly bond, but he wasn't about to disregard it, either.

"And don't forget to apply cream to his cuts, Viz! Change the bandages, too!"

Tony watched as Vision led Peter out of the room, easily keeping pace with the boy's shorter strides while also asking about his mold experiment. Despite the robot's aloofness, he had become quite close to Peter since the adoption was finalized. And Vision had honored his promise to Tony about keeping Peter a secret for as long as possible.

"You're a good parent," said Bruce as he cleaned Tony's wound, "And don't try to deny it. Anyone who watches you with Peter can see it."

That drew a snicker from Tony. "Yeah, well, so long as I do everything the opposite of Howard, then any kid would turn out okay under my tutelage. And we'll just have to wait and see a couple years down the line, won't we?"

"Always with the self-deprecation," sighed Bruce. "So, what have you found on the photographers?"

"FRIDAY and JARVIS narrowed it down to four parasites," said Tony. "I'm actually familiar with one of them. Galaro has been following me around for decades with his own psychotic protegees."
He's a real asshole and has no respect for anyone's privacy, not even children."

"You said that Pepper's releasing a statement tomorrow?"

"Sometime before noon. It'll be short and concise, only saying that I adopted a son and will be focusing on both him and Stark Industries in the future. Nothing will be mentioned about the Avengers aside from them briefly coming together to save my kidnapped child. We're hoping the whole kidnapping fiasco will earn some sort of sympathy from the public and make the paps more cautious about getting close to him."

"And your grand plan of revenge?"

"Still working on it. Don't wanna show my cards too soon and I want it to be effective."

"Let them stew for a little while?"

"While also releasing a handful of photos taken by a professional photographer here in the penthouse," said Tony with a nod. "None of them will show Peter's face and Pepper will have full control of what's released. It should quell some of the public's interest and make Stark Industries look a little better. Pep says it'll be easier for parents to relate to me, if they actually see me with Peter in a casual setting."

"And people say Cap's the Man with a Plan."

"Cap doesn't hold a candle to Pepper when she starts scheming. There's a reason why she's CEO of Stark Industries instead of me."

"Okay, enough shop talk. Let's get these bandages changed..."

The next ten days passed in relative silence, Tony sleeping away his achy injuries while Peter enjoyed the attention of Rhodey, Vision, and Bruce. He wasn't quite sure where Natasha had buggered off to, but she probably wasn't too far in case of another HYDRA attack. Pepper's statement had gone over well, although most people's reactions had consisted of shock and bemusement. Apparently, the mere thought of Tony Stark having a child was baffling to the world at large. Some reporters went so far as to question the sanity of the adoption agency, but Pepper had decided it was in their best interests to just ignore them.

"It's none of their business," Pepper had said. "And since you're the only Avenger publicly known to have children, it's not surprising that we would have to field these types of questions. Just smile for the official photos and let me handle the rest."

So Tony had done just that, instead spending an entire week sleeping in his extra-comfy bed while also scheming about how to get revenge on HYDRA and the paps. He hadn't heard anything from T'Challa on the frozen Soldiers and no news was usually good news when it involved the Wakandan king, meaning Tony wouldn't need to worry about that issue right now, either. And Ross had also been quiet, but that didn't guarantee anything. That man was just as big of a schemer as Pepper, albeit much more dangerous and cruel.

Happy had been kind enough to take Peter to his dentist appointment and as expected, several photos had appeared on *TMZ* the next morning. None of them wanted to alert Peter to what was going on, so Tony had stayed quiet on the subject and let Pepper deal with it. He also knew the Avengers—or whatever the hell they were being called nowadays—had finished their mission seven days ago, but they had thankfully kept their distance and allowed Tony to have some time to himself. Their constant presence had been grating on his nerves and he was just happy to be alone.
with his closest family for a couple days. And then something strange had happened...

"Sir, I think you should look at this news report."

"Fire it up, J."

Tony had been in the middle of a new Widow Bite project when the television turned to TMZ and showed a hysterical Gerard Fallini fighting with the cops. He had a gun drawn and was screaming about something, obviously not wanting the cops to get any closer to him. After a few more seconds of this lunacy, one of the officers finally got fed up and tased Fallini onto the ground.

"Well, that was definitely bizarre. And kinda entertaining."

"Quite. Would you like for me to look into what may have caused this strange display of behavior?"

"Sure, why not."

It was the following morning when Tony received a debriefing of the situation from JARVIS, the AI more than a little bemused by the supposed story behind Fallini's mental breakdown. Only a couple words had gotten out of the AI's speakers before Pepper charged in and started scolding Tony for not being on time and looking like a goofy slob and why couldn't he ever stick to a schedule. In other words, it was the usual barrage of complaints.

"But I was just about to do something impor—"

"Whatever it was isn't any more important than the photo-shoot I've been planning for over a week," snapped the redhead. "Now get yourself dressed like a big boy and don't argue with whatever Bruce tries to put you in."

"No Vision?"

"I'm not having you look like some model out of Ralph Lauren's fall catalogue." Pepper went straight into his closet without even asking for permission. "We're going for something more casual with this shoot and I really don't wanna deal with Peter's whining all morning, either."

"Who's dressing the midget?"

"I already laid some clothes out for him. Hmmm, I think this navy blue and white combination will work just fine. Bruce!"

"Geez, I'm coming, I'm coming..."

Pepper laid out the white tank top, white button-up shirt, and navy blue pants on the bed, mumbling to herself about shoes being too formal and that it was probably best that he not brush his hair. Apparently, the messier Tony looked, the better it would be. Single fathers often had an exhausted look to them, she claimed, and that's what they wanted to emphasize and play up today.

"Make sure he looks presentable but also kinda ruffled. Try to cover up the injuries, too."

"Of course."

"And make sure to dope him up with some painkillers. Grumpy and constipated expressions always look awful in professional photos."

"I'll make sure he doesn't feel a thing, don't worry."
Tony grumbled as he was led to the living room twenty minutes later, none too happy that he'd been woken and spiffed up at eleven o'clock in the morning. He felt a little goofy thanks to his medications, but the photo-shoot wasn't supposed to take more than an hour, at the most. None of them wanted to force an eight-year-old child to endure anything longer than that.

"Looking good, Stark!"

"Oh, for the love of... what are you doing here, Wilson?"

"I'm working with Ms. Potts and James here on a veterans' therapy program," said Sam with a big smile. "It's funded by SI and will help match injured soldiers with the latest and most advanced prosthetic limbs that science can offer."

"That's a load of bullshit and you know it."

"Well, the program itself isn't," said Pepper from where she was speaking with the photographer, "But I have a feeling that Sam's reasoning for being here right now involves ulterior motives."

"Hey, I honestly didn't know you were doing a photo-shoot this morning. And I wouldn't have brought these two lump heads if I didn't know Tony was busy with something else, either."

Lo and behold, there sat Steve and Bucky on the far couch, both looking more than a little uncomfortable at causing such an interruption and now being the center of attention. Tony felt like kicking himself in the head, only now remembering that he'd binge-invented the other night and had sent a message to Natasha about picking up some new tech. And then she'd sold him out, the jerk.

"All of you are just gonna have to train in the gym or watch a movie on your floors until we're done," said Pepper. "It's gonna be tough enough to keep Peter and Tony under control without the three of you snooping around."

"Hey, I'm more than used to these types of photo-shoots!"

"You normally don't have a hole in your side or an eight-year-old child to distract you, either."

"Are you gonna distract me, Petey-pie?"

"Nope."

"See, you're making assumptions again, Pep. It's not very becoming and why are you—ah! Gentle with the merchandise!"

"Put him on the couch, Bruce. We don't need him passing out."

"So bossy."

But Tony didn't argue with her after that, instead limping over to the couch while Bruce tried to keep him from falling over. Walking was still painful and crutches were completely out of the question due to his abdominal injury, so accepting help was something that Tony literally couldn't avoid at this point. And then everything was kinda better because Peter raced over and tucked himself against Tony's good side like a bloodsucking leech, Bumble hopping up to sprawl across his lap with a quiet meow.

The cat would be included in some of the photos, but the tarantula was a big no-no. Peter hadn't been too pleased with that restriction.
"Can't Matika be in one? Just one?"

"You know that Pepper already shot that idea down and I'm not about to argue with her."

"Please?"

"Take it up with the warden, kiddo. And don't give me that look, you know I'm not in charge around here," said Tony. "Oh yeah, Peps, did you hear about that pap from TMZ? Fallini? He apparently went crazy last night, got himself a gun to wave around, and then started ranting to the police about someone stalking—"

A sudden crash drew everybody's attention across the room where Bucky was staring wide-eyed and open-mouthed at the broken vase laying at his feet. Two picture frames were also knocked over, but neither of them had broken like the fragile and overly ornate vase.

"Ummm—"

"That was a $15,000 antique!"

If possible, Bucky looked even more terrified, eyes darting between the shattered vase and a disgruntled Pepper Potts. Seriously, Tony was amazed the poor dude hadn't passed out yet.

"I didn't mean—"

"Oh goody! I hated that damned ugly thing."

"Tony!"

"I'm sorry, Peps, but it really was ugly. Usually your artistic tastes are second to none, but that vase? It would've fit right in with Freddy Kruger and Jason."

Pepper pinched the bridge of her nose and said, "I need a vacation. A long, long vacation that doesn't involve billionaires or superheroes or paparazzi that deserve to be blown to smithereens by the Jericho."

"I think that would be your cue to beat it," Rhodey said to the Avengers. "And don't emerge for at least an hour. Maybe two. And could you please stop glaring at the photo team while you're at it? They're not gonna do anything violent or creepy while you're beating each other to bloody pulps. Now, bugger off before Pepper has you ejected herself."

"What the—"

Bucky literally leapt six feet backwards when two cleaner bots dashed out of their charging stations, booping and beeping as they happily smashed the vase into even tinier pieces with their miniature arms. He kept one leg in the air, obviously afraid that if he put it down, one of the little bots would suddenly appear beneath it and get crushed into equally tiny bits. If that happened, then there truly would be no saving Bucky from their creator's wrath.

"Don't get too close to Mr. Fantastic," warned Peter, "He has a bad habit of attacking strangers with his vacuums."

"And beware the Doominator, too. He's not the most... functional bot of my cleaning crew."

That statement sent Bucky scuttling around the nearest corner, clearly well and done with the technological weirdness that was Tony Stark's home. Steve and Sam followed him a moment later,
both of them giving the little bots a wide berth and wary eye. They'd had their fair share of run-ins with the spunky robots during their time in the tower.

"Okay, time to get this operation underway..."

It was two hours later before Steve, Bucky, and Sam dared to exit the gym, the former peeking around the hallway corner to make sure nobody was gonna scold them for returning too early. What they found was Pepper, Rhodey, Bruce, Vision, and the Stark family sitting in front of a half-dozen holo-screens, pictures slowly rotating in a set pattern as the photo crew stood nearby. From the sounds of it, they had already made their selection and were now discussing how the magazine spread should be set up and in what order.

"That's a nice one," said Sam, who now stood at the back of the couch. "It's very genuine and open, I think."

Everybody looked at the middle screen, which showed a picture of Peter sitting on the floor with Bumble, the cat rolling around while Peter spun a mouse toy above her head. It was taken from the back, so the kid's face wasn't visible, as Pepper had specifically instructed the photographer to avoid at all costs. A few feet away sat Tony, gazing at his son with adoration and a small, happy smile that none of the Avengers had seen in far too long.

"Yeah, we took that while on break," said the photographer. "They didn't know about it. Those are usually the best ones, if you ask me."

"Actually, all but one of the final selection were taken while on break."

Pepper pulled up another screen, showing Peter and Tony bickering at the kitchen counter about what they were gonna eat for lunch. Tony was pointing at three jars of jelly with a peanut butter-covered knife, obviously in disagreement with his son about what jelly should be used on the sandwiches. Even if you couldn't see Peter's face, it was easy to tell from the kid's posture that he wasn't pleased with the afternoon's choice.

And then JARVIS switched it out for another picture, this one showing Peter sitting on a love seat in front of the large bay windows, Bumble curled up next to him while he ate his sandwich. Tony was just barely visible in the background, keeping an eye on his son while the child watched a pair of peregrine falcons swooping around in the high-noon skies.

"We've already decided on these three," said Pepper with a pleased smile. "They're my favorites of the bunch."

"Mine, too."

Tony sat on the couch with Peter tucked under his arm, pretty much in the same position as when the Avengers left. He was obviously exhausted and his eyes were strained with a quickly approaching bout of pain, but he also looked more content than Steve had seen in a long, long time. Or maybe he had been just as content at some point in the recent past and Steve hadn't been around to see it. Considering their current relationship, that was the most likely option, especially since Peter had clearly been an immense boon to the emotionally shattered and downtrodden engineer.

It made Steve wonder how Tony had been fairing before Peter came into his life. Of the four times Tony had visited SHIELD's new headquarters—which tended to change every other month to keep ahead of both their enemies and the still pissed off feds—he had seemed almost manic and unhinged in his behavior, buzzing about like an overworked bee who didn't even have the time to speak two words to anyone, let alone his former teammates. It had unnerved all of the Avengers,
especially when Tony didn't speak a single word while implanting two neuro-blockers into a cryo-
sleeping Bucky, or when he fitted the assassin with a new and improved metal arm. There had been
some technobabble with the latter occasion, but no one had understood what any of it meant, and
then Tony had disappeared within minutes of the refit being finished.

Both Fury and T'Challa had told them to leave the engineer alone.

"If he wants to talk, then he'll call you on that pathetic excuse of a phone, Rogers," had been Fury's
exact words. "Now get the hell outta my fucking office and keep your freaky-ass war buddy from
scaring my agents. At this rate, I'm gonna have to attach a bell to the bastard's neck to keep track of
him."

And so they'd kept their distance, waiting for Tony to contact Steve if he needed anything. Then
again, it wasn't like the other Avengers knew much about the situation, either. Steve had told them
as little as possible about their confrontation in Siberia, including the murder of Tony's parents and
the fallout he'd likely have to face from General Ross. It wasn't until Pepper's explosion the other
week that they'd learned about most of the political and financial issues Tony, Pepper, and T'Challa
had been handling for them.

Steve felt like a complete heel for not checking up on him sooner. Or telling the truth.

"Well, this should shut the paps up for a little while," said Pepper. "And now that someone appears
to be chasing one of their most prominent members around, maybe we'll get more of a break than I
anticipated."

Huh, Steve wondered what they were talking about. He'd have to look it up when he had the
chance. If it involved one of Tony's stalkers being stalked right back, then he couldn't say that he'd
feel any sympathy for the asshole. Invading Tony and Peter's privacy had earned the jerk enough
of Steve's ire to last a lifetime.

"Tony? Tones?"

Eyes flicking over, Steve watched as Peter poked his father in the face and declared, "He's asleep
again. And drooling, too."

"Well, I guess this show is over then."

Sam shrugged. "Looks like we'll have to come back another time for the upgrades. Not too
surprising when you consider his injuries, though."

"Yeah, I guess we shouldn't have just assumed that he'd be—"

"Peter! Stop poking your dad in the face!"

"But he's drooling."

The good-natured bickering between Peter and his honorary aunt would've entertained Steve more
if he hadn't also been listening to Rhodey and Vision's hushed up conversation on the other side of
the room. They were both leaning over a Starkpad, speaking just barely loud enough for Steve to
determine that another article had been released on Tony's paparazzo and his new stalker.
Apparently, the man had suffered a total breakdown and was now in police custody for firing
several bullets through his bedroom window and then down an alleyway.

"You got any clue who might be doing this?" Rhodey asked Vision. "None of JARVIS or
FRIDAY's surveillance systems have matched him to anyone in the databases. Or gotten a trace on
"him, to be honest."

"He is very much like the ghosts you humans speak of so often."

"So that's a no, then?"

"For the moment," admitted Vision. "But I think it matters little so long as Anthony and Peter are left alone. Would you not consider it a boon?"

"Well, yeah, but I still wanna know who it is."

Huh, Steve was definitely gonna have to look this up on the internet later. If Fallini's stalker was able to avoid detection so well, then it was in their best interests to know the man's identity. For all they knew, he could be a complete lunatic who'd set his sights on Tony and Peter next. And that was unacceptable.

"Hmmm..."

Chapter End Notes

Hello there! This chapter was much more relaxed than the last one, although the plot is starting to thicken a bit. The paps are about to get a nasty lesson in stalking, too. Also, I have revised all past chapters to better align with "Civil War", although I was actually surprised with how little I needed to change. Keeping things vague worked out well, it appears.
Bucky watched as his target scrambled to unlock her door, eyes wide and frightened when he made the slightest noise from the shadows outside her building. It made him smirk with satisfaction.

For the past two weeks, HYDRA's finest assassin had been stalking the assholes who'd dared to stalk and photograph the Stark family. None of the other Avengers knew that he was sneaking out several times a week, usually after his therapy sessions or bedtime hours. Since SHIELD's current base was located directly across the Hudson River in Hoboken, it wasn't hard at all for Bucky to sneak into New York City, track down his targets, scare the shit outta them, and then sneak back into base without anyone being the wiser.

To be honest, nobody on the team—aside from maybe Natasha—understood just how dangerous and resourceful Bucky could be when he put his mind to it. After all, he did still remember everything from his time as the Winter Soldier.

He had been following Rebecca Pratt for the past four days, purposely staying just out of sight but also close enough to let the woman know that someone was there. This tactic was perfect for unnerving and then eventually terrifying a target, pushing them to question everything around them before finally entering a constant state of paranoia. Bucky hadn't used it since his mind was returned to him, but considering the amount of stress Tony and Peter had been placed under by these trolls, Bucky felt no guilt for employing such ruthless tactics.

A shriek suddenly sounded through the hallway, loud enough that Pratt's neighbors would notice but also not do anything aside from looking outside their doors. Bucky had left a dead rat on her doorstep, tucked just in the corner where it wouldn't be spotted until Pratt opened her door. He smirked at the sound of her curses, deciding that he'd done enough damage for the night. Besides, if he stayed out too long, there was a good chance that someone would notice his absence. So, with a click of his fingers against the metal pillars, Bucky disappeared into the night without leaving a single trace.

Hopping a ferry was simple and quick and allowed him to avoid unnecessary cameras. The ride to Hoboken took less than thirty minutes and Bucky easily hid among a group of tired workers, pretending to read a *Harry Potter* book while keeping his hoodie just low enough to hide his face. It made him appear mundane and standard, which was essential to being overlooked by the general public. Nothing memorable about him, was what Bucky wanted to portray.

He snuck off the ferry once it came into dock and took a roundabout way back to SHIELD headquarters. Sneaking past the agents was far simpler than it should have been, but Bucky wasn't going complain about it, either. As the Winter Soldier, he had snuck into some of the most secure government facilities in the world, so this was a piece of cake compared to many of his past missions.

Unfortunately, most of his past missions hadn't involved Natasha Romanov living in the same building as him.

"Coming in late again, I see."

"What's it to you?"
"I've got a whole list of reasons why it should matter to me," said Natasha as she slinked out of the hallway shadows, "But I imagine you already know all of them, so there's no need for me to elaborate. Took your weekly trip to New York again?"

"It makes for a nice stroll."

"Didn't know that stalking had taken on such an innocuous meaning nowadays. And hopping a ferry seems like a lot of work for a simple stroll, if you ask me."

"No one asked you."

"Actually, Steve was wondering where you were earlier tonight. Said he needed to talk to you about something important."

Bucky didn't say anything, instead just watching as Natasha pushed off the wall and approached him. Two assassins facing each other down was never a good thing, if you asked Bucky, but he also knew that any sign of weakness would be a fool move on his part. Fuck the others, when it came to espionage and murder, the other Russian was hands down the most dangerous Avenger aside from himself.

"I made an excuse for you," said Natasha. "Claimed that you just wanted some time to yourself. We all know this environment gets overwhelming sometimes, so he didn't argue or assume that I was lying for you."

"It wasn't a complete lie, if that makes you feel any better."

"No, I guess it wasn't."

They went quiet for a half minute, just eyeing each other up while also looking for any weapons that were, without a doubt, hidden on their persons. As usual, Bucky was armed to the teeth, a paranoid and ingrained habit that he would likely never be rid of. Having multiple knives and guns within a finger's reach always made him feel more in control. Steve didn't like it, but there were a lot of things about Bucky that Steve didn't like nowadays.

"Do you think doing this will make Stark forgive you?"

Bucky tried not to flinch at that question and said, "I don't like people who scare children."

"This goes beyond that and you know it."

Aside from Steve and Tony, Natasha was the only Avenger who knew the full story about Howard and Maria Stark's deaths. She had been with Steve three years ago when they'd learned about HYDRA's involvement and it hadn't taken her long to figure out why Tony had gone ballistic in Siberia. Although Bucky had been exempt to an extent, Steve had received a verbal beat down and then the cold shoulder for lying to Tony about their murders for so damn long. Natasha had bluntly stated that none of this would've gotten so out of control if Steve hadn't been protecting himself from the truth while also ignoring his friend's well-being at the same time. Even Bucky had agreed with her on that part. If Bucky had watched that video and then came face-to-face with the person who'd murdered his parents in cold-blood, his reaction would've been much the same as Tony's had been in Siberia. Winifred Barnes had been an amazing mother and just the thought of her being strangled to death made Bucky want to vomit; Maria Stark hadn't deserved such a fate.

Nor had Howard, even if the man had obviously been a less than ideal father.
"I owe his parents this much, at least," whispered Bucky, mouth dry as he remembered Maria's pleas for her husband's life. "I can remember my hands choking her to death and now I have to look at her son and grandson on a semi-regular basis."

"You weren't responsible for that."

"But it doesn't change the fact that it was my hands that murdered an innocent woman," snarled Bucky. "No one here knows what these fucking hands have done. I killed more children than I can count. Children! I see their eyes every time I sleep and all of them look like Peter now."

"I know," said Natasha. "Trust me, I know. Do you think I've never killed a child?"

Bucky didn't answer.

"The Red Room made me do things that I deserve to be locked up for life for. Just because I was indoctrinated and brainwashed doesn't change the fact that I was the one who killed innocent people," said Natasha, repeating his earlier statement almost word for word. "It eats you alive in a way that Steve and Scott and Wanda and Sam will never understand."

"I wouldn't be so sure about Wanda."

"Her involvement with HYDRA was a little different, but you may have a point there. Still, it doesn't mean that you have to sacrifice your new humanity to earn Tony's forgiveness. It may never come, or at least not for a long while. It may only come in bits and pieces, but don't overlook yourself while looking for redemption. Neither Tony nor Peter would want that."

"Stalking a child like these people do just reminds me of things. It doesn't feel right."

"And it's not."

"I'm not killing them or anything," said Bucky. "Just scaring them. Peter deserves a normal childhood."

Natasha snickered. "He's the son of Tony Stark. I doubt any child of Tony's will have what you call a normal childhood. Peter's already experimenting with black mold in his shower and accidentally blew up a toy rocket the other day with Rhodey. The Parkers must be rolling in their graves at this point."

That brought a small smile to Bucky's face. He liked Stark's kid, even if Peter wanted to stab him or Steve with a fork from time to time. The boy had spunk and was as sharp as a whip. He'd even noticed when Bucky had disappeared into his headspace, the sight of Maria Stark's face sending him back in time to those horrific days as the Winter Soldier. It was little wonder why Tony adored him so much.

Peter had lost so much, but it hadn't destroyed the kid's kind and friendly personality, either. The Parkers and Tony were right to be so proud of him.

"Which one are you after now?"

That earned Natasha the side-eye before Bucky said, "Rebecca Pratt. She's gotten more aggressive since Ms. Potts released that photo spread of hers. The bitch tried to follow Tony and Peter to his friends' house the other day."

Natasha nodded; she'd heard about Tony's efforts to reunite Peter with several of his friends from school. Twins Avery and Mason Carnahan had lived six houses down from the Parkers and had
been good friends with Peter since pre-school, as her background check had turned up. In an effort to get more pictures of Stark and his new son, several paparazzi had followed them around Queens until someone purposely manipulated the traffic lights to change at a precise interval, allowing Happy to get a good distance away and disappear into the afternoon rush.

She had a feeling that FRIDAY was responsible for that pre-planned act of sabotage, not that Natasha could blame her. Anything that kept the paparazzi away from Peter was good in her books. And that of course led back to the Barnes problem.

"Well, so long as she doesn't turn up dead..."

Bucky shook his head. "Nah, I'm not planning to cut her. Just scare the conniving witch a bit. Maybe make her shit herself a couple times."

"You do realize that you're probably messing up Tony's own plans now."

"It'll just give him more time to focus on Peter and tinkering with stuff," said Bucky with a shrug. "And it's good practice for me. I've been getting rather rusty lately."

"Steve's eventually gonna find out, you know."

"I can handle Stevie. And I'm not so sure he'd disagree on this particular subject, either."

Vision had let it slip the other day that a paparazzi horde had been waiting outside after Peter's latest therapy session, not even Happy able to completely evade them. One of them had gotten too close to Peter, causing him to hide in Tony's side for the better part of three hours. They shouted stuff at the little boy in a bid to capture his attention, including insults at Tony about his involvement with the Avengers and the Accords.

Pictures had even turned up on the internet of Peter clutching at his father, eyes wide as cameras flashed all around him. It was obvious to the Avengers that if Tony had been strong and healthy enough to physically pick up his son and make a dash for it, he likely would have. Rhodey had taken to accompanying them ever since, his military status allowing for some degree of caution on the paps' side.

Steve's head had looked like it was about to explode and both Clint and Scott had looked more than a little unnerved by the paps' complete disregard for a child's emotional well-being. While their children were completely hidden from the public eye, Tony couldn't escape it due to Stark Industries and his involvement in so many business ventures. The release of a new Starkphone and line of solar panels hadn't helped matters, either.

"They can't even fucking visit the kid's pediatrician without being assaulted," snarled Bucky. "And I don't give a shit what the news sites say, they all but assault the people they follow. It's fucking ridiculous."

Natasha grimaced; she hadn't realized that celebrity children were harassed to such an extent. Apparently, Tony was considering leaving New York City for an unknown period of time to protect Peter from the media. That was completely unfair to both of them, especially since Tony's Malibu home had been destroyed by the Mandarin a few years ago.

And unfortunately for them, there was no way under the sun that Tony would accept any help from the Avengers at the present time. It was obvious that he still didn't trust them and often cast a wary eye when they were around Peter, as if he was scared that one of his former teammates would hurt the child. That look made Bucky feel sick because having a parent look at him like that, fearful for
the safety of their child, was the last thing he'd ever wanted in life.

"Fallini's already in prison for resisting arrest and assaulting a cop, so that's one bright spot," said Natasha. "What are your plans for Pratt?"

"I have a special gift waiting for her."

"Just so long as no one catches you. The last thing we need is more bad press."

Bucky gave her a cruel smirk. "No one's going to catch me, darling. Not even Stark's AIs have been able to get a trace. And this spot is a total dead zone for all types of electronics, so nobody can hear us."

He got a nod in response and wondered if Natasha would rat him out to Steve. Then again, she had been a little more cautious around Steve since their blow-up fifteen months ago, so Bucky figured that she'd keep his secret for now. The fact that he was seeing results without repercussions probably helped, too.

"Get some sleep, Barnes. You're starting to look like a racoon again."

"Fuck you, Widow."

"No thanks, you're not my type. And don't slip up, understand?"

"I never do."

Bucky stood in the corridor for several minutes after Natasha left, just staring at a spot on the wall and wondering how his life had come to this. Killing people was all he'd done for decades and now he was protecting a not-friend's child from overzealous photographers, purposely creeping through deserted alleys and apartment hallways to scare them to death.

He was protecting the child of someone he'd been ordered to kill twenty-five years ago. Someone he'd stalked for months alongside his parents, watching for any sign of weakness that he could use against them. Tony was supposed to be with them that night, his mother and father. But for some reason, the kid hadn't accompanied Howard and Maria when the Winter Soldier ambushed their car, instead remaining in the Stark Mansion for Christmas by himself.

It had only been at the last minute that Bucky received orders not to kill the final Stark, metal hand letting go of the railing as Tony puttered around the kitchen and bitched about his parents' refusal to do anything as a family. Someone had wanted the kid alive, although Bucky never found out who it was. Considering how absurdly smart Tony was, Bucky wouldn't be surprised if HYDRA wanted to someday use him for their own means. And fuck, that seriously wasn't a good thought when you took into account the recent attack on Stark Tower and Peter's kidnapping.

"Fucking hell..."

Bucky was slamming on Steve's bedroom door not one minute later, heart pounding as several puzzle pieces started clicking together. They weren't all there yet, but he was sure that more would be coming in the near future. Poor Steve probably wasn't expecting to be faced with a frazzled and manic-looking Bucky at ass o'clock in the morning.

"We've got a problem."

About ten miles away, Tony was in a deep sleep when his phone suddenly started to buzz on the bedside table. He grumbled at the unfairness of finally having a somewhat decent sleep schedule,
but always having it interrupted by jackasses who couldn't figure out that different time zones existed and it was just plain rude to call someone in the middle of the night, eastern time.

"Ah, fuck my life," groaned Tony while grabbing the phone. "Who the hell is it?"

"Mr. Stark?"

"Huh? That's an African accent. What's up, pussy cat?"

"Where are you?"

"Sleeping like any normal person in this time zone is doing. Fuck, I can't believe I just said that."

"Mr. Stark, please listen very carefully," said T'Challa. "I need you to get up, fetch your son, and hide in a safe room that I know you have. Are any of your friends in the tower with you?"

"Just Bruce three floors down. Happy's at his own home, Rhodey's at a military conference, and Vision flew off to commune with nature for the evening." Tony jumped out of bed and made a beeline for Peter's room. "What's going on? JARVIS?"

"My sensors detect nothing at the moment, Sir."

"Two of the soldiers are gone from their containment units," said T'Challa in a tight tone. "They were among the four assets we were still searching for. Are you doing as I said, Mr. Stark?"

"Yeah, just let me get Peter."

Tony crept across the hallway to his son's bedroom, wrist repulsor unfolding to cover his right hand while his left grabbed a nearby lamp. It likely wouldn't do any good against a Winter Soldier if one was already inside the tower, but Tony needed to use whatever he could to protect Peter from an attacker. Except JARVIS and FRIDAY hadn't detected an intruder, which was at least somewhat reassuring. Or could the HYDRA soldiers hide from his tech now, too?

And there was his son, sound asleep in a twin bed that was covered in a hilarious mixture of Hulk, Thor, and Iron Man sheets, quilts, and pillows. Matika's tank gave off a soft glow in the far corner, said spider moving about her enclosure at a sedate and lazy pace. The trickle of her waterfall and stream was all that Tony could hear over the blood pounding in his ears. Dangerous situations weren't nearly as scary when you were the only person involved in them.

"Peter? Hey, Petey-pie, I need you to wake up for me."

"Wha—"

"C'mon, buddy, we need to head down to my lab, alright? There's a bit of a situation and it's safest if we're down there."

"Why?"

"I'll explain once we're down there, I promise."

"Can Bumble come, too? Matika?"

Knowing that his son wouldn't stop asking until he give in, Tony grabbed a nearby carrier that they used whenever Matika's tank needed to be cleaned or rearranged. Picking up the spider was never fun, but Tony had gotten used to it. Ugh, what he didn't do for his kid...
"Sure, you grab the cat and I'll throw Matika in a carrier, okay?"

It didn't even take a minute for them to gather the animals and make for the elevator, Tony's heart pounding the entire way, eyes searching every shadow for signs of a potential assassin. Peter stayed quiet the whole time, arms holding Bumble tight while his fingers gripped Matika's little carrier, body staying safe between his dad and the wall.

"JARVIS?"

"The elevator is safe and waiting for you, Sir."

"Anything else?"

"Nothing, Sir. The same applies on FRIDAY's end as well."

"Keep sharp."

A light rain was coming down on the penthouse glass, causing shadows to shift in a way that made Tony jump at every corner. He kept his right hand raised in case of an attack while the left remained firm on the back of Peter's neck, guiding his son towards the elevator as quickly as possible. The doors opened as soon as they were within twenty feet, a beacon of light in this shadowy hell.

"JARVIS?"

"I've already contacted the Avengers, Sir," said the AI as he closed the doors behind them. "The Captain is on his way and Vision will arrive in less than ten minutes. They will search the tower while you and Master Peter remain in the lab."

The elevator suddenly stopped and Tony felt panic churn in his gut until the doors opened and...

"Bruce!"

"What's going on?" asked the scientist when he rushed inside and their descent continued. "JARVIS just told me to get to the elevator as quickly as I could. Did something happen with the Avengers?"

"Not with them," whispered Tony. "It's the soldiers."

Bruce's eyes widened at this, instantly knowing what that meant since Tony had spoken with him about it on two occasions already, even seeking the other scientist's advice on cryogenic containment and various neurological treatments. Both men kept Peter between them as they entered the lab, not willing to bet on whether or not the soldiers could find a way inside of it.

The panic walls immediately went down behind them, Tony ordering Dummy and his brothers to stay in their charging stations. JARVIS also locked down all his Iron Man suits and anything else that could be stolen and used for nefarious purposes. Bruce knew exactly where the panic room was and went over to unlock it, taking Peter with him while grabbing a pair of repulsors that were laying on a worktable. Clint's new arrows were next, then Natasha's Widow Bites, and two guns that Tony had been working on for the hell of it. The table drawers they'd been locked in just weren't secure enough for Tony's liking, especially if a pair of fanatical Winter Soldiers could be coming for his head and whatever HYDRA thought was in it.

"Lock everything up, J."
"Already done, Sir. And would you like for me to patch through King T'Challa? He requested to speak with you or Dr. Banner as soon as you were in a safe location."

"Sure, go ahead."

Tony settled Peter on a couch while Bruce wandered over to the kitchen, taking stock of how much food and water they had with them. The panic room looked just like the lounge of Tony's lab, except for being surrounded on all sides by reinforced walls that could keep even the Hulk out for a good while. It was comfortable and cheery and self-recycling and could easily support them for two weeks before any type of rationing would be needed. And there was absolutely no way to get inside unless Tony gave the go ahead; not even JARVIS or FRIDAY could open it without his permission.

Well, except for Vision, but he could phase through pretty much anything.

"Mr. Stark?"

"Hey, what's up, Meowzer? So, you gonna give me and Brucie-bear a rundown on the situation?"

"Is your son present?"

"Yeah."

"Then I will give you a shortened version," said the king. "We presently do not know where the soldiers are, so I must insist that you remain in a safe location until I arrive. Do not leave even if the Avengers request that you do so. They do not understand what type of threat we're dealing with and it is best that I speak with the Captain and Sergeant Barnes first. It should take me about five hours to reach the tower and as I said, do not leave until I deem it safe for everyone involved, most especially Master Peter."

"Considering my past experiences with these soldiers," said Tony, "I'm going to defer to you on this predicament, Your Royal Toothiness."

"I will not dignify that with a response. Master Peter, are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm okay."

"I am gratified to hear that. Could you perhaps do a favor for me?"

"Sure."

"Could you make sure your father and Dr. Banner behave themselves until I arrive? I fear that a business venture of mine has, to reference a saying that you Americans enjoy so much, gone south and become rather difficult in recent hours. Could you do that for me, Peter?"

"I can do that."

"Thank you, little one. And please have JARVIS contact me if there are any problems. I must contact the Captain now."

"Oh, that's gonna be fun."

Apparently, T'Challa had had enough of Tony's particular brand of humor and promptly disconnected their call without saying goodbye. Oh well, Tony had plenty of stuff to keep him occupied for the foreseeable future. Unfortunately, none of that stuff involved watching the tower's
surveillance system since the last thing he needed at the moment was for Peter to watch the Avengers—most specifically Barnes, because that bastard was utterly ruthless in battle—ripping a Winter Soldier to shreds. It would likely scar his kid for life.

"Well, let's take a look at what FRIDAY has managed to gather for my latest Starkpad model."

Ten levels above them, the Avengers were moving systematically through the penthouse, still shocked shitless by T'Challa's warning that the potential intruders could be Winter Soldiers. Bucky had froze when he heard this, mind flashing back to the five bodies they'd found in Siberia not even one year ago. There weren't supposed to be any others left; Zemo had killed the remaining five and prevented HYDRA from slaughtering thousands of innocent people with them.

"See anything, Soldier?"

"Nothing yet," said Bucky as he moved through the shadows. "But that doesn't mean they're not here."

"I've cleared my own floor," came Clint's voice a few moments later. "We're going to move down to Widow's floor next. JARVIS?"

"No abnormal signatures have been detected, Agent Barton."

"Don't take that as confirmation that they're not here," warned Bucky for a second time. "Winter Soldiers are capable of avoiding almost all detection and surveillance systems. No offense, JARVIS."

"None taken, Sergeant Barnes."

"Okay, enough chatter, guys," said Cap. "Finish your first sweep and then go through it again. If they're here, then we have to find them."

No one argued with that, especially since Stark Tower has been invaded twice in as many months. This whole shitstorm was the absolute last thing that Peter or Tony needed right now. It was likely bringing back horrible memories for both of them and Tony was more vulnerable than usual due to his injuries, which still had a long way to being sufficiently healed. They would have to have someone stationed at the tower from on, and probably multiple someones to give Vision and Rhodey back-up just in case of another attack.

Bruce and Tony would have Peter as their first priority. The Hulk was just too dangerous and Tony wasn't going to let anyone else be responsible for his son. Nobody on the Avengers was going to argue against that requirement, not even Steve.

"I've got nothing," said Scott about two hours later. "Should I move down to the lower floors?"

"It can't hurt. Be careful."

"The bastards wouldn't see me coming, anyways."

"Be careful."

They had covered the top twenty-five floors by the time T'Challa arrived via helicopter, the king and Steve walking off to discuss the situation while Bucky continued to comb through the penthouse for a fifth time. He refused to miss anything and put the Starks in danger again. No one knew a Winter Soldier's mind better than he did and Bucky was gonna find even the tiniest trace if they'd been here.
"Why didn't you tell us?" demanded Steve from the living room. "We deserved to know that there were more of them out there."

"Because this particular mission is classified under Wakandan national security and information could only be disseminated under a need-to-know basis," said T'Challa. "Aside from my own people, Mr. Stark was the only outsider assisting on the operation. His engineering expertise was essential to transporting them without harm and incidence. None of your skills were necessary."

"You had no right to keep this from us."

"On the contrary," said the king, "I had every right. Considering your past behavior towards government affairs and the safety of civilians, I needed to think in the best interests of my people. Impulsive and uncompromising behavior is the last thing we need on an operation of this magnitude and quite frankly, I wasn't willing to take the risk of a repeat of last year's discord."

"Whoa! We've got quite the party up here."

"Mr. Stark, I see that you're well. And so is Master Peter. That is quite the relief."

"Too bad he's cranky as hell."

"I'm not cranky," snapped Peter's little voice. "I just need my beauty sleep."

"Yeah, yeah, that's called being cranky, kiddo."

Bucky moved back into the shadows when Tony came down the hallway with Peter, the little boy yawning and shuffling like an old man as he valiantly tried to get to his bed without falling asleep. The assassin shadowed them the whole way, staying just out of sight as Tony deposited Matika back into her tank and then grabbed the cat from Peter's arms. He spent about five minutes wrangling and tucking the kid into bed, promising to leave a nightlight on and fetch a cold water bottle from the kitchen.

"You gonna be okay in here?"

"Uh huh."

"If you get the slightest bit scared, you can come to my room, alright?"

"Yeah, I know."

The kid obviously had no clue just how dangerous tonight could've been. Of course, this was probably for the best, but it didn't stop Bucky from imagining what the Avengers could've arrived to if the Winter Soldiers had decided to launch an assault on the tower. With Peter to worry about, Tony's chances of getting to the Iron Man suits and fighting them on equal footing would've been slim to none.

"I'm right across the hall, okay? Just holler for JARVIS or FRIDAY if you need anything."

"Trying to sleep."

"Okay, okay, I guess that's my cue to leave. Goodnight, kiddo. I love you."

"Love you, too."

Tony left the door cracked open and then walked back out to the living room, already demanding to know what the hell was going on and why was Steve attempting to cause another diplomatic
incident. Apparently, threatening the King of Wakanda wasn't exactly Steve's brightest idea, as Bucky would've told him if he'd been out there. Instead, he stayed behind and considered all his options, even digging up some bad memories to better assess the current situation. There was no good answer to the Winter Soldier problem, at least not at the moment, but he still had a handful of leads that he could pursue in the immediate future.

"Okay, that's it, I'm done for the night."

"Mr. Stark—"

"Tony—"

"Nope, I'm going to bed. These past six hours have been horrible and I have an eight-year-old that I might need to tend to and I'm just done now. Goodnight."

The engineer stomped back to his bedroom, all the while complaining about thick-headed super-soldiers and know-it-all kings and jackass super-soldiers and stupid archers and murderous super-soldiers who deserved to be shot in the face. It was an incredibly detailed array of curses, but Bucky had to hand it to him because that was no doubt one of the nastiest tirades he'd heard in a long while. So, with the Starks safe and asleep and the tower uninvaded, Bucky made his way back to the living room, hid in a distant corner, and pulled out one of his many little notebooks.

It appeared that he had another target to add to his ever-growing list.

"Number six..."

Chapter End Notes

I've actually had this chapter written for a while, which is kinda surprising since I never expected to write Bucky's perspective at any point. It was interesting, especially since he has so many mental and emotional issues left over from his time as the Winter Soldier, guilt easily being the largest one. I feel like a lot of people really, really underestimate all of the issues Bucky would have after finally regaining control of his own mind.
"That's it, I'm moving to the Andaman Islands."

"But, Tony—"

"Nope, don't you even try to But Tony me, Captain Sparkly-Pants."

"You know that this—"

"Hey, if there's anyone in this room who knows about being kidnapped and ransomed, it's me. Do you know how many times someone tried to kidnap or kill me?"

"Well, no—"

"Yeah, neither do I," said Tony, "That's how often it's happened to me. Hell, by my fifteenth birthday, Dad got so tired of it that he announced to the world that loonies could try kidnapping me again, but it wouldn't work because he wasn't gonna pay the ransom anymore. Of course, terrorists never listen, so I just had to learn how to save myself."

Sam blinked. "Are you being serious?"

"As a heart attack, which is extra serious coming from me." No one laughed at that joke; tough crowd. "Afghanistan was one of my tougher stints, I'll admit, but you'd be surprised how good at it you become after fifteen or twenty times."

The Avengers all looked thoroughly disturbed except for Natasha, who had dug up information on most of Tony's kidnappings several years ago. It was amazing that the engineer hadn't been killed before reaching eighteen, something that even Rhodey had admitted over drinks one night. Once Howard and Maria were killed, the kidnappings had stopped because there was no longer anyone to negotiate a ransom with. Apparently, not even terrorists were stupid enough to assume that Obadiah would pay a multi-million dollar ransom for the Stark heir.

"You're their target, Tony. We don't know why, but you're the common denominator in this," said Steve. "You can't expect us to just leave you here without any type of protection."

"Ummm, wait, you do realize that I've got over a dozen Iron Man suits downstairs, right? And in case you haven't noticed, I've been protecting myself just fine for most of my life. It's not like we've done much protecting and defending of each other, either." Tony pointed at everyone in the room. "None of us."

"Do you have any idea what they might be after, Tony?"

As usual, Sam was the voice of reason. They'd been bickering for over an hour about what Tony should do, most of them saying that the Stark family needed to go into hiding while others said that that wouldn't stop assassins like the Winter Soldiers from finding them. As expected, Tony was firmly in the Don't Run Away and Hide Like A Sane Person camp, stating that the only people he was gonna run away from were overbearing super-soldiers who just couldn't leave well enough alone.
"At this point, no," Tony admitted. "Considering the sheer amount of shit I've got in my lab or in my head, it could be a dozen different things. Maybe two dozen if this year's batch of megalomaniacs is feeling particularly creative."

"Someone needs to stay here with you, Tony. We can't just leave you and Peter by yourselves."

"We have Rhodey and Vision. That's enough."

"Tony..."

Everything went quiet for a few minutes, Tony just standing in front of the bay windows while he weighed all possible options. It wasn't fun, especially considering the tensions that still existed between the team and himself. But Tony also didn't know much about their enemies at this point, aside from the fact that they could possibly be under HYDRA's control again. Or maybe they weren't and they were dealing with another enemy altogether. There were still too many unknown variables and Tony didn't like how precarious his and Peter's safety was right now.

"Okay, you know what, fine, we'll play this your way." Tony rubbed a hand over his face, collapsing on an empty couch when his side started aching again. "But I get to choose who stays and who goes, got it?"

Knowing that this was the best answer he'd get, Steve didn't hesitate to nod, fingers finally letting go of the railing he'd been gripping like an iron vice. They were lucky that Tony had even agreed to this much.

"It's your home, Tony. We don't want to impose any more than we have to."

"Yeah, that's a new one."

With a grunt of pain, Tony pushed up onto his feet and waved away Steve's attempt to help him. Allowing the Avengers back into his home wouldn't be an easy transition by any stretch of the imagination. No one besides Peter, Rhodey, and Vision had lived in the tower since last year, although Pepper and Happy were regular visitors due to their jobs. The latter two even had their own rooms just in case they were working longer hours or felt like staying overnight for whatever reason, Tony really didn't care or question it. All five of them had a home in Stark Tower, period.

Oh, and Bruce, of course. Tony would never ditch his twitchy science bro, no matter the circumstances.

The Avengers, on the other hand, were gonna be on probation for a good, long while. Yes, they still had their own personal floors, but it was gonna take more than a couple of rescues and promises to earn back Tony's trust. Not to mention the extra-low profiles they'd have to maintain while living in the tower. SHIELD and Tony may have been able to pull some strings with multiple world governments, including the United States and Canada, but the Avengers were still on many civilians' shit-lists at the moment.

Earning back the people's trust wasn't gonna be easy, either. Tony knew this from experience and he really didn't envy the reactions that Steve and the others would receive once they reemerged into the public arena. However, as usual and in the end, it would likely fall to Tony to perform some string-pulling with Ross and several of the more sympathetic media outlets.

"What a migraine this is gonna be," Tony mumbled to himself. "Definitely need to get a hobby that doesn't catch the attention of evil megalomaniacs who want to take over the world. Cliched douchebags."
"Ummm, Tony..."

"Seriously, what's so great about the world domination thing, anyways? Do these idiots not understand how annoying and needy people are? I can barely stand to boss around my own employees for thirty minutes, let alone an entire planet of whiny humans. They never think through these kinda schemes, if you ask me. Crazy bagful of cats, all of them."

"Is he purposely ignoring us or is this a normal thing?"

"Normal thing."

"At least he's not waving a coffee cup or smoothie or stick of dynamite around this time."

"The Doominator loves it, though."

"Dear God, can we change the subject, please? Saying its name will summon it. Ugh, I fucking hate that pile of rusted bolts."

"And he hates you too, Clint."

Tony was standing in front of the television, fingers flying over a holographic screen while looking at two others right above it. As usual, Steve was amazed by Tony's ability to make technology look so simple and easy; it had taken Steve weeks to learn how to touch the same screens without making them disappear and he still had a bad habit of making things spaz out of control.

"We're gonna have to talk with Cyclops about it first," said Tony. "Despite how much I don't trust the bastard, he's in charge of the caped crusaders nowadays. None of you will be my responsibility then. We need to keep SI separated from your actions as much as possible, got it?"

"I thought Fury had secrets for his secrets," said Clint. "Kinda creeped you out, right?"

"Don't ask questions you already know the answer to, Birdbrain." With a flick of his hand, another screen popped up for all of them to look at. "But I've got a couple of suspicions about our friendly neighborhood HYDRA agents that I'd like to interrogate him about."

That caught Steve's attention. "Suspicions?"

"A lot happened while you were hiding in the jungle, Cap. Our dear friend Coulson was busy ripping those lizards apart and I've got a weird feeling about what's going on with that particular group of insane lunatics. Or lack thereof."

"Lack?"

Tony just hummed in response, eyes roving over the holographic screens like they held the answer to all of his problems. None of the Avengers said a word, instead just waiting for the engineer to come out of his Mind Palace, as Clint jokingly called it. There would be no talking to Tony until he was ready, as all of them had learned in the past.

"I hate it when he does this," whispered Clint. "It's like he's possessed or something."

"He's been blinded by science."

"Shut up, Sam."

The elevator dinged behind them, soft footsteps pattering over in the way only a child could. Steve looked up to see Peter standing behind the couch, head twitching back and forth between his father
and the Avengers. He never knew that a young boy could look so judgmental and suspicious.

"Did you break him?"

"We didn't break your dad," said Clint with a roll of his eyes. "He broke himself."

"Happy..."

"No worries, Boss, I've got him."

"Hey! Hey!"

Peter protested the whole way back to his bedroom, demanding his human rights and civil liberties and anything else that came to mind. The look on Clint and Scott's faces made Tony wonder just how much time they actually spent with their kids. From what he'd seen and read, Peter's desire to be involved in everything and having a cranky attitude when he wasn't was totally normal for his age. If Tony's suspicions were even the slightest bit correct, then Laura and Maggie appeared to be stuck with most of the child-rearing work while their fathers gallivanted around the African wilds as international fugitives.

And yeah, single parenthood definitely didn't afford Tony such a luxury. He needed to do everything for Peter, with a little help on the side from his honorary aunts and uncles. Hell, it was the main reason why Tony had decided to start a new charity for single parents last month.

"Spy Twin 1," Tony pointed at Natasha, "I choose you."

All he got in response was a raised eyebrow, which caused Tony to release an evil smirk.

"Oh, don't give me that look, Red. If you're gonna live here on a semi-regular basis, then you're gonna have to become very familiar with Charizard and all of his poké-friends. My kid's obsessed with them right now."

"Sounds riveting."

"Hey, you're the one who volunteered to live with an eight-year-old boy. Cartoons and video games are just the tip of the iceberg," said Tony. "Okay, who else wants to become my kid's personal bodyguard against the brainwashed murder twins?"

"I will."

Everyone turned around to look at Bucky, who was standing off to the side like a creepy creeper. In other words, business as usual.

"Don't look at me like that."

"What?"

"Like I don't know what I want," said Bucky. "Nobody knows these bastards' minds better than me. Nobody. And that means that nobody will be better at keeping them away from Stark and his kid than me."

"But what if they use the—"

"You know as well as I do that the trigger words ain't working anymore, Stevie. Or at least not so long as Stark's neuro-blocker stays inside my head. I got no clue how it works, but the point is that it works. And I'm not gonna stand around and hide while two Soldiers hunt down a father and his
son for slaughter." Bucky looked around at everyone in the room. "I wouldn't suggest trying to stop me, either."

"Well, I can't really argue with that," said Tony with a nervous shrug. "You're hired. But seriously, keep the huge-ass rifles hidden or something. Peter's a bright kid, but I'm not about to trust him around loaded guns yet. We'll revisit that subject in ten or twenty years, I think."

"I will, too."

Tony stiffened a bit at Steve's voice, already knowing the blond would volunteer his protection as soon as Bucky did. It was a nice gesture, but Tony also had to wonder if Steve really meant it or if he was only doing this because Bucky had insisted on placing himself in the line of fire again. Peter had to be their top priority here and Steve needed to realize this; nobody else, including his best friend, could come before Peter's safety and life in the event of an emergency. The assassin seemed to understand this, but Tony wasn't so sure about their other resident super-soldier.

"You do understand what this entails, don't you, Cap?"

"Of course, I do," said Steve with an affronted look. "Tony, I'm not going to—"

"Peter comes first. There's no ifs, ands, or buts about it. Peter always comes first," said Tony, index finger poking his former teammate in the chest. "And since a bunch of lunatics are after something in my oversized brain—and seriously, we need more geniuses on this damn planet, if only to take some of the stress off me—they'll be gunning to use my kid as leverage. If you can't put Peter first, then there's no need to continue this discussion."

"I'm pretty sure that if I didn't put Peter first, every single person in this room would kill me themselves."

Bucky nodded from behind him.

"And I would never put any of us before your son, Tony. Even if it's your knowledge that HYDRA or whoever this is wants, Peter will always be our first priority. My word might not matter much anymore, but I can promise you this more than anything. I will never let Peter come to harm if I can prevent it."

"I'll be holding you to that."

Sam raised his hand. "What about the rest of us?"

"Okay, first off, neither Bird or Bugbrain are watching my kid," said Tony while pointing at Clint and Scott. "I don't trust them to remain dedicated to the cause. And I Dream of Jeannie gives Big, Mean, and Green the willies, so that's a gigantic no-no of epic proportions. You can be on rotation if you want, Flyboy. Peter kinda loves Thor, so he's an option whenever he's actually in our realm."

"I shall defend your child like he is my own, Anthony."

Tony patted Thor on the shoulder and said, "I don't doubt that, big guy."

"He is a good, strong child. Very brave."

"Yeah, that he is. A little on the sarcastic side, but pretty good overall. Easier than I ever was at his age, that's for sure."

"Aye, Peter reminds me of a young Loki at times."
"Holy fucking God, please do not say that ever again," cried Tony. "I absolutely cannot deal with you comparing my kid to your crazy-ass brother. I just can't deal with it. Nope, nope, just gonna forget you ever said anything. And shit, I need to sit down."

Tony flopped down onto the couch, unable to hold back a groan when his left side and leg burned from overexertion. He had been scolded multiple times by Bruce for moving around too much, but Tony just couldn't stay confined to bedrest any longer. It was driving him crazy! And damn, now Steve was staring at him like something vital was gonna fall off at any moment.

"So," drawled Sam after discreetly pinching his captain's thigh, "How is this gonna work?"

"From what I can figure, two or three of you can stay for whatever time intervals you'd prefer," said Tony with a wave of his hand. "It doesn't matter much to me so long as you stick to the rules I already laid out."

"I'll take first round," said Natasha. "And the time frame doesn't matter to me, either. My floor's still the way I left it and I already have more experience than anybody else in this room at watching over your eccentric ass."

"You really know how to make a man feel loved, Romanov. Almost breaks my cold, magnetic heart."

Bucky cleared his throat and said, "I'll be staying. Just need to pack up a few things and I'm sure they'll fit just fine on Stevie's floor."

"Whatever floats your boat, Barnes."

And that brought them to Captain Tightpants, who Tony already knew was gonna push his way into the first rotation whether the engineer liked it or not. This sudden protectiveness baffled Tony to no end; not even fifteen months ago, Steve had been ready to smash straight through the arc reactor and leave Tony to rot in what could only be described as a frozen hellhole. And when he'd later shown up at SHIELD to fix Barnes' brain and arm, Steve had kept his distance and didn't say a single word, cold eyes just watching Tony's every move with a disturbing amount of suspicion.

Once the One-Armed Wonder was functioning, Tony had high-tailed it out of there as quickly as his stubby little legs could carry him. Despite what everyone thought, he didn't actually have a death wish.

So why was Steve being so stubborn now? There had to be a catch to all of this malarkey.

"Okay, that's enough chatter for today," said Tony while purposely ignoring Steve's unflinching stare. "Everybody who's not on Fellowship duty can bugger off to your secret SHIELD base of doom. I've got a meeting with the board in less than an hour and Peter's gonna chew off Happy's hand if we don't unleash him from the awful torture chamber that is his bedroom. Like, right now. Peter!"

Said child came running out not ten seconds later, Bumble trotting behind him at a much more subdued and dignified pace. Peter gave the Avengers a sideways glance before he headed over to Tony, easily slotting himself into the older man's good side. Okay, yeah, Peter was being a little rude, but he just couldn't bring himself to care. Tony probably sounded like a selfish prick, but it was kinda nice to have someone who was 100% on his side for once, even if that person was eight-years-old and couldn't go on a field trip without him signing for it.

"When are we leaving?"
That caught everyone's attention and Steve raised an eyebrow in response. "Leaving?"

"Yeah, I might have forgot to mention something," said Tony with a sardonic grin. "I have a couple of important meetings in D.C. this week and I really can't put them off any longer without seriously inconveniencing Pepper and the new Starkpad's release. And since Peter doesn't start school for another two weeks, I'll be taking him along for the ride."

"And this means..."

"We're gonna be gone for the next eight or nine days, Frosty," explained the engineer. "Although if you lumps wanna stay behind and guard the tower, I'm totally okay with that, too."

Steve didn't even blink. "So, what should we pack?"

Honestly, Tony should've expected that type of response given Steve's recent behavior. And since Bucky was obviously suffering from some kind of parent-murdering guilt-complex, the assassin would no doubt insist on following both Starks to D.C. like a scruffy German Shepherd, which would then result in Steve tagging along like the overprotective best friend that he was. Avoiding either of them was gonna be next to impossible now.

"Oh, if only you knew what you were getting yourself into, Capsicle."

"What?"

"Just make sure to pack nine days worth of comfortable clothes, okay? Nothing fancy. Or old-fashioned," said Tony with a grimace. "Seriously, the point here is gonna involve blending in, not looking like you're a real-life pre-1950's museum exhibit. Draws way too much attention and you know it."

"Umm, okay..."

After handing Peter over to Natasha while he went to his board meeting, Tony returned four hours later to piles of luggage stacked outside the elevator, Ninja Turtles blasting on the television, and a rather impatient looking Bruce on the nearest couch. Apparently, the other man had correctly guessed that Tony would try to wriggle out of his latest medical examination.

"Hello there, Brucie-bear! You are looking mighty fine this—"

"Yeah, yeah, save it for the media talking heads," said Bruce. "I've already given Happy a list of medical requirements for your neglectful self and I'm gonna drag you off for a quick check-up right now."

"But Brucie, I feel just—"

"Don't even try to argue with me about it or I swear, I will sic Pepper on you."

"You're no fun."

Tony decided to be cooperative because Bruce could be passive-aggressively cruel when he was in the right mood. And considering how unhappy he and Rhodey were about Tony traveling without them, it was essential that both Starks be on their best behavior until boarding Tony's private jet. Maybe afterwards too, because Rhodey was a worrywart and might ditch that military conference of his if he thought either Stark was in the slightest bit of danger.

As Pepper had stated, that was a big no-no and Stark Industries really, really needed an effective
and loyal military liaison right now.

"You've gotta take things easy," said Bruce as they packed up the transport cars. "There's still a bit of inflammation in your large intestine and the last thing we need is for your old symptoms to flare up again. Do I need to whip out the stoma pictures for a fifth time, Tony?"

"If I never see those pictures again, it'll be too soon."

"Then listen to Happy and follow all of my instructions," said Bruce. "If not for yourself, then do it for Peter, okay?"

"A master manipulator is what you are. Ugh, fine, I'll behave."

"Really?"

"Yeah, yeah, I promise," said Tony. "You're almost as evil as Romanov, I swear."

"I'm gonna take that as a compliment."

Apparently, Steve had heard their conversation and grabbed all of Tony's bags from him, loading them up in the trunk while also ignoring Tony's protests about not being an invalid. Not a moment later, Peter came out of the elevator with Bucky and Natasha at his heels, already fretting about what kind of care Bumble and Matika would be receiving in his absence.

"I'll be taking care of them while you're gone," assured Bruce. "And I'll spoil both like they're the Queen of England."

Peter frowned. "I hope Bumble doesn't get lonely."

"Would it make you feel better if I stayed in one of the penthouse guestrooms? She won't be alone then. I'll even eat breakfast and dinner with her."

"But what about lunch?"

"We're talking about a feline of the highest order, Peter. She'll feel insulted if I hang around too much."

"Give her some catnip."

"Okay, we've already talked about this, kiddo," said Tony as he loaded Peter into the car. "The catnip distribution has to be kept to once a week. We don't want Bumble running around like Usain Bolt on a daily basis."

"I know, I know."

Tony got into the Lexus with Happy and his son while Natasha, Bucky, and Steve took the Audi, poor Bucky stuck in the backseat with a petulant grimace. Apparently, the former assassin wasn't a fan of being relegated to background scenery, but also didn't dare argue with Natasha to get behind the wheel. She had a spectacular love of Tony's most souped up and lustrous cars, particularly the Dodge Viper and Ferrari California, but the Audi RS7 would do while she had two men riding shotgun with her.

For now, Tony was gonna content himself with the safer and less conspicuous sports cars whenever Peter was driving with him. Until the kid was a good couple inches taller, he was only gonna be riding in cars that had a backseat and the highest safety ratings.
And wow, how had this become his life?

Tony Stark, passing over beautiful, million-dollar convertibles in favor of protective airbags, comfortable seats, and sound structural design. The paparazzi were gonna have a heart attack when they saw it.

"I've already programmed the safest and least visible route into your GPS, Natasha. The paps shouldn't be able to follow us for too long this way," Happy explained. "I reckon we'll lose them in one of three intersections before getting to LaGuardia."

"You're the experienced chauffeur," said Natasha over the mic. "I'll just follow your lead. Let's go."

As Happy had predicted, they did lose the paps shortly after crossing into Queens, although there was an incident with Bucky threatening to shoot one of the cars that got a little too close. Peter mostly just bounced up and down in his seat, excited to get on with his first plane flight. According to him, the Quinjet ride didn't count since he'd been distracted by his dad's life-threatening injuries. He could sit back and enjoy this one, which apparently made all the difference in Peter logic.

"We have arrived," said Happy as they passed through the last checkpoint. "Jet's already fired up and ready to go, Boss."

"Excellent. C'mon, Petey-pie, let's get you on your first plane flight."

It took both Tony and Steve to prevent Peter from toppling down the boarding steps, the little boy making no effort to contain himself as he gushed out all the stats behind his father's one-of-a-kind, personal jet. It was even pin-striped with hotrod red and gold, which Peter thought was the coolest thing ever. Once the kid was safe in the cabin, Steve went back out to help Happy and Bucky with the luggage, even though Tony said it wasn't necessary. But then his valuable attention was stolen by Peter, who had found his way into the mini-kitchen with a whoop of awe and delight.

All Bucky had to say when he got onboard was, "Whoa..."

Natasha laughed as Peter took a window seat, feet kicking up and down until Tony grabbed the kid from behind and strapped him into his take-off harness. However, Tony did make sure it was the seat closest to a window so Peter could see the whole take-off routine. Hell, he was almost as excited as Peter, more than happy to see his child smiling like a thousand-watt light bulb.

"Well, someone is certainly excited."

"It's his first flight," said Steve. "Can't really blame him for being a little hyper about it."

"Quinjet?"

"The kid says it doesn't count since he was distracted."

"Ah."

With a ruffle of Peter's hair, Natasha took her seat and listened as the captain went through the usual take-off procedures. Peter jabbered non-stop, only pausing as the jet taxied onto the runway, eyes watching all the other planes pull out of their boarding ramps and circle around to wait their turn. All of them tried not to laugh when he started naming the different airlines, including one that Aunt May had complained about on several occasions. Apparently, US Airways had a bad habit of charging too much for a puny bag of peanuts.

"Alright, kiddo, we're about to take-off, so lean back until we're in the air and Jeremy says it's safe
"to move around."

"But then I can't see everything."

"If you don't, then I'm gonna have Steve hold you down like a naughty little boy."

Said man wiggled his right hand in a threatening manner, not even attempting to hold back a laugh when Peter pouted and promptly leaned back like a good little boy. And then they were taking off, Peter giggling when his stomach dropped out from under him.

"Wow, take-offs are a lot smoother than they used to be," said Bucky. "Not as many bombs going off, either."

"Very reassuring, Barnes."

"I do try."

Once they leveled off at a solid altitude, Tony unstrapped Peter and let him explore the cabin, more than a little relieved when the kid eventually just settled himself in front of a window to watch everything pass by below them. He even listened to Steve as the super-soldier pointed out different landmarks and cities, including the Sandy Hook Lighthouse and Pine Barrens.

"So," drawled Bucky as Tony poured drinks at the bar, "What're we gonna be doing while you schmooze with the suits and ties?"

Tony handed Natasha a small glass of bourbon and poured some water for himself. Alcohol had been a huge no-no for several years now and it applied even more so with Peter's adoption. He still got cravings from time to time, especially in the last fifteen months, but Tony had managed to resist all temptations so far. He felt more than a little proud of himself, to be honest.

"That, my frosty assassin, is a surprise that I won't disclose at this point."

"Oh really?"

"I don't trust you not to blabber to my kid, so nope, you'll just have to wait and see for yourself."

Natasha grinned. "Let's just hope it doesn't involve explosions."

"What's wrong with explosions?"

Bucky just glanced between the two of them, obviously not quite sure what he should say or if they even expected anything out of him. Sarcasm had gotten him into a fair amount of trouble years ago and he was still learning how things worked outside the modern assassin world, so Bucky wisely chose to keep his mouth shut and let engineer and assassin snipe at each other. It was almost like a sport, in a weird kinda way.

"And this is exactly why inventors like yourself require constant supervision."

"You wound me."

"I just don't trust Rhodey to keep you in line anymore. He's a deceptive sneak who's almost as eccentric and prone to sudden explosions as you are. It's amazing both of you still have ten fingers. Or eyebrows."

"Hey, they grew back," said Tony. "Well, eventually..."
"I stand corrected."

"You know what, just shut up and drink your bourbon, Spider Lady."

"Whatever you say, Stark."

Chapter End Notes

The B/S/T will slowly start to take shape now. I know a lot of people have been getting impatient, but we're gonna be building up to it from here on out. It'll still be slow and gradual because it wouldn't be realistic otherwise, but I hope everybody enjoys the slow burn as it happens. Their grievances are now out in the open and Peter's starting to come around, which are the big steps I was building towards these last couple chapters.
"The Smithsonian?!

Peter had his arms wrapped around Tony's waist, bouncing up and down on his toes and smiling like a kid on Christmas. Tony had waited until they were at the Stark's Georgetown property to tell everyone about the mini-vacation Pepper and Rhodey arranged, although he'd ordered FRIDAY to buy extra everything for Natasha, Steve, and Bucky earlier that morning. As expected, Peter had been ecstatic and could barely contain himself, already leafing through the pamphlets Pepper acquired for him.

"Yep, and you can thank your Aunt Pepper for the idea," said Tony. "This place is enormous, so you won't be able to see everything, but FRIDAY also made sure to pre-order tickets to all the special exhibits."

"American Dinosaurs, Fossilab, Primordial Landscapes, Sant Ocean Hall..."

Bucky grinned and said, "Someone's an excited little nerd—holy shit, that's one giant-ass diamond. I didn't know they grew that big."

"That's the Hope Diamond," said Peter. "It's said to be cursed because everyone who's owned it has died. Have any people at the museum died because of it?"

"You'll have to read the exhibit labels to find out."

"They have a butterfly house! It's got everything from the Amazon to Borneo. We'll need to get there early so it's not too crowded. Do butterflies get stressed out by so many people? I don't think Matika would like it."

"Yeah, well, Matika can bite if someone pisses her off. Butterflies don't have fangs, kiddo."

"Look, look, there's an insect zoo!"

Poor Steve was the current recipient of Peter's excitement, smiling and nodding along as the kid listed all the exhibits they were gonna visit. In less than nine days, the Avenger's human fossils would be experts on 65 million-year-old dinosaur fossils. It was gonna be downright hilarious and Tony didn't want to miss a second of it. The super-soldiers had no idea what they were getting themselves into. Naive little saps...

"I'm sure Frosty and Sparkly will want to—and seriously, can I not go a single hour without these idiots calling me?!"

With a huff of annoyance, Tony disappeared into the first floor bedroom and closed the door behind him. He already knew who was calling at this late hour and the last thing he needed was for someone to overhear them. It wasn't going to be a pretty conversation since Tony wasn't in the mood to play diplomat tonight. All he wanted was a couple hours of peace, for fuck's sake. Was that too much to ask for?

"This is your friendly neighborhood Stark speaking. What particular grievance would you like to file today?"
Back in the living room, Steve was beginning to wonder if someone had slipped Peter a half-dozen pixie sticks or something equally adrenaline inducing, because the boy was still talking a thousand miles an hour. How could he even breathe like that? Did his cheeks look a little purple? Maybe they needed to give him a sip of water? Damnit, if the kid passed out from over-talking, Tony would blast them straight out the window and call the Secret Service to come pick up a trio of terrorists who'd gotten drunk on his front lawn.

"And here's the special tickets for the Air and Space Museum," said Peter, hands right in front of Natasha and Bucky's faces. "Uncle Rhodey would be ashamed if we didn't get to look at all the cool airplanes. See, here's the World War II ones. You're old enough to remember those and maybe these ones, too."

"Whoa, whoa, wait one second," said Bucky. "This exhibit is from World War I, shortcake. Just how old do you think I am?"

"Really, really old."

"Okay, you know what, this is a clear case of not respecting your eld—"

"Like dinosaur fossil old."

Bucky gasped in mock offense while Natasha and Happy laughed from the kitchen. The assassin even placed a hand over his heart, playing along with whatever game of wits mini-Stark had cooked up. Even if Bucky tried to act nonchalant about it, Steve knew his best friend was desperate for Peter to like him. Unlike Steve, Bucky came from a large family where children always seemed to be underfoot, dashing and jabbering and pouting about anything that caught their flighty interests. It was a world Steve wasn't too familiar with, as Peter's youthful presence had proven time and again over the last couple weeks. To be honest, Steve was kinda surprised that the kid hadn't stabbed him with a fork yet.

"You, little Stark, are committing elder abuse. I'm feeling very abused right now."

"Doesn't count if you don't have wrinkles."

"Oh really?" drawled Bucky. "Well, what about all those Hollywood people who get Botox shot into their faces? What about them?"

"The wrinkles are still there. They're just frozen," said Peter with a scoff. "That's what happens when you shoot botulism into your face. It makes it freeze and then you look like those creepy dolls in Nordstrom."

Bucky looked baffled and Natasha raised a single brow in surprise. "Firsthand knowledge, малютка?"

"My aunt's old boss looked like a clown and gave me nightmares until I was four-years-old. Four! Oh, and she also had lots of fat sucked outta her ass and shot into her lips." Peter looked thoughtful for a moment. "Hey, does that mean when she burps it'd actually be a fart?"

All of them just stared until Bucky muttered, "That's just fucked up."

Then the doorbell rang and groceries were delivered by a service Happy had ordered ahead of their departure from Manhattan. Natasha took Peter upstairs to settle into his room while Steve and Bucky helped Happy unpack and organize everything in the kitchen. An extra-large bag of potato chips was sacrificed to the struggle, but in the grand scheme of things, it was a small loss when two super-soldiers were involved. Well, and a huge tube of chocolate-chip gelato, but that was entirely
Bucky's fault and Steve would stand by that statement until the bitter end.

"Gotta give Stark credit," said Bucky around a mouthful of chocolate, "The man's got good taste in food."

"If you think it was Tony who picked out this selection, then you better think again," said Happy. "It's usually Vision or me who decides what goes in the tower's frig and cabinets, but I guarantee you that JARVIS or FRIDAY were responsible for our present fare."

"That is correct, Mr. Hogan," chimed in FRIDAY's familiar Irish accent. "I trust that my selection lives up to expectations?"

"Very much, Milady."

As Happy and Bucky finished up in the kitchen, Steve wandered through the enormous house and admired the rustic architecture with nothing less than awe. It was a gorgeous piece of craftsmanship that he could've only dreamed about in his youth, stuck in the concrete jungle that was pre-1950s Brooklyn. It had clearly been built in a bygone era, probably during the time of George Washington or John Adams, all dark oaks and earthy bricks that had aged beautifully into the 21st century. The rich colors and classic woodwork made Steve's fingers itch to grab his sketchbook and draw them.

It figured that Howard would purchase the fanciest house on an entire street of fancy houses. Steve didn't even want to know what the mortgage payments were, or would it be paid off by this point? Who knew with places this big and expensive; maybe Howard had paid for it upfront with cash decades ago. That certainly sounded like something he'd do just to shut up and impress everyone around him.

"—handles that now."

Steve blinked when he heard Tony's voice through a nearby door, the man sounding more than a little frazzled and pissed off. He had wandered down a long and dark hallway without realizing it, unconsciously making his way towards the first floor's only bedroom. It didn't sound like a pleasant conversation and Steve knew Tony would've verbally eviscerated the other person if they'd been in the same room. Hell, Steve would've done it himself, if only because of the fact that he hated hearing Tony so threatened and upset, no matter the reason.

After the damage Steve himself had done one year ago, it was the least he could do towards restoring their friendship. Then again, Tony had yet to show any signs of wishing to reconcile what they had lost—be it mere friendship or the possible romantic feelings they'd been dancing around before the damned Accords had blown everything to hell—and Steve wasn't about to push him at this point.

Pushing had backfired in the hospital five weeks ago and Steve was still disgusted with himself for acting like such an inconsiderate asshole. Even Clint had called him a jackass for confronting Tony while he was grievously injured and drugged to the gills. But as had happened so often in recent times, Steve hadn't thought his actions through before charging into a delicate situation like a bull in a china shop. And he'd been rightfully smacked in the face for it.

Maybe Natasha was right about his impulse control problems.

"None of those fall under my jurisdiction," said Tony. "And they don't fall under yours, either. That was the final decision of the United Nations and fifty-two countries, not just our state department. Yes, I know, as I've already told you three times."
Steve strained his super-human ears, puzzled by who Tony could be talking to in such an irritated manner. It certainly wasn't Pepper or Rhodey, or even a member of SHIELD like Fury or Coulson. He wondered if—

"You know, that sounds an awful lot like a threat, Mr. Secretary. Didn't we just discuss this last month? Oh well, I've lost track of time in recent weeks. Comes with the territory of actually doing something worthwhile and—yeah, that's just plain rude."

The title made Steve's eyes widen as he finally realized just who Tony was speaking with.

"Give Fury a buzz if you want those kinda answers," said Tony. "I'm not involved with the Avengers and their shenanigans anymore, as you very well know. Hey, it's not as if I was the only person who looked over the final document. The UN and at least half the Security Council gave it the go ahead, so that doesn't fall to me, either. And I doubt any of them wanna see my face any time soon, so no, I'm not gonna get roped back into this bullshit."

None of this sounded good to Steve's ears, especially since Tony had a stressed out tone to his voice that always precluded a colossal blow-up. Steve himself had only seen it happen on two occasions—Clint accidentally stepping on the Doominator and then the Siberia incident—so he wondered if Ross had any idea what he was in for. Then again, maybe Ross knew exactly what he was doing to Tony, as seemed to be the case right now.

Fuck, how often had this happened over the last fifteen months?

"Yeah, well, that's just—no, don't you fucking dare bring him into this," Tony all but snarled. "We meet on Wednesday and then we're done, got it? I've got other more important things to handle than this bullshit and you know it."

Steve stayed quiet, barely daring to breathe as Tony took on that imperious tone he used with pushy journalists and government officials. He had even used it on the team when feeling particularly threatened or belligerent. All it did was make Steve even more concerned about the situation.

"Don't dish out parenting advice that you don't even use yourself, Thunderbutt."

Holy shit, Ross was threatening Peter, Steve realized with a jolt. That was why Tony had gotten so hostile so quickly, which was an almost unheard of reaction from him. When it came to playing the press and higher-ups, few were better at keeping their cool and manipulating the situation than Tony Stark. The Avengers had seen him do it for years, and they'd even been the recipients of it during the Accords. Only something massive would make Tony drop his Smooth-dog Mask, as Rhodey liked to call it, and it was obvious that Ross had found the most effective and not-so-hidden trigger.

It made Steve's blood boil like nothing else. Threatening a small child to manipulate his father just proved that Ross was even more of a scumbag and coward than he'd originally thought. How long had Tony been dealing with this?

"You'll have to discuss that with my CEO," said Tony. "Not that Stark Industries even handles those kinda contracts anymore. Oh yes, I'm positive. Well, not that your ideas aren't nice and all, Rossie-boy, but I'm on a limited time frame right now, so that'll just have to wait until Wednesday's hearing. Toodaloo!"

Steve stood outside the door for about a minute before very carefully tiptoeing down the hallway. Considering recent circumstances, the last thing Steve wanted was for Tony to accuse him of
eavesdropping and espionage. That would be—

"I know you're out there, Steven. Now stop it with the creeper act and get your spangly ass in here."

"Shit."

He opened the door to see Tony sitting on the king-sized bed, a patently bored expression on the engineer's face as Steve tried not to appear too guilty. It was hard to tell sometimes if Tony was annoyed with you or not, simply because he was so good at hiding behind an indifferent mask. Tony tended to whip out that mask most often around people he didn't trust, which was almost everyone... and that now included Steve.

"Just in case you were wondering," drawled Tony, "You don't pull off the stalker look nearly as well as Barnes does. I think it's the whole lack of raccoon eyes and Anakin Skywalker scowl. Very intimidating."

"Everything alright?"

"I don't know. How much did you hear?"

"Enough."

"Well, then things are pretty shitty at the moment, not that that's anything new," said Tony with a bitter sigh. "You see, this is where you're lucky, Cap. When jackass politicians like Ross and his lackeys get their panties in a twist, it's Tony Stark who they hunt down for answers. Same applies to CEOs and foreign leaders and grieving parents; everyone wants a piece of Tony Stark to gnaw on like a rabid dog. Perfect scapegoat, right?"

Steve didn't say anything.

"Fucking hell, Wednesday is gonna be so much fun. Ross thinks I should bow down whenever he decides to call outta the blue, which isn't really too blue since it's all the damned time. I swear, I think the sleazeball gets a boner from harassing me. And he thinks Peter is fair game now, too."

"That's against the law."

"Lots of stuff is against the law, Cap, but that doesn't stop people from breaking it," said Tony, voice worn down and tired. "You'd know this better than anyone. And don't give me that look, I'm really not in the mood for it. I've gotta spend the next forty-six hours psyching myself up to deal with Ross and the testosterone-poisoned bullshit he loves to spew at every meeting we have together."

"Do you have to go?"

"For the sake of my company and its employees, yeah, I do. The bastard's got six more months left in office and then I'll be free of him, but until then, I've gotta play hardball and keep Ross from manipulating Congress and half the planet to his point of view." Tony ran a hand over his face and flopped back on the bed. "It's as terrible and frustrating as it sounds, trust me."

"What about Fury and Hill? Haven't they been helping you?"

"As much as they're able, but Ross has it out for my blood and insists on speaking to me and only me a lot of the time."
"Why?"

"Because he's positive that I helped you guys escape from the Raft," said Tony while throwing a pillow up and down above his head. "He's wanted my head on a silver platter ever since. Seriously, Steve, you didn't think things would end so easily, did you?"

"No, not really."

"There's a reason why Fury's keeping you guys far, far away from 90% of SHIELD's missions right now: it's name is Ross. And 117 pissed off countries all over the world. Just because the Avengers have been cleared of charges doesn't mean you guys can just go back to fighting and demolishing entire cities again. None of you signed the new Accords either, which means that my hands are tied, believe it or not."

"I'm not going to sign something that I don't—"

"That's not the point here, Steven," snapped Tony before throwing a pillow at Steve's head. "For once in your life could you just have a little sympathy for the person who's trying to keep you and your buddies outta the firing lines. Not everything's black and white and somebody needs to deal with the dirty grey areas. And since a good portion of the world already thinks I'm a cold-hearted bastard, it might as well be me."

"No, Tony, that's not—"

"But there's one crucial difference between the Me of Fifteen Months Ago and the Me of Today," said Tony, "And that difference is the Me of Today has a kid. A wise-ass, smart-mouthed, brilliant kid who our enemies now see fit to threaten and manipulate to their advantage."

"We're not gonna let that happen, Tony."

"Oh really? Because newsflash, it's already happening."

"Then we'll stop it."

"It's not that simple, Steve, and you know it."

With careful fingers and a willingness to pull back at the slightest sign of discomfort, Steve placed his hands on Tony's shoulders and waited until the other man looked him in the eyes. It wasn't an easy thing, considering the lack of trust between them right now, but a tiny bit of the friendship they'd once shared was still buried, if only far deeper than before.

"We are not going to let anything happen to Peter," said Steve. "I know this last year has been terrible and we've been complete assholes to each other and I wish so much that none of this had happened. I should've told you about your parents—and yes, I'm a complete and utter jerk for not telling you—and that will always be one of the worst decisions of my life. I still don't agree with the Accords, but I had no right to withhold that kinda information from you. But don't doubt for a second that I wouldn't give my freedom or my life for that child."

Tony just looked at him, seeming to weigh Steve's words and decide whether or not he was telling the truth. It hurt that Tony would second guess Steve's sincerity when it came to protecting Peter, but yet again, he couldn't really blame him. Steve had essentially ditched everyone and everything to protect Bucky, which in and of itself he didn't regret. But in hindsight, Steve also knew that he could've gone about that protection in a much less destructive and asinine way, as Bucky himself had pointed out on several occasions.
"You know I can't just take you on your word for that anymore, Steve."

"Then take mine."

Standing in the open doorway was Bucky, a large jar of plums clutched tight in his left hand.

"I know you don't trust us, Stark, and I don't blame you in the slightest. I wouldn't trust either of us considering everything that's gone down over the last year. Hell, the last seventy years, in my case. But I owe your family a debt that I'll never be able to repay—and shut up, Stevie, this isn't your decision to make—which means I'll guard that spider-loving kid of yours until the day I die."

"But it wasn't your fau—"

"And I swear, if I hear those words one more time, I'll run off and blow Ross' brains out myself," said Bucky. "I'm not some china doll that needs to be handled with kids' gloves and I can sure as hell take care of myself. All this coddling and whispering is annoying as fuck. Even my therapist would tell you that, not that anyone ever listens to her."

"Dad?"

All of them turned to see Peter standing a few feet behind Bucky, clad in Star Wars pajamas and hair still damp from his evening shower. Natasha had obviously come to the conclusion that men were idiots and if they didn't want a cranky eight-year-old on their hands tomorrow, it would fall to her to get Peter ready for bed. For the umpteenth time today, Steve felt a little sheepish by his own absent-minded behavior.

"Stalking the stalker, Petey-pie?"

"He's eating all the plums," accused Peter. "And Natasha says her bedroom is smaller than she thought it'd be."

"Well, that's just rude."

Bucky held out the plum jar as a peace-offering, cheeks puffed up like a chipmunk's around two large slices. It was a rather damning spectacle, but Peter must've decided to take pity on the assassin because he grabbed the jar and ate half a plum himself.

"They're even organic," said Bucky. "Your dad's got expensive tastes."

"Everybody knows that."

"Insulted by my own child. Where does it end?"

Peter munched on his plum and said, "I can't find my toothbrush."

"I packed an extra," said Steve while pointedly ignoring Tony's grumbles about boy scouts and spangly buttons. "You can have it if you want?"

"Does it have the Hulk on it?"

"No."

"Those are the best ones," said Peter with an all-knowing nod. "Can I just brush with my finger? Uncle Ben used to do it sometimes."

"And did your aunt yell at him about it?"
"Yeah."

"Then what makes you think I'll let you do it, too?"

Peter shrugged and ate another plum, glaring at Bucky's hand when it got too close to the jar. But it was the metal hand, so none of them had to worry about a biting incident. Even Peter had his limits, it seemed.

"Get him the toothbrush, Steve. I'm not raising a heathen," said Tony. "We'll find yours in the morning. Happy always packs one."

"Happy packs your luggage?"

"Don't judge, Barnes. I lead a busy life and I'm a lazy bastard when it comes to traveling. And it's not like he trusts me to remember, either. We've had a good system going for twenty years now."

"Uncle Happy's an angel."

"You got that damned straight, kiddo. Never doubt or underestimate the Hapster."

Steve frowned, realizing that he had yet again forgotten how long Rhodey and Happy had been friends with Tony. At least twenty or more years, which was just as long as Steve and Bucky's own friendship. With that kinda history, it was little wonder that both men were unfailingly loyal to the Stark heir. And Tony clearly trusted them more than anyone else in the world with his secrets and his son.

"Okay, where's that toothbrush, Rogers?"

After handing over the much anticipated toothbrush and being shown to his room, Steve couldn't stop himself from listening to Tony and Peter in the bedroom directly across from his. The little boy had quieted down since his adrenaline surge earlier in the evening, instead yawning and grumbling about everything they would see or do tomorrow at the museum.

"I wanna see the butterflies first," said Peter. "They might get tired and stressed out by the afternoon. Crowds are tiring."

"They'll probably fly to the tallest person in the room."

"Steve's really tall." Oh boy, was there ever a pout in Peter's voice. "Do you think they'll all go to him?"

"Wouldn't surprise me."

Everything went quiet for a minute before Peter said, "If I asked really nicely, do you think he'd kinda hold me up to see them?"

Holy shit, did that hesitant and sweet little question make Steve's heart pound with happiness. Peter had treated him like a leper since their first meeting and Steve had been afraid the kid would never warm up to him. And if Peter never warmed up to him, then Tony would definitely want nothing to do with him. But that question right there sounded like more than Steve could've ever hoped for.

"He'd put you right up on his shoulders if you asked," said Tony. "I mean, seriously, have you seen the guy? It wouldn't be a hardship."

"I don't think he would."
Yes, yes, he would, were Steve's thoughts. And if he didn't do it, then Bucky would. Even if Peter tried to stab him with a fork, Steve would still gladly hold him up to see the butterflies and whatever other insects were crawling and fluttering around the exhibit. Who wouldn't do that for the child of someone they loved? And damn, there came that bone-deep ache of regret and loss again.

"Hey, Peteroo, I know you think he's a jerk and an idiot," said Tony, "But Captain Hardhead's got a soft spot a mile wide for you. Nope, I'm not kidding. The guy seems to think you're the cutest thing ever."

"I'm not cute."

"Yeah, that pout? Not really helping your case, kiddo. I think you're adorable. Steve thinks you're adorable. The Avengers would probably use you as their cute little mascot if I wouldn't blast them outta the tower for it."

"Shouldn't you be in bed?"

"Wait, seriously, you're pulling that card? Wow, low blow, short-stuff. Give your old man a break."

"Bones get brittle when you're really old."

"Tell that to the fossils across the hall," said Tony. "Now, seriously, time for bed. It's already an hour past your usual bedtime and we've got an early start tomorrow. Gotta beat the other parents and their screaming brats."

"Okay. Love you."

"I love you, too. Now stop baiting FRIDAY and go to sleep. Sleeeep..."

Steve ran into Tony as he was heading to the bathroom—and no, it wasn't on purpose, of course not—causing the other man to startle and curse and then give Steve an appraising look. And as usual, Steve felt like a specimen on a petri dish.

"What's with the scruff?"

"Oh yeah, that," muttered Steve while fingering the slight stubble on his cheeks. "You said to keep a low profile, so I thought a slight change of appearance would help out. Everybody's used to seeing me clean-shaven and I figured what the hell, some fuzz might help me blend in."

"That's more than one day of fuzz, Sir Baby Face."

"Bucky suggested it a couple days ago. He's got some stubble going on now, too."

"The caveman look is kinda in style right now," said Tony, index finger poking at his own chin. "But trendy fashion or not, I think I'll keep my clean-cut goatee the way it is, thank you very much."

"You'd look weird without it."

Tony snickered and said, "You're so full of compliments, Steven. Now, we need to shut up or else Peter's gonna tell us off for messing with his beauty sleep. Well, that and you gotta prepare yourself for the child-filled hell that tomorrow will bring. Nighty night, Boy Scout."

"Night."
A hand punched Steve in the shoulder once Tony had disappeared down the stairs. Bucky looked at him with a raised eyebrow, a glint of mischief bouncing to and fro in familiar blue eyes. Aww shit, he'd probably heard everything.

"Real smooth, Stevie. Not only do you get tongue-tied around women, but you do with men, too. That takes a special kinda talent."

"I never do around you."

"Pretty sure I'm the weird exception to that rule," said Bucky while steering him towards the bathroom. "It's kinda sad that I'm better at talking to Tony than you are, and that's all kinds of weird when you think about it."

"Would you please shut up. For like, one damned minute."

"Not on your life, punk."

"You're a terrible person, Bucky. Absolutely terrible. And likely the reason I have issues with talking to attractive people."

Bucky kissed him on the cheek and then slapped him on the ass before sauntering out the door, barely dodging the towel Steve threw at his head. The guy could be such a shithead when he put his mind to it.

"Damned menace," said Steve, not even trying to hold back a smile. "Calling me a punk when he's the worst of them all."

A towel smacked Steve right in the face.

"Says the man with a weird repertoire of compliments." Bucky's head popped around the corner with a smirk. "I'm pretty sure none of those trashy dime store novels you used to read detailed the heroes insulting their lady loves and the weird goatees they grew."

"Fuck off, Buck."

"Ohhh, that rhymes. And don't mind if I do. Metal hands have their perks sometimes."

And with that said, Bucky disappeared around the corner with a filthy wink, footsteps silent as the grave to avoid waking Peter and their other housemates. That left Steve alone with his toothbrush, thoughts jumbled and cheeks red from the emotional rollercoaster of encounters he'd just had with Tony and Bucky. How two people could affect him so much was baffling, especially since his brief kiss with Sharon had been so lackluster and forgettable. Fuck, Steve really didn't know what to think anymore.

Was he weird for loving and wanting both of them?

Chapter End Notes

A little bit of Steve's perspective here. I've kinda neglected him until this point. And did you guys think I wasn't gonna bring Ross into this shitstorm? Because that bastard is totally gonna be giving Tony a shit-ton of shit in the canon-verse. He also seems like the type who'd be more than willing to use someone's child against them.
Dickhead to the nth degree, without a doubt.

And so the B/S/T begins...
"Steve and Bucky have their own exhibits."

"And you didn't believe me," said Tony. "See, they really are fossils. Always listen to your old man, kiddo."

"That outfit was really stupid."

All this did was pull a pained groan out of Steve and an evil cackle out of Bucky, the latter leaning over to get a closer look at Peter's pamphlet. Steve grumbled about the unfairness of life while Peter pondered the godawful tastes of 1940s propaganda campaigns. They were walking towards the Museum of Natural History right now, Tony holding Peter's hand while the other four walked around them.

"I think the wings were a nice touch," said Happy with a snicker. "Really brought out his blue eyes and all-American face. Not very subtle, though."

"Kinda made him look like a clown if you ask me."

"No one asked you, Buck."

"You always get your panties in a twist about that ugly getup. Whoever made it must've been blind. Or really stupid."

"Can we please talk about something else?"

Tony kept Peter close the whole fifteen blocks it took to reach the museum, still not quite trusting anyone besides himself and maybe Rhodey to ensure his child's safety. The Avengers either didn't notice or simply chose not to acknowledge Tony's protective behavior, instead just using their presence as a natural barrier between Peter and everybody else on the street. It was obvious Ross' call had put them even more on edge, which was quite impressive considering the Avengers' current concerns over Winter Soldiers being on the loose.

"Do praying mantises make good pets?"

"Nope, nope, you are not getting yet another pet," said Tony. "A giant cat and tarantula are more than enough for you right now. Plus, I know what happens when lil' kids get one too many pets: mommy or daddy ends up having to take care of it."

"I always feed Matika. And I've been doing it with Bumble, too."

"No more pets until you're not enlisting Vision's help 50% of the time. And nope, the puppy dog eyes aren't gonna work. Just give it up, kiddo."

"Praying mantises can be pets?"

"That's all you got outta that conversation, Barnes?"

"Pretty much."
"Well, nobody ever said you were the brains behind any operation. The last thing I need is for my kid to start weaponizing bugs, and with the goop that tends to pop up in Bruce's lab, it's a 1.4% probability that such a situation could happen in the near future."

"A gigantic spider would be rather useful."

"No one asked for your opinion, Lady Aragog. And biased presumptions are neither wanted nor needed."

"We're here, we're here!"

Tony held onto Peter's hand extra-tight, more than a little leery about his nerdy eight-year-old's impulsive need to race off and look at every exhibit he could find. The others must have had the same thought because Natasha and Happy each grabbed one of Peter's shoulders, neither the least bit ashamed of their clear paranoia for his son's safety. It was reassuring, in an overprotective parent kinda way.

"What'd we talk about just last night, Petey-pie?"

"Don't wander more than ten feet away and always stay within sight," recited Peter in a perfect imitation of his dad's lecture voice. "And yes, you have to listen to the Capsicle and One-Armed Wonder if they're with you. We don't need a rampage of scared super-soldiers running through the museums and terrifying the locals. I don't have enough brain cells left to deal with that kinda debacle."

"Holy shit," whispered Bucky, "That is fucking creepy. Kid's already becoming a miniature evil genius."

Peter gave a devious smile in response, grabbing Tony's arm with both hands and pulling until the engineer hurried towards the museum entrance. Knowing there was no stopping Peter at this point, Tony allowed himself to be led around like a ragdoll while Natasha saw them through the doors and antechamber with the finesse of a people-herding pro. As expected, the Rotunda was enormous and packed with people who'd apparently thought an early arrival was prudent, which Bucky pointed out with a curse.

"We'll just have to keep him close," said Tony. "At least cameras aren't allowed in here. We can attempt to—"

"C'mon, c'mon!"

Instead of Tony, it was Bucky and Happy who got dragged across the hall this time, Peter obviously realizing these two men would be easier to manipulate than his father. Steve snickered, easily shouldering the few small bags they'd brought before following Peter into the Mammals Hall with Tony and Natasha in tow. All of them had dressed down for the day, wearing little more than T-shirts, jeans, sneakers, and maybe a light hoodie to combat the museum's frigid air-conditioning. Happy had joked about Tony not being recognizable when he went into Casual Mode, which consisted of an AC/DC T-shirt, faded jeans, and Converse shoes that appeared to have lost a battle with several sharpies.

"Everyone's so used to seeing him in suits, be it Armani or titanium, that going out like this is easier than you'd think," Happy had said. "And nobody expects to see Tony Stark in a place like this, either."

They spent the next two hours being dragged to every mammal exhibit Peter could find, the little
boy rattling off an insane amount of facts about each animal and why some were extinct and others had managed to survive the Pleistocene. Only Tony wasn't surprised by Peter's vast repertoire, already aware that the boy's free time was often spent on Wikipedia or quizzing JARVIS about anything that came to mind. If Peter didn't know the answer to something, then he was gonna dig and dig until he found it, as May and Ben had encouraged him to do whenever possible.

"It looks like the Primordial Landscape exhibit is next," said Steve as he looked over the map. "Do you think that—whoa!"

"We need to hurry before other people get there."

"That kid's not nearly as shy or quiet as he first appears," said Natasha while watching Steve be dragged off to the next exhibit. "Very deceptive. I like it."

"Of course, you would."

"The North American and European tectonic plates created Iceland," jabbered Peter. "It's really young, like one of the youngest landmasses on year. I wanna go there and see the volcanoes someday. Aunt May had it on her list of places to go."

Steve nodded. "I don't think the ice in its name is really accurate."

"I read that they mixed the names up on purpose, that way everyone would go to Greenland and get confused and then avoid Iceland out of frustration."

"Sneaky Vikings."

Peter hmmed in agreement before dragging Steve off again, passing through every exhibit with a critical eye and vomit of information. They hadn't even made it to the Fossil Hall before lunchtime, Tony finally insisting they stop for some food or else his stomach was gonna start eating itself. The Atrium Cafe was just as beautiful as every other part of the museum and Tony wasn't even shocked by how much food Steve and Bucky consumed between the two of them. Everything about the day must've given Peter extra courage because the boy was even bold enough to grab some fries off Steve's overflowing plate.

"Bossing me around all morning and then stealing my food," said Steve. "I can see a definite father-son connection here."

"You've got plenty of food," was Peter's response. "Can we go see the fossils next? The pamphlet says they're moving things around right now, but all the big exhibits are still out for us to look at."

Steve finished chewing and said, "I gotta admit, the super-predators are pretty impressive. Almost as big as the Jurassic Park rex."

"I still like the Triceratops best. Oh, look, look!"

As Steve and the others were subjected to Peter's latest fascination, Tony glanced around at the dozens of other people eating in the cafe. No one seemed to have paid them much mind so far, which was A-okay in his books. Happy was his usual self, Tony and Steve were dressed down, Natasha had braided her hair into an intricate style that changed the shape of her face, and Bucky's metal arm was covered with long sleeves and a glove. He had even pulled his long-ish hair back into a man-bun, not looking half-dead and homicidal for once in his fucked-up life.

Overall, they were blending in pretty well. Peter's presence helped a bit since they probably just looked like an extended family taking their adored child out for a fun day at the museum.
Commercial cameras being forbidden anywhere in the building was helpful, too.

"I forgot my notebook," pouted Peter as they went upstairs to the replacement Fossil Hall. "It was in my blue bag that they put in the lockers."

"You can use it tomorrow, kiddo. We're here for nine days, remember?"

"I know, but it's always nice to have it."

After a few seconds of grumbling on Peter's part, Steve poked Tony in the side and then handed him a pencil and small pad of paper. The latter raised an eyebrow in pleased surprise.

"I always carry one with me," said Steve with a shrug. "And you never know when something interesting is gonna pop up, either."

"Total boy scout."

Peter whooped when Steve handed it to him, saying thank you and then grabbing Happy's hand to drag him up the crowded staircase. It was the most lively Tony had ever seen Peter, the little boy for once acting like the eight-year-old boy he was. For nine days, maybe the deaths of May and Ben Parker wouldn't hang over the kid's head like a malevolent shadow.

The Fossil Hall was as crowded as they'd predicted and there were several times when Peter had to be boosted up to see some of the exhibits. Tony's painkillers gave him a bit more energy to follow his bouncy son around, but his side and leg still ached at times, so it fell to the others to make sure Peter was able to see everything. Both super-soldiers seemed to take this position quite seriously, Bucky glaring at several parents who didn't control their overly loud and unruly children. It made Tony wonder how many weapons he'd managed to sneak past security.

Before dinnertime, Tony's side started hurting to the point where he needed to sit down outside the Fossilab, Steve volunteering to stay behind while the others took a slightly reluctant Peter to admire the paleontologists and their projects. No sooner had Tony sat down before a small tablet and bottle of water were thrust into his unoccupied hands.

"Bruce said you can have an extra tablet if all this moving around causes too much discomfort," was Steve's explanation. "And don't say it doesn't hurt because I can see that wrinkle between your eyebrows."

"Excuse me? Did you just say wrinkle?"

"Yes, I just said wrinkle. It's always a dead giveaway that you're stressed or in pain."

"Huh."

They just sat there for several minutes, watching mothers chase their hyperactive children while museum staff came and went like an afternoon breeze. It had a soothing quality to it, especially for someone like Steve who'd been cut off from the general public for nearly sixteen months: twelve months in Wakanda and then the last three months in SHIELD. Even with their sentences being forgiven, Fury didn't want the Avengers being seen any more than was absolutely needed, something that all of them had been forced to accept.

"I can't have you stupid assholes running around willy-nilly," had been Fury's exact words. "At least 117 countries are pissed off at you, the public thinks their so-called heroes have gone rogue, Wakanda's diplomatic treaties are going down in flames thanks to hiding your idiotic asses, I've had to completely reassess SHIELD's intro to the world again, and Stark won't even talk to his
Agent anymore. Seriously, for fuck's sake, how the fucking hell did you manage to piss off over half the mother-fucking planet in less than two weeks?"

When Steve had tried to talk, all Fury had done was slam his fist on the table.

"Nope, I don't wanna hear a fucking word outta your mouth, Rogers. That bastard Zemo played all of you asswipes like a fucking fiddle and now we've got even more of a mess to clean up than before. If it wasn't for Coulson and his minions, I'd have just blown my brains out and been done with this whole mess. And what the fucking hell did you do to piss Stark off so much?"

And that question had then led into several more uncomfortable questions, Sam storming from the room when he'd learned that concessions to the Accords had been on the table and Steve never told them about it. That Tony had been willing to compromise and sanction their past actions, freeing them from the various stigmas that came with being international fugitives. That they'd had enough leeway with the UN and several of the larger governments to amend and even rewrite whole sections of the Accords they didn't agree with. That King T'Challa had spent long months negotiating the Accords himself, loyalty always falling first and foremost to Wakanda and her people, not a disbanded team of hard-headed vigilantes.

Their subsequent glaring and yelling matches had only resulted in Fury saying, "I should've stayed in fucking Honduras."

Now, twelve months later, Steve is sitting in the Smithsonian with Tony less than a foot away from him, grumbling about stupid injuries and stupid pills and if Bucky dares drop his kid, there will be murder on the horizon. A few weeks ago, such a statement would've automatically made Steve's hackles rise, but he now understood that Tony didn't really mean it. Well, for the most part, at least.

If Peter was put into immediate danger by Bucky, Steve had no doubt that Tony would make good on that threat. And unlike before, there would be absolutely nothing Steve could do about it. Tony had made it abundantly clear—along with a rather lethal-looking Vision—that anyone who posed a direct or physical threat to Peter would be taken down without remorse. It didn't matter who they were, be it Avenger or homicidal terrorist or delusional civilian, there would be no holding back this time when it came to Tony's only child and close family member.

"Are you sure we're gonna be able to get Peter on the plane next week?"

"Natasha's already agreed to hogtie him if push comes to shove," said Tony. "The kid would probably live in here if I gave him the option. And I'm sure the dinos would make great video game and insect collecting partners."

"Being around them too much would probably result in cloned dinosaurs, though."

"Ah, yes, exactly what the world needs, yet another mad scientist to bring honor and glory to the Stark family."

"You got that from Mulan."

"No, I didn't. Well, okay, about half of it," Tony admitted. "Except my baby's never gonna run off to destroy people in a stupid-ass war. Nope, my baby's gonna be some kinda brilliant scientist who'll be far away from messy battlefields. My ol’ heart can't take anything more than that, nope."

"Dad?"

"Hey there, kiddo." Tony held out his arm and pulled Peter in tight. "Enjoy the fossils? You know,
"Real funny, Stark."

"Think paleontology would be a good career? But just as a forewarning, a Ph.D in that field takes forever to complete. Like, seven or eight years nowadays. And trust me, the whole Ph.D thing can be brutal, even for geniuses like us."

"How long did it take you to get yours?"

"All three of them? About eight years, give or take. The physics one was kinda fun. Butterfingers came from the electrical engineering one. I would not suggest going sixty-one hours without sleep, though. Leads to some really weird hallucinations and AI creations."

"What's the other?"

"Mechanical engineering. We can blame that one for You's creation. And maybe my life-long addiction to caffeine. Yeah, definitely that last one."

Bucky snorted. "So you're Dr. Stark, too?"

"Only at universities and conferences," said Tony with a preening smirk. "Or when Reed Richards is in the room. Always call me Dr. Stark when that jerk's within a sixty mile radius. Same applies to Doom. And jury's still out on Strange. Magic, blah."

"You're tired," Peter declared. "We should go home. Does your stomach hurt?"

"It's fine, kiddo."

"No, it's not. You've got a wrinkle right here." The kid pointed at his forehead. "That means it's hurting you. Did you take a pill?"

"Welp, we've already got a budding doctor on our hands. Just great. Hey, no poking at your father without permission, that's just plain rude. Despite what your Uncle Bruce might think, I'm not a human pin cushion."

Peter turned to the others and said, "We need to go home for him to rest. The exhibits will still be here tomorrow."

Even though Tony was feeling more than a little peeved about an eight-year-old bossing him around, he could also understand why Bucky and Happy were barely able to keep a straight face and Natasha had turned around to hide a very unsubtle snicker. Steve, the huge jerk, didn't even try to hold back his traitorous laughter, which earned him a glare from both Starks and a smack upside the head from Natasha. Not that it would do any damage, but it was the thought and effort that counted, at least in Tony's opinion.

"He's like a little old man," mused Natasha. "A bossy, little old man."

"I'll call the service to pick us up," said Happy. "No need to walk all the way back like this, even if three of us could take it."

Natasha raised an eyebrow at him.

"What? I'm not as young as I used to be. And I'm certainly no super-soldier or super-spy. I can admit when my bad knee's acting up, too."
"Uncle Happy's a fossil."

"I hope you know that I'll be remembering that insult when perusing the cereal aisle next week."

Peter just smiled in return, whipping out the angelic act like a seasoned pro. Tony was sure May and Ben had been on the receiving end of it many times, and he also took it as a good sign that Peter was warming up to his new family little by little. Unfortunately, the fact that Tony was clearly aching and in pain made Peter revert back to his clingy ways, tucking himself into Tony's side the entire trek out of the museum. They didn't even stop in the gift shop, Peter insisting they could do it another day when Tony was feeling better.

A mother stared at them while Steve got their bags, head cocked in a quizzical tilt as her eyes moved from Tony to Steve then back to Tony. The sight of Natasha's red hair must've been the tip-off, causing the mother's brow to narrow with recognition. She didn't say a word, which Tony was grateful for, but she did give Steve a rather guarded look before grabbing her three kids to walk out the main exit.

"I think that's gonna happen a lot from now on," whispered Natasha. "They're still afraid of us. Of what we can do. Have done."

"And I can't really blame them."

Tony pulled Peter closer to his side, well aware of just how fragile and breakable normal people like them were compared to Steve, Bucky, Wanda, Scott, Vision, Bruce, and Thor. Hell, even Natasha, Clint, and Sam could be downright lethal thanks to their extensive training, and T'Challa was a force unto himself. When outside his Iron Man suit, Tony only had his brains and limited tech to back him up, as he'd discovered in his initial clash with the Winter Soldier last year. And that didn't even begin to cover the vulnerability of the arc reactor, which was bright blue and smack-dab in the middle of his chest.

And now he had a son who was small and fragile and identical to Charlie Spencer from Sokovia. Peter was a normal child with normal muscles and normal bones and a slightly crappy immune system, if his medical records and occasional asthma flare-ups were to be believed. Just like millions of other parents across the globe, Tony was scared shitless by the thought of Peter being caught in the cross-hairs of an Avengers' mission gone wrong. A collapsing building or misplaced explosion would kill a normal child like Peter, and it would likely kill Tony in the process, too. Just like it had done to Miriam Spencer before him.

"It's too hot," griped Peter when they were finally outside. "Used to make Aunt May's hair all poofy. She hated it."

Natasha flicked at her own hair and said, "It's a mutual feeling."

"Just wait 'til you go to fucking Florida," said Bucky. "Whole state's like a damned sauna. Except it makes your hair greasy instead of poofy. Feels gross."

"Disney World's in Florida!"

"Thanks for that, Mr. Man-Bun, now I got yet another item to add to our vacation list."

"Vacation list?"

Peter turned to Steve and said, "We came up with it last month. I wanna go to all the places that were on Aunt May's list. Disney World, Borneo, Australia, Patagonia, lots of weird places because
she didn't like the touristy stuff."

"We can now check the Smithsonian off the list. Or at least one of them."

Not wanting to pass up an opportunity to speak with Peter on good terms, Steve inquired about what other places he wanted to visit and was promptly bombarded with all kinds of strange destinations. Aunt May apparently had a flair for the unusual and Tony couldn't help feeling sad that she hadn't lived to explore all these bizarre places with Peter at her side. And fuck if that wasn't some of the most depressing shit in the whole damned world.

"Bucky has a man-bun."

"Excuse me? This is a warrior bun, short-stuff. All the badass samurai used to wear it."

"Keep telling yourself that, Buck."

The service ride home was quick and efficient, Peter refusing to leave Tony's side until he was settled on the living room couch. Okay, so yeah, maybe walking around for hours and hours without a rest break wasn't the brightest idea, even Tony was willing to admit that. His left leg and side were throbbing like a bitch, the latter more than the former, and it was all thanks to Tony's stupid stubborn streak.

"Looking good, Boss."

"Oh, shut it, FRIDAY," groaned Tony. "Just order us some pizza, okay? Tonight doesn't feel like a cooking kinda night."

"Already on it."

"How're you feeling?"

Tony looked up to see Steve not five feet away, a stupidly concerned expression on his stupid too-pretty face. It still made butterflies twitter around in his gut, but unlike a year ago, Tony wasn't about to acknowledge or remotely act on their existence. He could tell by watching Steve and Bucky's interactions that something was there now, or had always been there, and Tony wouldn't have the slightest chance anymore. Then again, maybe he never had a chance to begin with, since why would anyone want to deal with the fucked up mess that is Tony Stark?

"Like Thor got a little too hammer-happy again."

People still liked to joke about Tony's sex life, even if he hadn't really had one for several years now. His short-lived relationship with Pepper had been his only sexual or romantic encounter since building the first Iron Man suit—and wow, that had been almost nine years ago now, time really did fly when you were blowing shit up—and Tony certainly wouldn't be doing anything in the near future since he now had Peter to worry about. Nothing drove potential lovers away like a young child that wasn't theirs, especially one as protective and jittery as Peter. For all his many faults, Tony wasn't about to put romantic dinners and sex above his son, who needed stability more than anything else right now.

Huh, Obadiah must be rolling around in his grave, utterly horrified by how responsible Tony had become since his death. Not that Tony didn't feel like having an anxiety attack at least twice a week, but yeah, the whole accountability thing still tended to freak people out. Obviously, no one had ever expected genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist Tony Stark to be the Avengers' most duty-bound member. How ironic...
"You can't take another pill until after you've eaten," said Steve. "Bruce did send along an icy-hot pack, though."

"I adore that jolly green man so much."

Steve laughed. "I saw Happy put it in the medicine cabinet yesterday. I'll go grab it."

"What do you wanna watch?" asked Peter once Steve was gone. "And I know, no more dragons or giant lizards that just look like dragons. Still don't think that counts, though."

"How about we just let FRIDAY fire something up?"

"Okay."

"I've got just the right film in mind, Boss. And the pizza will be here in twenty minutes, give or take."

"You're my favorite lady, Fri."

Out of the corner of his eye, Tony could see Bucky walking around the foyer and kitchen, hands and eyes running over every piece of furniture in the house. It only took a few moments for Tony to realize that the assassin was looking for signs that anyone had broke into the house while they were gone, hand tapping at random points while quietly speaking with FRIDAY about something only they could hear. Bucky even had a knife in one hand, moving in and out of the hallways and closets like a wraith.

Oddly enough, instead of making Tony feel anxious or paranoid, he instead felt calm and reassured by witnessing Bucky run a perimeter check around his home. Nobody on their side knew HYDRA assassins better than Bucky Barnes and if he was willing to offer the Starks his expertise and protection, then Tony wasn't gonna argue against it anymore.

"Ahh, Jumanji. Good pick, baby girl."

"Oh, I almost forgot something," said Peter as he raced upstairs. "I'll be right back. Don't move!"

"Wasn't even thinking about it."

Peter came running down the steps a few minutes later, something well-worn and far too familiar clutched in his small hands. Aww, shit...

"Look what I found in the closet."

And there, in his son's hands, was Tony's old Bucky Bear doll. It still had a loose string on the left paw, several rips on the goggles, and a little spot on the back where Maria had sewn a hole closed. All these years and it still looked the same as the day Tony had left it behind over thirty years ago, Howard scolding him about stuffed animals being for little children. Of course, a Captain America doll would've been fine, but anything else? Nope. According to Howard, Stark children weren't supposed to need toys, just their brains and the ability to create newer and better machines.

"You need to grow up," had been his father's words. "Nobody wants to see a boy clutching his stuffed animal like a damned toddler. It'll just get you bullied at school, so put it away for good, you hear me?"

The morning seven-year-old Tony had left Bucky Bear behind, Maria had stood at his bedroom door and tried to explain that his dad was just overreacting, that lots of people had a special toy
they kept with them. It was a gift from his beloved Aunt Peggy, so of course he should keep it with him, had been Maria's argument. And then she had gone quiet, not saying another word when Tony grabbed his suitcase and vanished down the stairs without a backwards glance.

Maria had ignored Howard the whole way back to New York, glaring out the window and occasionally running a gentle hand over Tony's shoulders. That cold December morning had been the last time Tony saw his favorite childhood toy. Until now, at least.

He hadn't known his mother had kept it.

"Is it supposed to be a bear or a raccoon?" asked Peter, voice piercing through the haze in Tony's head. "Kinda looks like a mix to me. Did that used to be your room? I guess that explains all the metal junk boxes."

Tony didn't say anything, instead focusing on the emotional mask that was slipping more and more by the second. He couldn't let Peter, or especially Steve and Bucky, see him lose control. It would be disastrous and he couldn't let it happen. Not again.

"I found a really old computer in there, too. It's jumbo-sized and clunky looking, like in my stinky textbooks from school. Do you think it stills works?"

"Hey, Tony, I've almost got the..."

Blinking in what felt like slow motion, Tony stood up and ignored everyone else in the room, not wanting to see the expressions in their eyes and faces. Nobody tried to stop Tony from disappearing into his bedroom, confusion in Peter's voice as he asked what was wrong and who had upset Tony while he was upstairs getting the stuffed bear.

"Tony? What's wrong with him? No, you can't just—Dad!"

It was strange not to instinctively react to his son's bemused distress, but nothing felt like it usually did at that particular moment. It was almost like he had fazed out of the room, detached from everyone and everything around him.

All Tony knew was that he needed to be alone right now.

Chapter End Notes

Unfortunately, Tony's PTSD and anxiety issues aren't gonna just disappear into thin air, nor will anybody else's. I'm working with a trio of emotional basket-cases here, so trying to navigate their combined issues is a little tricky at times. And, as usual, Tony's sense of self-worth is down deep in the crapper, especially when it comes to romantic relationships of any type. Peter and robots are easy for him to interact with. Adults with a history like Steve and Bucky? Not so much.

Sorry that my Bucky Bear introduction wasn't happy, either. I've had this planned since the beginning and it's a very important plot-point, as you'll see soon.
"What's wrong with him?"

"Peter, I don't—"

"He's upset and might be crying," snapped Peter. "What did you do to him?"

When no one answered immediately, the boy surged forward and slammed straight into Steve's stomach, demanding to know what they'd done to upset his father so much. None of them knew what to say because they hadn't done anything, at least not in recent times. Their silence didn't do anything to calm Peter down, who was already crying and breathing erratically, eyes fixed on the hallway his father had disappeared down not even one minute ago.

"You did something! I know you did! Just like before!"

Steve leaned down and said, "Peter, none of us know what's going on, I promise. Your dad just needs—"

"No! You did something again!"

At this point, Peter's face was bright red and snot and tears were covering his cheeks, a full-blown temper tantrum slash panic attack coming on like a freight train. All of them were taken aback and didn't know what to do, completely unfamiliar with how to handle an emotional breakdown in someone Peter's age. Thankfully, there was a single person among them who seemed to have his head screwed on tonight.

"Hey, hey, no hitting," scolded Happy, arms reaching out for Peter without hesitation. "Come here, kiddo. Hey, what'd I say about the flailing arms?"

"They hurt him again."

"We don't know why your dad's upset. He hurts sometimes and won't tell any of us the how or why," explained Happy. "I was in the kitchen with Steve the whole time and Bucky was doing his paranoid perimeter checks. They weren't even in here."

This only seemed to marginally calm Peter down, small shoulders shaking with his sobs while Happy held up a tissue for him to blow his snotty nose into. It was more than Steve had thought to do, just standing there helpless as Tony's son had a total meltdown.

"Okay, talk to me," said Happy. "Tell me what happened. I've known your dad for twenty-two years and I like to think I've got his triggers figured out pretty well by this point."

"FRIDAY put Jumanji on and Dad ordered pizza and I went upstairs to get this teddy bear to show him," said Peter, hiccuping every couple words as the tears and snot just kept coming. "I didn't do anything else, I promise. I just wanted to show him this and some of these."

Peter held out a handful of action figures and the stuffed bear, obviously not understanding the significance that might be attached to them. Neither Steve nor Bucky recognized any of the little plastic toys, instead guessing that they were likely from a '70s television show or comic book Tony
had enjoyed in his childhood. With what they knew about Tony's early years, the implications behind these toys were rather painful to think about it.

"You didn't do anything wrong, buddy. But you know how Fang means so much to you? Because your Uncle Ben gave him to you? Well, that's probably how your dad feels about these toys. They mean something special to him and it made him remember stuff he didn't want to remember. Or thought he'd forgotten about a long, long time ago."

"I didn't mean to do it."

"We know you didn't," assured Happy. "And nobody blames you in the slightest, least of all your dad."

"Is he okay?"

"Yeah, I'm sure he's fine. Just kinda thrown for a loop. He just needs some time to think and process," said Happy. "Now, how about we get you showered, pajamaed, and then we'll come down to see how your dad's doing. I guarantee he'll be wanting to see you by then. What do you say?"

"Okay."

Peter was reluctantly led upstairs to get cleaned up, eyes looking down the darkened hallway to his father's bedroom the entire way. Meanwhile, Tony was sitting on the bed in said room, staring blankly at a framed picture of his mother and him at his third birthday party. She had insisted on throwing one until he was ten, typically just a small party for immediate friends and family instead of the opulent staged galas Howard tended to favor. It was a special time, Maria had argued, and only those who loved Tony should be invited, public be damned.

A second picture sat off to the side, Aunt Peggy smiling big and wide while cuddling a small Tony in her arms. She'd been adamant about being there for every birthday and Christmas, always remembering to bring her honorary nephew a sentimental gift that he'd keep for a good, long time. Bucky Bear had been her chosen gift for his fourth birthday, something soft and cuddly and loving just like his favorite aunt. By his thirties, the gifts had stopped coming because Aunt Peggy could barely remember her own name or children anymore.

Why the fuck was he doing this? Letting people into his life who'd already hurt him beyond measure?

Peter and Happy didn't count since the first was his son and the second was more loyal than a golden retriever. Same applied to Rhodey, Pepper, and Bruce. But everybody else had viciously fucked him over on multiple occasions. Maybe there really was something fundamentally wrong with him.

And wouldn't that be funny since it was good ol' Obadiah who'd always said Tony's mind was like a labyrinth he could never break out of, or allow anybody too far into. Beautiful and twisted and easy to get hopelessly lost in, as Tony himself had learned more times than he liked to admit to. All it took was one wrong turn for Tony to descend into a world where only numbers and scientific logic mattered.

No people, no emotions, just the flow of numbers as they explained everything around him. The universe was so much simpler when you only used numbers to explore and explain it. And Tony loved numbers so much that he sometimes forgot there was a living world that needed to be protected from them.
It was both his greatest strength and his greatest weakness.

And that was why Tony had decided to hide in his bedroom like a weeping coward. If he'd been back at the tower, then the workshop would've been his first choice of hiding place, but options were a little limited down here in D.C. with only FRIDAY and a small basement at his disposal. Howard hadn't spent a lot of time in this specific house, so it wasn't nearly as advanced as those in Malibu and New York. It felt like a curse right now.

"Would you please stop doing that!" Obie had ordered all through Tony's childhood. "The investors are going to think you've fried your brains at this rate."

"He's only seven," Maria had sighed. "What more do you want from him?"

"A guarantee on investment. If we can show the board and investors that Howard's own progeny is even more brilliant than him, there's no doubt they'll be willing to part with a good portion of their bank accounts."

"Oh God, not you, too."

"C'mon, Maria, let's be serious. You can't tell me you don't see the boy's potential," Obie had said. "It's impossible to miss."

"If we're having this conversation, then I need a drink. A strong drink."

Neither adult had known a young Tony had been standing outside the door, eyes wide and Bucky Bear clutched tight in his arms while Jarvis and Ana made lunch in the kitchen. Little did he know that six hours later, Howard would rip into him for being a whiny crybaby who couldn't even go to sleep without that stupid stuffed bear and Star Trek pillows.

By the next morning, Tony had left both gifts behind in D.C., sullen and quiet the whole way back to New York. As usual, he had tried to get lost in the numbers, letting them flow through his brain like a cascading river. But it wasn't enough. It was never—

"Tony?"

He looked up when there was a knock on the door, Happy's voice familiar and soothing because Happy was always there for Tony, no matter what. He didn't think he could ask for a better friend. Fuck, Tony really needed to give the man a Galibier for his birthday this year. It was the least he could do for everything Happy had done for him.

"Come in."

A small figure was cuddled in close to Happy's side, Peter's hair still damp from his shower and Star Wars pajamas unrumpled from nighttime activities. All Tony did was hold out his right arm and Peter bolted forward, careening into his dad's side in his urgency to seek comfort. Little arms wrapped around Tony's neck, an ugly sob echoing in his ear like a serrated knife.

Fuck, he'd made his kid cry. What kinda shitty parent was he?

"I'm sorry, kiddo," whispered Tony, hugging Peter like he was a lifeline. "I'm so sorry. Everything's gonna be okay, I promise. Shhhh..."

"Don't leave."

And those two words just made Tony hate himself even more. Here was a kid who'd lost his birth
parents and then his aunt and uncle before he was even ten, likely terrified that his newest parent would either be killed or ditch him, too. Peter's therapist had warned him about abandonment issues, saying it was normal for a child like Peter to feel extreme anxiety over his living arrangements and whether a new parent would genuinely love and care for them. He would be looking for any reason that could cause Tony to leave him, obsessing over it until an inevitable breakdown occurred.

Tony had been doing everything in his power to avoid this, but it appeared he'd failed at yet another parenting endeavor. Why couldn't he figure this shit out? Was he really no better than his father at this point?

"I'm not leaving," said Tony before kissing Peter's forehead. "There's no way I'm leaving you. I'd permanently give up the Iron Man suits before I'd give you up, you goofy lil' midget."

"But you were so mad."

"No, I wasn't mad. Just very surprised. I wasn't expecting to see that stuffed bear ever again."

"I'm sorry."

"You've got nothing to be sorry about, so stop saying it. This whole mess is on me and my screwed up head."

"Aunt May told me not to touch things that aren't mine."

"Yeah, well, pretty much everything in this house is yours," said Tony. "Just try not to break stuff. The crashing sound nearly gives me a heart attack every time and you know that's just plain mean to your old man."

"I won't break anything. Promise."

They just laid there for a long time after that, Peter tucked up into Tony's side like a leech. He'd asked about both pictures before falling asleep, fascinated as ever by the beautiful ladies who would've been his grandmother and great-aunt if they'd lived to see him. Peter was out like a light when the next knock came, Steve's baritone asking if it was alright for him to come inside. Knowing full well that Steve would just stand out there until doomsday, Tony told him to get his spangly butt and one-armed sidekick inside before their feet stuck to the floor.

Bucky raised a curious eyebrow when he poked his head around the corner.

"Don't give me that look," said Tony. "Wherever one of you is, the other isn't far behind. Doesn't take a genius to figure that much out."

And that was still a difficult pill for Tony to swallow, if only because it meant anything that had previously existed between himself and Steve was impossible now. With Bucky back in the picture, there would be no need for an emotional or romantic attachment to someone like Tony Stark, who had done nothing except bicker and argue with Steve since their first meeting five years ago. Not to mention he now had a small child, and nobody wanted to deal with a kid who wasn't theirs, be it through biology or adoption.

"I think you underestimate my need for independence, Stark."

Peter grumbled in his sleep, arms wrapping even tighter around Tony's waist and squeezing the healing wound on his left side. Tony held back a wince, ignoring the pain because he was far more in favor of an emotionally and physically exhausted Peter getting his beauty sleep vs. being
horrendously cranky and liable to maul poor, unfortunate Steve if provoked. That was the last thing they needed tonight.

"Shhhh..."

Bucky covered his mouth, eyes darting over to Peter's curled up form. "Oops, sorry. How out of it is he?"

"On a scale of one to ten, at least a seven. Rough night."

The assassin nodded and stayed right next to the door, leery of doing anything that might wake up Tony's son. It was kinda comical, seeing the Winter Soldier himself shying away from an eight-year-old boy like he was a particularly bitey piranha. Then again, considering Peter's initial reaction to the Avengers, it wasn't too terrible of an assumption on Bucky's part.

Steve twiddled his fingers before asking, "You okay? Was it something we did? I did?"

With a sigh of deep exasperation, Tony debated whether to come clean on his little panic attack or just bury it further into the back of his fucked up mind. Honestly, it was very tempting to just go with the latter option, as he'd been doing for the last thirty-five years. However, Tony now had Peter to contend with and there was little doubt the boy would continue to rummage through Tony's old possessions from time to time. It was a pretty standard curiosity for any child, especially one who'd been adopted out of the blue like Peter.

So, Tony decided to go for broke and just spill the beans while the spilling was good.

"I haven't seen that bear since I was seven," he admitted. "It was a birthday gift from Aunt Peggy that my old man hated from the first time he saw it."

"Peggy?"

"Did you seriously think I didn't see her on a regular basis? She was one of the few bright spots in my childhood. Aunt Peggy was always the first person to tell Howard off whenever he became too overbearing. I saw her often enough to be considered an honorary nephew. Who do you think paid for her top-notch care in old age? And the personal protection units? I wasn't about to let SHIELD lock Aunt Peggy up just because she might say something that was a security breach."

Steve's eyes widened at this admission.

"Yeah, you weren't the only person who loved or mourned Peggy Carter's death," said Tony. "She lived into her nineties and was the best damned aunt I could've ever asked for. The only reason I wasn't at her funeral was because I had prior engagements scheduled and she would've been pissed if I'd missed them for something as unimportant and depressing as her funeral. 'Death is natural and shouldn't be feared when you're as old as me,' were some of the last words she ever said to me. 'Give those kids their scholarships and stop wallowing in misery.'"

Steve swallowed a painful lump in his throat and whispered, "Yeah, that sounds like Peggy."

"Why not Captain Ameribear?"

If it was possible to look like a confused raccoon, then Barnes pulled it off better than anyone Tony had ever seen. He apparently hadn't even known there'd been stuffed bears made about him. Ugh, dealing with out-of-time super-soldiers was so frustrating sometimes.

"Because she said Captain America wasn't the only war hero who should be recognized," said
Tony. "That someone didn't need to be physically enhanced to be remembered as a hero. And she knew how obsessed my old man was with finding this lump of icicles. A Bucky Bear made more sense, I guess."

The super-soldiers both appeared to be baffled by this line of reasoning. Dear God, did he have to spell it out for them?

Brawn vs. brains, front and center here.

"In case you two haven't noticed, I am neither an athletic nor physically enhanced human being. In fact, I always tended to avoid sports whenever possible. Science and robots are much better time spent, if you ask me."

"Point, Tony?"

"Bucky Barnes was easier for me to relate to and Aunt Peggy knew it. At that age, I probably would've put Captain Ameribear through an industrial blender or tried to take a blowtorch to him."

"That's kinda vicious."

"Well, I did try to set fire to some of your memorabilia once. Dad was not happy about that, let me tell you."

"You kept it?"

"No, my mother kept it," said Tony, "My dad wanted to throw it out, but Mom must've hid it upstairs in the closet. She never agreed with how obsessed Dad was in finding Captain America. Always believed he was dead and should've been left in peace."

"Maybe she had a point."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Okay, seriously, the last thing we need right now is yet another pity party. Especially from the Capsicle. At the moment, I've got a blockade on that particular issue, so don't go stealing my glory, capisce?"

All he got in response was a pair of eye rolls, although they were nowhere near as sarcastic or potent as Tony's had been. After so many years of dealing with stupid reporters and overbearing investors, Tony had turned outward annoyance and exasperation into an art form. Rhodey had suggested he patent the look at least thirty-seven times.

He'd have to run the idea by Pepper next time he saw her. Tony just loved having shoes thrown at him. It was like a sport.

"My mother was a smart woman," said Tony, "Far smarter than Howard ever gave her credit for. And she knew my mind pretty well, even if I would've never admitted it back then. Few good things come from those who don't feel fear or the rattle of their body on a regular basis. Mom wanted me to know being physically enhanced wasn't necessary to being a hero. That was what Aunt Peggy said, too."

Bucky was staring at the floor now, eyes blank and vacant like they seemed to be so often nowadays. It was a little unnerving and Tony pulled Peter in close, his daddy senses tingling as the assassin worked through whatever problem was fucking around in his head. The BARF neuro-blocker would prevent him from slipping into Winter Soldier mode against his will, but Bucky's head-space could still get pretty weird and chaotic at times. It was the main reason why he tended to disappear with no notice, unable to handle Steve's coddling or Natasha's suspicious glances.
Fucking around with the paparazzi had become Bucky's favorite pastime in recent weeks. It was an outlet for his pent-up aggression without being physically violent, which his therapist had recommended during each session. Then again, stalking nosy photographers probably hadn't been the man's idea of non-violent recreation. He had likely been thinking somewhere along the lines of boxing or volleyball, not scaring the piss out of idiotic civilians.

On the other hand, scaring the dumbass civilians was for a worthy cause, so maybe that would garner Bucky some therapy points. Or not...

"You wouldn't believe how much—oww!"

Another grumble came from Peter, the kid nearly whacking Tony in the face with his fist. Honestly, the wounds he had to suffer for being a father seemed to know no bounds. Nearly losing an eye or tooth seemed to be par for the course with parenthood. Not to mention all the jackasses who thought it clever to target his only child. Quite the dangerous occupation, it seemed.

If Maria had lived, she would've been laughing her prim and proper ass off right now. Sweet revenge, she'd probably say.

"Okay, you know what, this child is a menace. How have I not lost an eye yet?"

Peter's fingers were now buried deep in Tony's shirt, refusing to let go even when his father plucked at them. With how their day had turned out, Tony just didn't have it in him to deny Peter the physical and emotional comfort he so obviously craved. If May or Ben had been in his place, he had no doubt they would've done the same thing.

After a few moments of tense silence, Steve finally said, "The pizza's here."

"Very astute, Stevie."

"Yeah, I can hear your stomach growling from here, Cap. And since I'm not sure when this little leech is gonna wake up, could one of you bring me a plate?"

Bucky nodded. "Sure thing. I'll make sure this bottomless pit doesn't eat everything."

"You eat even more than I do, Buck."

"Says the man who ate five pizzas just the other week. It's amazing SHIELD doesn't just leave us to starve considering how much a single week of groceries must cost them."

"It's not cheap, trust me," grumbled Tony. "Now hurry it up. I'm gonna waste away at this rate."

"What a tragedy."

"Yes, it would be a terrible, terrible tragedy." Tony sniffed in indignation, pointedly ignoring the eye rolls he got in response. "The whole world would suffer, so fuck you, Barnes."

"Not in front of the child, Stark."

Okay, yeah, Tony might have sputtered at that filthy quip, but the super-soldiers were out of the room before he could throw back a retort. Instead, all he did was sit there, Peter glued to his side and thoughts far away from the stuffed bear that was probably still haunting the living room. Then again, maybe the stuffed bear would have been a better thought option.

Stupid super-soldiers...
"Extra-cheese with pepperoni and sausage," said Steve when he returned a few minutes later. "Only two slices, though. Bruce said we still have to be careful with your stomach and how much goes into it."

"Oh my fucking God," groaned Tony. "I'm gonna kill that traitor."

"Food?"

Peter's nose was suddenly sniffing right over Tony's plate, sleepy eyes growing more alert as he surveyed the cheesy goodness Steve had brought them. And of course, Peter just assumed Tony's food was also his food, gobbling down a slice like his hungry father wasn't sitting right next to him. Yet another bright spot of being a parent: if you have tasty looking food, then don't be surprised when your child steals it.

"I brought extra," said Bucky as he walked into the room. "Natasha just told me to bring four pies and shut up about it."

With Peter awake and still clinging tight to his dad, FRIDAY apparently saw fit to turn on the television in Tony's bedroom and restart their earlier choice of Jumanji. It was a pretty good idea on her part since Peter was quickly distracted by Robin Williams and knife-wielding monkeys, paying Steve and Bucky little mind when they honkered down on a nearby couch.

"Never seen this one," admitted Steve. "So the game drags people into it?"

"Only if you roll a certain number," explained Peter. "Each space has different outcomes, like the mosquitoes and the bats and the lion. The main guy's been in there for a long time since nobody else continued the game."

"And it just disappears when the game's finished?"

Peter nodded. "Yeah, but it's super hard to finish since everything's trying to kill you."

"Including the hunter guy who—"

"No, you can't tell them," ordered Peter, finger pushing against Tony's lips. "They gotta watch it and see what happens for themselves."

"Oh, great, I've gotta kid who hates spoilers."

"You're like Uncle Ben." This was said with a dramatic roll of the kid's eyes, which seemed to be an ongoing theme tonight. "He never cared if someone told him about the twisty parts or the ending. Used to drive Aunt May crazy."

And then the scene came with Robin Williams saying, "Hunter from the darkest wild, makes you feel just like a child."

"Wait, so who's this guy?"

"That's Van Pelt. He's been hunting Alan ever since he got sucked into the game." Peter coughed around a slice of pizza. "He's supposed to be what you're most afraid of. The same actor plays both him and Alan's dad, so that's why they look alike."

"Huh, never noticed that."

And yeah, Tony really hadn't noticed that interesting little factoid. It made him wonder if Howard
would be his own Van Pelt in a world like Jumanji, always hunting and degrading him for not being good enough. Apparently, Steve must've had the same thought because he glanced between Tony and the screen several times, drawing conclusions that Tony really didn't want to think about.

"He's a shit shot," said Bucky. "I wouldn't mind having that rifle, though."

"Seriously, Buck, we've talked about this."

"My collection isn't that big. And it's not like I have an elephant gun laying around, either. Not practical."

Tony didn't remember much after the stampede scene, eyes drooping as Peter continued to explain things to Bucky and Steve. Both men nodded along like good little babysitters, doing whatever they could to worm their way into Peter's good graces. Even if Tony had been roiling mad at the super-soldiers for months, he didn't want his son holding a grudge if he could avoid it.

No child should have to carry that kind of burden.

When Tony woke next, everything was dark and Peter had reclaimed his father's right side like he owned it. There was a large spot of drool on his shoulder and the kid had somehow stolen three of the bed's four pillows. It appeared that even Tony's bed was no longer sacred. He should've figured this was gonna happen.

"Oh boy, this is gonna be fun."

It took Tony a good three minutes to untangle himself from Peter's octopus arms, desperately trying to maneuver his pathetic body into positions he hadn't tried out in years. Except this time, instead of abusing his flexibility for sexual fun times, Tony was abusing his flexibility for a few hours of quiet times. Waking his eight-year-old son was the last thing Tony wanted at... whatever time of the morning it was.

Ugh, five o'clock. Fuck that.

"Gotta pee, gotta pee," muttered Tony, "Oh shit, really gotta pee."

After making it to the bathroom just in time, Tony decided to grab his tablet from the living room and nearly had a heart attack when he found a not-so-sleepy assassin camped out on the couch. And would you look at that, the bastard wasn't even asleep.

"Fucking hell," gasped Tony, "Would you please stop doing that!"

"I can't help it your senses suck."

"Who needs senses when you have your own FRIDAY and JARVIS. I swear to Thor's one-eyed dad, you're more of a menace than my own kid is."

"I couldn't sleep." Bucky shrugged. "That happens a lot nowadays."

"Then welcome to the insomniac club, Buckaroo. It's where all the popular kids hang out in my tower."

When Tony came over to grab his tablet off the coffee table, he finally saw what Bucky was holding and why he may have chosen to sleep on the downstairs couch. It was that damned bear again.
"I'm really sorry about your parents," said Bucky, fingers picking at the bear's goggles. "I can't even tell you how absolutely sorry I am about what happened to them. What my fucking hands did to them. I hate myself for it every day and I see their faces every night. No amount of therapy is gonna erase that fact, despite what Stevie thinks. It's a nightmare that never stops and even though I was brainwashed and forced to do it, that still doesn't change the fact that my hands did it."

Tony stayed silent, watching as the super-soldier ran a frustrated hand through his hair. It was greasy and stringy, which seemed to happen whenever Bucky was stressed or didn't get enough sleep.

"If I could kill all of HYDRA for what they made me do to your parents and so many other innocent people, I would. Maybe that makes me a bad person, but I want to make them suffer for the torture and murders they made my hands commit." Bucky pulled at his hair even harder. "And I punched Steve when I came outta the ice. He had no right to keep that kinda information from you and I just can't believe he did that."

Afraid that Bucky was gonna pull his own hair out, Tony whacked at the other man's hand with his tablet and then flicked him in the head. It earned Tony a bitter chuckle in return.

"I loved my own mother so damned much. She was beautiful and amazing and loving and she died of lung cancer in 1951, thinking her only son was dead in a fucking war that should've never happened," said Bucky. "My father was pretty great too, even if he died when I was twelve. And my sisters were gorgeous and smart and I can't believe they're all gone now."

Bucky stood up and just looked at the bear, seemingly lost in his long-winded apology. It was so earnest that Tony, who still felt plenty of anger over the debacle that was Siberia, couldn't bring himself to interrupt.

"For what it's worth, if I'd been placed in the same situation—watching a video of my parents and sisters being murdered while in the same room as the physical person who'd done the killings—I know I would've reacted in the exact same way. And if Stevie had lied to me about it..." Bucky ran a metal hand over his face. "I'd likely have knocked his teeth out. I mean, if he'd even had a notion of it, I just don't..."

Swallowing down his own anger and frustration, Tony laid a hand on Bucky's shoulder and then used his other to tap at the man's metal arm. It seemed to catch his attention and much to Tony's relief, didn't result in a violent reaction.

"This arm wasn't used to kill my parents," said Tony. "I made this arm with my own hands. And if I thought you'd use it to kill innocent people again, I'd rip it right off to prevent you from having to live with even more blood on your hands. It wasn't this hand that killed Howard and Maria Stark. This metal hand saved my life and my son's."

Bucky took a deep, shuttery breath, which Tony ignored. The last thing they needed was a sobbing super-soldier and mad scientist in the same room.

"What happened to the old one?"

"I burned the fucking thing into molten pieces," said Tony without a hint of remorse. "And those pieces are rotting at the bottom of the filthy and polluted Hudson now."

"Good riddance."

"Can't say I'm gonna lose sleep over seeing them go out that way."
Bucky seemed to realize that that was closest thing to an apology he'd get from Tony at this point. Considering the festering wounds that had existed between all of them for the past year, it was probably the best that could be hoped for until time and actions did the necessary work. Nothing about this situation was gonna be resolved quickly, and they all knew it.

"Dad?"

Well, that was short-lived...

"I swear, he's like a bloodhound," groaned Tony. "My privacy is non-existent. Poof, all gone."

All Tony got in response was an eye roll—seriously, they were everywhere tonight!—Peter yawning and tottering over to stand between them. Bucky reached out to run a hand through Peter's messy hair, careful and gentle and more aware than ever of how the metal contrasted with Peter's fragile skull. For once, Tony didn't feel like running after him with a blowtorch for giving such an affectionate gesture.

"What're you doing up?"

Peter narrowed his eyes. "I should be asking you that. You're too old and injured to be up this early."

"Excuse me?"

"Bruce and Uncle Rhodey said you need plenty of sleep to get all better, so get back to bed." Peter started to push him towards the bedroom. "I'll make Bucky do it if you don't. He can carry you."

"This is extortion. Pure, manipulative extortion."

"I don't know," said Bucky with a shrug. "Sounds pretty legitimate to me. After all, it's Dr. Banner's orders."

"Damned traitor."

Chapter End Notes

Very important turning point in this chapter that I've had planned since the beginning. Until Tony and Bucky had some kinda talk about Tony's parents and came to a tenuous but mutual understanding, there was gonna be no moving forward. As someone who's seen the reaction of children to their parent's murders (in both a medical and personal setting), it is absolutely, 100% not something you just "get over", as some people have implied. I hope I handled this part in a fairly realistic and believable manner. And yay for Bucky Bear and Jumanji and adult talk!
"I have to meet with Ross and his lackeys today."

That single sentence caused everything in the kitchen to grind to a halt, Peter looking up from his whipped cream and blueberry pancakes to see his dad standing in the main doorway. He watched the others out of the corner of his eye, Steve's frown and Natasha's tense shoulders a clear sign that none of them were happy with a visit between his father and whoever this Ross person was. The name sounded familiar, but Peter didn't bother to remember everyone his dad interacted with outside their daily lives.

"Are you sure that's wise, Tony?"

"Don't look so concerned," said the engineer with a nonchalant wave of his hand. "I've been dealing with this asshole for the past year with only Fury and T'Challa for back-up. Sometimes Pepper and SI's legal team if necessary. He's a grade-A asshole, but I know how to play his game and manipulate the law where it suits me. The system can be worked if you know how to do it."

"I'll be with him," said Natasha. "They won't even know I'm there."

Bucky didn't even try to hide his displeasure. "And what, we're just supposed to sit here and twiddle our thumbs? While you're schmoozing with a megalomaniac?"

"No, you're supposed to take my son to the National Air and Space Museum and show him what crazy lunatics you both were in your bygone years," said Tony around a piece of toast and scrambled eggs. "And you better do a good job of it, because Rhodey won't be amused if his precious nephew doesn't get a good, solid education on the finest death-traps our country ever produced."

"I don't know," said Bucky, "The New York subway's a pretty strong contender for that title most days."

"Just stay outta trouble and don't traumatize him."

"How long will you be gone?" Steve was less than amused by their joking banter. "I'm sure Peter would like to look at some of the exhibits with you."

Peter nodded in confirmation.

"Oh, well played, Rogers, well played. I honestly didn't think you had the balls to whip out the parental guilt card on me. Well, at least not so soon. Honey bear's been using it for about five weeks now."

"Did it work?"

"That remains to be seen," said Tony with a waggle of his eyebrows. "Okay, here's how it's gonna work. Ninja Twin 1 and the Happster will accompany me to visit our most esteemed elected officials while Jack Frost and Ice Cube entertain my smart-assed offspring for the next eight hours. We shall converge at the museum cafeteria whenever those bloodsuckers see fit to return my freedom. Or when I feel like walking out. It could be either, to be honest. Any objections?"
"I still don't like it."

"Well, that's practically the story of your life, Cap. Hey, Nat, do you think Ross would notice if I zapped him under the table?"

"I doubt he'll be as understanding as Bruce about it."

"You ruin all my fun."

Bucky smirked. "I've got a pistol if you wanna shoot him in the dick with it."

"Tempting."

"Are you at least taking something with you?"

"No worries, I've got my trusty watch and a half dozen other Iron gadgets attached to my person. All of them can sneak through metal detectors and frisking without a hint of discovery. And seriously, you're gonna go grey and give yourself ulcers if you keep up the needless worrying, Cap."

"I don't think you've got much room to talk, Stark."

"Shut your filthy mouth, Barnes. If I wanted the opinion of a geriatric centenarian with a gun fetish, I'd just head over to the local nursing home."

"One of your frequent haunts?"

"Just on Sundays. The older ladies are handsy and can't get enough of the infamous Stark ass," said Tony with a shameless wink. "Mrs. Havisham has a bad habit of pinching the same spot thrice."

"Okay, you two, language. Peter is sitting right here."

That shut Bucky up real quick, eyes darting between Tony and his son like they might suddenly bite him for being a crude cad. Of course, this was pretty hilarious when one considered Tony's own filthy personality. He flirted like he breathed, even if nothing tended to come of it nowadays. It was one of the main reasons why he tended to rub people the wrong way, too.

Hell, Example #2542 was standing right behind him with a disapproving frown.

Then again, it was kinda nice not to be the only person on the receiving end of that nasty grimace for once. Good ol' Buckaroo could suffer right along with him.

"Uncle Ben already gave me half of The Talk," said Peter. "There are good touches and bad touches, daddies and mommies have babies together, women have cramps once a month, and some people just like to kiss a lot and I shouldn't stare or make rude comments about it. Only adults are allowed to do that kinda stuff."

"I officially love your uncle," said Tony. "He already did half the work for me."

And then Tony's phone rang, loud and shrill in the comfortable bubble that had settled over the kitchen. Peter scrunched up his nose in annoyance, not liking that the stupid officials were taking so much of his dad's attention. This was supposed to be a vacation and Tony needed to relax like Aunt Pepper had ordered him to just last week. Instead, all these stupid people kept bothering him.

Peter hated them.
"Of course, I've already drawn up schematics for the BURP and FARC programs. I'm feeling quite insulted here. Oh, but when have I ever been anything but a complete professional at these meetings. Well, yeah, except in my defense, it was only one time. Nobody needed that table, anyways."

Peter watched as everyone eyed his dad with bemusement, obviously more than a little curious about what Tony had done to piss off whoever he was talking to. The only one who didn't look interested was Natasha, but Peter wouldn't be surprised if she already knew all about the incident. She always seemed to know about every little thing that went on in their lives.

"Yeah, yeah, I'll be there in an hour," said Tony. "Not to mention that this whole thing was rather short notice. I have other, far more important responsibilities these days than playing handler to a pack of superheroes and the government. Oops, sorry, my toast just popped up."

"What the fuck is BURP?" asked Bucky once the call had ended. "And I'm assuming that was Secretary Fucktard again. Seriously, I've got a gun that you can shoot him in the dick with."

Tony shrugged. "I figured if I used enough acronyms, our dearest friend might think I'm a Scientologist and leave me alone."

"I thought you were a scientist?"

"Oh, my poor, time-traveling popsicles, just wait until you see the glorious insanity that is Tom Cruise and his horde of alien-worshipping followers. I'll look like a sane postal worker by comparison."

"There's no need to traumatize them, Tony."

"Yes, there is," cackled Tony. "Why didn't I think of it sooner? It'll be the perfect revenge."

"And he's finally gone full mad scientist on us."

Peter tried not to show his anxiety as his dad got ready to leave, instead choosing to remain in the kitchen and munch on a piece of toast. Unfortunately, this didn't stop Tony from bustling in like a whirlwind to give Peter an exaggerated goodbye kiss on the cheek. His beard tickled and Peter wasn't quite able to stifle a snorted giggle.

"That's an epic frowny face, kiddo," said Tony. "You're starting to look like Rhodey and I can't deal with another of him, so no frowning. Hey, no glaring, either. It'll just be for a few hours, I promise."

"You'll be back by lunch?"

"More likely around two or three o'clock. I've got a couple meetings to attend with a bunch of boring ol' corporate and elected officials. Fingers crossed that my brains don't leak out halfway through. But I'll definitely be there before dinner. No doubt about it."

"I'll keep a list of stuff for you to see."

"That'll work. And please try to behave for the popsicles," said Tony. "I know they can get a little overbearing sometimes, but don't make either of them cry, okay?"

"Steve promised to buy me funnel cake."

"Already manipulating Captain America for sweets? You're a son after my own heart."

Tony
leaned forward to give him another kiss on the cheek. "Just ask Steve or Bucky if you wanna call me. I'll have my phone on the whole time. And seriously, behave yourself."

Peter stuck his tongue out at this, watching as his father left the house with Happy and Natasha in tow. And so he was left with two super-soldiers who were still a little leery of Peter's mood-swings and temper, Bucky's head peeking around the corner to give Peter a cheeky grin. They'd visited four museums in the last five or so days, making their way through the exhibits while Peter chattered their ears off.

It would be strange to be alone with them.

"Almost eight o'clock now," said Steve. "We'd better be going if we wanna beat the lines at the zoo."

"Zoo?"

"Yeah, the special reptile exhibit is today." He held up a pamphlet for Peter to see. "Your dad mixed up the dates in that cluttered brain of his. And since we actually need a sunny afternoon to enjoy it, I think going sometime today would be prudent. We can visit Air and Space tomorrow."

"It's gonna be pretty warm, so let's get some sunscreen on you."

Peter didn't object and just let Steve and Bucky fuss over him. The former nearly stepped on Hammertime in the kitchen hallway, the little robot buzzing and beeping as it tried to vacuum crumbs from the floor. It even chased Bucky into the living room, clearly annoyed with so many people invading its domain on such short notice. Peter thought it was hilarious.

"I swear, everything Stark creates is vicious and homicidal."

"Yeah, just wait until you meet his trio of AIs down in the workshop," said Steve as they left the house. "Dummy's about as threatening as a white dove and all U and Butterfingers want to do is blend grease-filled smoothies."

"Vision's really good, too."

The super-soldiers easily settled Peter into the service vehicle Happy had called for, Steve shouldering the backpacks they'd filled with anything an eight-year-old might need on a day-long field trip. Bucky had even double-checked with JARVIS before leaving the house.

"I heard he's gotten a lot better at cooking. Have you been his guinea pig?"

"Lots of cookies and blueberry pies."

"Why those?"

"Because Dad likes those and Vision has a hard time saying no to him." Peter leaned over Steve to look at the Washington Monument, accidentally kneeling him in the gut on two occasions. "Don't tell anyone, but I think Dad's a little worried about his weight now. He keeps complaining about everything migrating down to his butt and thighs."

A snort came from Peter's left, Bucky clamping a hand over his mouth when the kid looked at him. It didn't stop Peter from kicking him in the shin, face pulled into a pout when the assassin busted into open laughter. Adults were so weird.

"If you tell him I said that, he'll shoot you and ground me."
"Sounds like a fair trade."

"You say that until you're blasted into a wall. Steve, make him shut up."

"Will you be nice to me if I do?"

"Maybe."

"Shut the hell up, Buck."

"Seriously? A simple *maybe* gets you to turn against me?"

"I had to reassess my priorities."

"Fuck you."

Peter tried not to laugh at the offended look on Bucky's face, the knot that had been sitting in his stomach all morning finally starting to unravel bit by bit. He had been nervous about separating from his dad, even if it was only for a couple hours at an exciting place like the National Zoo. Tony hadn't gone anywhere without Peter since his adoption, staying within a minute's distance of Peter at all times and always being ready to comfort him.

Not being able to immediately locate his dad was more scary than Peter was willing to admit, but the knowledge that Steve or Bucky could contact him at a moment's notice made things a little better. Neither man was anywhere near as good or comforting as his dad, but they'd have to do for the next few hours. Maybe Peter could guilt them into buying him a giant stash of candy.

His dad couldn't side with the cranky, cavity-obsessed dentist when the candy was a gift from Captain America, right?

"We're almost there."

Now it was Bucky's turn to get a lapful of Peter, knobby knees meeting soft stomach like a painful missile. Thankfully, it only took two minutes for the driver to pull into the parking lot and drop them off, both men doing their best to keep Peter from racing off to the entrance booths. Bucky easily grabbed the boy just like he'd done so many years ago to his own niece and nephews.

"Okay, short-stuff, let's not run off and bring your dad's fury down on our heads. We've got all day to scope out this place."

"I wanna see the reptiles."

"You're gonna spend all morning and afternoon with the scaly critters, don't worry."

"What if there's lines?"

"Then I'll find a way to sneak around them."

Instead of being fascinated by the pandas and elephants and tigers like most kids his age, Peter spent nearly the entire morning moseying around the reptile exhibits, rattling off information about each and every animal they looked at. Peter had spent hours on Wikipedia the other night, reading up on the animals and exhibits they'd see at the zoo. Steve and Bucky didn't know what hit them.

"The Gilla monster's one of only two venomous reptiles in North America."

"Dad won't let me have a green iguana as a pet because he thinks it'll eat me. But they're actually
herbivores, so they don't eat meat."

"Cuban crocodiles are critically endangered and can only be found in two wild places now."

"That's a Burmese python. They can grow to over twenty feet long and lots of people buy them as pets and then dump them outside when they get too big. Florida's being overrun by them."

At ten o'clock, Steve disappeared outside for a few minutes to call Tony and tell him where they were, claiming he didn't trust the trackers that Tony had no doubt fitted into his son's clothes. All Peter did was ignore them, far more interested in the Brazilian rainbow boa than their mutual accusations of betrayal and child neglect. Uncle Rhodney was a much better babysitter, if you asked him.

"King cobras are the longest venomous snake in the world."

"See those? They're fire-bellied toads and they like to come out in the rainy season in China. I'm trying to convince Uncle Rhodney to get one for me."

"Leopard geckos live in the Asian deserts. I want one of them, too."

"White's tree frogs have horizontal pupils and are from eastern Australia. Everything there tries to kill you."

"Gharial's are super long and funny looking."

Whenever Peter couldn't properly see an exhibit, he just waved his hand and Steve or Bucky were right there, giving him a steady boost to see over the heads of the other parkgoers. All it did was result in Peter treating them like his own personal jungle gym.

"And that's an American alligator. His name's Wally. And if you're in Florida, assume every body of water has gators in it."

"Matamata turtle means I kill, I kill in Spanish. They're good hunters."

"Veiled chameleons can change their color when they want, but they're usually kinda sandy or light green since they're from the Arabian deserts."

"Look at all the venomous ones! That's a cottonmouth and that's a timber rattlesnake and that's a black rat snake. C'mon, look, look, the website said that they've got a Gaboon viper!"

"Ouch, okay, we're coming. No need to break any fingers."

Peter was practically dragging both super-soldiers down the hallways, amped up on sugar—and yeah, Steve was even easier to weasel candy out of than Peter had anticipated—and childish excitement over seeing so many rare animals for the first time. Aunt May and Uncle Ben had taken him to the Bronx Zoo twice, but Peter had still been too young to have a clear memory of it.

Maybe Tony would take him there again if he asked really nicely? Or Uncle Rhodney would. If his dad didn't have time to do something like that, then his uncle or Vision were bound to cave in at some point. They'd done it every time so far.

"I'm kinda happy for the glass right now."

"They don't like to bite unless they have to," said Peter, leaning back against Bucky as they looked at the vipers. "Sometimes it's a dry bite, too. Those won't kill you since they have no venom in
"Good to know."

"Your arm's made of metal. She couldn't bite you even if she wanted to."

"Huh."

"Don't give him any ideas, Peter."

"The green anaconda could eat him, though. They can get to be over thirty feet long. See, it's over there."

"Wait, we just—whoa!"

For a solid six hours, both men were towed from one exhibit to the next, only stopping for lunch when Steve could hear telltale rumbles coming from Peter's stomach. Cheeseburgers and fries were their choice of the day, Peter watching a peacock strut through the nearby bushes while squawking like a fire engine. If it hadn't been for the soldiers' enhanced hearing, the cranky fluffball probably would've snuck up and given them all an unexpected heart attack. Steve tried to shoo it away, but all the giant bird did was squawk at him.

"That's a male," said Peter around his burger. "He's got the giant tail feathers. And he's gonna use them on you if you keep doing that."

"I don't want him to attack you."

"He won't attack anyone if we just leave him alone. And you're not supposed to feed the animals, either. It's bad for them and their stomachs can't digest it right."

"By God, you are a walking encyclopedia."

Peter shrugged, "I like to read and animals are interesting. I like them more than people."

From there, they were off to the bird exhibits and then the giant ape exhibits and then back to the reptile exhibits. It was around one o'clock when Tony, Natasha, and Happy found them at the Aldabra tortoise enclosure, Peter jabbering with the zookeeper about the tortoises and their diets and native environments, completely shameless in his fascination with the huge, slow-moving reptiles.

"Well, looks like someone's having fun."

"Dad!"

"Am I the only person who thinks it's unbearably hot out here?"

"You're in a suit, Stark."

"And I look damned fine in it, too. Don't be jealous, Barnes."

"Of you? Never."

Peter raced over to hug Tony around the waist, smiling up at him as the tortoise moseyed over to eat a pile of carrots. A few other parents were standing nearby with their own children, keeping a respectful distance from both tortoises at the zookeeper's request. Steve and Bucky were right by Peter, keeping an eye on Tony's kid like the paranoid vultures they really were.
"Hey there, kiddo. Been having a good time?"

"Tortoises can't swim."

"Huh, well, that's kinda unfortunate. I guess the whole not swimming thing is what separates them from turtles, right?"

"Yep. And they get stuck in the mud a lot, too."

Ecstatic to have his dad back so early, Peter proceeded to drag Tony around just like he'd done to Steve and Bucky, jabbering his dad's ear off while also munching on the giant lollipop Natasha had bought for him. By the time dinner rolled around, they'd seen almost every exhibit and Peter was starting to flag, feet and calves aching like hot irons.

"I think the sugar crash is coming."

"My feet hurt."

"Yeah, I've only been here for five hours and my feet are already hurting, kiddo."

In an effort to get some sympathy, Peter grabbed Tony's right hand and leaned his head against it, grumbling about his aching feet and the blisters that were already popping up all over them. Natasha merely raised an unimpressed eyebrow at Peter as they left the gift shop, gently flicking him on the ear when he became more whiny and petulant than she deemed appropriate.

"Okay, that's it, I'm calling in the big guns. Steven, get your spangly ass over here."

"Yes?"

"The midget's complaining about blisters and everything else imaginable, so be a dear, sweet gentleman and give my brat a piggyback ride."

"But what if—"

"He's not gonna bite or maim you. Kid's too tired to do much of anything right now." And yeah, Tony was right. After ten hours of standing and walking around in nothing except Hulk sneakers, Peter was just too tired to put up a fight and didn't object to Bucky boosting him up onto Steve's back. Strong hands settled under Peter's thighs, easily redistributing his weight into a more comfortable position as they continued towards the zoo entrance. Peter wasn't quite sure how long he dozed on Steve's shoulder, eyes half-lidded and unfocused as people and their children bustled around them. It was strange, being carried by someone he still didn't really trust, but Peter was too tired to care at this point.

"Happy already called for the cars," said Natasha in the background. "They'll be out front in a few minutes. Did anybody recognize you?"

"Some parents gave us suspicious looks." Bucky sounded really close and Peter tried to swat at him with a limp hand. "I think the beards threw them off, though. Hey, what's with the swatting? You're so damned vicious."

"You do look bizarre with them, I'll admit."

"Hey, I pull off this look way better than Stevie. He looks like a giant neanderthal."

"Stop poking my kid, Barnes."
Peter managed to land a hit on Bucky's head this time, grunting when Steve had to readjust his hold on Peter's upper thighs and bum. Being bounced when you were half asleep wasn't a pleasant experience. In retaliation, Peter made sure to drool on Steve's neck. It was a fitting punishment.

"Your kid's gross, Stark."

"I'm sure you were ten times worse in your caveman years, Snowcone. Don't provoke him."

"He's kinda squishy."

"Keep up the poking and I'm gonna break your fingers, Buck."

"Spoilsport."

Peter grumbled when he was deposited in the service vehicle, Tony sliding in next to him while Happy took the other window seat. He dozed the entire way home, a tired and cranky lump that required Steve to pick him up again once they arrived at their destination. Bucky had apparently rode in the front while Steve and Natasha took another car.

"Go upstairs and get packed," said Tony. "We're leaving tonight."

"What? Why?"

"Just do as you're told for once, Cap. I'll explain once we're on the jet. And don't attack Vision, either."

"He's here?"

"Arrived this morning. I sent him here earlier and he should've already packed my stuff and Peter's. I'd like to be outta here by eight o'clock."

"Okay, but we're talking about this later."

Strong hands laid Peter out on the couch, carefully rearranging his arms and placing a pillow underneath his head. Peter could hear the adults moving around upstairs and in the kitchen, whispering amongst themselves so he couldn't hear what they were talking about. His aunt and uncle had done that all the time and it irritated Peter to no end.

"I'm gonna bring the bots with us," said his dad's far-off voice. "They've gotten depressed being here all alone."

"What should I put them in?"

"Their transport carriers are in the hallway closet next to my bedroom. And don't even think about running off with the blowtorches, Barnes."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

Peter must have completely conked off for a good while because before he knew it, Steve was shaking him awake and attempting to avoid his flailing hands. Sighing in exasperation, the supersoldier simply reached down and picked Peter up bridal-style, carrying him out to the car like a limp ragdoll. Peter didn't bother to object, too tired and groggy to argue against the childish treatment. Plus, Steve was kinda comfy when he wasn't running his big mouth.

"Everybody got everything?"
"Yep."

"Then let's not keep my pilot waiting. Jeremy has an important dinner with his future in-laws tomorrow afternoon."

"Dad?"

"Just go back to sleep, Petey-pie. We'll be at the airport soon."

Deciding that his father's advice sounded pretty good, Peter curled into Tony's good side once they were in the car and shoved his bare feet under Happy's thighs, content to sleep until Steve needed to carry him onto the plane. And what did you know, it turned out Peter was correct about the carrying part because as soon as they stopped, Steve was reaching through the door to grab him again.

"Seriously, kid," grunted the blond, "You're like a limp noodle."

"Heads up, ladies, we've got company."

"Just ignore them," said Tony, reaching out to cradle his son's head as Steve rearranged noodle-like limbs. "Our dear friend sent them as an intimidation tactic. They're stuck on the sidelines until Thunderhead finds something extra-nasty and life-threatening to pin on me."

"Can I at least shoot at their feet? Make 'em piss their pants?"

"Knock it off, Buck."

"You know they know who we are. Fuckin' Ross just can't keep his goons to himself."

"We're not doing anything that could get us arrested and thrown back into the Raft," snapped Steve. "Especially since the new Accords haven't been finalized yet. And Peter is right here, too."

"I still wanna shoot 'em."

Peter held on tight when they started up the jet's steps, eyes fixed on the ominous figures that stood just outside a nearby boarding ramp. His dad was right behind them with Vision at his heels, leaning up to ruffle Peter's hair once he noticed the kid was still awake. Dulles International Airport was lit up like a candle as the sun set, planes taxiing in and out in perfect little lines that Peter found utterly fascinating. He wondered how many times Uncle Rhodey had taken off from here.

"Alright, let's get you strapped in."

Everything went quickly after that, his dad and the others taking their own seats once everything was secured in the cargo hold. Tony had leaned over and taken Peter's hand at some point, giving it a tight squeeze as the pilot announced their take-off time as less than three minutes. Across from them, the Avengers were speaking with Happy in hushed tones, likely commiserating over whatever had happened in his dad's meetings.

"Are you okay?"

Tony turned to him in surprise and said, "Of course, I'm fine. Just had a long day listening to those ridiculous ol' windbags."

"At least you got to see the tortoises and snakes."
Just like Peter had expected, this pulled an amused laugh out of his dad, Tony shaking his head at the innocent statement. In Peter's world, nothing was better than a bunch of multi-legged and scaly creatures that could kill you with a single bite.

"Yeah, at least I got to see the tortoises and snakes. They were probably the highlight of my week, too."

"Can I have an African pancake—"

"Not a chance."

Then they were taking off, Peter grunting when he was pushed back into his seat. None of the adults looked the slightest bit fazed, but he figured that was probably due to them flying in all kinds of planes all the time. Peter held on tight to his dad's hand, watching as the tarmac disappeared below them and gave way to the Washington city-scape.

It was really pretty and relaxing and Peter didn't argue when Tony kept holding his hand for the next hour. Something was obviously bothering his dad and Peter was willing to put up with a sweaty hand if it made him feel better. Aunt May had always liked nervous hand-holding, too.

"What about a gecko?"

Chapter End Notes

Lighthearted chapter with some dark foreshadowing lurking underneath. Peter's still fishing for more pets and Steve's pretty much a glorified cargo carrier at this point with a jackass Bucky harassing him from behind. Lots of candy was bought. And yes, the vacation is now over. A storm's abrewing and as usual, the Avengers are at the heart of it.
The next few weeks were a combination of mundane and nerve-wracking. Even with the threat of Ross and Winter Soldiers on his radar, Tony still had an eight-year-old son to prepare for school in late August, something that he was wholly unfamiliar with at the best of times. Apparently, the third grade required a lot of supplies, including many that hadn't been around when Tony himself was a child. To his relief, Steve had volunteered to venture out and pick up the list that Peter's homeroom teacher had given Tony at their pre-term conference. Non-computer stuff wasn't exactly Tony's forte and starving artist Steve seemed to know more about what the school would expect than him.

Oh well, just one less thing he needed to do. No love lost there.

Peter's clothes and backpack were a whole lot easier to purchase for a novice parent like Tony. Of course, this was due to Peter wanting anything and everything that had a Hulk or Star Wars theme to it. In the end, his new clothes were a hodgepodge of both while his backpack depicted a classic scene between Luke Skywalker and his homicidal father. Who said Starks didn't have good taste?

"Just as a note," Tony had said after they bought the backpack, "There will be no lightsabers in your immediate future."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not about to have you lose a hand before your eighteenth birthday."

"JARVIS said you tried to make a lightsaber when you were my age," had been Peter's response. "And that you nearly blew up Grandpa's workshop in the process."

"I really need to reprogram that hunk of useless circuits."

"Noted, Sir."

For the most part, Peter was an agreeable kid when it came to school and almost seemed excited to return. At first, Tony had planned to enroll him in a private school several blocks from the tower, but after giving it some thought, speaking with his therapist, and receiving protests from Peter himself, Tony had decided it was best for him to remain at the same public elementary school as Mason and Avery in Queens. It was far from the top in New York City's educational hierarchy, but Tony also knew that separating Peter from his friends and a familiar environment was the last thing he needed right now.

So, to make up the difference, Tony would be sneaking some huge-ass donations to Johnson Heights Elementary in the near future. After attending a parent-teacher conference with Ms. Brynowski, it was clear that the school was struggling to purchase classroom supplies and furniture for the students, but Tony could remedy that with little effort.

To everyone's relief, Peter's first day of school went off without a hitch. Depending on the traffic, either Vision or Happy took Peter to and from school, the former using his flight and intangibility powers to fly across Manhattan to Queens in less than five minutes. Peter thought it was the coolest thing ever and got Vision signed in with the office as his older brother and co-guardian to allow for easy pick up. Everyone had laughed their asses off when they heard this, Vision just cocking his
head to the side and pondering his new position as a glorified transport for Tony Stark's pint-sized son.

"It's a most respectable designation and responsibility," had been Thor's words. "Perhaps if I myself had been more attentive to my own younger brother, things may have turned out quite differently. Take young Peter to his lessons and revel in the closeness it brings, my friend."

"My robot baby is growing up. I'm so proud."

Vision had simply given Tony the side-eye before saying, "I was taller and heavier than you at my creation, Anthony."

"The snark is not appreciated, young man. You're grounded."

"How distressing."

The school had seemed more than a little puzzled by Vision at first, but several dozen non-disclosure agreements had solved that problem before it could even make its way into the media. A flying red cyborg who had a bad habit of phasing through solid surfaces wasn't exactly their idea of a stable guardian, although Vision appeared to be winning them over by the third week. Honestly, who could resist those sweet cybernetic eyes?

"Did you brush your teeth?"

"Yes."

"Remember to pack your homework?"

"Yes."

"Got all your pencils and notebook?"

"Yes."

"Okay, then get your bum in gear," said Tony from the hallway. "Vision's waiting for you in the kitchen. You've got five minutes."

"I know!"

Unfortunately, it also appeared that Peter was not a morning person. He grumbled and whined and trudged around every weekday, always asking for just five more minutes and often barely having time to shove a piece of toast into his mouth. Tony countered this by saying that he needed to get up early to get Peter up early, so the bitching wasn't gonna work on him.

Bucky, the damned bastard, thought it was absolutely hilarious.

"Seriously, that kid—Peter! Get your ass in gear, kiddo! You're gonna be late if you don't hightail it out here right now!"

"I'm coming! I'm coming!"

Peter nearly tripped over the Doominator as he raced into the kitchen, also barely dodging Bruce as the older man grabbed a cup of coffee. With the expertise of any long-suffering parent, Tony pushed a plate of toast and scrambled eggs in front of his son, tapping the table in the universal sign of Eat right now or forever hold your peace. And since breakfast had been made by Steve, it was guaranteed to be delicious.
"Seven minutes to eat. Get to it."

Once their morning routine was over and Peter had attached himself to Vision's front for his aerial ride to school, Tony planted a firm kiss on his kid's cheek and then went down to the workshop. It was Friday and he needed to get the new Starkpad schematics to Pepper by twelve o'clock or risk permanent damage to his manhood. The past few weeks had been rather hectic and he'd fallen behind on several projects as a result.

"Fire up the blueprints for me, J."

"Of course, Sir."

"And what do we got on the crazed maniac front?"

"Nothing of importance that King T'Challa himself has not already uncovered," said the AI. "Everything has remained quiet and I have not noticed any deviation in the Secretary's movements, either. Would you like to see the video feeds yourself?"

"Nah, I trust our Lady Widow and you to handle that operation just fine. What's your report, Fri?"

"Only rumors, Boss. I have already forwarded all information to King T'Challa and Agent Coulson, who said they will personally look into the chatter themselves. Mr. Everett Ross is also pursuing a lead as we speak."

"Poor bastard," said Tony. "I'd hate to always be mistaken as a relative to Thunderhead. Unfortunate name choice."

"I suspect he had little say in the matter, Sir."

"Still sucks."

"There has also been no unusual activity around Master Peter's school. If the Secretary's underlying threats are credible, then he has not employed any agents that would surface on my surveillance systems. Background checks on all faculty and staff have come up negative, too."

"Have Natasha plant a couple more sensors and cameras as soon as she's able then. I don't trust that asshole not to, in his words, force my compliance if I become too much of a hindrance. Thunderhead must've gotten an F in his diplomacy classes."

"I will forward your message, Sir."

"You also received a message from Dr. Cho," said FRIDAY. "She requests that you set up another appointment and have your triglycerides and white blood cell count tested again. If you do not, then she will be forced to resort to drastic measures."

"Those her exact words?"

"Are you calling my honesty into question, Boss?"

"I'd never do such a thing."

"You did the other night when you accused me of purchasing illicit confection substances for Master Peter."

"Someone's feeding that kid sugar and I'm gonna find out who," said Tony. "Nobody gets away with such treachery in this tower. I will find them."
"Best of luck, Sir."

At least three of the Avengers had taken up residence in Stark Tower since their return from D.C., most specifically Steve, Bucky, and Natasha. They lived on their own floors and occasionally mingled with the permanent residents, but things were still tentative at times. Sam also appeared about once a week, apologizing for some of his past actions and spending time with Rhodey whenever the colonel was in, which was pretty often nowadays. Thor was only around for the first week before going on yet another trip to Asgard, but not without promises to bring back a magical present for Peter.

Yeah, Tony wasn't really looking forward to whatever Asgardians considered appropriate gifts for their eight-year-old children. Magic was a fucking menace and he'd prefer his son stay far, far away from it.

As for the other Avengers, Tony still wasn't ready to allow them around Peter on any type of basis. Clint and Scott had both ditched their own children at the drop of a hat and Tony didn't trust them with Peter as a direct result of that decision. If they weren't willing to stand by their own brats, then why should Tony assume that they'd be willing to do the same for his? And Wanda wouldn't be in the tower any more than absolutely necessary so long as Bruce was living there. The physicist was in no way comfortable around her and Tony wasn't about to make his friend suffer for the sake of anyone else.

"Don't forget about the Hearthstone Gala tonight either, Boss. It starts at seven o'clock and Ms. Potts will rip out your liver if you're late again."

"Oh fuck, I completely forgot about that."

"She insists that you remain on your best behavior as well. And that includes, I quote, not telling business partners to fuck a cactus and consume a lethal amount of Bud Light Lime. Flirting with socialites should also be kept to a minimum. You're a wholesome father now."

"You don't need to remind me."

"I believe that Vision, Sergeant Barnes, and Captain Rogers will be available for babysitting duties this evening," said JARVIS. "Would you like for me to contact them?"

"Sure, go ahead."

It was about thirty minutes later when the workshop doors slid open, two super-soldiers walking through with cautious eyes and footsteps. Neither of them had been in the workshop since the initial attack, and in Bucky's case, he'd never before ventured into Tony's private space at all. The assassin looked at Dummy, Butterfingers, and You with an almost childlike degree of wonder, the three robots bustling around to fulfill their creator's requests for his armors and the new Starkpad. It was Dummy who first noticed their presence, beeping and booping and waving his favorite wrench in the air like an unruly child.

"Dummy! Pay attention and hold this piece still," snapped Tony. "By God, it's not like you've never seen Steve before. And Barnes won't drink your smoothies, either."

He got a sad whine in response.

"Nope, don't give me that shit, you menace. These two assholes are my new babysitters and the last thing I need is you poisoning them with a cup full of grease and engine oil and avocados."

"What the hell's he talking about?"
"The bots like to make smoothies," said Steve with a shrug. "They're of questionable quality, to say the least. Never drink one unless JARVIS tells you it's safe or you physically watch them blend it."

"Ookay, thanks for the—oh, hello there."

Butterfingers had trundled up to the soldiers, holding up a Starkpad prototype like it was the best thing in the world. And to Tony's bots, it probably was since they'd played a large part in putting the tablet together.

"He wants you to look at it," said Steve. "And be careful of You. He's got a fire extinguisher. No, You, stay right over there."

All Steve got was a disgruntled click in return.

"Hey, you know I didn't mean it like that. He's always the melodramatic one. And I've warned him about spraying me before, too. Never listens."

"I have a feeling me and him will become good friends."

Tony watched the soldiers interact with his bots, Steve not even reacting to the vicious pinch Butterfingers gave his right thigh. The bots had all seen the damage done to their creator after his return from Siberia and had likely overheard several of his and Rhodey's conversations, so it wasn't surprising that they'd be somewhat hostile at first. However, it was also heartening to see that Steve didn't respond with any type of violence towards his cranky synthetic children.

"So, JARVIS said you wanted to talk to us?"

"I need a babysitter tonight."

"Umm, well, okay," said Bucky with a bemused frown. "It's not like we have anything else to do, anyways. Unless Stevie's scared of an eight-year-old?"

"You're hilarious, Buck. Literally a barrel of laughs."

After setting down his soldering tools and mask, Tony looked at the two bickering soldiers and tried not to feel a painful twist in his gut. At that moment, he knew that any chance he'd hoped to ever have with Steve was officially gone. Even with the hostility and bad blood between them, a tiny part of Tony had still hoped for, well, he didn't really want to think about whatever he'd once wanted. It was best for him to just focus on Peter from now on.

As long as Tony focused on Peter, everything would be alright.

"I'll be leaving at seven and should be back before midnight," said Tony. "Just make sure Peter doesn't blow up the building and is in bed before ten and you shouldn't have any problems. And don't listen if he says I let him stay up later on weekends. We're working on a solid schedule here. And since it's Friday and we usually do his homework on Sunday afternoons, he'll probably just play his Pokemon games the whole time."

"Where are you going?"

"To a gala that Pepper threatened my life and limbs if I don't attend." Tony started to spin around and around in his chair. "Gonna have to schmooze with the socialites and CEOs and investors for a couple hours. Let dirty old ladies grab my ass in the name of good relations. Deal with pompous assholes who'd love to see me failed or dead. The usual stuff."
"That's not something to joke about, Tony."

"If I want to retain my sanity for the evening, then yes, it is. Have you seen how the corporate world is? Underneath those fancy suits and dresses is a whole bunch of sociopaths who love to trample anyone they see as a rival. And I'm a rival to pretty much all of Wall Street. Trust me, Winter Soldiers and Thunderhead aren't the only people who've painted targets on my back."

"That's just depressing."

"Eh, I know who my business enemies are," shrugged Tony. "They're literally the easiest to identify nowadays."

And okay, maybe that was a petty jab at Steve and the Avengers, but Tony didn't really feel any remorse about it. To everybody else's surprise and his own, accepting Bucky had been quite a bit easier than re-accepting his old teammates, especially those who'd been the most violent in their confrontations. Tony and Steve had been civil to each other, the latter guarding Tony and his son like a Rottweiler wherever they went the last few weeks. Hell, Steve had even kept his beard in an effort to blend in and keep the media from connecting Captain America to the Stark family.

Then again, the paparazzi had been unusually quiet and passive since Peter had started school, so maybe they'd found another celebrity to fixate on. With Ross' veiled threats still fresh in his mind, Tony really hoped so. That man would use anything he could to his advantage, including whatever information he could find on Tony's only child.

"Will he be okay with just us here?"

"Since I doubt you're talking about actual physical protection, I think you'll be happy to know that Vision will also be home tonight."

Bucky snorted. "So you're pawn ing two of your kids off onto us?"

"Yep. And you can make a sleepover outta it."

"Never thought I'd be spending my Friday nights watching a spider baby and a cyborg baby. The future is weird."

"Gripe, gripe, that's all I hear outta you people," said Tony. "Now, stop bitching and get your super-soldier asses over here. I need to test out these new repulsors and you two are perfect to use for target practice."

Tony tried not to cackle when both of them looked mildly terrified. Sweet revenge.

By the time Peter got home just after three o'clock, Tony was already being harangued by Pepper about which investors were the most important and which CEOs had ended up on her infamous shit-list. Steve and Bucky had watched all of this from the kitchen, wisely keeping their mouths shut and presence discreet as Pepper tried to make Tony cooperate like a good business owner. It didn't appear to be working, either.

"Dad!"

"Hey there, kiddo." Tony leaned down to hug Peter close, eyeing Pepper from across the room. "Just in time to save me from your homicidal aunt. She wants me to wear a godawful purple tie. It's a travesty."

"You've worn it before!"
"And I thought it was completely awful back then, too. I don't think old lady Hanson is gonna care if I'm wearing the same colors as her ancient family. Besides, she's probably got cataracts by this point."

"She's the top donor to our Bulgarian and Greek charities, Tony."

"Fine, I'll let her pinch my butt. You happy?"

"I think we need to reassess your idea of appropriate fundraising etiquette."

"Don't we do that every month?"

"Peter, darling, please try to talk some sense into your father. He's not behaving like a good adult."

"I can't work miracles."

And that just proved Tony's child was evil, pure evil. No respect for his elders at all. Honestly, why did he put up with this disrespect in his own home? He really needed to purchase new friends and family members. Or he could just make some like he'd done before. Yep, that always worked out so well.

"Bunch of traitors, the whole lot of you."

Three hours later, Tony was putting on his gala suit when a knock came on his bedroom door, the pattern familiar from several years of hearing it on a semi-regular basis. After taking a deep breath, Tony yelled for Steve to come in and stood dawdling like a misbehaving teenager. It was a goofy habit that Steve had had for as long as Tony had known him.

"If Pepper's sent you to harass me, then I'm going to be very cross."

"She's busy fussing over Peter and trying to persuade him to eat his broccoli," said Steve. "No, I just wanted to talk to you about... something before you leave."

"And what would that be?"

The blond hesitated for a moment before stepping further into the room and placing a small, thin box on Tony's bed. He just looked between it and Steve for several blinks, not quite sure what to make of the simple package. The hopeful look on Steve's face didn't help, either.

"I know you don't like being handed things."

"Touche."

"You're supposed to open it, Tony."

"I'm getting there."

He slowly unwrapped the package, eyes widening when he saw four framed pictures slide out of it. The first was of Peter at the zoo, crouched down a few feet away from an Aldabra tortoise, apparently holding an important conversation with the slow-moving animal. The second showed his son with a trio of lorikeets on his shoulders and head, one of them pecking at Peter's ear with a vengeance. The third was of Peter with a white and pink praying mantis on his face, nose scrunched up as the insect walked around his head. The fourth and final picture had Peter holding a small black and orange snake, looking far more enthusiastic than any child had a right to be with a snake in their hands.
"I took them when he wasn't looking," said Steve, holding up a small Kodak camera. "Since you were stuck at the meetings, I thought you'd like some pictures of him with the animals. I've got about thirty more that aren't framed, too."

Steve pulled out an envelope that, as he said, had a stack of developed pictures stuffed inside it.

"You didn't have to do this."

"I wanted to. And it's not fair that you couldn't spend the whole day there with him."

"Do you want one?"

That seemed to take Steve by complete surprise, his eyes widening to a comical degree. However, it also took Tony himself by surprise, especially since things had still been tense between the two of them. Despite Steve now staying in the tower, they had yet to speak about the Accords and everything that had happened sixteen months ago. It was a sticking point that Tony was too weary to address, no matter how necessary it was.

"Are you sure?"

Steve looked painfully hopeful, fingers twitching when Tony held the stack out to him.

"Yeah, and take one for your other half, too."

Not waiting for Steve to respond, Tony walked over to his closet to retrieve that dreaded purple tie, surrendering to Pepper's orders like he usually did. Kinda cowardly, he was willing to admit, but facing the relationship that obviously existed between Steve and Bucky wasn't something he wanted to do tonight.

"Tony! Hurry up!"

"I swear, that woman is a slave driver," said Tony, pointedly skirting around Steve when he tried to speak with him. "Fingers crossed that Natasha doesn't stab anyone who tries to grope me. She'll probably claim they looked suspicious and had a weapon on them."

"Anthony Edward, get out here now!"

He heard Peter giggle from the hallway and say, "She used your middle name! You're in trouble."

"And that sass means no gecko for you, Peter Benjamin."

"Shit."

"He's developing a potty mouth, too. Just what I need."

Tony headed to the living room with Steve not too far behind him, adjusting his cuff links and sticking out his tongue at Peter. The brat responded in kind, leaning hard on Bucky to see over the couch. Thankfully, the assassin didn't hesitate to grab Peter's shoulder and prevent him from toppling over.

"A growth spurt's gotta be coming because you're more clumsy than a newborn horse," said Tony. "And stop using Frosty as your own personal jungle gym. His rickety old bones can't withstand that kinda abuse anymore."

"Says the man who's been forced to up his intake of calcium and potassium by Dr. Cho. Or did I mishear the good doctor's latest orders?"
"Don't tempt me to remove your eardrums, Sir Grease-a-lots."

"Behave, boys."

Pepper came over to straighten Tony's tie, already dressed in her midnight blue Zuhair Murad gown. Her goofier half was ready to go in his own matching suit while Natasha lounged on the couch, appearing perfectly comfortable and formidable in her own golden dress. Tony wondered how many weapons she'd managed to hide underneath it.

"You said that Colonel Rhodes is gonna meet you there?"

"He usually doesn't attend these types of galas," said Pepper, "But it's probably best that we have as much protection and backup as possible. Just in case. You have your Iron tools on, right?"

"Never leave home without them."

And wasn't that a sad truth. Tony literally never left his workshop or bedroom without at least the repulsor watch, knowing that he could be a target in any location to Ross and the Winter Soldiers. Nowhere was safe anymore.

"I've got mine," said Happy with a wave of his wrist. "You packing the belt taser, too?"

"Among other things."

"Well, let's just hope the night goes smoothly." Pepper leaned over to kiss Peter's forehead. "Behave yourself for the senior citizens, okay?"

"I'm gonna watch the new episodes of Dragon Ball Super."

"Good boy."

The others headed for the elevator as Tony went over to say his own goodbyes, promising Peter that he'd be back before midnight. And if Peter wanted to see him or call him, JARVIS could easily fire up his tablet and connect to the cameras that Natasha and Agent had already installed around the venue. This would be his first night away from Peter, even if only for a few hours, so Tony tried to reassure him.

"And you're to be in bed by ten o'clock," said Tony. "I've already warned these two lumps about your deceptive ways, so don't even try to manipulate them."

"I'd never do that."

"Oh yeah, I totally believe that not at all conniving face. And don't forget to feed Bumble, either."

"Tony!"

"Okay, okay, I'm coming!"

Peter clung to Tony for a few moments before finally going back to sit beside Bucky, separation anxiety rearing its ugly head just like the therapist had warned. School had been fine so far, but any other separation was met with clinging and sweaty palms. Tony was gonna have to speak with Dr. O'Meara about it after Peter's next session.

"Bye."

While Tony and his co-conspirators made their way to the gala, Peter sat on the couch and watched
Goku and Vegeta get the ever-loving shit beat out of them by Lord Whis. He tried to ignore Steve and Bucky, who were having a heated whispering contest in the kitchen. The soldiers weren't nearly as quiet as they thought they were and Peter could clearly hear his dad's name mentioned on several occasions.

"Adults are stupid."

Bumble meowed from her spot on his lap, looking up as if in agreement. She was such a smart cat.

"And they say I act like a cranky child."

It was half past eight when Peter took a shower and brushed his teeth, coming back to the living room to watch one more episode of his favorite show. Steve and Bucky were still in the kitchen, although they'd gotten a lot quieter than before and appeared to be eating a giant stack of sandwiches. A knot formed in Peter's stomach when he realized his dad was far away on the other side of Manhattan, dealing with investors and other important people and open to attack by all of the nasty people who wanted to hurt him.

"JARVIS?"

"Yes?"

"Can you show me my dad?"

"Of course, Master Peter. Just open up your tablet and I will connect it directly to the venue's cameras."

"Thanks."

Peter sat on the couch with Bumble and grabbed his tablet, impatiently waiting for an image of his dad to appear on the screen. His stomach twisted more and more with every second that passed, palms sweating as he tried to force down that awful feeling deep in his gut. The taste of bile had also risen up in the back of Peter's throat and he swallowed in an effort to keep it down. He missed Aunt May and Uncle Ben so much.

"Your father is right next to the lady in the purple dress," said JARVIS. "I will adjust the angle and scope to give you a more accurate view."

It only took a moment for Peter to spot his dad, fluffy hair and sharp goatee acting as easy identifiers. Tony had his media smile on, which Peter thought looked really fake and weird, mostly because his dad never smiled like that at home. Peter didn't like it.

Everything was super boring until about ten minutes in when a tall blond guy approached his dad, body language relaxed and smile wide as he started speaking to SI's owner. Peter scrunched up his nose, eyes narrowing when the man placed his hand on Tony's lower back and leaned down to whisper something in his ear. From the look on his dad's face, it must've startled him.

Okay, Peter really didn't like whatever was going on down there. It was way different than the older ladies he'd been talking to earlier and the knot in Peter's stomach got even tighter when his dad's fake smile came out in full force. The guy obviously had gross intentions and Peter was gonna stop him.

"Steve!"

A blond head popped around the corner. "Something wrong?"
"Call my dad and tell him I'm real sick. Like, puking and diarrhea and boogery nose sick."

"Why?"

"Because this stupid guy's getting handsy with Dad and he's not allowed to do that," said Peter while holding up the tablet. "If you say I'm real sick, he'll come home right away."

"What do you mean by handsy?"

Both men were at his side in less than ten seconds, eyeing the tablet with a disconcerting level of attention. Normally, Peter would've commented on it, but right now he just wanted to get this stupid blond guy away from his dad. Someone needed to stab the dude's hand with a fork.

Peter reached over and whacked at Steve's back left pocket, knowing full well that was where he always kept his phone. They needed to hurry up because Mr. Suave was obviously putting the moves on his dad and that just wasn't acceptable. What if he was some type of murderer out to kill Tony? Or drug him with a drink? Peter needed to nip this flirting thing in the bud as quickly as possible.

"Any idea who he is?"

"Not a clue."

"C'mon, c'mon," snapped Peter with an impatient growl. "Call him!"

Bucky and Steve stared at the tablet, watching as the blond put his arm around Tony's shoulders like it was meant to be there. They could vaguely see Rhodey about four tables away, head turned to look at whoever this flirtatious and arrogant asshole was. It was too bad you couldn't shoot people in public anymore.

"Vomiting and puking, right?"

"Really bad and runny and I feel like I'm dying," said Peter. "He needs to come home right now. It's real serious."

"The bastard definitely just tried to cop a feel. What the hell's—"

"Okay, worried Tony coming right up."

Chapter End Notes

Peter doesn't appreciate anyone getting handsy with Tony without his permission. Pretty typical of any kid who's experienced a divorce or parent's death. And Tony's getting some attention from a familiar fellow here. I'm sure fans of the comics will be able to guess his identity pretty quickly, too. Peter's also got some eager accomplices at his side now.
"Hello, Tony."

"Stone."

"Finally decided to reenter civilized society again?"

"Pepper's influence, I assure you."

"Ah, yes, that woman has always been quite the slave driver."

"You could say that."

The CEO of Viastone had a huge smile plastered across his face, charcoal suit perfectly pressed, blond hair windswept, and posture just a smidgen away from relaxed and overconfident. It was a facade that Tony had seen all too often over the years, always aimed at the engineer whenever Stone wanted something from him. The taller man knew exactly how to charm his way into people's pants and bank accounts when he put his mind to it.

"I'm surprised you're even here," said Stone, "What with everything that's been going on. Bigger fish to fry than humble investors nowadays, right?"

"Not in Pepper's rule book."

"Well, it's always nice to see old friends," A familiar arm slipped around Tony's shoulders. "Time breeds familiarity and all that hogwash. So, I see that you're working on a new prototype for the Starkpad. Gathering tech from that thunder god must be pretty helpful."

"Everything's of my own creation, I can assure you."

Stone laughed and said, "No one would ever doubt that brain of yours, Tones. Now your common sense, oh yeah, but a scientist would have to be insane to turn down such advanced technology. Not to mention this little trinket of clean energy. You could make a fortune off of it."

The blond tapped at Tony's chest, obviously referring to the arc reactor hidden beneath his clothes. It made Tony flinch, startled that even Ty would attempt to touch the only thing keeping him alive.

"I already have a fortune, Ty. No need for another one."

"Howard would be horrified to hear those words come out of your mouth."

"My old man would be horrified by a whole lot of stuff I've done," said Tony with a nonchalant shrug. "He had a bad habit of becoming stuck in his ways, as you already know. Best to innovate before anybody else does."

"Spoken like a true futurist."

And there was that charming yet manipulative smile again. Tony knew exactly what that smile meant and he really didn't feel like dealing with Ty's relentless advances tonight. The man was like a dog with a bone whenever someone piqued his interest, which Tony didn't want to happen with
him again.

"Staying in the past is always a terrible venture, as both you and I have discovered."

"Depends on the situation."

"Well, extrapolating from already collected data does have its advantages, I'll admit," said Ty, hand dipping low on Tony's back as he led him to a nearby table. "But I suppose you'd know this better than anyone considering the last few—"

Tony was feeling more than a little uncomfortable when his phone rang, buzzing like a nasty gremlin in his suit pocket. It was the perfect opportunity for him to escape the asshole who'd haunted him for nearly three decades. Oh, the wondrous wonders that came with having a young child. Seriously, nobody was going to argue with a parent when the babysitter was calling. It just wasn't done.

"You'll have to excuse me, Ty," said Tony while waving his phone. "The babysitter's calling and I need to take this."

"Ah, yes, I'd heard you had a new son."

"Be right back."

"Take your time, we have all evening."

He wasted no time in disappearing behind a nearby pillar, more concerned with being able to hear Peter than the gossiping hens around him. If they leaked anything to the press, then FRIDAY had video confirmation of every single person within listening distance. And dear, sweet Pepper would be on them like flies on manure. The lawsuits would be quite the sight to behold.

"What's up, Petey-pie?"

"Tony?"

"Okay, you're definitely not my Petey-pie. Did you lose my kid, Rogers?"

"No! He's just kinda... sick."

"Wait," snapped Tony, "What do you mean by sick? He was fine when I left. What'd you do to my kid, Winghead? Out with it."

"Seriously, it's nothing major, Tony. I promise," assured Steve. "So just calm down and listen, alright? After Peter took his shower, he said he wasn't feeling well and watched his cartoons for a couple minutes before complaining about his stomach and then throwing up all over Bucky."

"Oh shit, is he okay? And I mean my kid, not Barnes."

"I gave him some Pepto-Bismol and Bucky's with him right now. It's kinda been coming outta both ends. Maybe it's a stomach bug from school?"

"Children are little germ bombs."

"Do you want to talk to him? I think the latest round of vomit has slowed down."

"C'mon, don't ask stupid questions, Steven."
"Okay, give me a minute."

It was forty-eight seconds later when Tony heard Bucky's voice in the background, saying something about kids being composed of nothing but nasty liquids. It made Tony smile a bit, enjoying the mental image of his son puking all over a master assassin. Sometimes, reality was unrealistic.

"Dad?"

"Hey there, buddy. You having fun barfing all over the One-Armed Wonder?"

"Steve's a jerk."

"Already a well-known fact, but what'd he do this time?"

"He promised not to call you," said Peter in a viciously petulant voice. "I don't like him anymore."

Tony heard the blond's muffled voice say, "When has he ever liked me?"

"Never."

"Okay, enough abuse of the super-soldiers. Their feelings are very sensitive. Can you behave yourself until I get home?"

"You don't have to—"

"It should only take Happy a half hour to get us out and back," continued Tony without pause. "Rush hour's long over and that man's a master at finding shortcuts in the most unlikely of places. I'll find Pepper and tell her to schmooze in my place, okay?"

"Okay."

"Now put Steve back on the phone. And try not to throw up on Barnes again."

"I can't guarantee anything."

"Then try to aim for his shoes or something that won't result in him wanting to maim me. I need all my limbs to properly science, kiddo."

"I gotta go to the bathroom."

With that said, Peter must've given the phone back to Steve, who ordered Bucky to get Peter to the toilet as quickly as possible. Tony tried not to laugh at the slightly frantic tone his voice has taken on. His son was traumatizing a pair of super-soldiers. He was so proud.

"Does he have a fever?"

"Not that we could find," said Steve. "Maybe it was something he ate? I've already had JARVIS contact Bruce and ask for his opinion."

"He's not that kind of doctor."

"Yeah, I know, he said exactly that when I called down to him."

Tony scoffed. "Don't let his modesty fool you. Our Brucie-bear is capable of great feats in multiple fields. He's just too humble to admit it."
"Umm, I think Bucky needs my help. You're coming home?"

"Yes, I'm coming home. Not even I'm so cruel as to leave your wrinkly ol' asses with my vomiting child." Tony glanced at his watch and signaled for Rhodey to come over for a minute. "With Happy driving, I can get there by ten-thirty. You gonna survive until then?"

"I think we can manage."

"Good. Now go attend to my child like the lowly servant you are. And feed the cat while you're at it."

"It's not time for—"

"Begone, annoying peasant. Your sickly prince awaits."

With a flick of his finger, Tony cancelled the call and turned around to find Rhodey not four feet away, brow furrowed in that oh-soworried look he pulled off so well. It was a well-practiced expression, especially with two Starks to look after these days.

"Everything okay?"

"Peter's sick. Barfed all over the Bionic Man."

"Heading home?"

"Of course, Honey Comb. What kinda parent do you take me for?"

"Mildly overprotective."

"Oh, like you're one to talk," said Tony. "I do recall an incident two weeks ago when you insisted on attending all five of Petey's parent-teacher conferences with me. It was, and I quote, a necessary precaution to make sure none of them had unsavory or double-crossing intentions."

"You're a celebrity. The paps are willing to manipulate anybody to get the information they want."

"Excuses, excuses."

"I'll find Pepper and tell her what's going on," said Rhody with a long-suffering sigh. He was used to dealing with icky Starks. "I'm sure Nat already knows, so don't be surprised if Happy shows up and—fuck me."

Tony blinked. "I thought we decided that wasn't gonna happen twenty-six years ago."

"Good evening, Colonel."

"It was until a few minutes ago, I can assure you."

Oh boy, this definitely wasn't an ideal turn of events, not in the slightest. If there were two people in Tony's life who hated each other, it was Tiberius Stone and James Rhodes. To be honest, Tony was kinda surprised that Rhody hadn't tried to murder the blond yet. Pepper and Happy had a long-standing betting pool for that eventuality; it was at least a decade old and still growing, too.

After taking an elbow to the ribs, Rhodey finally greeted Ty with a sharp, "Stone," before moving on to an equally acidic, "Finally returned from Europe, I see. It's been what, ten years?"

"Few sights can rival the Tuscan coastlines," said the blond with a knowing glance towards Tony.
"It's little wonder that so many brilliant minds have sprung up from that region of the continent. I found it quite difficult to part with, although New York certainly has its advantages."

Did Rhodey just growl? Yeah, Tony was pretty sure that he'd just heard a growl come from his best friend's throat.

"It is a rather lively place, I'll give you that."

"No better place in the world for business and innovation, as I've already seen here tonight. Am I to assume you are attending on behalf of the USAF?"

"And Stark Industries. I work closely with both now."

With a giant and very fake smile, Tony waved another pair of investors off towards Pepper, not wanting to risk their safety or bank accounts if Rhodey decided to make a lunge for Ty's throat. Believe it or not, televised bloodshed was bad for business when actual fucking superheroes were involved. Parents didn't like it, schools didn't like it, churches didn't like it, and Fury really didn't like it.

"An interesting combination. SI doesn't deal in weapons anymore though, does it?"

"The United States Air Force collaborates with many industries outside of weapons design and manufacturing," said Rhodey. "The clean energy and medical technology SI has developed in recent years is essential to both maintaining and upgrading our current domestic and international capabilities. Last year's Stark Expo merely gave competitors a brief glimpse into SI's potential advancements."

"Yes, things look quite promising," said Ty. "I was fortunate enough to attend Tony's NYU lecture on new semi-conductor technology last week. It'll likely revolutionize the industry before the year is out."

"What?"

"That was a closed conference."

"University officials invited a Viastone representative to attend." Ty didn't even attempt to hold back a smug smirk this time. "Considering who was giving the talk, I decided it'd be best to see Tony's talk in person. And as usual, it didn't disappoint."

Rhodey scowled and said, "It never does."

For a long moment, Tony considered the possibility that Thor's asshole brother had used the Glowstick of Doom to curse him five years ago. Sadly, it wasn't nearly as farfetched as he would've liked, but with all the ridiculous bullshit that kept happening in Tony's life, remaining open-minded about black magic was almost a necessity to survival at this point.

And then his phone started to vibrate again.

"Parenthood calls," said Tony without a hint of shame. "Hello?"

"Dad?"

"Hey there, kiddo. Feeling any better?"

"Are you coming home?"
"Yeah, I'll be there in a half-hour. Just needed to talk to your uncle about some things before leaving. Do you wanna talk to him?"

"Can he come, too?"

Rhodey grabbed the phone and said, "I'm sending Tones home right now, baby boy. And I'll be back a little after midnight. Gotta handle some stuff for Pepper and your old man. Being responsible is exhausting."

"I think I ate something bad."

"Yeah, that happens sometimes. Or one of your friends infects you with a gut-churning virus and never apologizes for it."

"Lies, all lies."

"I'm forcing him to leave as we speak," said Rhodey while shoving Tony towards the nearest exit. And far away from Stone. "Cuddle with Bumble and try not to barf on any more grunts, okay?"

"Can't guarantee anything."

"Atta boy."

It was a firm push that sent Tony past several investors, an apology on his tongue as Happy joined him not a moment later. Apparently, the other man had noticed Ty's approach and likely would've intervened if Rhodey hadn't gotten to him first. Without a word, Happy took his arm and led Tony out to the parking garage. He was more than practiced in getting his boss from Point A to Point B without interference.

"Something wrong with Peter?"

"How'd you guess?"

"You only get that worried look on your face when it involves the half-pint," said Happy. "And he's the perfect excuse to get you away from Stone, too."

"He puked all over Barnes. And Steve's freaking out."

"Figures an eight-year-old with an upset stomach would bring two super-soldiers to their knees. It's kinda poetic, in a way."

"Do we have any jello?"

"I'll order some on the way over. Peter likes cherry best."

"You're my hero, Haps."

"I do try."

Meanwhile, Peter was lounging on the penthouse couch, watching as Tony escaped the blond man's clutches. Bucky and Steve were seated right next to him, attention fixed on Rhodey and whoever it was that had unnerved his dad. For once, Peter didn't mind their proximity and actually took a bit of comfort in it. Both men also sensed something unpleasant about the blond and hadn't hesitated in furthering Peter's schemes, so a couple more points could be added to their tally now. They still had a long way to go, but Peter might let them play with Bumble if they kept behaving themselves.
"Hey, JARVIS?"

"Yes?"

"Do you know who that blond guy is?"

"That would be Mr. Tiberius Stone," said the AI. "He is a longtime acquaintance of your father. They were friends in late adolescence and continued their interactions in their college years. To my knowledge, it has been over nine years since they last encountered each other."

"Why doesn't Dad like him?"

The AI seemed to pause before saying, "Your father and Mr. Stone had a rather dramatic falling out in their mid-twenties. Relations after that were sporadic and hostile at best. Much of Sir's insecurities stem from his past relationship with Mr. Stone. In my personal opinion, it is in Sir's best interests if they do not interact in the future."

Peter felt both men tense on either side of him, the coffee table creaking where Bucky's metal hand had been resting upon it. Thankfully, the flesh one hadn't reacted as violently on Peter's knee, instead seeming to use him as an anchor of some sort. He wondered what had made the soldiers so angry, especially since it was really weird for Steve to grind his teeth like that.

"Did he hurt Dad?"

"Yes."

"I don't like him," Peter declared. "Bucky, get rid of him."

"That an order?"

"Yes."

"Just let me figure out which knife and gun would work better. And which kneecap has opted for oblivion."

"Buck!"

"Okay, fine, you can have an arm if you want." The assassin was playing with a knife, keeping it well away from Peter despite his attention being fixed on the screen. "But I get the bastard's dick."

"How bad was it, JARVIS?"

"To such an extent that I am quite willing to assist Sergeant Barnes in his dismemberment endeavors."

"Fuck."

Peter squeaked when Steve suddenly grabbed him underneath the arms, smoothly hefting the boy up like he was nothing more than a ragdoll. Normally, Peter would have objected, but something about Steve's demeanor prompted him to keep his mouth shut. Instead, he just held on tight to Steve's shoulder, faintly hearing Bucky continue to speak with JARVIS as they disappeared down the bedroom corridor.

"Are you mad?"

"Not at you, no," said Steve when they arrived in his bedroom. "Can you act like you're real sick?"
Peter nodded. "What kid my age can't."

"Touche."

While Peter laid down on his bed with Bumble, Steve went about building their charade with a trashcan full of tissues, two discarded thermometers, and wet cloths and Pepto-Bismol on the bathroom sink. Everything was ready to go by the time Bucky arrived, body leaning against the door frame with a deep frown. It slipped a bit once he realized Peter was watching him.

"I changed my clothes to help with our ruse," said Bucky. "We'll blame Bruce's curry for your tummy ache. That stuff is lethal."

"That shirt's kinda ugly."

"Hey, don't hate on Elvis Presley. He was the King."

"AC/DC's better."

Steve snorted from the bathroom and said, "That is 100% your dad talking there. Has he bought you any of their shirts yet?"

"Five."

"I'm surprised it wasn't more. He's always—"

"May I suggest assuming your farcical positions," said JARVIS. "Mr. Hogan and Sir have just arrived in the basement garage. They will likely exit the main elevator in five minutes time."

Peter waved his hand at both of them and said, "I can handle things from here."

"As you wish, Your Highness."

That earned Bucky a stuck-out tongue, Peter grumbling as he pulled up the covers in a way that would make him appear sickly and pathetic. Considering how late it was, he didn't even need to fake being tired. Steve must've figured this out since he wasted no time in switching off the ceiling light, wandering over to flip on Peter's arc reactor nightlight and double-check Matika's tank.

"Hey, Steve?"

"Yeah?"

"I don't like that man. The blond one."

"Neither do we, buddy." Steve took a seat on Peter's bed, his right hand coming to rest on the boy's hip. "But your dad has people to look out for him now, so you don't have to worry about that Stone fella hurting him again."

"He gives me a bad feeling."

Steve didn't say anything to this, instead just continuing to sit at Peter's side like a marble sentinel. Peter was thankful for the silence, especially since he was so tired and discombobulated. Things had been a lot easier when he didn't have to worry about strangers trying to flirt with or date his parents. This was the first time Peter had had anything like that happen and it was scary.

What if Tony met someone who didn't like him? Peter had heard stories from his classmates about their parents divorcing and then dating other people and ignoring their children in favor of their
new boyfriend or girlfriend. And since Peter was adopted, what did that mean? Lots of people didn't want to have kids they weren't related to, and that could doubly apply to anyone his dad decided to date or marry. Peter's stomach hurt just from thinking about it.

"Hey," said Steve's voice right next to his head, "You're gonna suffocate under there. Tony'll murder me if that happens."

Peter growled when the covers were pulled down from his head, glaring at Steve like he was a wad of gum on the bottom of his shoe. All the blond did was smile, fingers waving in the air like a sanctimonious jackass. Uncle Ben used to do the same thing when Peter was being difficult.

"I'm tired and sickly. Shhhh, old man."

"Low blow, kid."

"What'd you do to my offspring, Barnes? If you broke him, I'm gonna break you."

"It was Bruce's curry, not me."

"Blaming the Jolly Green Giant now," said Tony with an exaggerated scoff. "Your cruelty knows no bounds. And I really need to reprogram the Doominator. Lil' bastard keeps sucking up my shoelaces. Oh, hello there, kitty."

Tony walked through the bedroom door with Bumble at his ankles, the giant cat acting as Tony's personal guide to her ailing master. It was a comical sight and Bucky didn't even try to hold in his laughter. It earned him the middle finger.

"How's my baby boy feeling?"

"He's only got a low-grade fever," said Steve. "I think it might have been something he ate. Maybe the spicy curry didn't agree with him."

"Awww, throwing up all over master assassins," cooed Tony while running a gentle hand over Peter's head. "I'm so proud. This is a defining moment in my life. Make a note of it for posterity's sake, J."

"Of course, Sir."

"So, I'm guessing we're gonna be staying home tomorrow. Did the pink liquid of goodness help any?"

"A bit."

"Well, at least only so much can come out," reasoned Tony. "And would you look at that, the Bionic Man fetched you some nice, cold water. Drink up."

"But what if I get sick again."

"Then throw up on Steve. They're a matching pair, so it's only fair. Oh, that rhymes."

It was about ten minutes later when Peter finally fell asleep, Tony puttering around his kid's space while the others waited out in the living room. To everyone's relief, there had been no more barfing or diarrhea and the worst of Peter's stomach bug seemed to be over. With light footsteps, Tony crept out the door and asked JARVIS to keep him apprised of the achy-tummy situation.

"One more parenting first down," muttered Tony as he headed out to the living room. "Guess I
should be thankful it wasn't the flu. Or inflamed tonsils."

"Master Peter had his tonsils removed when he was five-years-old, Sir."

"Probably should've known that."

"The procedure appears to have decreased his probability of suffering from a sore throat by 96%. The same also applies to his earlier proclivity towards summer colds and sinus infections."

"I like those numbers."

"Unfortunately, it appears to have done little to treat his chronic asthma."

"Can't have everything."

Tony found the super-soldiers, Bruce, and Happy in the kitchen, settled around the island like a bunch of impatient teenagers who didn't quite know what to do with themselves. His questioning glance was answered a moment later when Vision emerged from the walk-in pantry with a massive box of homemade granola that he'd thrown together last week. Vision made sure to sneak a bagful into Peter's backpack each morning.

"And the vomit machine is sound asleep," said Tony. "At least for now. I've got J and Fri keeping an eye on him."

"That's good. I hate seeing kids sick like that. It's terrible."

Bucky kicked at Steve's leg and said, "That's 'cause you were a walking virus bomb at Peter's age. A stiff breeze could've blown him over half the time. I can't tell you how many times he sneezed snot all over me."

"With friends like these, who needs enemies," grumbled Steve. "So, how'd the benefit go?"

Ugh, that was most definitely not something Tony wanted to talk or even think about. To be truthful, things hadn't been going too bad until Ty showed up in all his arrogant, macho glory, sidling right up into Tony's space like he'd never left it. The blond only ever popped up when he wanted something, usually tech ideas or sex, neither of which Tony was willing to give him anymore.

It figured that Ty would reappear at the absolute worst time, too. With everything going on, the last thing Tony needed right now was for Ty Stone to shamelessly flirt and follow him around like an obsessive, sparkly vampire. He had Peter to think about and the press would no doubt love a juicy story about the billionaire heirs and their sordid past with each other.

"Oh, it was as boring as ever," said Tony around a mouthful of granola. "A couple old ladies tried to ply me with liqueur. The usual."

If the soldiers noticed his hesitancy in answering, they gave no indication aside from a slight frown and narrowed eyes. Happy, of course, gave a quiet snicker at this explanation, obviously thinking of his boss' uncomfortable encounter with Ty not an hour earlier. Thankfully, the other man didn't say anything about this out loud, or even respond to the raised eyebrow Bucky shot his way. It was best if none of the Avengers knew about Ty's existence.

"I'm sure one of them would make a lovely stepmother for Peter."

"Ha! They'd try to ship him off to boarding school in less than a month," said Tony. "I doubt half
of them raised their own kids. Nannies are par for the course in these kinda social circles, trust me."

Steve and Bucky looked horrified. "Why would anyone wanna do that?"

"Because they don't wanna be bothered with their own offspring. To the old-school wealthy, kids are for show and inheritances." Tony grabbed another handful of granola. "In the span of two hours, I had three different donors ask me if I'd be sending Peter to one of the Eight Schools Association in New England. Or Michigan's Cranbrook School, where I myself spent two years before I blew up a chemistry lab and got transferred to Exeter."

"So, they just dump their kids off onto a bunch of teachers for most of the year?"

"Yep, pretty much."

"That's awful," said Steve. "What happens if they get sick? Peter's so young."

"You suck it up. Stiff upper lip and all that."

Bucky leaned forward and asked, "You're not planning to send him off anywhere, are you?"

"I should shoot you with a repulsor for even daring to ask a bullshit question like that. There are plenty of perfectly good schools right here in New York and I can just give them a couple million dollars in donations if any of Peter's schools need spiffing up," said Tony. "Not to mention May and Ben would come back from the dead and kill me themselves if I sent Peter away for something as stupid as elementary school."

"Good to hear."

After eating another handful, Tony wandered off to shower and change into his pajamas before checking in on Peter. He was relieved to find the kid still lost in a deep sleep, Bumble curled up at his side like an extra-furry bodyguard. One of the others must've also checked in at some point because Peter's nightstand had been cleaned up and Matika's lights dimmed to a barely-there glow. It was a pleasant surprise and Tony couldn't help wondering who was responsible for it.

"I forgot to bring in the children's Tylenol."

Well, that answered his question. It figured that Captain America would be a ridiculous worrywart over a sickened child.

"He'll probably be better by morning."

Steve gave him a thin smile and said, "Better to be safe than sorry."

The super-soldier set several pill cases on the table, rearranging things in that compulsive manner of his. Rhodey, Sam, and Bucky also had similar habits, so Tony figured it was an ingrained part of having served in the military. It still annoyed him at times.

"I don't like seeing kids sick. It makes me nervous."

"Peter's medical records are good," assured Tony. "He might need some stronger glasses in the near future, but other than that, it's mostly just asthma and the average cold. Hasn't even blown off his own eyebrows yet."

"That makes me feel so much better."
More than a little exhausted by the evening's events, Tony chose to retire to bed much earlier than usual. If the weather was nice, they were taking Peter, Avery, and Mason to Callahan's Beach on Long Island tomorrow afternoon, so Tony would need all the energy he could muster. It was almost mid-September and they needed to go before cold weather started to set in. Besides, Tony had a small horde of live-in babysitters now.

Tony ran into the tower's other resident super-soldier on his way to bed, left eyebrow raising when he saw the deep frown on Bucky's face. A Starkpad rested in the man's metal hand, flesh fingers tapping at lightning speeds that even Tony was impressed by, although he'd never admit to it.

"Finalizing the destruction of a Mexican cartel? Or will it be a couple of Triads? I hear they're getting ballsy nowadays."

"Something like that."

"Yeah, that raspy Batman voice gives me the creeps, so I'm just gonna go hide in my room," said Tony around a yawn. "And let me know if you go Uma Thurman on anyone's asses, that way I can make sure I'm far, far away when Fury inevitably busts a blood vessel."

"Go to bed, Stark."

"Why is everyone so bossy around here? Need I remind you that this is my tower."

Bucky gave him an unimpressed look.

"No respect. None at all. I'm feeling very offended right now. Make note of my offendedness, J."

"Already done, Sir."

If Tony had turned around and stopped blabbering, he would've noticed the arrival of Steve and the even deeper frown that had spread across Bucky's face. Neither of them stopped the cranky engineer from disappearing into his bedroom, instead focusing on the information that JARVIS had sent them about Tiberius Stone and all the ways he had manipulated and hurt Tony since his first year at Exeter Academy. It was a fucking long list.

"It's worse than we thought, Stevie. Lots worse..."

Chapter End Notes

The illustrious Tiberius Stone has made his entrance. He's such a lovely fellow. And not used to having any kind of competition when it comes to Tony. At this point, about four months have passed since the first chapter, so it's also been well over a full year since Civil War. Nothing except time and actions will heal the wounds left from that shitstorm.
Bucky Barnes was a weirdo.

To be honest, it didn't surprise Tony too much considering all the horrible shit the other man had suffered through, but there was really no other way to describe him most of the time. Bucky's insomniac tendencies were even worse than Tony's and it wasn't unusual to find him wandering the tower like a creepy racoon at late hours. He also tended to disappear for long periods of time before reappearing like he'd never left. If the assassin was out getting a chocolate milkshake or terrorizing some unsuspecting degenerate, then he was damned good at hiding from the press.

When Bucky was having a bad day, his mood could shift from hour to hour, causing even Steve to have issues communicating with him. Tony suspected this could partly be attributed to the other super-soldier's overbearing nature and inability to accept that the Bucky Barnes of today was very different than the Bucky Barnes of their childhood. It was almost normal to find the assassin hiding in one of the tower's many spare rooms, just looking out the windows or writing in those scruffy little notebooks of his. Sometimes he even took one of the cleaning bots with him.

That last part would've been more reassuring if Hammertime and Mr. Fantastic didn't try to annihilate each other on a semi-regular basis. Tony had tried to warn him about their rivalry, but all he'd gotten in response was a devious laugh and Bucky tying several strings to a stick on Mr. Fantastic's back. Apparently, they both enjoyed a good game of capture the flag, or in this case, the baggy full of dirt.

Peter thought it was hilarious.

So, yeah, reformed Winter Soldiers were a weird bunch. Tony often wondered if it'd be wise to carry a special insurance on them. And speaking of super-soldiers...

"What in the seven pits of hell are you eating?"

"A pickle sandwich."

"It looks like something the cat barfed up."

"Don't judge until you try it."

The statement seemed to summon Peter from out of nowhere, eyes staring at the sandwich with a quizzical curiosity that Tony worried about. His son was calm and cautious in a lot of ways, but he also liked to try new things that were sometimes of the questionable variety. Bucky's disgusting mayo and pickle sandwich definitely qualified as one of those things.

"Want some?"

"Don't you dare feed that monstrosity to my child, Barnes. I will end you."

Peter leaned forward and took a bite before Tony could intervene, chewing for a minute before pulling an unhappy face. The assassin wasn't able to hold back a quiet laugh, patting Peter on the back when he continued to dramatically gag and grumble about food poisoning.
"It tastes weird. Blah!"

"Oh God, please tell me you didn't feed him your pickle and mayo sandwich, Buck? That's just cruel."

Steve strode in from the living room and gave Bucky a disapproving look. The soldier was holding a pile of papers in his hands that were marked up by line after line of red ink. It was the newest version of the Accords and as Tony expected, Steve still didn't look the slightest bit happy about them.

And Tony's day had been going so well.

"It's good."

"I wouldn't quite describe it like that," said Steve while grabbing Peter some juice to wash it down. "More like haggis instead. Very much an acquired taste."

"He poisoned me."

Peter stuck his tongue out in disgust and then disappeared into the living room, probably to play the newest Playstation game Rhodey had bought last week. For a kid who grew up with very little and became nervous when gifted anything remotely expensive, Peter had been making out like a bandit since his adoption eight months ago. Tony knew that Rhodey was the guilty party behind this development. The military man was an absolute sucker for his nephew and felt absolutely no shame in buying Peter whatever his little heart desired, usually without consulting Tony about it.

Then again, it wasn't like Tony cared too much, either. The Parkers had been excellent parents, but their finances had also been very limited, so although Peter always had what he needed, what the kid wanted was a very different story. And Rhodey appeared to be trying to make up the difference now.

"So, I see you finally got around to reading the newest version. Fury send it to you?"

"Last night."

Tony eyed the marked up stack and said, "Been rather busy, I see. And am I to assume that Fury and T'Challa will be receiving that in e-mail form, too?"

"I've already sent them a digital copy."

Everything went quiet after that, a sudden tenseness falling over the kitchen. The Accords were still a testy subject between several of the Avengers, with only Wanda and Scott agreeing to sign if certain changes were made to them. The latter had conceded largely because he wanted to see his daughter again, while the former had stated that with new information, she felt something could be done with a modified version of the Accords to stop another Sokovia debacle from happening. Steve and Clint were the primary hold-outs with Sam requesting to see the revisions before he came to a final conclusion.

Bucky still wasn't in a position to make his own call, so he was just waiting to see the final outcome. With BARF and thrice-weekly therapy sessions, the assassin was slowly getting better, but he also didn't trust himself yet.

The revelation that Tony had been willing to compromise and massively lawyer up to protect their rights had changed quite a few stances, especially after Pepper had given them a thorough dressing down on the harsh realities of their actions. While some of the Avengers only had to worry about
their own well-being, others on the team had families and other obligations to think about. Between Clint, Scott, and Tony, that was five children they needed to consider when decisions were made, a statement that caused the former two to hang their heads in shame.

It was only six days ago when the team had gotten together at SHIELD's headquarters in New Jersey, purposely eschewing Stark Tower or the Avengers Compound to avoid media attention. Agent Fitz had kindly taken Peter down to the gym while everyone else tried to hash out what was going to happen with the newest draft of the Accords.

For the most part, things had been neither pretty nor agreeable at first, with the CEO of Stark Industries calling bullshit on a whole lot of stuff.

"You have more than just yourselves and your morals to think about," had been Pepper's words. "And I for one won't stand any of you putting Peter in danger just because a piece of legislation—which can be altered and revised with the right legal defense team, I might admit—offends your black and white outlook on right and wrong."

"Maybe Clint and Scott can get away with being reckless," said Rhodey, "But if the Avengers pull another stunt like last year's while Tony's associated with them, there is a very real chance that someone could try to take Peter away."

"No."

Bucky looked about ready to jump out of his skin at the mere thought, metal hand causing the table to creak beneath it. Only a firm squeeze on his shoulder from Steve helped calm him down, although he remained twitchy and tense for a long while afterwards.

"You can stop breaking the table, Barnes. Nobody's taking my kid. Not unless it's over my dead body, that is."

Okay, maybe that hadn't been the best choice of words, if Steve, Bucky, and everybody else's expressions were anything to go by. But seriously, did they actually think he'd allow anyone to take Peter from him? Tony would sooner quit being Iron Man than allow CPS to take custody of his son. Nope, wasn't gonna happen.

"Don't say that, Tony."

"Just felt the need to point that out. For posterity's sake."

"If you three are done ironing out a custody agreement for Stark's progeny," drawled Fury, "I think we'd better talk shop before Agent Coulson decides to call a time-out and send everyone to the kiddie-table."

"Unfortunately, that never works for any of them."

"Now, as we all know, there have been some problems of multiple varieties in both this agency and team as of late. So, we're going to sit down like a bunch of fucking adults and discuss them. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal."

"Good, then let's get down to business. Ms. Potts?"

"I've done everything I can to soothe things from the business side," said Pepper. "It took some persuasion from Tony himself to pacify several countries and many of their bigger companies, but
the situation has at least improved over the last few months."

"And the UN?"

"Our legal team has managed to secure a number of concessions to the original and revised documents. We still have some room to work with, but these are likely the best terms we'll get at the moment."

Steve leaned forward and asked, "What kind of concessions are we talking about?"

"Border controls, fair trials, the whole works. Our team's been trying to show clear accountability while also guaranteeing the Avenger's freedom to operate. SHIELD has largely been working behind the scenes while Tony's lawyers and King T'Challa handle everything on the world stage. The UN can't say anything about SI either since the legal team is funded upfront by Tony himself."

Several people raised an eyebrow at this.

"Oh, don't worry," said Pepper while tilting her head towards Fury, "He's being reimbursed this time around. We're not making that mistake again."

"Fucking overpriced assholes."

"No offense, but the last thing we need is an organization with an agenda controlling our every move," said Sam. "Or dictating who we can help. What happens when someone like Loki shows up again?"

Rhodey sighed and said, "There's always going to be someone like Loki showing up again. That's unavoidable."

"And every single person has an agenda, not just SHIELD or the UN," Pepper pointed out. "I have an agenda and I'm willing to admit it. Stark Industries is always my first concern because I'm responsible for the livelihoods of 120,000 people. And that doesn't even include those who are supported by our countless collaborative and humanitarian projects."

"Despite what some of you may believe, crossing another nation's border without their permission is unacceptable." T'Challa stood at the front of the room with Fury, perusing a revised section of the Accords. "I do not tolerate it in regards to my own country and I do not expect others to tolerate it, either."

Steve did not look happy with this explanation. "We can't just stand by when hundreds or thousands of people are being killed. The Accords would prevent us from helping those in immediate danger."

"Entering a nation to provide support when there is a large-scale and uncontrollable attack is a very specific scenario, Captain. Especially if it is going to spill over into multiple other countries. We have already compromised on this issue with the UN and 148 countries. At least 30 other nations are in negotiations as we speak. But to illegally cross a border for minor incidents that can often be handled by a nation's own special forces? That must be regulated to both prevent abuse and keep civilian populations from questioning their own government's ability to protect them."

"Fear is a powerful thing," said Tony after holding his silence for over an hour. "And a whole lot of people are scared of us right now."

Sam nodded, conceding this point to them.
"Another incident like what happened in Leipzig isn't gonna happen," warned Fury. "I don't know what the fuck all of you were thinking, but this mess has put not only the Avengers but all enhanced humans in a very precarious situation. If you'd kept your fucking heads straight and not rushed in like a bunch of no-good fucking fools, we likely would've been able to negotiate a better deal without needing to grovel at the feet of multiple governments."

Fury threw a hard-copy of the Accords in the center of the table, crossed arms and pissed off glare preventing anyone from opening their mouths. It was even thicker than the original by about 100 pages, likely due to Pepper, Tony, and Maria Hill's backroom negotiations with so many countries.

"You've got one week to read the fucking thing and give me your list of grievances," said Fury. "I've had it with your bitching and whining. Act like grown-ups for once in your lives and find a way to compromise. S.H.I.E.L.D.'s been purged, HYDRA's barely functioning, and we need to take advantage of the quiet while we can. You don't want to compromise or negotiate this time around, then get the fuck outta my sight."

"What about the agents who tried to kidnap Peter?"

"They were HYDRA's last ditch effort to gain leverage against us." Maria pulled up several photos on her tablet. "The female agent that Agent Romanov interrogated was only able to gain entrance for a two hour window before exposing herself."

"She committed suicide before I could get much out of her," said Natasha, "But one of the lower ranked mooks squealed enough for me to get a general idea of HYDRA's present situation. They're depleted and desperate right now. Tony Stark and his son were easy targets, especially with no Avengers besides Rhodey and Vision to provide any type of protection or support."

Maria showed them multiple pictures of Tony and Peter alone in the tower, obviously taken by someone who'd infiltrated Stark Industries and posed as one of its employees. HYDRA had figured out their routine and knew exactly when Vision and Rhodey were gone.

"They didn't anticipate any help coming from us."

Most of the Avengers paled at the implications of their enemies making such assumptions. Despite his genius and resources, Tony was the only regular and untrained human among them, which had always made him an easier target than the others. Being a high-profile businessman and celebrity didn't help matters, either.

And now there was Peter to consider...

"Someone's always after my shit," said Tony with a nonchalant wave of his hand. "So long as they don't rip out the arc reactor or shoot my guts to pieces, I can handle my business just fine, thank you very much."

"And since when has getting your tower blown up equaled handling stuff, Stark?"

"I thought we were talking about the Accords here."

Fury pinched the bridge of his nose and said, "If Tony Stark is murdered and the general public thinks the Avengers abandoned him to it because of the Accords, we'd be looking at a shit-storm of epic proportions."

"Yeah, no more fancy tech for you guys anymore. Now back to the subject at hand?"

Tony pointedly ignored the looks everyone around the table gave him, instead focusing on his
tablet and the schematics of his latest project. They were here to talk about the Accords, not the inability of anyone to put up with him. Plus, Peter had a weekly get-together with Mason and Avery later that evening, so things really needed to hurry up.

"None of you are very familiar with the business world, are you?" said Pepper. "Our legal team is more than capable of taking on the Accords. And in case you forgot, Stark Industries is more powerful, wealthy, and influential than many world governments. I'm actually insulted that you thought we wouldn't be able to negotiate an acceptable portion to our terms."

"I already had Blumenthal and his horde of blood-suckers on it when I first met with Steve last year," said Tony while spinning in his chair. "Also sent him and his minions straight after the Raft once you guys were broken out. That was not in the original Accords, I might add."

T'Challa nodded. "The UN and many governments were most unhappy to hear about General Ross' illegal addition. His political power has been greatly diminished since the facility's existence was leaked to the public thirteen months ago."

"And people wonder why the man wants my head on a silver platter."

Everything had gone pretty quick after that, Fury telling the whole table to shut the fuck up and read the Accords by Sunday or else. If they had grievances, then they were to write them down for discussion with Tony's legal team. And as Tony could clearly see three days later, Steve had taken Fury's words to heart and mutilated his hard copy of the Accords.

"You're still not gonna sign it, are you?"

"Not yet."

"Why doesn't that surprise me," muttered Tony as he stood up to leave. "I'll be down in the workshop if anyone needs me."

"Tony, wait."

"Nope, we're not having this discussion again." Tony walked out of the kitchen, purposely ignoring Steve at his heels. "All it ever does is end in an argument and I'm too tired for that kinda stress today."

And yes, Tony was tired. The past year had been downright horrible—aside from adopting Peter, of course—and almost everything about it had stemmed from Steve and the Accords. Maybe he was being a coward, but Tony just plain didn't want to talk or think about either of them today. And with Peter within earshot, that applied doubly so.

"Keep an eye on my kid and Barnes while you're up here. No pickle sandwiches."

The elevator closed in Steve's face without any prompting and Tony took a deep breath, gingerly touching his achy side while also wondering when things would ever be mended between the blond and himself. Who would've thought that Bucky Barnes would be the easier super-soldier to deal with. If someone had said that to Tony last year, he would have laughed in their face.

God, everything was still so fucked up.

With a leaden heart, Tony stepped into his workshop and proceeded to yell at Dummy and Butterfingers for destroying yet another blender. How they'd managed to get green goop all over the ceiling was beyond him.
"Why the hell do I continue to keep you travesties around, anyways?"

Dummy hid in the furthest corner.

"Yeah, yeah, run and hide you useless bucket of bolts. Should've donated you to a community college years ago."

It was six days later when Stone decided to show his stupid face again. After sitting through several meetings of both the SHIELD and SI variety, Tony declared Friday a day of rest and refused to do anything that involved responsible brainpower or common sense. In other words, he spent eleven hours in the workshop with his bots and then took Peter out for ice cream after school, because that's what cool dads did, right?

The early October breeze felt pretty good, too.

"Mason thinks we should use the mold for Ms. Sborza's next project," said Peter while licking at a large clump of rainbow sprinkles. "But I already promised Dummy that we would—"

"Whoa, whoa, wait one second here, young man. Are you implying what I think you're implying?"

Peter had a shifty look about him.

"Uh, nope, don't even think about it, kiddo. Dummy is not allowed to leave the workshop, let alone the tower. Can you imagine the lawsuits? He'd probably set fire to all of lower Manhattan."

"He promised to behave himself."

"And you believed that bucket of bolts? For God's sake, it was supposed to be a full year before I'd have to put up with this kinda crap."

"I didn't do anything."

"Not yet," said Tony with a wag of his finger. "But it looks like the big brother-little brother manipulation has already began. Cybernetic or organic, it doesn't matter, as our dearest Brucie tried to tell me, but nope, I didn't listen to him. Bad habit of mine, I'll admit."

"He wants a new fire extinguisher, too."

"Absolutely not."

Peter giggled from behind his ice cream cone, not even bothering to dodge the wadded up napkin Tony threw at his head. Nobody was more amused by Dummy's zany and petulant antics than his youngest sibling and to Tony's abject horror, Peter seemed to think the one-armed robot was a decent role model. Sometimes, Tony had to question the state of humanity and why so many people wanted to reproduce. It was both nerve-wracking and really hard work, if you asked him.

"What about a robot version of Matika?"

"Are you insane?"

"Only on Monday mornings in the winter when it's snowing."

"Why only when it's snowing?"

"Because my nose always goes runny and boogers like that are real nasty."
"And this right here is the reason why I often question the necessity of human reproduction," said Tony before taking a big bite out of his chocolate waffle cone. "And for once in my life, I cannot be blamed as a harbinger of destruction because I had nothing to do with the creation of this."

Peter stuck his rainbow-colored tongue out in response.

After spending several weeks working on a machine that would hopefully locate and contain another of the Infinity Stones, Tony wanted nothing more than to relax for a little while and spend some much needed time with Peter. Aside from Vision and Thor, none of the other Avengers were aware of the Infinity Stone situation since Fury and Strange thought it best to keep the existence of additional Stones under wraps for now. Nobody was quite willing to trust the Avengers with sensitive information that related to national and international security yet.

"I'm not about to have another fucking debacle like last year on my hands," had been Fury's words. "Coulson will skin the whole fucking lot of you if he has to protect his agents and staff from being lynched again. Not to mention the paperwork and backroom diplomatic bullshit. I fucking hate those bastards."

So, it was pretty much just Tony and Strange working the project at this point. Mechanical and magical monkeys, as Agent Johnson liked to call them. It was amazing how snarky Agent's minions could be. Tony liked them.

"Do you think Bruce would let me use his lab to split Henry in two?"

"Oh dear God, you actually named that moldy monstrosity. I'm gonna have a long talk with your uncle when we get home."

"He's fat like Henry VIII. It's a good name."

Tony reached over to flick at Peter's sticky hands. "More like goofy and royally ridiculous. Your taste in names is questionable at best, kiddo."

"I guess that trait runs in the family then."

A foot connected with Tony's shin beneath the table, causing him to yelp and nearly drop his own ice cream cone. None too happy about yet another bruise, Tony gave Peter a disgruntled glare before turning around to acknowledge their new arrival. Since Tony would know that voice anywhere, he already knew Ty was standing a few feet behind him, looking well-groomed, confident, and all too pleased with himself.

Damn the fucker for being so damned good-looking. It wasn't fair.

"Stone."

"Tony."

"What brings you to an ice cream parlor that caters to parents and their noisy rugrats?"

"I've always had a sweet tooth, as you well know," said Ty before taking a seat between Tony and Peter. "Reviews for this place are excellent and I highly recommend the strawberry sundae. That's still your favorite, right?"

"Dad prefers chocolate with sprinkles."

Small feet wrapped around Tony's shins, bouncing up and down with each word that came out of
Peter's mouth. He could already see the cranky look on his son's face, twisting Peter's sweet features into an unhappy grimace Tony was only just becoming familiar with. And, well, this certainly wasn't a pleasant situation. Not in the slightest.

"And you must be Peter," said Ty with a wide smile. "I'm an old friend of your Dad's. Hell, we've known each other since we were about your age, actually."

"He's never told me about you."

"Wow, if that isn't the Stark snark, then I don't know what is. Already taking after your old man, I see."

"That's a good thing."

Okay, that was definitely some underlying hostility right there. Tony had no idea where it had come from, but it appeared Peter had already set Ty in his sights. It would've made Tony laugh if he didn't know how vindictively overprotective his son could be. Maybe he should set up a group therapy session for everyone his vicious child wanted to destroy; Steve, Bucky, and Clint would no doubt commiserate over drinks and pickle sandwiches with the blond businessman. Hell, they could also talk about how pathetic and annoying Tony was while they were at it.

"Peter, this is Tiberius Stone. I've known him since my time at Exeter Academy. And yes, that makes him ancient, too."

"Hello."

Ty laughed and said, "I think that's the most enthusiastic greeting I've ever received. You sure this kid isn't blood-related to you, Tones?"

"My birth parents died in a plane crash."

It took every ounce of Tony's admittedly pathetic self-control to not bang his head on the table. How the hell was it possible for an eight-year-old to sound that pissed off while also being so cute? Well, okay, Peter probably didn't look very cute to Ty right now, but Tony thought that little glare of his was nothing short of adorable and hilarious.

"Well, I think that's enough introductions," said Tony with a clap of his hands. "So, to what do we owe the honor of your presence, Ty?"

"Always so suspicious."

"I have every right to be suspicious, in case you haven't been watching the news lately. Now, what do you want, Stone?"

The blond waved down a waiter to bring him an strawberry sundae before saying, "Straight down to business. That's certainly new, if not too surprising. I suppose becoming a parent shifts one's priorities, doesn't it?"

"You could say that."

"Aren't you supposed to talk about this stuff in special meetings?" asked Peter. "Sensitive ears are all around us and I have a bad habit of repeating things. Or that's what Uncle Rhodey said last week."

Ty just stared at the kid, who smiled back.
"Gotta admit, the rugrat has a point," said Tony while munching on his waffle cone. "And the paps are standing right over there, so yeah, probably not the best place to talk shop."

Flashing cameras were par for the course in a Stark's life, so Tony wasn't surprised to see three paparazzi lurking just across the street. Their numbers had dwindled quite a bit over the last couple weeks and Tony hadn't even seen Rebecca Pratt or Gerard Fallini lurking around since Pepper's photo-spread had hit the stands. He figured some other scandalous celebrity had either gotten divorced or pregnant on the West coast, drawing their fickle attention far away from Peter and himself.

It was kinda nice, just being able to take Peter out for ice cream without being stalked by a huge crowd of blithering idiots. Of course, Tony also knew they were far from alone since Steve, Bucky, and Sam were lurking somewhere amongst the surrounding populace, personally making sure nobody tried to hurt the Stark family, be they super-human or not.

Ugh, Tony could just imagine what tomorrow's rags were gonna say: "Childhood Friends and Lovers Rekindling Their Romance? Will Tiberius Accept Tony's New Son? Juicy Details Inside!"

Pepper wasn't gonna be happy about this.

"And we need to head over to my friend's house," said Peter after gobbling down the rest of his ice cream. "We're working on a project for science class and it needs to be done by Monday morning."

Well, that was news to Tony. What devious scheme was his kid up to now?

"Then we'll just have to schedule another time to talk," Ty conceded while whipping out his phone. "Let's see what I have on my planner for this coming week..."

Despite a little voice in the back of Tony's head telling him to say no, the engineer ended up accepting Ty's invitation to discuss the newest tech being developed by their companies. Even if Ty was an asshole more often than not, he was also a gifted scientist and knew exactly how to goad Tony into designing new creations that usually took the world by storm.

Maybe discussing tech would help his mind come out of the slump it'd been in over the last year. And it wasn't like he didn't know how to deal with Ty, either.

"I'll see you next Thursday then," said Ty with a wide smile. "Don't be late."

The blond ran a somewhat suggestive hand down Tony's side before walking away in that arrogant stride of his, purposely waving to the paps as he passed by them. Oh yeah, Pepper and Rhodey weren't gonna be happy about this. Not at all.

"I don't like him."

Peter was standing with his arms crossed and death glare out in full force. He looked like a miniature Darth Sidious. Kinda creepy, if Tony was being honest.

"It's just business, kiddo. No need to get your knickers in a pinch."

"Says you."

With a huff of irritation, Peter grabbed Tony's hand and dragged him into the crowd without a backwards glance. Like any true-born New Yorker, the kid easily weaved through the crowds and even took short-cuts to get away from the paps, steering Tony this way and that as they neared Stark Tower. He wondered for a moment on the whereabouts of their unofficial bodyguards, but
eventually decided the he'd rather not know. Although Steve was far from spy-material, Barnes and Wilson were both more than capable of hiding in plain sight when they put their minds to it.

"There's Bucky."

Peter let go of his father's hand and dashed towards a jewelry store across from Stark Tower. A bolt of panic shot through Tony's chest until he realized that it really was Bucky standing in front of the store, as inconspicuous and bland as you'd expect from a master assassin and former spy. How Peter had spotted him in such crowded conditions was beyond Tony, but the kid obviously had a good set of natural instincts on him.

"Hey."

Tony fought back a flinch and snapped, "Are you trying to give me a heart-attack, Steven?"

"Just making sure you're okay."

"That's your excuse?" Tony gave the soldier a sharp poke in his side. "Why wouldn't I be okay? And where's Wilson?"

"Fifteen feet behind us. And you looked a little upset back there."

"You're such a snoop."

"Guilty as charged. And I'm just doing my job, Shellhead."

Steve placed a gentle hand on Tony's back to steer him towards the tower's hidden entrance, maneuvering through the crowds just as easily as Peter had done. Tony heard a quiet laugh directly behind him, the familiar pitch alerting him to Sam's presence right where Steve had said he was. Several yards ahead, Bucky was leaned over and in deep conversation with Peter, flesh arm wrapped around the chattering boy's shoulders.

"You're gonna turn grey if you keep this up, Cap. There's nothing to worry about."

"Whatever you say, Tony."

Chapter End Notes

Been very busy lately with lots of antibiotic-resistant cases. And the Accords are rearing their ugly heads again and Tiberius is weaseling his way back into Tony's head and life. Certain people will be very unhappy about this. I'm debating about whose POV to use in the next chapter. Decisions, decisions...
Peter made sure his dad missed Thursday's meeting with the blond-haired jackass. And no, he wasn't talking about Steve for once. This particular blond was a much greater threat than the wrinkly ol' super-soldier.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me about a hazelnut allergy?"

"I didn't know I had it."

"And now Vision feels like a complete heel for almost killing you," said Tony. "Open the mouth and let me look inside."

"Ouch, just wait—ahhhhh!"

"The swelling has finally gone down. All I can say is thank God your buddy's mom carries an EpiPen around on her," Tony's head snapped around to stare at the door. "Oh, for fuck's sake, I'm surrounded by idiots. Barnes! You can stop lurking outside the door now."

A familiar head poked around the far corner with an unrepentant frown. Natasha had been the bodyguard assigned to Peter while he was at his friends' house after school, so the super-soldiers and Tony hadn't seen the allergic reaction firsthand. It had happened just minutes before his meeting with Ty, so Tony had had to cancel and rush off to the local children's hospital in a panic. Apparently, the cupcakes Vision had made for the twins had contained hazelnuts, which Peter had always been mildly allergic to, although he'd obviously miscalculated the possibility that his allergy would grow worse with age.

So, cue his dad and Uncle Rhodey racing into the emergency room, terrified one of the Winter Soldiers had poisoned their youngest family member. Once it was revealed to be an allergic reaction to hazelnut cupcakes, the panic had promptly died down, although poor Vision kept apologizing for his grave mishap. The android was horrified that such a simple ingredient could potentially kill a young child.

"How is he?"

"Wide awake and already giving me sass. Anaphylactic shock is always a bag of hoots."

"Bucky, look at my throat."

The assassin came over to look down Peter's mouth, even poking his tongue at one point to make sure everything was returning to normal. When Peter looked back up, he could see Steve in the doorway talking to his dad, the latter gesturing wildly at something Steve had said. And then Bucky grabbed Peter's chin, turning it this way and that to examine every piece of skin above his collarbone.

"Don't knock my kid's head off, Barnes."

"Just double-checking."

"He's already been looked over by the ER doctors and Bruce, so I think he's gonna survive."
"I'm allergic to hazelnuts."

"So we've heard," said Steve as he came over to take a closer look. "And you can't blame us for being worried. Allergic reactions like that were really, really dangerous when me and Buck were growing up."

"The epi shot wasn't invented yet, right?"

Bucky shook his head and said, "Nope, not yet. And Stevie was allergic to more foods than he could eat. How he managed to survive to adulthood is beyond me."

"Thanks a bunch, Buck."

"You're welcome. Now, you up for a couple rounds of Mario Kart?"

"Stupid question."

Peter hopped off the exam table in Bruce's lab and dashed straight for the elevator, only pausing when the scientist came over to take one last look at his throat. Even if he denied it until Kingdom Come, there was no doubt that Bruce could be quite the worrywart whenever a Stark's health was involved. He had tsked and tutted for a good hour, checking to make sure the ER physicians hadn't missed anything.

"Nothing more strenuous than video games and couch-surfing, okay?" ordered Bruce. "The last thing we need is for you to have an asthma attack when your throat is still healing. No gym, no roughhousing, no running after Bumble."

"Got it."

"No worries, Doc, I'll make sure he behaves himself," said Bucky while grabbing Peter around the waist with an exaggerated grunt. "Nothing more sweat-inducing than Mario Kart for mini-Stark. I think the rugrat might be putting on some weight, though."

"I'm not fat, I'm just big-boned."

"You're a twig, kid."

"And he's been watching South Park again," said Tony. "Not even a teenager and already breaking father-son contracts."

"Contracts?"

"I'm not supposed to watch brutal, clever, politically incorrect shows like South Park until I'm ten-years-old. Dad says I need to understand and replicate their brand of sarcasm to an appropriate degree before using it in public. Or around you old guys."

Bucky just stared at him before saying, "You're a creepy kid and I hope you know that. Your kid's creepy, Stark."

"Old news, Furiosa."

With a final wave, Peter dragged Bucky into the elevator and headed for the penthouse living room. His uncle had set up an extensive array of gaming systems ranging from classic to brand new and Peter was still trying to figure several of them out. Since Bucky was ancient and pretty clueless, Peter had taken it upon himself to teach the assassin how to play Mario Kart, Banjo
"Kazooie, and Ratchet and Clank. They were making some good progress, too."

"Okay, what's on the menu today?"

"Uncle Rhodey bought the newest Mario Kart last week. You can be Princess Peach."

"You're hilarious, kiddo."

It was just before dinnertime when Bucky called it quits and wandered off to scrounge up some food in the kitchen. Peter switched over to his uncle's all-time favorite after that, torching rhynocs with ease while Spyro raced around collecting stolen dragon eggs. Even if the game was super-old and pre-millennium, Peter couldn't help loving it almost as much as Rhodey. It was addictive, as Tony had warned him.

With a yawn, Peter snuggled into the couch cushions and torched another rhynoc that tried to headbutt him. It was about halfway through Seashell Shore when Peter felt his eyes start to droop, not even the smell of good food keeping him from yawning and yawning until the screen became a blur and he was out like a light. Without an internal clock to wake him, Peter must've dozed for at least an hour before the sound of raised voices reached his ears, bouncing up and down in a poor attempt to keep the eight-year-old from hearing them.

"Hmmm?"

After rubbing his eyes and losing to yet another yawn, Peter pushed himself up and then walked towards the kitchen, purposely keeping his footsteps light so none of the adults would hear him. Hiding behind the farthest table, it only took a few seconds for Peter to recognize his dad's voice, hardened and sarcastic and dripping with more frustration than he'd ever heard before. It didn't even sound much like his dad, if Peter was being honest.

"...dare lecture me on secrets, Cap," snapped Tony. "Or have you conveniently forgotten about that enormous secret you kept from me for three fucking years. Uh huh, yeah, sucks to be on the other side, doesn't it?"

"I'm sorry about that, Tony. It was a terrible choice on my part, I knew that then and I know it now. I chose the coward's way out and I'll keep apologizing for the rest of my life if I have to, but we need to know what's going with the Winter Soldier situation."

"And why they're after you," added Bucky. "That's our main concern at this point. Somebody obviously wants something from you."

"Somebody always wants something from me. It's the story of my life." His dad was likely pacing now, agitated and waving his hands around in frustration. "Hell, Fury would've never given me the time of day if I wasn't able to make fancy shit for you guys. And don't bother denying it. None of the team has wanted me around except when I have stuff to give you."

"Tony, you know that's not—"

"Oh yeah, then how about blaming me for everything that happened with Ultron? Or did you ignore the part where Wanda got into me and Bruce's heads, influencing us to create something that shouldn't have been created. And don't give me that crap about her being a kid. The woman's in her twenties and deserves to be treated like it."

"What was done to her wasn't fair, Tony."

"Nothing in this world is fair, as you should know better than anyone. And in case you were
wondering, I was going to speak with Wanda after our little meeting about temporarily staying in the Compound until my legal team could work things out. Blumenthal is one of the best human rights lawyers in the world and he already had an excellent case built for her. Did you really think I'd throw her under the bus like that?"

"No, Tony, it was just with everything going—"

"Well, it certainly didn't look like that. You didn't trust me then and you don't trust me now. Not with my parents' murders, not with the team, not with anything."

"I've always trusted you, Tony."

"That's a load of bull and you know it. When someone on the team fucks up, everybody looks to Tony first. I'll admit, that's rightful a lot of the time because I've had a wide array of fuck-ups in my life, but this time? Nope, it doesn't all fall back on me."

Steve sighed and said, "The Accords were dangerous, Tony. Even you have to admit that."

"And that's what I have a legal team for! To fight bullshit like that the legal way. Planting your feet in the ground and refusing to compromise shot everything straight to hell. I even had a contingency plan for Barnes here."

"Putting Bucky in a psychiatric facility controlled by the government wasn't right."

"Nothing's right, according to you. And did you even bother thinking to ask Barnes what he wanted? Because getting kidnapped and tortured and treated like you're not even human does horrible things to a person's mind, trust me."

Peter frowned at that, wondering what his dad was talking about. He knew that Bucky had been through some terrible traumas when he was the Winter Soldier, but why did his dad sound like he was referring to himself? No one had made any mention of something bad happening outside of the Ultron and original Accords dramas, so none of this made any sense. Had JARVIS hidden stuff when Peter searched for information on the internet?

"You can't just disregard the opinions of seven billion people, Steve. All that'll do is make you enemy number one to the rest of the world."

"The Accords will never be right."

"Nothing is or will ever be completely right. Not even the Constitution is and the Founding Fathers knew it," said Tony. "But if you're not willing to compromise on some things, then the Avengers will never be able to function as a team again."

"We can only compromise where we can, Tony. And there are times when you just don't."

"Ah, yes, I see what you did there, using Aunt Peggy's words. Or did you forget again that I knew her literally from the day of my birth? I know exactly how she felt about compromise, and she would've told you to pull your head out of your ass, compromise on some sections of the Accords while also fighting other sections tooth and nail. That is what Aunt Peggy would've done. Not snub over half the world while also turning against half your supposed friends."

The fridge door slammed and Peter tried not to flinch, unused to hearing his dad sound so angry and hurt. However, there was clearly much more to this argument than just the Accords. Peter wasn't as naive or stupid as the adults thought, and he couldn't help wondering what else had happened between his dad and the team that he didn't know about. Nobody wanted to tell him
anything.

"And that fossil of a phone you sent me? Dummy has it."

"Why?"

"Because it makes an excellent puck for when Butterfingers and You feel like playing one-armed roller hockey."

Well, that explained a mystery that had been bugging Peter for weeks. After finishing his homework and cleaning up the blender for a fifth time—his dad really needed to get rid of that damned thing—he had found an old flip phone just laying in a box of tennis balls next to Dummy’s charging station. It was probably the most archaic thing in the whole lab.

"Okay, that's fucking hilarious. I've gotta see this."

"You gotta earn that privilege, Barnes. Only an approved audience gets to watch a B vs. D match. It's a sight to behold."

"I'm sure. But why the hell's your AI playing hockey with a phone?"

His dad snorted and said, "Why don't you ask our fearless leader over here? He's the one who thought sending a half-assed apology on paper and a monstrosity of a flip phone would somehow solve all our problems. I think not."

"Seriously, Stevie?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Yeah, if I had a dollar for every time you've said that over the decades, I'd be as wealthy as Stark here."

"Good luck with that."

"Wait, just wait, Tony. Please..."

Peter couldn't hear much after that, realizing with a grimace that they must've moved to the far side of the kitchen. However, despite the distance, he could safely say that none of the whispers were happy sounding, especially from his dad's end. Usually, he would've tried to sneak closer, but Peter knew Bucky or Steve would notice even the slightest sound or movement. Super-soldiers were creepy like that.

"Nope, that isn't going to work this—"

"Boss?"

"What is it, Fri?"

"King T'Challa wishes to speak with you. I tried to delay, but he says it's urgent."

"Tell Whiskers I'll be with him in a minute."

At the sound of coming footsteps, Peter pushed himself tight against the wall and held his breath, hoping his dad's flighty attention was focused elsewhere as he left the kitchen. Tony rushed out of the far entrance like a swarm of killer bees was dogging his heels, twice telling the soldiers they were done with this conversation and if anyone tried to follow him, Dummy had a fire extinguisher
with their name on it.

" Fucking hell!"

Deciding that it was probably best to make himself scarce, Peter grabbed his backpack and dashed off to his bedroom, narrowly dodging Bucky as he came out of the nearest kitchen door. Peter ignored Bucky's call for him to stop, disappearing down the hallway without a backwards glance. The assassin let him go after that, grunting and cursing about something Peter couldn't hear. And for once in his life, Peter didn't let curiosity get the better of him, instead staying in his room until Tony came to check on him.

Thankfully, Peter always kept a stash of Cheetos and granola bars under his bed. And a box of Cheerios. Best midnight snacks ever.

It was the next morning before Peter decided to emerge with Bumble at his side, still anxious about the confrontation that had occurred between his dad and the two super-soldiers. Only Vision and Sam were in the kitchen when he arrived for breakfast, the former placing a bowl of honeyed oatmeal and buttered toast on the table for Peter to eat. A smiley face made out of blueberries greeted him.

"He gave me one made of strawberries and apple slices," said Sam, "But I think yours looks tastier. And has more honey in it."

Vision didn't even bother to deny this.

"So, I heard you gave everyone quite the scare yesterday. Feeling better?"

"My throat isn't swelling shut."

Sam laughed and said, "Yeah, that's always a good thing."

"Hey, less talking and more eating," said Tony as he came into the kitchen. "You've got seven minutes before Vis has to float off. And since I have to meet with your homeroom teacher this afternoon, I'd prefer you not be late and make me look like an irresponsible parent. Not that anyone actually thinks I'm a responsible person, but it's always nice to create a facade, you know."

"Ms. Brynowski's just happy I turn in my homework. Lots of other kids don't."

"Well, you got an exemption for today, what with the whole throat swelling shut thing. I already called the nurse and Dr. Everly to get the extension slips."

"I did it last night."

Tony blinked before saying, "And you didn't see fit to tell me this before? I made a phone call for nothing."

"I believe JARVIS made that phone call, Anthony."

"That is correct, Vision."

"Hey, hey, enough with the ganging up, we've talked about this. And I hate making actual phone calls. Everybody knows this."

"And nobody likes it when you call them, either."

"Shut it, Wilson. No one asked for your incredibly biased and unnecessary opinion."
Peter finished eating his breakfast and double-checked that everything was in his backpack, eyes darting around the kitchen as Vision waited on the terrace for him. This was the first morning in a long time that neither Steve nor Bucky were present for breakfast, and Peter couldn't help but wonder if their absence had to do with a certain confrontation from last night. He still didn't understand most of what they'd been arguing about, though. Adults were weird.

And speaking of weird, his dad was definitely acting a little strange, indifferent mask firmly in place as Sam talked with him about SHIELD's latest projects. Peter didn't like that face since it meant Tony was upset and trying to hide something important from the people around him. Maybe it was time that he talk to Uncle Rhodey about what was going on between his dad and the soldiers. If anybody would have an answer, it'd be Uncle Rhodey.

"My latest adjustments to the capacitor are almost—Peter! Get your butt in gear, kiddo!"

"I'm going, I'm going."

"And don't forget your English books, either! Or your notebook!"

"I got 'em!"

Since it was a Friday, Peter anxiously watched the clock from lunch time until his final period. Uncle Rhodey had promised to take him out for a new skateboard after Tony was done meeting with Ms. Brynowski about his first quarterly report. Not that Peter had gotten bad grades or anything, but the school apparently liked to speak with willing parents after each report card. It probably applied even more so to Peter since he'd missed two months of school after his aunt and uncle's deaths in March of last year.

"Hello, Mr. Stark, thank you for coming," said Ms. Brynowski once his dad arrived in the empty classroom. "I know your schedule is very busy, so we'll make this quick. I can safely tell you that Peter's a very good student, so there's not too much to discuss."

Tony waved his hand and said, "This got me out of a board meeting I really didn't want to attend, so I should be the one thanking you right now."

"Well, I'm glad I could be a little helpful. Peter? I have a desk just outside the door for you to sit at while I discuss your progress with your father. You can get a head start on your science and English homework if you want."

With a tired yawn, Peter moseyed on out into the hallway and got to work on reading chapters four and five of *My Side of the Mountain*. Once that got tedious, he headed off to the bathroom, not even bothering to ask for permission since neither adult was paying attention to anything except his report card. Swinging wet hands through the air and humming a little tune, Peter was about halfway back to his desk when Ms. Brynowski's classroom door blasted across the hall. A body came out with it, slamming straight into the concrete wall at a velocity that was more than hard enough to kill a person.

However, it quickly became apparent that this wasn't a normal person because in less than five seconds, he was on his feet and charging back into the classroom.

"Oh shit..."

No sooner had Peter backed up a few steps before he was grabbed from behind, something sharp pricking his neck just above the shoulder. Peter struggled back and forth to the best of his abilities, but whoever this was knew what they were doing and had completely immobilized him with little
to no effort. Another blast came from the classroom and Peter watched as his dad came tumbling out, wrist repulsor aimed at the unknown man attacking him.

"Dad! There's another over—"

Kicking his legs upwards, Peter gave Tony a perfect view of his captor's lower legs and tried not to cheer when a repulsor blast sent them flying at least twenty feet down the corridor. Desperate to get away, Peter tried to twist and punch and bite at anything he could reach, even clawing at the other person's eyes when given the opportunity. Unfortunately, it quickly became apparent that there was little Peter could do to break out of his captor's hold, head bent in such a way that prevented Peter from seeing anything else around him.

"Dad! Dad!"

"Fucking bitch! Get away from my son!"

With a grunt of frustration, Peter was only able to land one more punch before his head hit the ground and everything went black.

Meanwhile, about ten miles away in Hoboken, it was almost an entire hour before the Avengers found out what had happened at Peter's school. Bucky was muddling through his thrice-weekly therapy session when someone knocked on the door and then opened it before Dr. Fischer could even give them the go-ahead. Clint's head popped through not a moment later, brow furrowed and lips pinched in a signal that something terrible had just taken place. It immediately made Bucky's stomach drop out from under him.

"You're gonna want to cut this session short, Bucko. We've got a huge problem on our hands."

Clint didn't even get to finish before Bucky was up and out of the room, charging down the hallway with a frantic glower. Bucky was already halfway through the building when Clint finally caught up with him.

"The Winter Soldiers were waiting at Peter's school," said Clint. "According to FRIDAY, Tony had to attend a parent-teacher conference and someone disabled all the surveillance cameras you and Nat installed last month. It was only for a half-hour window, but that was more than enough time for them get in and get out with Stark and his kid."

"Why wasn't anyone protecting them?"

And yeah, okay, maybe it wasn't right to snarl at Clint like that, but Bucky didn't give a flying fuck at this point. After their fight with Tony last night, Steve and Bucky had temporarily removed themselves from the Stark-duty roster, both of them thinking a week or two of separation would do everyone some good. What a giant load of horseshit that had turned out to be. All the fucking separation had done was result in Tony and Peter disappearing right under their noses, snatched by a bunch of brainwashed lunatics who had no qualms about torturing targets for information.

It made Bucky want to track his former comrades down and break every fucking bone in their bodies. A stupid fight should've never been enough to make either soldier leave the tower. What the fuck had they been thinking?

"Nat and two of Phil's agents were assigned to them. One's dead, another critically wounded, and Nat looks like she was put through the meat grinder." Clint let out a gusty sigh as they neared the conference room. "She intercepted the female Soldier after hearing Tony blast the other one through a classroom door. Medical was still examining her when I came to fetch you."
"I'm gonna fuckin' kill 'em."

"Ditto. And please never use that voice around me again. It's terrifying."

"Then don't get on my bad side, Barton."

As Bucky had expected, the conference room was abuzz with chatter and shouting, several Avengers and agents already present for a debriefing. Steve was at the far end of the table with Fury and Phil, locked in a furious debate that none of them looked the slightest bit happy about. Wanda, Scott, and Sam were seated with eight of Phil's agents, arguing amongst themselves about what was the quickest and safest way to locate Tony and Peter. Considering their present enemies, Bucky doubted there was any completely safe manner in which to rescue them.

"Sergeant Barnes," said Fury once he entered the room, "Do you recognize either of these two people?"

A picture popped up on the screen behind him, two figures turning a corner about four streets away from Peter's school. Bucky had been in that neighborhood more than enough to recognize the buildings and had even installed a few additional cameras without telling anybody. Well, except for Tony's AIs, who had obviously forwarded the footage to SHIELD as soon as possible.

"The woman's Rafaela Mendez and the man's Albert Nguyen," said Bucky around a lump in his throat. "I was responsible for... recruiting them back in the early eighties and late nineties, respectively. I don't think they've been active at any point in the last ten years, though."

"Were they given the same training as you?"

Bucky nodded. "I was brought in a few times to work them over. And make sure they didn't try to kill their handlers before the mind-wiping settled in. They're both just as dangerous, if not more so, than I was this time last year."

"So somebody's controlling them?"

"Without a doubt." Bucky pointed at the screen. "See how they move here? They're in full Winter Soldier mode. All that matters is the order and the target. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Aside from what we already know and suspect, do you think there's the possibility of anyone else being behind this?"

"I know HYDRA's too weak to attempt something like this right now."

Fury pinched the bridge of his nose and said, "Yeah, that's what I thought. From what Coulson's been able to find, their attack in June was a last ditch effort to gain leverage against Stark and whatever it is they want from him."

"Would they be willing to work with anybody else? Towards the same goal?" asked Steve after a long silence. "I know it's not usually their MO, but HYDRA might not have much of a choice at this point."

"It would explain why JARVIS and FRIDAY have been shut down before."

Not noticing Bruce in the far corner showed just how out-of-sorts Bucky was, especially since the other man wasn't even attempting to hide himself for once. He had a tablet in hand, tapping at it in rapid-fire motion while also speaking on the phone with what must've been Colonel Rhodes. However, even in a situation like this, Bruce still stayed far away from Wanda, posture stiff and
wary whenever she came even the tiniest bit closer to him.

"I don't know of anybody in HYDRA who has the hacking skills to disable either AI," said Bruce, "Not even for a few seconds. We're likely looking at someone from outside the organization, and I wouldn't be surprised if Tony already knows whoever it is. The list of people who could potentially hack and shut down Tony's systems can probably be counted on one hand."

"Does the Colonel have any idea who it could be?"

"James says he has his suspicions. And that he'll be here in less than ten minutes by helicopter. Twenty at the most."

"What about Vision?"

"They've just left the school, so I presume they'll be coming here together."

As the debate started up again, Bucky walked over to stand beside Steve, reaching out to grip his forearm when the table started to creak under Steve's hands. The blond grunted in acknowledgment, eyes trained on the shifting images of Tony and Peter's kidnappers. If looks could kill, both Soldiers would be piles of ash on the floor.

"We should've been there, Buck."

"I know, but we're gonna get them back, alright? Tony's got enough trackers on him and Peter for an army."

"The trackers aren't working."

Bucky punched his bicep and said, "Then we'll find another way to follow 'em. Or Tony will find some way to contact us. I've only known the guy for a few months and I can already tell you that he's gonna be an awful hostage."

"Not with Peter there. Tony won't take any unnecessary risks if his son's involved."

And that was a wrench in their plans that Bucky really didn't want to think about. He'd read quite a bit about Tony's previous kidnappings, more than a little impressed by the other man's ability to manipulate and escape his captors on multiple occasions. But with Peter involved, there was no way Tony would take the same degree of risks he had in the past. Hell, if Bucky had been in the same position, he likely would have—

"Hey, guys! Colonel Rhodes is incoming!"

As several people walked off to greet their former teammate, Bucky took Steve's hand and said, "Hey, snap out of it, you hear me? If you can't get your head in the game, then I'll force it in myself. Tony and his kid are counting on us, so pull it together."

"I know, I know, but it's just that we should've been there and I can't believe we—"

"Yeah, we were all pig-headed idiots, but what's new about that? The guilt-trips can wait until after we've got Tony and Peter back, safe and sound in the tower with those ridiculous robots trying to eat their shoelaces. You got it?"

Steve let out a deep sigh and then straightened up, eyes going steely as he said, "Got it."

"Good. That's better." Bucky clapped him on the shoulder and then pointed to the door. "Now let's
talk to Rhodes and find out what brand of motherfuckers are behind kidnapping our favorite pair of science geeks. You with me?"

"Every step."

"Well, that's good, because I didn't wanna have to pull you along by your ear again."

"Captain!"

"We're coming! Let's hurry, Buck."

"Gladly."

Chapter End Notes

And now the fun begins! Well, more so for us than Tony and Peter. As most of you may have guessed, Steve and Tony finally had their huge blow-up over the Accords, Siberia, and his parents' murders. Peter only heard snippets of it, but the argument wasn't pretty. The plot thickens from here on out. I will forewarn readers ahead of time: if you're squeamish of medical stuff, then read the next chapters with caution.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony cursed every entity he could think of when he woke up, not giving the slightest fuck if he was being observed or had been left to rot in yet another godforsaken cave. If his arms and legs hadn't been strapped to a table, clawing out somebody's eyes and then kicking them in the dick—or crotch if they were a woman, since Tony was all about equal opportunities—would've been at the top of his priority list.

"By Thor's old man, I fucking hate you unoriginal, inbred, troglodyte assholes."

The ceiling lights burned Tony's eyes, which were covered in goop and were making a valiant attempt at drilling a hole in his head. It would've been nice to rub them with his hands, but yet again, pinned to a steel table that was really, really uncomfortable. Thankfully, someone had made sure the table was padded, so Tony's back wasn't hurting quite as much as he'd anticipated. Now, if only that also applied to his injured left side, which was literally pulsating with pain from his earlier encounter with the Winter Soldiers.

Bitch had punched him right in the side, obviously knowing about Tony's previous injury. And then she'd stomped on his bad leg. Honestly, what the fucking hell was wrong with these people?

"Ugh, my mouth feels like somebody shit in it," Tony grumbled. "Hello? Any assholes in here? It's rude to leave your guests waiting like this, you know. Or did your mother teach you no manners?"

When nobody answered, Tony forced his eyes open and took a quick look around the room. It was obviously for medical examinations, with various surgical equipment lining the walls. Everything had a sterile look and smell to it. As expected, Tony's throat clicked with anxiety, mind jumping back to his time in Afghanistan and the torture he'd been subjected to. A glass window gave him a view of another lab room, which also appeared to be empty of personnel at the moment.

"Great, I've been kidnapped by a bunch of scientific sadists. Again. Just my luck."

After mumbling to himself about the insanity that often came with his fellow scientists nowadays, Tony noticed a strange pressure in his chest and lungs, every breath he took accompanied by wheezing that he hadn't felt in a long time. Eyes widening at the implications, he very slowly turned his head to the side and barely held back a scream at what he saw next to the table.

"Fuck, no, fuck..."

Not even two feet away was a fancy-looking car battery, resting harmlessly on a wheeled stand while two cables snaked across the short distance and up into Tony's exposed chest cavity. A soft whirring sound was the only indication that it was running and keeping him alive.

The arc reactor was gone.

And of course, because Tony's life was a mean bitch, everything went downhill from there. The images, the sounds, the smells of a damp cave and shouts of Urdu and a dying Yinsen flashed before his eyes, replaying as if all those events had happened yesterday afternoon, clearer than anything Tony had experienced in four or more years. It was like a waking nightmare.

"Put him under again," said an unfamiliar voice. "And use the same sedative. It'll be easier on his
Tony barely felt the hand that grabbed his arm, likely adding the aforementioned sedative to the IV drip they'd stuck into him. Due to his erratic breathing and panic attack, Tony was so delirious that he couldn't even see past the white fuzz that surrounded his current range of vision. He was practically choking when the sedative kicked in, pulling the engineer under like a terrible, Loki-induced sleeping spell.

"Should we try the stone again?"

"No, not until his vital signs are more stable. It might... cause him to..."

"Poor bastard..."

Whenever it was that Tony next awoke, the lights had thankfully been dimmed and he was alone yet again. Considering the circumstances, Tony would view that as a good thing, especially since his head felt like it was stuffed with cotton and one too many bottles of vodka. Dangerous barely began to describe the situation him and Peter were in right—

"Shit, shit, Peter..."

These sons of bitches had taken his son. Kidnapping Tony was one thing, but taking Peter? That threw everything into a completely different league. Touching his kid meant war and Tony was gonna make these fuckers pay for ever harming a hair on his son's messy lil' head.

As it turned out, discovering that your child's in danger is an amazing distraction point, because Tony went so deep into his mind palace—and yes, thank you for coming up with that term, Rhodey—that he didn't even have another panic attack over the godforsaken car battery. Oh, Tony knew it was there, but he also now had something more important to focus his attention on. Absolutely no one was gonna hurt his son and get away with it.

"Good evening, Mr. Stark."

And where the hell had this bitch come from? Honestly, all Tony did was zone out for ten or fifteen minutes and creepy pink-lady decided to pop up out of nowhere. Like daises! She was even typing at a computer now, completely ignoring Tony and everything else in the goddamned room. How all these little scarings hadn't yet resulted in a death by heart attack was beyond him.

"You know, I've been tied to quite a few tables in my lifetime. I'd even categorize a couple of those instances as kinda enjoyable. But this? Nope, definitely falls into the unpleasant and victimizing category. So, despite what you might assume, this hasn't been a good evening for me."

The pink-lady ignored him.

"Oh, that's how it's gonna be, huh? Just ignore the person you're torturing. Classic and very traditional strategy, right there."

And yep, she was still ignoring him. How rude.

Tony continued to jabber the entire time Pink-Lady—he'd decided to give her capital letters because hello, that just made sense—did whatever it was she was doing on the computer, purposely trying to annoy the ever-loving shit out of her. And wow, the bitch really was pink. Like actual, baby girl clothes pink, not just the soft pink tint that pale-skinned people acquired when they were out in the sun too long. The purple eyes were an interesting feature, too.
"You're an alien, aren't you?"

No answer.

"Aw fuck, that means I owe Cyclops two thousands dollars. You just couldn't wait two more years to arrive on our doorstep, could you? Please tell me you're not carrying a magical hammer or scepter, either. Advanced alien technology I can deal with, but all this magic mumbo-jumbo is getting on my last nerve."

Seriously, how was this crazy lunatic ignoring all of his ramblings?

"Did you know that you're pink? Because the whole robe thing really isn't that great of a disguise. We don't do pink here on Earth. At least not naturally."

Finally, some movement, even if it was only the Pink-Lady moving away from the computer. And shit, was that a needle? Why the hell was she picking up a needle? For the love of whatever deity was popular right now, there was no need for needles! The liquid inside of it was even pink and had an ominous glow to it. What the actual fuck was with this lady and pink?!?

"Hey, where the fuck are you putting that? What the—hey!"

She inserted the needle into Tony's IV port, depressing the pink liquid into his veins without so much as a frown. It was almost creepy how emotionless the alien was, and Tony tried to focus on this anomaly instead of the unknown chemicals entering his bloodstream. Dear God, what the fuck was going on?

"Prepare for the second phase, Yrda."

"Another five minutes before we can begin, ma'am. It's best to let it work first."

"Very well."

Tony hadn't noticed the other alien until now. Unlike the female, this guy was blue and tall and skinny, eyes deep red and creepy looking. He moved without making a sound, preparing something in a box across the room. Tony took a deep breath as his fingers started to tingle, twitching his hands in an attempt to fight off the drugs he'd just been given. Unfortunately, snooping in on the aliens' conversation proved futile since they'd switched to a language Tony didn't understand, likely to keep him from gathering vital information on what they had planned for him.

"Alien languages, huh? Didn't your mother ever teach you that it's rude to talk in another language around people who don't know it," drawled Tony. "Or don't pink and blue people have moms? How would that work?"

Well, it appeared that neither alien gave a flying shit about Tony's rambling, instead talking quietly amongst themselves while hovering over that damned box. All this did was stoke Tony's curiosity and anxiety even more, emotions warring on what he was supposed to feel in a situation like this. His abduction by the Ten Rings eight years ago hadn't been anything like whatever this was and it made Tony's stomach churn with apprehension.

He was way, way out of his depth right now.

"Is that a stone? Or a crystal? What the hell are you gonna do with that?"

Neither answered him.
"More magic mumbo jumbo? You know, I'm not a fan of magic at all. It just doesn't make any
sense and—whoa, not so close to the eyeballs, lady. I've only got one pair of those things and I'm
kinda attached to them."

The pink alien didn't say anything, instead just holding the small sliver of blue crystal directly over
Tony's forehead. After taking a deep breath, she said some words in a language Tony didn't
understand and touched it to his skin for several seconds. Of course, this also caused Tony to go
cross-eyed, heart pounding as he waited for a butt-load of pain and agony to come from whatever
the hell it was they were doing to him.

"Ugh, is something supposed to be happening here? Because this is all rather anticlimactic if that's
the case."

After about thirty more seconds, the alien and her little stone pulled away from him. Tony could
barely hold back a sigh of relief, watching as the aliens tapped away at a tablet and spoke to each
other in quiet and slightly frustrated tones. It appeared that whatever they'd been hoping for hadn't
occurred, which made Tony's poor ol' heart slow down for a few minutes. He pointedly ignored the
car battery that sat less than two feet away from his head.

"Hey, are either of you gonna tell me what's going—Peter!"

Whatever demands and wisecracks Tony had been going to make were promptly forgotten when
another pink alien and a uniformed human brought his son through the door. Peter was sporting a
black eye and fierce scowl, lip split and wrist splinted in a way that made Tony's blood boil. The
injuries appeared to be at least several days old from the looks of it, making Tony wonder just how
long he'd been unconscious. And fucking hell, Peter had been alone that whole time, not knowing
if his dad was alive or not.

The thought made Tony sick to his stomach. For days, Peter had probably imagined that he was
abandoned and alone, at the mercy of people who didn't even appear to be from this planet. It made
Tony want to scream and rip all of them apart. These sons of bitches had hurt his baby and Tony
was gonna destroy them if it was the last thing he did.

"Oh, Peter, what did I tell you about picking fights with wannabe Teletubbies?"

"You should see the other guy."

Tony snorted at that and said, "I'm sure his face is even uglier than before. If that's even possible."

"Dad, your chest..."

The terror in Peter's voice made Tony's heart clench. His son shouldn't have to see him like this.
Hell, nobody should have to see Tony like this, hooked up to a damned car battery like an
unfeeling machine. It was the stuff of nightmares and Tony had fully intended for Peter to not learn
what was wrong with his old man's heart until at least his eighteenth birthday. Nothing seemed to
be going right anymore.

"I'm okay, kiddo. It's keeping me going and that's what matters right now."

Peter wasn't able to reply before he was tugged forward by the Pink-Lady, nearly toppling over due
to being bound in handcuffs. The kid was quite obviously terrified, eyes darting between their alien
captors and his father the entire time. Tony wanted to hug and protect him so much that it actually
hurt. He needed to figure out an escape plan and he needed to do it quick.

Then the pink bitch raised the blue stone to Peter's forehead.
“Hey! What the hell are you doing? Get that hunk of rock away from my kid before I rip your...”

Tony watched in horror as Peter's eyes glazed over a milky blue color, tension draining from his son's body in less than five seconds. Everything seemed to freeze in Tony's world as he realized why the aliens had wanted to capture him and only him so badly.

"You made a synthetic Infinity Stone. How the hell did you manage that?"

Somewhere along the line, these aliens had discovered that the Mind Stone hadn't worked on Tony like it had on everybody else. He remembered the surprised look on Loki's face when the arc reactor had prevented him from gaining control over Tony's mind, something that had obviously never happened before in his little quest for world domination. If these aliens had gone through so much trouble to get a hold of Tony, then being able to resist the Mind Stone's control must've been a pretty big deal.

"Approach your father."

Peter stepped forward like the mind-controlled slave that he was, staring down at Tony without a hint of affection or recognition. Lots of things in Tony's life had made him want to curse and shout and scream, but this was hands-down the worst situation he'd ever been in. There was nothing of Peter in his son's eyes, just a vacant, emotionless stare that would've scared any parent out of their minds.

And then the glaze disappeared from Peter's eyes, vanishing like a sick mist that should've never been there in the first place. It brought Tony a surge of relief, but he also couldn't reach out to touch his son, which simply threw the whole predicament back in his face like an ACME anvil. Peter shook himself a few times to throw off the lingering side-effects, head swinging around to look at the aliens surrounding him.

"Dad?"

"Hey, you're okay, baby boy. Look over here."

"What just—"

"No! Don't you dare fucking take him! Let him go, you blue piece of shit!"

"Dad! Dad!"

Tony fought against his restraints this time, snarling and cursing at the aliens as they hauled his son away. Unfortunately, his violent reaction must've been enough of an inconvenience to the aliens for them to add another sedative to his IV line. Eyes drooping and ears ringing, all Tony could do was watch as Peter was dragged out of the room kicking and screaming. For the umpteenth time, black encroached on Tony's vision and pulled him under in record time.

And for the umpteenth time again, Tony came to when the lights were dimmed and no one else was in the exam room. Still more than a little fuzzy in the head, he tested the strength of his bonds and was disappointed to find they were even tighter than before. Apparently, his captors had decided that any degree of movement was a bad thing and, to their credit, that Tony Stark was an infamous and explosive escape artist.

"Okay, this could be a problem."

Yes, Tony was amazing at escaping from kidnappers. He'd done it more times than most people visited the dentist in their whole lives, usually because those doing the capture and kidnapping...
were a bunch of idiots who underestimated the world's most famous billionaire at every turn. This
time, however, it appeared that his captors had been prepared and weren't about to give Tony the
opportunity to blow their hideout to Kingdom Come. Because if Tony couldn't get a hold of any
tech or talk his captors into letting their guard down, then there was little he could do to break them
out of this place.

Tony was dealing with a whole new brand of kidnappers here.

The trick to escaping would have to be Peter. From the looks of it, the Winter Soldiers had stripped
Tony and Peter of their clothes as quickly as possible, likely figuring that Tony had lined them with
trackers at some point. That ruled out his AIs or friends being able to track and locate them through
GPS, which was a pain in the ass that he had planned for. However, what Tony hadn't planned for
was being restrained from every limb on his body. Activating the last tracker on his person would
be impossible if he couldn't get his hands free.

So, that was why he needed to get Peter in here. All it would take was a few seconds for Peter to
hit the tiny button that was hidden inside the electromagnetic base in his chest, purposely designed
and placed there just in case someone tried to search for it under Tony's skin. It blended in almost
perfectly with the base and was all but undetectable if you weren't specifically looking for it.

No one besides Rhodey and his AIs even knew about its existence.

So Tony needed to find some way for their captors to bring Peter back in and let him get close
enough to Tony to activate the tracker. At this point, Tony wasn't willing to rely on the Avengers or
anybody else to locate and break them out of here. He needed to think of Peter and contacting the
outside world through this method was the only safe route he could see right now.

God, the thought of putting Peter in danger made him sick. Then again, a lot of things were making
him sick lately.

"Rhodey's right. I need to become a hermit."

A nurse came in about an hour later, dumping ice chips into Tony's mouth—holy shit, those things
were amazing!—and changing his catheter. That last part nearly made Tony die from humiliation,
but to survive the ordeal, he forced himself to think of Peter and getting them out of here. The past
year had been little more than one embarrassment after another, so what was a couple dozen more,
right?

"Umm, is that really necessary?"

"Would you like to piss all over yourself in your sleep?"

"Point taken. Catheter away."

It was several hours before the Pink-Lady and her lackeys appeared again, Blue Guy carrying the
same box as last time. It was apparently where they stored the little crystal that had somehow been
manufactured to imitate the Mind Stone and its powers. Considering the short duration of control
it'd had over Peter, the stupid thing was definitely nowhere near as powerful as the real Stone, but
the fact they'd been able to create anything even remotely close was amazing in and of itself.

"Oh, are we gonna try to turn me into a zombie again? I'm so excited that I might've pissed
myself."

As expected, both aliens ignored him.
"I've gotta say, you guys are probably the most boring kidnappers I've ever had. No threatening to chuck me off a Grand Canyon cliff?"

Well, that didn't work, either. Tough crowd.

"If that stone didn't work the first time, I don't think it's gonna work now."

The door opened and two humans came in with Peter at their side, the boy scowling in a manner that would've made Severus Snape proud. When one of the men put his hand a little too close to Peter's mouth, the kid even tried to take a bite out of him. A burst of pride rushed through Tony, further fueled by the fact that he'd wanted to do the same thing for several days. Unfortunately, it also earned Peter an extra hard shove, which Tony took extreme exception to.

"Seriously? You come to this planet and then ally with fuckin' Nazis right off the bat? Way to destroy your reputation, Pinky."

One of the goons glared at him and said, "Does he ever shut up?"

"Never!"

"Just place the child over there. We will need both of them in close proximity to test the third phase."

"Yes, ma'am."

To Tony's immense joy, Peter was forced to stand less than a foot from his right side, hands still bound in a pair of handcuffs. Okay, they could work with this. Peter had small hands and would be able to reach inside the arc reactor casing with little problem. And he was a smart kid, so Tony wouldn't have to say more than a few words to convey what needed to be done.

"You alright, kiddo?"

"Uh huh."

"That didn't sound very convincing. They feeding you?"

"Every couple hours. It's kinda nasty."

"Yeah, they never provide the good stuff in situations like these. I've been complaining for years, but does anybody listen to me? Noooo, never. It's almost like no one is taking my concerns into consideration. Very rude, I tell you."

Peter gave him a thin smile, hands reaching out to touch his father's right arm. Okay, it was showtime.

"C'mere."

It only took a split second for Peter to obey, the kid instantly knowing from his dad's voice that this was something very important and very urgent. Tony kept his voice as low as humanly possible, wanting no one besides Peter to hear the words coming out of his mouth. Thankfully, the soldiers were distracted by whatever Pink-Lady was doing with the stone twenty feet away.

"Tiny button inside reactor casing," whispered Tony. "Middle of my right side. Also a small pick next to it. Bump battery stand to make it look like an accident. Hurry."

The kid's eyes only widened for a brief moment before narrowing with determination, hands
reaching out to touch Tony’s chest before faking an unbalanced step to the side. This caused Peter to bump into the cart and pull one of the battery cables from the electromagnet in his father’s reactor casing. Gasping in fake surprise, Peter surged forward to grab at the cable and reinsert it into the hole, left hand disappearing inside the casing with no hesitation.

"Get away from there!"

The human soldiers grabbed Peter in less than five seconds, but from the look on his son’s face, that was apparently more than enough time for Peter to push both the button and grab the pick. Just as the soldiers drug Peter away, Tony felt a piece of metal no larger than a toothpick being slipped into his bound hand. Did he have the most brilliant kid in the universe or what?

"Remove the child and bring in Mr. Stone," ordered Pink-Lady. "We need to ensure that no damage has been done to the reactor casing."

"Yes, ma'am."

Tony forced himself not to react when Peter was hauled out of the room, but it was an impossible sell considering the fear and uncertainty that still dominated their situation. It would take him at least several hours to discreetly pick away at the cuff holding his right hand, so Tony knew that patience was a virtue and being a drama-queen wouldn't get them anywhere except tighter lockup. That didn't mean he had to like it, though.

"Wait, did you just say Stone?"

Blue Guy walked right past him and said, "Do you think a damaged casing would produce different results?"

"We need him alive. Father's orders."

"Perhaps the engineer could attempt a different method of treatment this time," mused Blue Guy. "So long as the shrapnel doesn't reach his heart, there is little reason to foresee an adverse reaction."

"I will consider it."

The aliens only stayed long enough to ensure both cables were reattached to Tony's electromagnetic anchors, neither giving his harsh breathing or words a lick of attention. A deep ache had settled in Tony’s chest, likely due to the cable being pulled out in such a traumatic manner. It wouldn't kill him, of course, but it did make his chest feel like someone had lit it on fire. Bruce and Helen weren't gonna be happy when they took his next batch of EKGs and chest x-rays, that was for damned sure.

"Tony."

"Ah, if it isn't everybody's least favorite traitor. Nice to see you, Ty."

"Your son removed one of the cables."

"Nothing more than an accident," said Tony. "Of course, my son shouldn't have ever had to see me like this, either."

"I would suggest being more careful next time."

Tony snorted. "And I would suggest not tricking and imprisoning your ex-boyfriend if you ever
wanna fuck his ass again. So, tell me, what made you think this was a good idea, hmm?"

"You really do never shut up."

"Did you honestly expect me to take all this laying down? It's like you don't know me at all, Ty."

The blond didn't respond, instead hooking up a barrage of machines that had likely been stolen from Stark Industries, if the labeling was to be believed. For perhaps the thousandth time, Tony wondered what had ever compelled him to get involved with Tiberius Stone and the toxic personality he carried around with him. It had been pretty obvious at a young age that Ty was manipulative and ruthless to a fault, happily using anyone and thing to his advantage if the opportunity presented itself.

Then again, as Rhodey loved to point out, Tony had always had a weakness for tall, blond, and handsome people with take-charge personalities. It had applied to Ty, Pepper, and the majority of his other lovers, with a handful of tall, dark, and handsomees thrown in to spice things up from time to time. The sudden appearance of tall, blond, and gorgeous Steve Rogers had resulted in quite a bit of teasing from both Rhody and Happy, although they were extra-careful to never mention Ty's name during said teasing. It'd only gotten worse as Tony's infatuation and not-so-silly crush grew more intense, too.

"If you stare at his butt any longer," Rhody had said one morning several years ago, "Your eyes are gonna fall outta your head and get glued straight to it."

"Doesn't sound like a bad fate to me."

"Yeah, I've heard that before. Just try to look up every once and a while, okay? The dude's gonna figure things out if you don't."

"Uh, nope, he's never gonna figure things out."

"C'mon, don't be like that. Steve's a good guy, if a little uptight. You don't have to compare him to —"

"I've got a meeting with Pepper in five," Tony had said, more than a little desperate to get away from what Rhodey had been implying. "See you tomorrow morning, honey bear. And don't eat my pizza again."

"You can't hide away forever, Tones. Remember that!"

"La la la la!"

Hell, even Tony was willing to admit that the resemblance between Steve and Ty was striking. Both were golden blond, blue-eyed, strong-jawed, and in phenomenal shape with stubborn and charismatic personalities. If Steve's close-cut hair and broader build hadn't been a dead giveaway, telling the two apart from behind would've been pretty difficult. The similarities were almost too frightening for Tony to think about sometimes, especially in light of recent events.

Except Steve didn't take any type of perverse pleasure in manipulating and abusing his significant others. Despite their differences over the past year, Tony wasn't afraid that Steve would throw a vodka bottle at his head or push him over the kitchen island or purposely humiliate him in front of their peers. There was a damned good reason why Tony had been cautious and almost paranoid around potential male partners since his and Ty's breakup. If half of Tony's hangups could be attributed to Howard, then the other half could be attributed to Ty and the many abuses he'd rained down on Tony's head for well over two decades.
Not to mention that Steve would never hurt Peter. Yes, there were a lot of trust issues still between the two of them, but Tony could finally say without a shadow of a doubt that Peter was safe with Steve. The super-soldier doted on Tony's son like he was his own child half the time, even overlooking Peter's occasional bouts of hostility towards him.

Few people were willing to show such tender care and affection to a little boy who'd tried to bite them before. In Steve's case, it'd only made him work harder, determined to gain whatever favor he could from Tony's skeptical child. And it was these actions that had done more to win back Tony's trust than anything else.

Unfortunately, the same could not be said of Tony's ex, who had never been particularly fond of small children. To say that Tony didn't trust Peter with Ty would've been an understatement.

"Don't poke so hard! Geez, I'm not made of vibranium, you know."

"Tell your kid congratulations," said Ty after he'd finished examining the reactor's interior. "He almost killed you."

"And that's need-to-know information Peter will never know about," snapped Tony, patience wearing thin at the mention of his son. "Also, if I ever find out that you tell him about this, I'll chop off your dick and mail it to Sunset's doorstep."

"You like my dick far too much to ever commit such a travesty, Tones."

Tony just huffed in reply and said, "Keep telling yourself that and maybe it'll come true."

"I'm sure it will."

Something about that tone gave Tony pause, eyes darting down to watch Ty mess with the car battery that was keeping him alive. It sounded innocent enough to the untrained ear, said in jest between two people who'd known each other almost their entire lives. But to Tony's ears, it promised an unpleasant occurrence in the near future.

That tone had been used on him many times and nothing good ever come of it.

"What the hell are you doing with these people, Ty?" asked Tony after a long silence. "Do they have something on you? Like last time?"

By Thor's old man, Tony really wanted to believe that some sort of mind control or blackmail was going on here. For all of Ty's faults and past transgressions, Tony had never thought him capable of endorsing this kinda treatment and torture on his oldest friend and former partner. Not to mention Peter, who was a terrified little boy trapped in an awful situation.

"Or did you bite off more than you could chew again?"

"I already have what I need," said Ty. "And you won't be here much longer, either. Trust me."

Tony was about to shoot off a smart-ass remark when his mouth was suddenly covered by Ty's, deep and fast and everything Tony didn't want to think about or deal with right now. It didn't last more than a few seconds and if Tony hadn't been so stunned, he would've tried to headbutt Ty with the little leverage he had. But then it was over and Ty was leaving the room without a backwards glance.

"What the—hey! Get your ass back here! What the hell was that?!"
A deep-seated anxiety settled in Tony's stomach, memories of his past relationship coming back with a vengeance. He had no idea what Ty was up to and that was not a good thing. If Peter hadn't already activated the tracker in his chest, Tony probably would've had another panic attack. Between being separated from his son, hooked up to a car battery, not knowing where the arc reactor was, and possibly staring down an alien invasion, yes, Tony was feeling more than a little cornered at the moment.

"I need to get outta here."

Chapter End Notes

If you guessed that I'm making connections to *Infinity Wars* here, then you'd be correct. This chapter was very Tony-centric and he's more than a little out of his depth here, what with aliens and Stone and other unpleasant things raining down on him. If readers are familiar with the comics, then you'll likely be able to identify some of the people from their descriptions. And yes, Thanos is looming ever closer.

P.S. - See, there was a reason why I kept the arc reactor!
Chapter 23

It took Tony several hours to cut away at the metal clamp on his right hand. The pick was vibranium, so slicing through the weaker metal was easy, but he also needed to keep his captors from noticing what he was doing. Pink-Lady came in to test the synthetic stone on him once more, but for the most part, Tony was left alone and to his own devices.

"Assholes think they can keep me locked up in here. Well, they've got another thing coming."

Once he had the right clamp broken, Tony quickly transferred the pick to his left hand and started to cut away at it. The whole process was slow and frustrating, but Tony couldn't take the chance of being caught. Everything needed to go according to plan because he'd only have one chance at this.

The second clamp took a little longer to break since it wasn't his dominant hand, and Tony may have cut himself a few times, but the telltale click of the metal breaking was well worth it. His stomach unleashed a loud growl as he wriggled both limbs to restore some feeling, reminding Tony that he hadn't eaten anything except chicken broth through a straw in several days. The lack of solid food had even made him a little dizzy from time to time, which was likely the result his captors wanted in order to control him.

"Okay, about halfway there. C'mon, Tony, you can do this."

Eyes watching the glass window across from him, Tony quickly leaned forward and slashed straight through the cuff around his left ankle. It was much easier when he had full leverage, but Tony decided to wait on the next one just in case someone came walking by the exam room. He'd also have to behave himself in the foreseeable future, too.

If Ty or the aliens had any reason to check or tighten Tony's bonds, they'd immediately notice the slashes through them. Staying calm and collected was the only way his escape plan would work. Of course, as were all things in Tony's life, that was easier said than done.

"Good morning, Tony."

"Goodbye, Ty."

The blond rolled his eyes at Tony's sarcastic response, being none too gentle when he inspected the casing and its electromagnetic anchors. Both cables appeared to be in working order, although the prospect of Ty messing with and disturbing them was a very real possibility. If there was one thing Ty didn't like, it was Tony being a smart-ass and mouthing off to him.

Vodka bottles tended to connect with his head when that happened. Never a fun way to spend the evening.

"So, what's on the menu today? Planning to pull my teeth out with pliers? Or are you gonna be creative and unleash the Spanish Inquisition on me? I've heard the guillotine is always a fun way to snuff it."

Ty didn't say anything, instead just running another barrage of tests on the casing and whatever readings he thought it was giving off. For fuck's sake, the idiots had to know that Tony wasn't about to give them information on his own life-saving energy source. And he'd really appreciate if
they gave him back the actual reactor, like right now, too.

Even if Tony was used to having a giant hole in his chest, said hole was never exposed to outside environments like it was now. Tony desperately tried not to think about it because if he did, then he'd have yet another panic attack and possibly claw somebody's eyes out. Preferably Ty's since the blond was pissing him off to an extent that Tony had never experienced before. With Peter in the picture, he felt a need to fight back against Ty's manipulations with everything he had, knowing full well that Ty would have no qualms about hurting his son if the situation called for it.

"You know, I've witnessed quite a few lows from you over the years, but this definitely takes the—hey! What do you think you're—"

"Shutting you the fuck up."

"Ahhhhh! Ahhhh! Arghhhh! Arghhhhh!"

"Figures that not even duct tape could shut out your annoying personality. Now, are you finished?"

"Arghhhhhhh!"

Ty folded his arms and leaned against a nearby table, lips curving up into a cruel smile that Tony was all too familiar with. He had been the recipient of that smile many times, and it always involved criticizing and ripping Tony's self-esteem limb from limb. The last time the engineer had been subjected to it, Rhodey had weaseled all the dirty details out of Tony before charging off to confront Ty himself.

Whatever Rhodey had done must've been brutal, because Tony hadn't seen Ty for nearly ten years after that. Well, except for on television, where the blond had been sporting an impressive black eye and split lip two days after Rhodey had confronted him.

"I can see why the Captain beat your ass into the ground," said Ty while running his fingers over Tony's cheek. "You never know when to stop pushing, Tones. It's not an admirable trait to have, and all it usually does is piss people off. You're lucky the Captain and his lil' Soldier didn't kill you."

A finger traced around the reactor casing, tugging gently at one of the cables. Tony fought back a flinch.

"I'll admit, I was a tiny bit surprised to see any of the Avengers hanging around your tower. Especially considering how much they hate you. I mean, it makes sense to keep your enemies close, as I'm sure Rogers and Barnes and the SHIELD spies were taught during their years of service, but I'm kinda shocked that you'd be so damn stupid not to see their intentions."

Ty leaned down to look Tony right in the face, finger now tracing underneath Tony's chin. If there hadn't been duct tape over Tony's mouth, he would've tried to bite the arrogant asshole. All this was mental manipulation, Tony reminded himself. Nothing more, nothing less.

"Not to say that Rhodey and Pepper aren't looking for you, but the others? I highly doubt it. Hell, they're probably rejoicing as we speak. After all, how could either of those Soldiers gotten a hold of you and Peter if someone hadn't been turning a blind eye? Little gets by Barnes or the spies unless they want it to. Ahhh, and there's that big brain of yours putting the pieces together. Always nice to see that it's still working."

Tony pulled out his nastiest glare, refusing to let Ty plant seeds of doubt in his mind again. All of the Avengers had their asshole moments and tendencies, but none of them would intentionally put
Peter in danger. They wouldn't.

"Expected too much out of assassins and mass murderers never turns out well. I would've thought you'd learned that by now."

The engineer wasn't able to hold back a flinch when Ty gave him a kiss on the cheek. It was unnerving and unpleasant and Tony refused to watch as the blond walked over to the nearest computer. It was just another mind game, that's all it was.

"No need to look so cranky," said Ty, fingers spinning several holograms this way and that. "In fact, you should probably be thanking me. If last year's events are at all reliable, then I've saved you and your son from a pretty nasty fate."

Tony raised a skeptical eyebrow at this.

"Aside from the whole alien issue, it would only be a matter of time before the Avengers turned on you again. Not that you can blame them for being suspicious, what with Ultron, the Accords, and your history of weapons manufacturing. And from what I was able to find, they still think you're in cahoots with Ross, too. Not exactly the best environment for team-building. Or a young child."

The blond did something to the car battery that Tony couldn't see, purposely keeping it just out of his sight. Tony knew this was all about intimidation, trying to scare him into compliance with whatever it was Ty and these aliens wanted. Normally, he'd be throwing the mind games right back at his captors, but something about this being Ty had thrown Tony off.

Well, that and the goddamned duct tape.

"It seems that your white blood cell count is slightly elevated," mused Ty. "Probably due to your son yanking on—"

"Mr. Stone?"

"What is it? I specifically asked not to be disturbed."

"You're needed in 628."

Ty grimaced and said, "Tell them I'll be there in a few minutes. I would hope that they'd be able to manage until then."

"Yes, sir."

Once the guard had left, Ty walked over and laid a hand on Tony's cheek. The engineer continued to glare at him, still not liking the smug expression that seemed to be perpetually plastered on Ty's face. And then the blond's other hand came to rest on Tony's hip, far too close to a sensitive part of his anatomy that Ty had no business going anywhere near anymore.

"What I'm doing is in your best interest, Tony. None of the Avengers appreciate the tech you've been providing them. As a fellow engineer and scientist, I know that to be true whether you're willing to admit it or not."

Tony snorted at that statement.

"As stubborn as always," said Ty with a roll of his eyes. "Now, attempt to get some rest. The doctors will be wanting to run more scans later tonight."
With a flick of his wrist, the duct tape was ripped off Tony's mouth and replaced with Ty's lips for a quick kiss. The blond pulled back before Tony could bite him, eyes dancing with an arrogance that would've made Rhodey vomit on his own boots. Hell, it almost made Tony want to vomit, but then it'd just get all over him and that would be disgusting.

"Do behave yourself while I'm gone."

"Fuck you."

"Hmm, if I'm recalling the past thirty years correctly, then I believe it was the other way around, Tones."

And with that said, Ty disappeared out the door after giving Tony a soft pat on the thigh. Once he was certain that Ty was gone, Tony released a deep breath that he hadn't even realized he'd been holding. Emotionally drained didn't even begin to describe how Tony was feeling at that moment. Although he knew Ty was just trying to psych him out, that did little to help Tony's frazzled nerves or the twisted knot in his stomach. If anyone knew how to get inside Tony's head and manipulate the engineer's low self-esteem to his advantage, it was Tiberius Stone.

Hell, Tony was so freaked out he didn't even notice the nurse who came in to perform several blood draws. Thankfully, she didn't have to move his arms from either of the now broken clamps, so that was one small mercy Tony wasn't gonna scoff at. He needed whatever good fortune he could get right now.

It took about a half-hour for the nurse to finish her check-up, Tony remaining quiet and still through the whole ordeal. He wasn't exactly the biggest fan of needles or catheters, which meant he'd needed to disappear into his own head space to prevent another panic attack from bubbling to the surface. In Tony's opinion, eight vials of blood was completely unnecessary.

Seriously, were they trying to drain him of all fluids? He should've known that Pink-Lady was some kind of alien vampire. It all made sense now.

Tony tried not to rejoice when the nurse finally hauled her blue ass out of the room. Being examined by SHIELD doctors didn't hold a candle to the nerve-wracking affair that was multi-colored aliens, former HYDRA agents, and a possessive ex-boyfriend with something diabolical up his sleeve. Tony had a sinking feeling that Ty had yet again gotten himself involved with a group of people he didn't fully understand. It certainly wouldn't the first time that had happened, and Tony himself didn't know diddly-squat about what these assholes wanted, either.

Pissing off one too many business rivals and then becoming the target of blackmail had been what drove Ty out of the United States twelve years ago. He was always biting off more than he could chew, which was likely the case here.

Then again, Ty's arrogant screw-ups were all well and good, but Tony had bigger things to worry about right now, such as hiding the broken clamps and concocting an adequate escape plan. With how often the aliens and their cronies were checking up on him, Tony figured that he'd need at least several hours to create a safe, surefire breakout strategy. It wasn't going to be easy with Peter, but Tony had known that from the start of this whole debacle.

"Gonna need a USB port and maybe some bypass cables and a roll of duct tape and WD40 and a power drill," muttered Tony as he looked around, "And oh, there we are. How terribly convenient."

Lo and behold, a computer with USB ports, a roll of duct tape, and what could pass as bypass cables were resting on a desk about twenty feet away. And would you look at that, he was already
halfway done.

Tony could work with this.

"Alright, I just gotta keep my cool and make sure none of them check the—"

Just as Tony was giving himself a little pep talk, faint tremors seemed to shake the walls around him. It was strong enough to knock a couple objects off the tables and cabinets, glass shattering on the floor as an alarm sounded in the distance. Not even bothering to hold back a whoop of joy, Tony leaned down to slash the last clamp on his right ankle, immediately laying back down into a prone position on the table.

A blue alien came charging into the room with a curse, heading straight for the computer to check on Tony's vitals and whatever else it was used for. Deciding that the arrival of his compatriots meant it was go-time, Tony grabbed the nearest object—which happened to be some type of heart monitor—and surged forward to smash it into the back of Mr. Blue's head. Already knowing that he was outmatched physically, the engineer went straight for a nearby defibrillator and cranked it up to the very highest setting.

"Clear, you damned fucker."

Tony placed both paddles on either side of the alien's head and gave him a full-voltage shock right through the ears. Mr. Blue dropped to the floor with a guttural yelp, eyes rolling back as Tony gave him two swift kicks to the throat and forehead. Not wanting to take a chance on the guy's physiological resilience to electric currents, it only took a moment for Tony to race across the room and shove a tiny USB into the computer. The screen lit up for a few seconds before going black as stores of data were transferred directly to FRIDAY's servers.

"I love it when my things work," said Tony. "Always underestimating genius. Fools."

He removed the teeny-tiny USB and popped it back into the hidden slot inside his arc reactor casing. After that, Tony grabbed the car battery and made for the door, staying at least ten feet away Mr. Blue the whole time. As he opened the door, another series of tremors rocked the building, followed not thirty seconds later by an enormous explosion that even Tony could hear from several stories underground. Now that FRIDAY had the hideout's schematics, maybe Tony and Peter's explosive and trigger-happy rescue team wouldn't bring the whole damned thing down on their heads.

"Structural integrity, you filthy heathens. Geez, has no one taken an architecture class before?"

Tony grabbed the duct tape and bypass cables, eyes widening when he realized that he was clothed in nothing more than a flimsy hospital gown. It barely even tied in the back! Not to mention the assholes hadn't bothered to provide him with underwear, either. Bunch of perverts, the whole lot of them.

"Well, I always did like a nice breeze around my privates. Ugh, this isn't gonna be fun." Shouting could be heard from down the hallway. "I hope nobody minds being mooned, because my pasty ass is gonna flash them whether they like it or not."

And then another explosion rocked the building, pipes quivering above Tony's head as the wall directly across from him developed a three foot crack through it. What the fuck were those idiots doing?! There would be no Tony or Peter to save if they brought down the ceiling and squished them into splats on the floor. Was he really the only person in this ragtag outfit with a lick of sense?
Peeking around the corner, Tony spotted two soldiers and an alien at the end of the hallway, obviously arguing about what to do now that their top-secret hideout had been discovered. After another explosion and burst of tremors, the three assholes disappeared into an unseen door that led to who knows where. Nothing besides the now infected computer was available in the exam room, so Tony knew he'd have to find another piece of tech if he wanted to communicate with the outside world and his destructive rescuers.

After grabbing a thick tray off one of the nearby tables, Tony held the car battery close to his chest and started to creep down the hallways. He eventually came across an empty room that had three pre-2000 computers in it. Definitely not what he was hoping for, but Tony could make it work. The aliens had probably assumed any tech this old would be useless, which was a huge mistake on their part.

"Just need to bypass this over here and—oh yes, we're back in business."

It took less than a minute for Tony to hack, download, and memorize the building's schematics. Fuck you very much, alien scum.

"Two hallways over, third door on the left. Daddy's comin', baby boy."

Since most of the locks on this floor appeared to be electronic, Tony was able remotely open the door to Peter's room by rerouting the currents. It was laughably easy and Tony couldn't help but wonder how stupid these people had to be to underestimate him this much. However, any gloating Tony might've wanted to partake in was gonna have to be put on hold for now.

The latest rumble above Tony's head didn't sound good at all.

"I'm gonna kick their asses when I get up there. Absolutely no common sense, the whole lot of them."

Another rumble made Tony pick up the pace, narrowly dodging a soldier who came barreling around the furthest corner and tried to shoot at him. All but one of them missed, grazing Tony's left shoulder and causing him to yelp in pain.

"Hey! Watch it with the bullets, you giant oaf! My brain's worth more than your entire lifetime earnings."

Not wanting to be a sitting duck, Tony decided that it'd probably be wise to circle around and maybe lose the soldier, if lady luck was feeling especially generous today. This whole place was like a labyrinth, twists and turns appearing from out of nowhere. Lab rooms were hidden around sharp corners and thick steel doors blocked an unnecessary and unfair amount of exits.

Or at least they looked like exits. The schematics hadn't been as clearly labeled as Tony would've liked. Just another reason why he hated this wannabe dungeon with a burning passion. Once Peter and him were outside and safe, the Hulk could rip it apart to his angry green heart's content.

And would you look at that, there was the door to Peter's room.

Tony opened it with only the slightest hesitation, heart pounding at the prospect of an alien having already taken Peter away. Thankfully, those worries were proven to be exaggerated since Peter was hiding underneath his bed, head peeking out to glare at the latest intruder. However, once Peter saw that it was Tony instead of their multi-colored captors, he dashed across the room and collided face-first with his father's stomach.

"Dad!"
"Hey there, baby boy," crooned Tony around a lump in his throat. "Are you okay? Did they hurt you?"

"They punched me in the face."

And yeah, the split lip and black eye were still fresh and achy on Peter's face. Ointment had obviously been applied since there was no sign of infection, but that didn't make the injuries any less painful.

"Well, I think we'll just have to give them payback for that offense, yeah?"

"Can I blow 'em up?"

"That will depend on how much C4 and other combustive materials I can find on our way outside. Now, it would be prudent to—fuck!"

"Over here!"

Everything shook around them and a large chunk of the wall cracked from ceiling to floor right next to their feet. Peter grabbed Tony's arm and yanked him out of the way just in time, several hundred pounds of concrete crashing down onto the spot he'd just been standing. They had to jump back even further not five seconds later, another ton of concrete and steel twisting its way down from the level above. Peter held on tight the whole time, one arm wrapped around Tony's waist while his other kept the battery firmly between them.

"The building's trying to kill us."

"Okay, listen here, kiddo. I'm gonna need you to help me out a little with this."

Peter nodded.

"We're gonna use this duct tape to stick the battery and its cables directly to my skin," said Tony while already ripping at the tape. "That should at least prevent it from being pulled away and disconnected from the reactor's anchors. Also, just ignore my pasty ass and other unmentionables. I'm already well-aware of the fact that I'm traumatizing my own kid by doing this."

"I've seen naked people before, Dad. And that includes Uncle Ben."

"Oh, great, I got a voyeur in the making."

Peter stuck his tongue out in response, but didn't hesitate to help Tony reach under the gown and start duct taping the battery to his torso and chest. They covered a little bit of the open reactor itself, but also left just enough space to look inside or adjust the cables. Another explosion nearly sent them toppling over, but Tony was able to grab the wall before falling flat on his face. Someone was gonna get a serious talking to when they got outta here.

"This whole place is gonna come down," said Tony. "C'mon, kiddo, we've gotta move and we've gotta move now."

"What about the aliens?"

"I'll figure something out, but if I had to choose between them and twenty tons of concrete, I'd go with the pink and blue assholes."

"Umm, Dad," whispered Peter, "What's that over there?"
Tony turned around to see what Peter was pointing at and nearly shit himself when he realized they were staring straight at the Winter Soldier. Most specifically, the female Soldier. Oh, fuck him.

"C'mon! Run!"

They had just ducked around a corner when bullets slammed into the wall directly behind them. Tony skimmed over the schematics inside his head and made a sharp left turn at the next junction, narrowly missing a half-open steel door as they disappeared into the darkened stairwell. The sound of unfamiliar voices from above made Tony curse in frustration, heart pounding when he realized they'd need to head down instead of up.

"Change of plans, kiddo. We're gonna have to head downstairs for now."

"Are you sure?"

"Not much of a choice at this point."

Peter didn't argue, fingers tightening around his father's hand in fear. Heading down was the exact opposite of what they needed to be doing, but Tony also didn't feel like being shot full of bullets, either. So, they descended the pitch black steps as quickly as possible, both gasping when they landed in what must've been two feet of water. Fucking hell, things really weren't going according to plan.

Looking upwards, Tony came to the awful realization that the cooling pipes were directly above their heads and there was a very real possibility that this damned place had been built near a subterranean river or aquifer. It would've made it much easier to power the building while also keeping it hidden from national authorities where they'd set up shop. However, if Tony was rereading the schematics correctly in his head, it would also make it easy to flood all thirteen lower floors if the aliens and their lackeys needed to make a quick getaway.

"They're flooding the place. Sons of—"

A bullet skimmed right past Tony's head, clipping him in the ear and sending a gush of blood down his neck. Damnit, he'd forgotten about that bitch. With a shout and a curse, Tony dragged Peter down a dimly lit hallway and headed for the eleventh level's power room. He'd already unlocked that particular door from upstairs, so it was likely that a super-computer of some type was stored in there.

"Get down!"

Tony had barely yanked the door open before ducking down into the water, high-caliber bullets punching through the solid steel barrier like it was nothing more than Plasticine. He threw Peter across the space like a ragdoll, practically rolling in himself while also pulling the heavy door shut behind him. Both scrambled to hide behind the concrete walls, Tony signalling for Peter to hide in a corner while he crawled over to the computers. A thud echoed through the room as Tony popped the USB out of his reactor casing, shoving it into the computer as a large dent appeared on the door.

"C'mon, c'mon, hurry up..."

It took every bit of restraint in Tony's body to suppress a whoop of joy. Just a few more seconds and—

"Boss?"
"Thank fuck, I've never been so happy to hear your beautiful Irish voice, Fri."

"I have your location, Boss. Help is coming and I'm overriding the enemy's electrical systems to give them a quicker route." The AI's tone was a mix of concern and relief, which made Tony smile with pride because, hello, his synthetic babies were awesome. "I'm also attempting to divert the water systems to give you more—"

A fist suddenly came crashing through the door, fingers immediately searching for the handle to unlock it. Tony was just about to grab a nearby wrench and hit her as hard as he could with it when Peter came out of nowhere and repeatedly slammed a hammer down on her fingers. The Soldier shouted in pain, retracting her hand for a few seconds. It wasn't much, but Tony took the short opportunity to grab Peter and run for another door at the far end of the room.

"Help me pull this open, kiddo."

"Dad, the water..."

"I know, but we can't do anything about that right now. Just help me here."

"It's almost at my chest."

And yeah, there was no denying that the water was rapidly rising, now reaching a little higher than Tony's waist and up to Peter's chest. The next room should have a grated ceiling, so there was at least a chance that Tony would be able to bust through it and pull them up to the next level. With the Soldier directly behind them and breaking through the door, it wasn't like they had anywhere else to go, either.

"Dad, it's getting higher!"

"I know!"

The water was even deeper in this room, but Tony was more than a little relieved to see the grated ceiling and several generators that were connected through them on both levels. Holding tight to Peter's hand, he headed for the generators and gave his son a boost up first, scared that the water would rise over Peter's head while he was unscrewing the grates.

"Get a good handhold, alright? That's it, c'mon, increase your rate of climb, short stuff."

"It's all wet and slippery."

"Okay, hold my wrench while I climb up, too."

Tony pulled himself up on whatever handholds he could find, grabbing the wrench from Peter and starting to work on the grates' screws once he found a good place to sit down. Loud thuds could be heard from the connecting door, a sure sign the Winter Soldier would be breaking through in a matter of minutes. The rising waters didn't help the situation, either. It was freezing cold and more than a little dirty, causing both Peter and Tony to shiver as it reached their calves and lower thighs. If they fell off the generators, the water would be completely over their heads.

"Dad, hurry up."

"I'm trying," said Tony, numb fingers slipping on the wrench. "God, this is fucking annoying."

"Dad..."
"I know!"

Tony had only managed to get five screws loose when the door busted open, the Winter Soldier's head just barely visible over the water. Knowing he was out of time and defenses, Tony hit the grate as hard as he could, only shoving it up a few inches. Neither of them would be able to fit through that and Tony knew most of the ways he could fight back were too dangerous with Peter right here, directly in the line of fire and—

Another crash startled all three of them, the Winter Soldier whipping around just as something large slammed straight into her. Whatever it was took her right under the water with it, a plume of bubbles the only sign anything was going on under the surface. Tony had just pulled Peter to him when he heard the grates above start to creak, footsteps banging across them like a thunderstorm. And then booted feet were directly above their heads.

"Tony!"

The engineer let out a gusty sigh of relief. "Nice timing, Cap. Mind using that super strength to break us outta here?"

"Can you move a little bit to the side?"

"Just a couple feet to your left. We'll drop into the water otherwise."

"I can work with that."

Ducking to the side and making themselves as small as possible, both Starks tried not to choke on the frigid water that now almost reached the ceiling. Once they'd moved out of the way, Steve raised his shield and slammed it down on the unopened screws, fingers pulling at the grate to test its give before quickly moving on to the next screw with another brutal slam of his shield.

"Hurry up, Steve."

"I'm almost there. Just one more hit and I'll be able to pull it off."

"Gettin' kinda wet down—"

"Da—"

Tony shouted when Peter was suddenly yanked out of his arms and under the water, ignoring Steve's demand to know what was happening and immediately diving under himself. No sooner had Tony gone down than he was hit from behind, fingers clawing at his chest before they were pulled away and he was pushed back to the surface. And then, not ten seconds later, the female Soldier's head popped above the surface for a few moments before being violently yanked back under, blood pouring out of her mouth while what looked like a knife carved straight through her throat.

"Oh, fuck, Peter!"

Almost hysterical with worry and terror, Tony was about to go back under to search for his son when a metal arm burst out and grabbed onto a grate about ten feet away. There was barely four inches of air left, but Tony could see the arm flex once, twice, and then the grate was ripped right down into the blackened water. Tony would've gone over to inspect it himself if a hand hadn't grabbed him from behind, yanking him out of the water like a drowned rat.

"You're alive," breathed Steve, holding Tony close as he shivered and coughed. "When FRIDAY
told us they were flooding the compound, we weren't sure if we'd be able to get here in time. But you're both alive and... fuck..."

"Peter..." said Tony, hands already pushing at Steve's chest, "No, no, I need to get to Peter. He's still down there and—"

"I've got him."

Not ten feet behind them sat Bucky, also soaked like a greasy rat and holding Peter tight against his chest. The little boy was hacking and shivering, but also very much alive and trying to suck whatever warmth he could out of Bucky. Anticipating Tony's reaction, Steve half-carried him over to the other super-soldier and his tiny bundle.

"Give him to me."

Bucky didn't argue, letting the engineer scoot closer to grab hold of Peter, who appeared to be in some degree of shock. Neither soldier moved an inch, forming a protective cage around the father and son as they tried to return to some semblance of normal. Bucky even tugged the two closer—knowing that he and Steve were like living furnaces at the worst of times—desperately wanting to share whatever body heat he could with them.

A few seconds passed before Steve asked, "The Soldier?"

"She won't be bothering us again."

The stone cold and vicious tone in which Bucky spoke should've spooked Tony, but instead it sent a wave of relief and warmth through him. That bitch had been ready to kill his son and it had been Bucky's ruthless nature that had saved Peter's life. So, no, Tony wasn't about to be scared of someone who'd literally fought another Winter Soldier underwater to protect Peter and himself.

And dear God, he'd been under water. Tony was so scared of water that he didn't even take baths or swim in pools. It was like Afghanistan all over again, in so many ways, and the water was still rising and around his legs and—

What the hell, did somebody just kiss him? Huh?

"Okay, seriously, we need to leave," said Bucky as he pulled back. "The water's rising fast and we need to stay ahead of it."

Tony didn't notice Steve reach around to whack Bucky on the shoulder, but he did hear him say, "Since Tony got FRIDAY into the systems, she should be able to give us a quicker route than the one we took down here. I'll take these two if you take point."

"Stop ordering me around, you damned punk."

"Like you'd even listen, anyways."

"I'm cold."

"We'll be getting you someplace warm real soon, sweetie." Steve pulled both Starks to their feet, easily holding their weight on each arm. "I just need you to help me out a bit, okay? Can you walk?"

"Yeah."
"Then I'm gonna need you to do that as best you can for me."

"Uh huh."

Steve gave Tony a little shake to bring his attention away from the water, probably knowing exactly what was going through the other man's head. Tony hated having his head underwater and the team had learned that the hard way several years ago.

"We've gotta move. The other Soldier's still out there and we don't know much about the people who brought you here, either."

"Bunch of fuckin' pink and blue aliens with a God-complex," Tony grumbled. "Let's just go, okay?"

Steve bumped his forehead against Tony's and said, "Okay."

"I hate water. And aliens. They suck so much. And ex-boyfriends. I think they suck more than anything else, and not in a good way. Like in the real bad way that makes you wanna kick 'em in their stupid, bulbous-sized, blond head."

Poor Steve nearly tripped as they left the room. Weirdo.

Chapter End Notes

The cavalry has arrived. Happy now, folks? And yeah, I'm a total bitch for throwing Ty, hospital gowns, Winter Soldiers, and frigid water at Tony all in the same day, but life just isn't fair sometimes. One Soldier down, one to go. Also, I'm purposely keeping the aliens and their motivations rather mysterious in this story, mostly since Infinity Wars is coming and Thanos hasn't shown his ugly face yet.
"Wait."

Tony tried his damnedest not to topple over when Steve came to a halt, breaths coming out in short, wheezing pants that definitely weren't a good sign. His chest was burning and his fingers felt numb, both symptoms he'd been warned about over and over by his cardiologists. It had been a long time since Tony had felt this dizzy and sick due to the arc reactor, so he knew hiding it from Steve and Bucky just wasn't feasible anymore.

"Something's not right."

Bucky snorted and said, "I'm pretty sure everything's not right right now."

"No, this is really not right."

The super-soldiers nearly choked when Tony pulled down the neck of his hospital gown, revealing a circular wad of duct tape covering the arc reactor's opening. Tony had put extra tape over any exposed holes before they'd fled into the generator room, but that hadn't stopped water from leaking into the tiny crevices around both battery cables. And although Peter had done a good job of wrapping up and pinning the battery itself, the thing definitely wasn't running at full capacity and Tony was more than a little worried it was either about to short-circuit or disconnect from the electromagnetic anchors.

If even one of those two things happened, he'd be dead in less than five minutes. Honestly, could this day—hell, this whole fucking year—get any more worse?

"What the hell is that, Tony?"

"Our good friends Pinky and Big Blue apparently wanted the glowy energy thing inside my chest," said Tony, fingers flexing in an effort to get rid of the tingly sensation. It just wouldn't go away. "And so, like the alien asshats they are, Pinky took the damned thing out and gave me this lovely car battery instead. Now, I'll admit, it's quite a bit fancier than the one I had in Afghanistan, but also still liable to short-circuit and kill me."

"They actually took it out?"

"You know, Steven, it's a good thing you're pretty. Otherwise, life would be very difficult for you."

"How the hell are you still alive?"

Disturbed hardly did Bucky's facial expression justice, his eyes trained on the duct taped hole in Tony's chest and the flimsy cables that disappeared into the hospital gown. Tony would've felt a little self-conscious if he also hadn't felt like he was gonna drop over any second from exhaustion and nausea. Thankfully, Steve had the mind to keep a tight grip around Tony's waist, easily supporting his weight as they neared another stairwell. Just looking at the murky steps told Tony there was no way he'd be able to make the climb without lots of super-soldiery assistance.

"That's a good question that we really don't have time to talk about," said Tony around a painful wheeze. "Okay, having some trouble breathing here, boys. Oh yeah, definitely something not right
down there."

Peter reached over to inspect things for himself. "Maybe the battery got wet. And that wouldn't be
good, right? Could it electrocute you?"

Bucky looked about ready to claw somebody's eyes out before saying, "Just fuck it and carry him,
Steve. And put Peter on your back if you have to. I can provide any protection and cover fire we'll
be needing, so hurry it up."

"Hey, we don't really need to take this—oh, so we're going bridal carry here? How original,
Steven."

"We need to get him to Bruce. I've never seen it like this before."

"Hello, I'm right here."

"And we've still got seven floors to go. The bitch also wrecked my comms beyond repair. Yours
still working?"

"I can still hear chatter in certain areas."

Tony grunted when Peter hopped on Steve's back, small feet poking at his father's exposed
shoulders and calves like pointy lil' missiles. He could easily spot a dozen or more cuts on the
boy's right foot, obviously a direct result of running barefoot through a crumbling dungeon. They
all appeared to be shallow and superficial, but Bruce would no doubt insist on administering a
tetanus booster to both of them.

"Sons of bitches must have some kinda jammer in place," said Bucky while triple-checking his
guns. "I'm surprised Tony's tracker even worked down here."

"Hey, Mr. McGreasy, I take extreme offense to that statement. My toys always work."

"These don't."

"Yeah, well, I didn't make those things. You can blame Fury for using Hammer or Os or Via Tech
once we're outta here."

"I knew there was a reason I didn't like 'em."

"Well, at least you have some degree of taste in—whoa! Behave yourself, Steven. I'm pretty sure
groping geniuses in distress is against every ancient and somewhat modern code of chivalry out
there."

Steve meeped in surprise, right hand shooting away from Tony's bare ass so quickly he almost
dropped him. It would've been more comical if Tony hadn't yelped in pain, one arm grabbing at his
own chest while the other made a mad grab for Steve's tactical vest. Thankfully, Bucky was close
and aware enough to jump forward and snatch up Tony's lower half before he could topple to the
ground.

"Oh fuck, I'm so sorry, Tony! I didn't mean to... I wouldn't..."

Bucky snapped his fingers in front of Steve's face and said, "Keep breathing there, Stevie. I'm sure
Tony's willing to forgive you since his pasty ass is on display for the whole world to see right
now."
"Seriously, why does everyone call my ass pasty?"

"Hate to break it to you, Stark, but it clearly hasn't seen sunshine in a good, long time. Hence, the pastiness."

"I'm never fixing your arm again, you geriatric asshole."

The assassin helped rearrange Tony into a more comfortable and less pervy position in Steve's arms, kindly fixing the hospital gown so Tony wasn't on display for every pink and blue alien to see. He also double-checked Peter, whispering a few words of encouragement to the boy before flicking Steve upside the head. Even though the corridor was eerily dark, Tony could still make out the bright red flush all over Steve's cheeks and neck, causing him to look far more like a tomato than the glorified super-soldier he was supposed to be.

"Cap's not gonna pass out and drop me, is he?"

"Good luck gettin' him to let you go after that little stunt just now. Overprotective instincts and all that." Bucky walked around to make sure Steve really, truly wasn't gonna stumble into another grope and panic attack. "And just as a forewarning, it's incredibly annoying, too."

"I'm right here."

"Oh, would you look at that, he's back with us."

After running a hand through Tony's hair, Bucky signaled for them to stay where they were while he disappeared around a nearby corner. Since the super-soldiers were wearing all-black tactical gear, he was out of sight within seconds. The quiet was more than a little creepy and Tony couldn't help looking around to see if anyone had snuck up on them.

"Just rest, Tony," said Steve once he noticed the brunet's fidgeting. "You need your energy and Bucky will be back in no time."

"There's a room full of explosive chemicals only four doors down," said Tony, mostly because he was bored and anxious. "It's just past those yellow steam pipes, on the next floor. Probably a whole lot of weird alien stuff, too. Go fetch me some, Captain Ice Cube."

Steve chuckled. "Always thinking about blowing something up, aren't you?"

"It's a perfectly healthy pastime."

For some reason, that statement seemed to use up the last of Tony's energy, his head lolling against Steve's chest with an exhausted sigh. Just this once, Tony would allow himself to take some comfort in the other man's presence, not to mention the delicious heat he was giving off like a furnace. Tony tried to ignore the ache in his chest and quiet hum of the car battery, but it just wouldn't stop vibrating against his skin and the memory of water rising above his—

"I think your son's trying to destroy my kidney."

"Am not."

Tony grunted in response, shamelessly nosing into Steve's chest. It was a very nice chest. Hard and firm. So very, very nice.

"Now he's pinching me with his toes."
"You can't feel that."

"Don't underestimate the sensors your dad puts into these things, kiddo. They're very sensitive."

Oh yes, pique the kid's interest by calling his bluff. Real good job, Captain Bigmouth. Honestly, it was like Tony was surrounded by idiots half the time. Giving into Peter and his manipulative bluffs was a very unwise course of action. Poor strategy, too. For a supposed master strategist, Steve was sure good at getting hoodwinked by both himself—seriously, the guy really needed a couple classes in leadership, ethics, and strategy from West Point or The Citadel—and those around him.

"You're lying."

"Says the kid who hides chocolate covered pretzels in his bedroom."

"Lies, lies, lies."

"They're in the bottom left drawer of your nightstand. And wait, I think I've got something over the comms. Or maybe not..."

Another loud boom came from above, the lights flickering almost completely out and making it so all Tony could see was a faint outline of Bucky about ten feet in front of them. The assassin signaled for Steve to follow him a few moments later, disappearing and reappearing out of the shadows every time they came upon a darkened stairwell or corner. Normally, Tony would've made a smartass comment about Bucky being a creepy creeper who creeps, but his chest was aching more and more with each passing minute and Tony knew it was only a matter of time before things took a turn for the worst.

"We need to move," said Bucky. "The water's coming up fast and I know someone's following us."

"The Soldier?"

"Probably. But it could be one of the aliens, too."

"Any tracks?"

"Only a few and they're not distinctive. I'll double back while you head up the left hallway. If FRIDAY's directions are correct—"

"Why is that... even in question?"

"Then reinforcements should be coming down that stairwell in less than five minutes. Hey, you okay there, Petey? We'll have you safe and outta this hellhole in a little bit, I promise."

Bucky leaned forward to whisper something in Peter's ear, too quiet for Tony to make out the words but still loud enough for him to hear the tender tone. Whatever it was seemed to give Peter a little boost and the kid's head finally emerged from Steve's neck. Tony forced himself to look away, eyes watering at the sight of either super-soldier with his son. It was painful to watch, no matter how much he tried to deny it.

"You good now?"

"Uh huh."

"Then let's get moving and find a doctor of the non-malicious human variety."

"I'm okay."
"Your feet are bleeding, short stuff. And your dad looks like he got run over by a combine. Twice."

"Fuck you, Barnes."

"I was kinda hoping it'd be the other way around."

Okay, the synthetic Mind Stone must've done something to Tony's brain, because Bucky's voice was entirely too serious and not nearly sarcastic enough to be real. First, he'd imagined a kiss after the whole water rescue thing downstairs; and now, he was fabricating an interested tone in the assassin's voice. Oh yes, Tony was most definitely losing his mind. No doubt about it.

Ugh, he hated oxygen deprivation. So much.

Everything went quiet after that, Tony taking the coward's way out by feigning exhaustion—well, okay, maybe the ache in his chest was worse than he was letting on—and hiding in Steve's chest. The dreaded taste of coconut and copper had settled in the back of his throat, a sign something was seriously wrong with the arc reactor.

He wondered if the super-soldiers could sense his physical distress, because they were definitely moving much faster and more urgently than they had before. Steve even shook him a handful of times, demanding Tony stay awake while also apologizing for the poor treatment. It was frightening and Tony tried to fiddle with the car battery a couple times. He knew something wasn't right down there.

"Wait, I think we're in a transmission zone," said Steve as they arrived on the fourth floor. "This is Captain Rogers. Awaiting confirmation on location."

The Starks remained silent as Steve spoke with what must've been Natasha and Rhodey, eyes wandering around to watch the shadows as they heard scuffling down a nearby hallway. Bucky had wandered off at some point and to be truthful, the engineer was more than happy to not know what he was getting up to, especially with Peter clinging to Steve's back. They had passed several dead bodies on their journey up, most of them sporting blown off heads, slashed throats, and grossly mangled limbs. Both Tony and Steve had ordered Peter to close his eyes as they passed them.

"We're currently on the fourth floor and just left of stairwell B. Structural integrity is decreasing and we have an injured Iron Man and child in our company. Any form of assistance would be appreciated and meeting on the next floor near stairwell—fuck!"

A body collided with Steve from the left, knocking him sideways and causing Peter to topple right off his back. Tony tried to hold back a yelp of pain, but that apparently didn't work since he could hear his own voice echo through the corridor like a gunshot. Another vicious curse from Steve was the only warning Tony had before he was deposited on the floor, narrowly avoiding a boot that connected with the wall above his head. And then Tony heard a crash, their attacker literally flying across the hall when Steve slammed him with the shield.

"Steve! Hit the yellow pipe over there. Now!"

The blond didn't question Tony's order and threw his shield straight at the pipe, vibranium easily cutting through standard steel to send boiling hot steam gushing out into their attacker's face. A pained grunt of surprise brought some satisfaction to Tony—especially since he was almost useless right now, which he fucking hated—but the engineer also knew getting Peter and himself out of the way was imperative to their continued survival.

"What's going—Dad! I can't see where—"
"Don't move."

Aside from grabbing Peter's arm to drag him over, Tony remained perfectly still and tried not to flinch when a gunshot sounded several feet behind them. He didn't even have time to turn around before Bucky was charging forward into the steam, black combat suit allowing him to seamlessly blend in with the inky darkness at that end of the corridor. With his eyes unable to see anything in front of him, Tony turned his head to the side and was both disturbed and delighted by what he saw laying not five feet away.

"Our favorite Robocop may need to learn some general restraint," said Tony while scooting over to grab at the dead body, "But I think I can forgive his transgressions this time around because, oh boy, this beautiful metal baby might be my new favorite thing in the world."

Peter poked him in the side.

"Well, after you, of course. Nothing beats my cranky lil' spider-baby."

If it hadn't been so damned dark, Tony would've seen Peter roll his eyes and lean over for a closer look at the bizarre-looking gun. Since the dead woman behind Tony was blue, it was definitely of alien-make and in Tony's opinion, of exquisite construction and aerodynamic design. And, as expected, it only took Tony a couple seconds to figure out how the thing worked.

When an alien came around the corner, Tony blasted it straight through a steel door. Unfortunately, the kickback was a bitch and Tony could barely hold back a groan of agony. Okay, maybe that wasn't the brightest idea he'd ever had, considering his chest felt like a boulder had been placed on it. With steam billowing through the corridor, Tony also couldn't be sure if his vision was really fading out or if the air was just becoming murkier with hot vapors. He could have asked Peter, but all that would do was send the boy into a terrified panic.

"Packs quite... the punch," Tony groaned. "And wow, this really... isn't my fucking day, is it?"

Two bodies came crashing to the steam's edge, several gunshots going off as the super-soldiers wrestled for control and Bucky attempted to ram his long knife into the other Winter Soldier's throat. Tony was getting ready to aim the alien gun at Nguyen when a hand grabbed him from behind, causing both Peter and Tony to yelp with surprise. Unfortunately, this also distracted Bucky, who was kicked across the hall and probably would've lost his head if not for his enhanced reflexes.

"It's just me, Tony. Don't panic."

"Sharon?"

"We need to get you outta here while Nguyen's distracted," said the blonde, who was covered from head to toe in a black combat suit. "The Captain said your reactor's been removed, correct?"

Peter nodded. "They took it out right away. I saw 'em do it."

"Okay, well, that's really not good."

With a worried click of her tongue, Sharon reached around to take a quick look for herself before grunting and dragging Tony to his feet. As usual, Tony was amazed at the strength contained in his adoptive cousin's body, inwardly scoffing at her longtime winning streak when it came to arm wrestling contests. The engineer refused to let her carry his entire weight, because that would just be humiliating.
"The Colonel's going head to head with that fuckstain of an ex-boyfriend of yours," said Sharon, already moving them down the hallway and far away from the super-soldiers' blood-soaked fight. "About half the explosions you've been feeling are from him. But he apparently has a replacement arc reactor waiting for you, so we need to get you topside as quickly as possible."

"Yeah, that might be smart. I can't really breathe too much anymore."

"Fuck."

"Language around the child, blondie."

"Shit."

"That's not much better."

"Don't start lecturing me on language, Tony. I know you swear like a sailor around him."

"He does."

A pitch black stairwell was what greeted them about four hallways over, Tony gasping in pain with every step they took up the godforsaken stairs. Sharon was clearly trying to absorb most of his weight, but there was only so much to be done when she was barely an inch taller than Tony himself. A small form slipped under Tony's left arm about halfway up, Peter trying to support his dad to the best of his abilities. It was a clumsy yet valiant effort and Tony was seriously reconsidering his stance on no more pets in the tower. 

Rewarding the kid with a leopard gecko was looking more and more viable with each passing second.

And for once, luck appeared to be on their side because they didn't run into any guards or aliens the whole way up. Explosions were still rocking the building and the super-soldiers were no doubt ripping each other apart downstairs, but at least the regular humans weren't being bombarded by pink and blue lunatics. Seriously, out of all the ridiculous and stupid possibilities, Tony just had to get kidnapped by a baby shower vomit party. Besides, who did these assholes think they were, anyways?

Once they were out of this mess, Tony was gonna hack every database he could find on aliens and their dastardly plans. He'd been avoiding that little issue for nearly four years now—and yes, the mere mention of aliens tended to remind Tony of a certain nightmarish wormhole, thank you very much—but it appeared that avoidance wasn't going to work anymore.

Maybe he'd name this new project Operation Roswell? It had a nice ring to it, even though Rhodey would snort at the unoriginal name. Tony still couldn't figure out just what the multi-colored asshats were up to, but hopefully Coulson or T'Challa had tracked down some shred of information by this point. Not to mention Thor, who always seemed to have a passing knowledge of the various worlds beyond Earth. Taking a few hostages for interrogation would probably be prudent too, but with his big green buddy smashing up the place, there was no guarantee of—

"Hey, I can feel you thinking from here," said Sharon. "We'll exchange information after the gaping hole in your chest issue is resolved, so let's just focus on getting you to the Colonel right now. How're you doing over there, Petey?"

"Dad's heavy."

"I resent that remark," Tony panted. "I'm just big-boned."
"And you really need to stop watching so much *South Park.* Okay, here's another stairwell. Ant-Man says it's clear and a couple of Coulson's agents are coming down to meet us."

"Ouch."

"Be careful of the rubble, Petey. The Hulk's been smashing things to pieces upstairs."

Tony snorted and said, "Easy to say when you're wearing boots and pants. Some of us are committing indecent exposure here."

As usual, Sharon used sarcasm to lighten the situation. Tony knew she was doing it to distract him from the pain and kinda appreciated it, especially since his chest was hurting more and more with each step he took.

"I don't think the super-soldiers are complaining."

This drew a grumble from Peter. "I have lots of objections. Dad's butt is super pasty."

"Hey, my ass is a gift to the world."

A misstep made Tony groan in agony, chest twinging when they nearly toppled down the concrete stairs. Sharon cursed, almost falling over herself when an explosion shook their feet from the floors below. If Tony had been a little more clear-headed, he probably would've realized that Steve had gotten into the chemical room he'd referenced earlier, but all Tony could think about at that moment was the pain in his chest. He needed another arc reactor, and he needed it now.

"I can barely feel my legs, Shar."

"Fuck."

"I think that came from downstairs," said Peter, arms wrapped around Tony to hold him up. "Are Steve and Bucky alright?"

"I'm sure they're okay, kiddo. Here, help me with your dad. We're running outta time. "Hold onto that battery, Pete. We need to make sure it doesn't short circuit or disconnect."

Sharon moved like a freight train after that, charging through the hallways and even shooting a HYDRA agent at pointblank range when he ambushed them. They were on the second floor when Sharon nearly put a bullet between Steve's eyes, the super-soldier quickly putting his hands up to show he meant no harm. Bucky was right behind him, pistol and knife immediately lowering when he saw their familiar faces. Both men were covered in soot and blood, visible even on their black combat gear.

"Oh God, Tony..."

"Whoa, back off, Captain. You're covered in who knows whose blood and Tony's basically a big, open wound right now. I can carry him the rest of the way if you two keep the path clear. Got it?"

Although Steve and Bucky looked ready to argue, both nodded their heads and didn't interfere with Sharon's renewed charge into the stairwell. Once they were on the first floor, comms came back on and Steve demanded an immediate evac while also alerting Rhodey to his best friend's precarious situation. Tony was on the verge of unconsciousness by now, eyes drooping and breath labored as they finally came to the building's entrance. A slew of SHIELD agents were waiting for them,
including Coulson and a medic familiar with Tony's heart condition.

"Colonel Rhodes is going to meet us at the evac point," said Coulson as he came over to support Tony's other side. "Falcon and Vision will continue pursuit of Tiberius Stone and his new creations. How are you feeling, Mr. Stark?"

"Like I'm about to pass out."

"Well, we can't have that. Agent May is bringing the Quinjet over as we speak and the Hulk should be here in a moment. I assume that he will be able to revert to his normal self once he learns of your condition."

It was dark when they arrived outside, Tony's eyes just barely discerning the landscape around him. The whole area was mountainous and dusty and reminded Tony far too much of another place where he'd been tortured not even a decade ago. Sharon seemed to pick up on the tension and placed a soft hand on the back of Tony's neck, just like Aunt Peggy had done to calm him as a child. Unfortunately, even that wasn't enough to soothe the abject terror coursing through his veins.

"Where are we at?"

"About five miles north of the Khyber Pass in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan," said Coulson, pointedly ignoring the brutal battle going on just above their heads. "An Indian base just outside of Amritsar has offered their services until we can stabilize your condition and then transport you to American soil. Dr. Schaeffer is concerned about surgically treating you in the air, or at least on anything except a helicarrier, which we no longer have."

Steve snapped his fingers in front of Tony's face and said, "We're not going to Kabul?"

"A large suicide bombing took place in the city center yesterday. Transporting the Starks to such an unstable location would be ill-advised at this point. Colonel Rhodes, we require cover fire at our two o'clock."

Explosions rocked the ground as War Machine literally blasted another machine... thingy out of the sky, streaking right after it like a bloodthirsty missile. Tony was more than a little proud when he saw that Rhodey was using his latest additions, including an upgraded unibeam and box rocket system. The Quinjet appeared only a few seconds later, flanked on either side by Vision and Falcon before they rejoined the battle against whatever that alien metal thingy was. And then Agent Hill popped up from out of nowhere, easily swinging a barefoot Peter up into her arms while also keeping her gun raised to protect him.

"Where Tony?"

"Oh, hey there, Big Guy. Having fun smashing... stuff to bits?"

Everyone and their mother instinctively backed up when Hulk landed right in front of them, muscles clenched and veiny from the destruction he'd been wreaking on Tony's kidnappers. Despite the vicious aura Hulk gave off, Tony wasn't afraid of him. The Big Guy wouldn't hurt him or Peter, that he knew without a doubt. There was no reason to be scared of him.

"Hurt?"

"Yeah, just a little bit. Could you possibly revert back... into your less-green self and patch me up?"

"Cookies?"
"Have I ever deprived you... of cinnamon cookies? You wound me, buddy."

"Glowing heart?"

"Someone took it out. And I need you... to fix it before I die, okay?"

That last sentence did the trick and Hulk promptly shrunk down into the familiar form of a very human and very naked Bruce Banner. The physicist shouted and gasped through the transformation, shoulders heaving for a few moments before he forced himself to stand and stumble towards Tony's barely conscious form. It only took a quick glance for Bruce to rush off towards the descending Quinjet, ordering the medics to gather a whole slew of medical supplies and have them sterilized and ready as quickly as possible.

"Set him down on the exam table over there," said Bruce once they were inside. "It pulls out of the wall. And please tell me we have vancomycin and tetracycline? He's penicillin-hypersensitive and likely already suffering from infective endocarditis."

"We're stocked with both, Dr. Banner."

"Good, then start up an intravenous line for both of those. He's about 160 pounds, below average height, and suffers from high blood pressure, inflammatory cardiomyopathy, and mild multifocal atrial tachycardia, so take that into consideration when measuring the dosage. Can you do that while I examine the arc reactor itself?"

Agent Trip nodded. "Yes, Doctor. I've done this several times before."

Bruce wheeled over the equipment and said, "Start up his vital lines along with some oxygen first. And you two, I want you stripped and in a decontamination wash right now. If not, then get off this plane, because you're a walking biohazard to Tony's immune system. Where's Dr. Cho and Dr. Schaeffer?"

"Right here."

The doctors came racing in with a few trays of supplies and equipment, shoving everyone else to the back while hooking Tony up to a ridiculous amount of machines. Anxiety spiking yet again, Tony closed his eyes and tried not to hyperventilate, instead focusing on the nurse's voice who was examining Peter. Aside from a split lip, broken nose, cut up feet, and mild dehydration, the kid was otherwise unharmed by their captors. Those words were a huge relief to Tony, who had been terrified of his son being seriously injured or killed because of him.

"Sterilize yourself before crossing the white line! Agent Simmons, bring over that disinfectant and box of gloves. We need to wipe down and scrub everything in this area, including ourselves. And prepare those vials over there for blood draws and tissue samples."

Tony clenched his fingers so tight he could almost feel blood underneath his nails. Even with the oxygen mask, breathing was becoming more difficult and Tony didn't know how much longer he could—

"Hey, stop doing that," said Steve from out of nowhere. "Breathe with me, Tony. In and out. That's it, in and out."

After getting a rather pathetic rhythm going, Tony opened his eyes to see a now squeaky clean and PPE-wearing Steve right next to his head. The doctors were still setting up equipment, obviously waiting for Rhodey to arrive with a spare arc reactor. He forced himself not to look down at the newly exposed car battery and giant hole in his chest, instead focusing on Steve and his stupidly
perfect hair and beard. Wow, the idiot still hadn't shaved. Not a bad look, though.

"Colonel Rhodes is almost here. Just another minute or two, I promise."

"Freaking you... out yet?"

Steve let out a strained laugh and said, "I don't think you can comprehend how much we're freaking out right now. Anxiety attacks for everyone."

"You're not the one... with a hole in your... fucking chest."

"No, I'm not."

"Did anyone manage... to find my arc reactor? The one they took?"

The blond got a shifty look to him before saying, "No, well, not really. We'll talk about it more when you're not so holey."

"Utterly terrible... pun, right there."

"I do try."

Steve ran his fingers through Tony's hair to keep him calm and relaxed, assuring him that Peter was safe and all bandaged up with Bucky in the cockpit. Several other agents had been wrangled into helping with whatever machines they'd hooked Tony up to, Sharon debating with Bruce about something related to the arc reactor and its core, or at least that's what it sounded like. Tony's hearing was kinda questionable at this point.

And then a bang came from the hangar doors. Sharon rushed over to open it.

"Where is he?"

"Right over here, Colonel. Do you have it?"

"Always."

With a quick kiss to Tony's forehead, Steve disappeared out of view while Rhodey popped into it. The airman didn't waste any time with greetings, instead throwing out orders like the lifelong military man he was. Nobody aside from Tony and his AIs understood the arc reactor better than Rhodey, who'd assisted him in upgrading and modifying it more times than he could count. If something needed to be fixed in Tony's chest, it was Rhodey who stood beside the Arc Cradle and did whatever Tony himself couldn't do alone.

The older man was a brilliant engineer in his own right and Tony trusted no one in the universe more than him. He didn't even freak out when Rhodey picked up the car battery, examining it with the careful eye of an MIT-trained engineer before moving on to look inside Tony's chest. A big hand returned to brushing Tony's hair, just hard enough to distract him from Rhodey's poking and prodding. This wasn't gonna be pleasant.

With an unhappy grunt, Rhodey pulled back to speak with Bruce and the doctors, signaling for Sharon to fetch something from across the hangar. Tony just focused on Steve's fingers and warmth, silently vowing to murder his ex-boyfriend and shoot the first pink or blue alien he saw. Those fuckers deserved a bullet in their asses.

"Okay, let's do this, folks."
For anyone with a medical background, especially in cardiology, Tony's signs and symptoms are expected but also rather bizarre. Considering how physiologically weird the arc reactor is, I'm extrapolating on a lot of stuff here. Hence, why I've kept the medical jargon to a minimum. And yes, Bucky stole the first kiss last chapter, although Tony still thinks he imagined it.

Also, Tony's very unwell and out of it in this chapter, so if some parts seem rather flaky or meandering, that's on purpose.
Chapter 25

Tony hated hospitals.

Of course, this wasn't exactly a revelation to anyone who knew him, but he just felt the need to state it. Multiple times. You know, for posterity's sake. Hospitals and the special brand of crazy that worked in them were the bane of Tony's existence. And that included the young nurse who was taking yet another blood draw—eight within two hours, he'd been counting—from Tony's horrendously abused left arm. He didn't care what Rhodey said, this woman was a vampire.

Everything had been quiet since Tony woke up, only a doctor and two nurses puttering in and out, scribbling down notes on those stupid lil' clipboards of theirs. Why they didn't use a computerized system was beyond him, but Tony assumed from the medical personnel's accents that they weren't in the US or on any type of naval vessel. Tony had faked sleep every time someone came in, mostly because he didn't wanna talk to anyone yet. Well, aside from Peter and Rhodey, but he also knew they'd make an appearance sometime soon.

Okay, scratch that, Tony wanted to see Peter right now.

"You're a vampire, ma'am."

The nurse turned around to give him a knowing smile and said, "I was wondering when you would stop feigning sleep, Mr. Stark. You lasted an hour longer than I had predicted, well done."

"And that's not creepy at all."

"I'm accustomed to patients trying to trick me through sleep. Do not think yourself special."

"Ouch, that one hurt. You are a cruel lady, Ms. Nurse."

That earned him an amused chuckle as she came over to recheck his vitals and ask the usual wake-up questions. Tony eventually learned that instead of Ms. Nurse, the snarky young woman's name was Amita Chopra and a cranky man with an eye-patch had vetted and selected her to be Tony's attending nurse during his short stay in Amritsar. It seemed that for once in his life, Cyclops had made a good decision in Tony's favor, because Amita's brand of humor and wit was right up his alley, making the more invasive of his examinations almost bearable.

"So, where am I?"

"About a half hour from being moved to the USS Gerald Ford," said Amita while preparing several pieces of equipment for transport. "You were deemed stable enough for the move about two hours ago by Dr. Schaeffer and Dr. Bhatia. There's only so much we can do for your... unique condition here at the Government Medical College. Are you able to feel when I pull on your fingers?"

"Should I make a farting sound to prove it?"

Amita gave him a sidelong look and said, "You Americans are a weird bunch."

"It's a side-effect of all the pickles."
By the time Amita was done giving him the once over, Rhodey and a team of SHIELD agents had arrived to move him by Quinjet to the waiting aircraft carrier. Rhodey stayed with him the entire time, holding Tony's IV-less hand as the pain medication started to make his eyes droop and the hallways blur. And since Rhodey was the bestest friend in the whole world, he also said that Peter was waiting for them on the helipad with Vision and Bruce. Apparently, the kid had been in Tony's room for two days straight and Bruce had insisted on him getting some fresh air and sunlight.

"Dad!"

The afternoon sun temporarily blinded Tony and prevented him from seeing the little ball of energy that would've tackled him if Rhodey hadn't anticipated and averted the collision. Peter smiled down at him like an angel, nose bandaged and cheeks bruised from the rough treatment their captors had given him. For a painful moment, Tony just stared at the various injuries his son had suffered, stomach twisted with a burning hatred he'd never felt before. Not even the video of his parents' murders and Steve's lies could compare to the anger he was feeling right then.

"Hey, baby boy, how're you doing?"

"The food here is super spicy. My tongue almost fell off this morning."

"Indian curry is brutal."

Peter gave him a sage-like nod and said, "I think I lost half the papillae on my tongue. See—ahhhh!"

Well, that certainly was a very red and abused-looking tongue. As they were maneuvering Tony into the Quinjet, Peter crawled from Vision's arms to Tony's bed and totally ignored any objections the medical staff gave. One of the other nurses probably would've removed the boy if Amita hadn't stepped in, saying that Dr. Schaeffer had cleared him for close, restricted contact with Peter and a select few others. That was a huge relief to Tony because he didn't know if he'd be able to let anyone—and that included well-meaning nurses—take Peter away from him again.

"I'm afraid the curry won the war, kiddo."

"You can blame Vision. He dared me to eat it. And then he laughed when I started crying. It was really mean."

"For some reason, I highly doubt that."

"There was no dare to speak of," said Vision from his spot on a neighboring bench. "I simply stated that such spicy cuisine would be foreign to Peter's palate, making him unable to tolerate it. And as proven by his subsequent reaction, it was a perfectly reasonable assumption given Peter's ethnic and cultural background in relation to both the Parkers and yourself."

"Sorry, kiddo, but the Caped Crusader has a point."

"I've eaten spicy food before."

"Oh really? I'd be very interested in hearing this lil' tidbit of information since I know I've never fed you anything remotely spicy before. Do tell?"

"Aunt May's salsa had a kick to it."

That earned a snort from Tony, who barely even noticed the hangar bay doors closing behind them. Peter settled himself at Tony's left hip, already stealing some of his dad's blankets to create a
little cocoon. It was a reassuring sight and allowed Tony to finally relax against the lumpy hospital pillows. And then a knobby knee jabbed right into his kidneys, reminding Tony that he was still injured and Peter was a klutz at the best of times.

"For some reason, I don't think a kick can hold up against Indian food. You've struck out on this one, buddy."

"Will they have cheeseburgers on the ship?"

"It's an American ship," said Tony around a yawn. "I think it'd be blasphemy if they didn't. Or maybe treason. Yeah, definitely treason."

"Good, but you need to go to sleep. It'll make you feel better later."

Tony popped an eye open and said, "Well, would you look at you, already acting as my own personal physician. Do I need to worry about you attempting to insert an IV while I'm passed out here."

"Ewww! No! Those things are gross and they really, really hurt."

"Tell me about it."

"But you should go to sleep," said Peter with a sure nod. "It's supposed to be good for old people and you'll heal quicker, too."

"Lil' brat. No gecko for you."

He heard Peter squawk in offense, but the pain medication pulled Tony under before anything coherent made it through his eardrums. The vibrations of the Quinjet had always been a comforting sensation, so Tony had no problem dozing for the entire flight. Having Peter curled up on his hip while Vision and Rhodey spoke in hushed tones just over his head was a major plus, too.

After they took off, Tony drifted into a deep slumber and only awoke after they landed on the aircraft carrier. He tried to open his eyes, but a warm hand settled on Tony's forehead and instructed him to remain right where he was. Normally, Tony would've objected, but exhaustion was still tugging hard at his body and listening to Rhodey had always been second nature in situations like this. It also didn't help that a solid weight was sprawled across Tony's lower half, imprisoning him to the bed like a useless lump.

"Don't worry about moving, Tones. We're only stopping to refuel, pick up some supplies, and then we'll be on our way. Peter's staying right here with you, so don't get squirrely or give the baby agents a rough time, alright?"

"You're leaving?"

"Only for a few minutes," said Rhodey while leaning over to give Tony a clear view of his face. "I need to make sure they're giving us the right equipment to keep your diagnostics running until we reach New York. Sharon, Bruce, and Vision will be standing guard the whole time, though."

Tony swallowed around the dryness in his mouth and asked, "Where're the others?"

"Some of them returned to Pakistan with SHIELD to look for more evidence." Rhodey reached down to pet at Tony's head, something he usually only did when worried sick or giving bad news. "And the others weren't given clearance to cross the Indian border. I'm sure that doesn't surprise you considering India's original stance on the Accords and Steve's behavior towards them."
"And here?"

"Just because Steve, Bucky, and Sam were given domestic pardons doesn't mean that military have finished their own trials. Or reinstated their ranks yet."

"I figured that'd be the case. Did they at least attempt to cooperate?"

"Well, they weren't happy, to say the least."

Tony tried not to laugh at that, easily imagining the pissed off expressions on both Steve and Bucky's faces. He wondered what poor soul had delivered that batch of news, because it couldn't have been pleasant facing down two cranky super-soldiers. But seriously, if Steve had created yet another international incident, Tony was gonna rip off his balls and hang them from the Liberty Torch.

"It took me twenty minutes to reason with them," said Rhodey. "And, as usual, Barnes has a hundred times more common sense than Captain Hardhead. That man has some serious stubbornness issues. And needs about a half-dozen courses in leadership, too."

The brunet shrugged and said, "It's not like he has any formal officer training. I've figured that's where at least half his issues have come from."

"I warned Fury and the higher-ups about it from the start. But nope, nobody listened to the lowly colonel." He picked up a couple of bags and then placed a gentle hand on Tony's forehead. "You gonna be okay up here for a few minutes? It's about time for your three-hourly checkup, too."

"Just do what you need to do, Colonel," said Bruce as he exited a storage closet. "I already have everything prepared for the return flight home and Tony's just about due for his next round of meds. How's the nose feeling, Peter?"

The little boy raised a hand from his makeshift cocoon and waved it back and forth in a so-so pattern. Peter hadn't moved since their departure, clinging to his dad like an octopus and grumbling at anyone who tried to touch him. Well, except for Rhodey, but when it came to his uncle, Peter was a manipulative demon who knew exactly how to get what he wanted. And Rhodey had no problem giving the runt what he wanted, either.

Being a strict parent was tough sometimes. Or as strict as Tony could force himself to be with Peter. How his own father had been so nasty was beyond Tony; he hated having to yell at or scold Peter, and usually felt like a mean asshole afterwards, too.

"I feel so funky."

"Well, that's because I have you on some very strong antibiotics. As in vancomycin and ciprofloxacin strong."

"Oh, my favorites."

Bruce chuckled and said, "Just be happy I didn't put you on metronidazole again. Tony Stark dancing naked up and down hospital hallways would've made the front page of every newspaper in India."

"For a doctor, you're a cruel, cruel man."

"You know I'm not that kind of doctor, Tony. And hold out your arm so I can check the IV port."
Tony did so with a groan, more than a little sick and tired of needles being jammed into his poor arms. He looked like one giant bruise by this point, and certainly felt like one, too. Thankfully, Bruce was a pro at handling needles and fixed the aching pinch of Tony's port with little problem, even saying that if it continued to bug him, then he'd just remove and switch it to another spot.

"Just move it. I'm tired of the pinching and it fucking hurts."

"You sure?"

"In this case, oh yes." Tony leaned his head back and refused to look at Bruce while he added the new needle. "You know, I feel like I've become more acquainted with hospital beds than my own in recent months. It's an unfortunate occurrence that needs to be fixed right away."

"Get ready for a slight pinch," warned Bruce. "I also need to take a couple blood draws to make sure the antibiotics haven't ran into any type of resistance. Or another foreign agent. I don't trust your screwy immune system at this point."

"Oh boy, I'm so excited."

"And don't worry, I've already got you on a round of anti-fungals to head candida proliferation off at the curve. I'll start you up on some probiotics once we're back at the tower, too."

"You know my intestines so well, Brucie-bear."

"Not exactly the best compliment I've ever received, but not one of the worst, either."

Tony sniped with Bruce and Sharon for about twenty minutes before Rhodey announced they were stocked and ready to leave. A few important looking naval officers had accompanied him to the hangar doors, but Tony wasn't close enough to see what their rank or various insignias were. Three of the younger sailors offered him a succession of well-wishes, genuinely awed to meet the outspoken, larger-than-life man who'd become the greatest inventor of their time. And considering how many terrible things had happened with the Avengers in the last year, the soldiers' stunned and rather comical reactions were kinda heartwarming.

And then there was Peter, who still hadn't emerged from his hiding place on Tony's left hip. Normally, his son would've been excited and rushing forward to look at the colorful patches, but instead Peter was refusing to even poke his head out of the blankets, grumbling in irritation when Tony jostled his knees to get a response. And ouch, were those teeth?

Okay, no more bouncing the rabies-infected child. Even Tony knew when to fold in his cards. Well, sometimes...

After releasing a huge yawn, Tony decided that Peter had the right idea and promptly passed out like a newborn baby. Functioning on little to no sleep was an art form Tony had perfected over the years, but when antibiotics were involved, he tended to sleep for an insane amount of hours. Or a full flight from India to New York City, as Tony learned when he finally woke up nine hours later.

"You were whistling."

"Huh."

"In your sleep," said Peter's soft voice. "I tried to poke your nose to make it stop, but Sharon wouldn't let me."

"And for good reason. It's rude to torment people while they're sleeping." Sharon appeared beside
the bed, checking on a few diagnostic wires before moving back to wherever she had come from. "We're coming in for a landing now. Honestly, I still can't believe you built this damned thing."

"Now who's the rude one? I should revoke your guest-right privileges."

"Threats, threats, so many threats."

Sharon placed a strong hand on Tony's shoulder and Peter's back as the Quinjet vertically descended, releasing only the slightest thud as it touched down on Stark Tower's helipad. A series of shuffling came from Tony's other side, Vision, Bruce, and Rhodey emerging from the cockpit where Agent May was speaking with Coulson about something to do with Pakistan. Ugh, Tony really hoped that wasn't yet another place they'd have to add to their List of Pissed Off Countries, because he really didn't feel like dealing with that kinda bullshit any time soon.

"Brace yourself, Tones. This isn't gonna be pretty."

"What do you—"

"If you two don't keep your heads straight and your tempers cool, I'll have Vision chuck you off the balcony, understood? Yeah, that's what I thought. Now, help us get these two lumps off this rust bucket and into a warm bed."

"Honey bear, did you just call my baby a rust bucket?! Those are fighting words!"

With a roll of his eyes, Rhodey came over with Steve and Bucky at his heels, triple-checking the diagnostic devices that were hooked up to Tony's arc reactor while also taking a peek in at Peter. To nobody's surprise, the kid grumbled and pulled the blankets back over his head, arms wrapping around Tony's hips in an iron grip. Oh boy, if anyone tried to remove Peter, even if it was just to carry him to Tony's bedroom, they'd be dealing with an anxiety-ridden temper-tantrum of epic proportions.

"You're in no position to be fighting anyone right now, Tones. And seriously, stop squirming like a little kid. You're worse than Peter."

"Am not."

"Do you want me to get Mom on the phone?"

Tony froze for a moment before saying, "You are a terrible, horrible person, James Rupert."

"If you don't stop acting like a thickheaded moron, then I will resort to drastic measures," threatened Rhodey. "She's been itching to pay you a visit for months now, so you'd better behave yourself or else there'll be dire consequences."

Over half of the jet's occupants cast bewildered looks between themselves, none of them possessing the gumption or poise to question who they were talking about. Tony was tempted to laugh, but he also knew the reason behind their reticence, especially when it came to Barnes. Even the slightest possible reference to Maria Stark made the assassin clam up like a pimply, anxiety-ridden teenager.

After several seconds of this stupidity, Sharon took pity on them and said, "The Colonel's talking about his mother. Tony's terrified of her."

"Hey! I'm not terrified of Bobbi. I just possess a healthy fear of her."
"Yeah, well, she wants you to give her a call as soon as you've eaten a warm meal, took a long shower, and settled into a nice, soft bed," said Rhodey while signaling for Vision to come over. "And specifically in that order. I'd suggest including Peter in that call, too. It might calm her down a bit."

"If Bobbi sees Peter, she'll be up here by tomorrow morning."

"Then you'll just have to take your chances," said Rhodey with an evil smile. "Okay, here's how it's gonna go. The doctors think it'd be easier if Tony wasn't hauled in with this clunky bed, so we're gonna have Vision float him inside all nice and slow. No bumps, no lumps. You'll be following right next to him with the IV stand, Cap. I'll take the diagnostic machine."

And then Rhodey poked Peter in the bum, cranky grumbles coming from beneath the blankets.

"I know you're awake in there, so don't bother faking. Now, we can do this the easy way or we can do this the hard way. What's your pick?"

Peter didn't say a word.

"I'm gonna take that as an affirmative to the easy way." Rhodey lifted up the blankets to reveal Peter's messy head. "Vision can't carry you along with your dad unless we want a pair of concussions on our hands. So, pick your poison and decide who's gonna carry you like Princess Peach?"

"Not a princess."

"Of course not, how silly of me. You're a Prince of the Stark Empire. Now, you gonna give me an answer?"

"Bucky."

All Peter had to do was hold one arm out and Bucky was right there, easily scooping up the boy and at least one blanket to keep him warm in the stiff November breeze. And wow, it really had gotten a lot chillier since their kidnapping two weeks ago. Tony kinda wanted to follow his son's lead and use Bucky as his own personal space-heater. He loved Vision to pieces, but the J. Crew-loving android just wasn't warm enough to suit Tony's tastes right now.

"And there goes my poor ass," said Tony as he was picked up, "Exposed for all the world to see yet again. Kinda becoming a pattern nowadays."

"No accidental gropings this time around, Stevie."

Rhodey looked less than amused, giving both super-soldiers the stink-eye before saying, "What's this about accidental gropings? Because if I see or hear of any such thing, someone's gonna wish they'd never lived to experience the 21st century and the poisons that come with it."

If possible, Steve probably would've choked on his own tongue, or kicked Bucky off the tower. Either option looked feasible at this point, and Tony just tried not to laugh at the sight of his best friend's vicious glare and Steve's slumped posture. Earning back Rhodey's fragile trust was gonna take a whole lot longer than any of the Avengers realized. Poor bastards...

"Nothing untoward happened or will happen, Colonel. Of that, I can assure you."

"Good, let's keep it that way."
Tony rolled his eyes and said, "Okay, seriously, you guys do realize that I'm right here. And trust me, the last thing I need is for someone to protect my virtue. Have you even looked up my name on the internet?"

"I wasn't allowed to see your bare butt."

"What child wants to see their old man's pasty ass? And make a note about updating the parental controls again, J."

"Already done, Sir."

Vision held Tony close in a bridal carry as they exited the Quinjet hangar, Sharon thankfully twisting and pinning a blanket into the android's belt to cover Tony's bottom half. Hospital gowns were fast becoming one of Tony's least favorite things in the world, right up there with kiwis and magic and empty coffee machines. He was never gonna wear one again if he could get away with it.

"I don't know," said Sharon, "I think it looks quite nice on you. Really brings out your eyes."

"Wha?"

"You were talking out loud, Tones."

Bruce bit back a laugh and said, "I think the antibiotics might be going to his head. Actually, I'm surprised you're even awake right now."

"I'm so tired of sleeping."

"Try telling that to your body. It's been through a lot these past couple weeks."

"More like years," said Rhodey as they passed through the penthouse living room. "I'm surprised he hasn't managed to lose a couple toes or fingers yet."

"Says the man who's blown up my lab twice. And convinced Dummy it was a good idea to mess with the fire extinguishers that were purposely hidden in the walls. I should have put you on a year's worth of bot-sitting duty for that particular offense."

"So melodramatic," drawled the airman. "Okay, boys, just put both of them down on the bed. Everything's already set up to monitor Tony's vitals and the arc reactor, so no need for the infirmary this time."

"You're my favorite person in the world, platypus. I love you. Truly. Well, after Peter, of course."

"Oh yeah, he's definitely out of it."

Tony would've fired back a witty retort, but a huge yawn came out instead. He grumbled a bit as Vision lowered him onto his massive California king, thousand thread-count Egyptian sheets feeling like heaven to Tony's battered body. The familiar weight of Peter was settled on his side not a few moments later, Bucky asking if the kid needed to go to the bathroom or eat before they went to sleep.

"I think they can afford a few hours of sleep before doing other basics like showering and eating," said Dr. Cho while she got everything set up. "We'll stick with soups for now before moving onto semi-solid foods. Could someone fetch them a water bottle, though?"
"Already on it."

The sounds of everyone's voices blurred together as Tony cuddled Peter close, the little boy offering no protest to the clingy contact. Considering the extreme ordeal they'd just gone through, Tony wouldn't be surprised if Peter became his personal shadow in the immediate future. And yeah, he still wasn't quite sure what all had happened after their grand escape/rescue, but Tony was okay with that lack of knowledge for the moment.

All Tony wanted right now was to sleep in his own bed with his son tucked up into his side. Everything else could be placed on the back burner, including the obnoxious cleaning bot buzzing around underneath said wonderful bed. How the hell had it gotten under there?

The sensation of gentle fingers running through Tony's hair almost made him purr, a feeling of comfort and security settling into his conscious for the first time in, well, a very long time. Oh goodness, this was delightful...

A beautiful fuzziness took over every aspect of the engineer's existence, allowing him to float around in a pleasant void of blackness that was occasionally intermixed with bizarre images of Butterfingers, metal arms, and half-dressed pink aliens. Tony had always been prone to weird dreams while on medication, but this one was a special kind of weird. Nope, nope, Peter wasn't getting his own skate park in the real world, that was for damned sure.

"Hey, Tony, you coming back to the land of the living?"

"Ughhhhh..."

"Was that supposed to be a question or a confirmation? I don't speak caveman."

"You should 'cause you're as old as one."

The hand was back in Tony's hair again, gently massaging his scalp as the engineer waged a valiant battle with the crusty goop in his eyes. And yeah, he pretty much lost that battle, because it took Steve running a damp cloth over Tony's face to really wake him up. Tony might want to punch the guy on a semi-regular basis, but he couldn't say anything negative about the blond's bedside manner.

So many stubbornness issues shoved into a beautiful, super-muscled, flippy-haired package. It just wasn't fair to humanity. Or Tony's libido, which had been behaving itself to startling proportions over the last couple years. Adding a child to the mix had just killed it even more. Dial back fifteen years and Tony's younger self would've been horrified to the point of passing out.

Actually, that would've been hilarious to watch. Tony would've paid good money to see his younger, asshole self pass out at the thought of having a child and being cut off from sex. Hmmm, maybe inventing a time-machine wasn't such a bad idea after all.

"Hello, Tony, you still with us?"

"Depends on your definition of that particular statement. Wow, your face is super hairy."

Steve chuckled and said, "Yeah, that's kinda what happens when you don't shave for nearly three months. Do I look like a caveman now?"

"You're old and hairy. Can I touch it?"

Before Tony could do anything, a small hand reached out and yanked on Steve's beard, fingers
nearly going up the blond's nose at least twice. To Steve's credit, he took the exploration with a great deal of calm, even giggling when Peter's hand ventured up into his hair. Tony was just thankful there was no more hair pulling, because parents weren't supposed to let their kids do those kinda things.

God, being a parent was hard sometimes.

"How you doin', Petey? Satisfied that my face has officially been taken over by protein filaments."

"You look like a lumberjack."

Tony squinted and said, "Did you just use a scientific term? Oh my God, you just used a scientific term. I think I'm gonna faint. Record this for posterity's sake, J."

"Wow, you Starks are just full of compliments today."

On the far side of the bed sat Bucky, two Starkpads laying in front of him while *Jurassic World* played on the television. This, of course, caught Peter's attention and the kid finally emerged from Tony's side to watch Owen Grady run training exercises with his four psychotic raptors. In a sneaky move, Bucky leaned over to sniff at his son's hair, wrinkling his nose and giving a few hand waves to show that somebody seriously needed a shower.

"Whew, you stink, kid. How long's it been since you last bathed?"

"I don't remember."

"Okay, that's super gross." Bucky stood up and held out his arms. "That odor's gonna kill your old man at this rate. I think you need to commune with Mr. Bubbles for a couple minutes. Or an hour, if your armpits are any indication."

Peter looked a little cagey until Tony gave him a nudge and said, "I'll be in to take one right after you. We both kinda smell like dumpsters."

"I gotta take a bath 'cause of my feet."

"That's fine," said Bucky. "I already grabbed stuff from your room. Should we bring Bumble in, too?"

Oh, Tony hadn't even noticed the cat laying right next to Peter. Big green eyes watched them, far more intelligent and perceptive than an animal had any right to be. And now he was being creeped out by a damned cat. How was this his life?

"She likes to sit on the toilet seat."

"I should be creeped out by that tidbit of information, but I've also seen much stranger things in my 100 years of life."

"Wow, you're really old."

"Okay, that's it," said Bucky as he walked over with grabby hands, "You're getting thrown into the ridiculously oversized tub your dad apparently thinks is necessary to his survival."

Tony just stuck his tongue out in response, shoving Peter towards Bucky without a hint of remorse. The little boy shrieked with indignation, playfully whacking at his captor's chest while Bucky released a maniacal laugh. It was lighthearted and carefree and Tony didn't like to think about how
ridiculously rare that had been in both his and Peter's lives as of late.

"How're you feeling?"

"Like someone ran me over with a combine," said Tony while accepting Steve's help to lean further up on the pillows. "Seriously, do you know how embarrassing it is to say that I was kidnapped and beat up by a baby shower vomit party? Ugh, I'm never gonna live that down."

"I think you might change that thought once we discuss everything that's happened," said Steve. "But I also think we can hold off on that until tomorrow when you're feeling less like a walking corpse."

"Thank you for that compliment, Steven. Very invigorating."

Bucky emerged from the bathroom a few seconds later, long sleeves a little wet from where he'd gotten Peter's bath ready. The assassin didn't come over to the bed, instead taking a seat next to the bathroom doorway.

"He kicked me out."

"Probably should've warned you about that. He likes to be independent and quite frankly, if his feet weren't torn up, he'd be taking a shower."

"Why?"

"Because baths are for little kids, not big boys like him."

"Ah, so he's already entered that stage," said Steve. "Did you at least clean around his nose and the bandages, Buck?"

Bucky gave him an unimpressed look. "Who's the only person in this room who had siblings? And must I remind you, there were five of them. All younger and prone to injuring themselves, too. I know how to clean up a filthy child, Mr. Worrywart."

Both of them just stared at the brunet.

"Don't give me that look," snapped Bucky. "I do actually remember them now. Or at least the things that matter."

Steve was obviously about to say something comforting when Peter yelled, "Bucky! You forgot to get me underwear! Dad says I have to wear 'em!"

"Huh, I knew I forgot something."

The assassin was halfway across the room when he suddenly stopped, turned around, and marched right back to the bed. Tony just stared when Bucky got all up in his face, not quite sure what to make of it when the other man leaned forward and—whoa, what the hell?!

"Bet you thought it was a hallucination, huh?" said Bucky with a shit-eating smile. "You can punch me when I get back if you didn't like it. Or punch Stevie in my dearly departed absence. Either one works. Now, I've got Star Wars-themed underwear to fetch."

Tony just sat there for a moment, not quite sure if he'd just imagined the super-soldier giving him a quick kiss on the lips or not. When he finally blinked, Tony's head whipped around to stare at Steve, heart pounding at the implications behind what had just happened. Steve and Bucky were
together. Of that, Tony was sure. They may have been discreet in their interactions, but Tony wasn't a total idiot and he didn't have cataracts, either.

Oh God, that meant this was all a game, wasn't it? They were still pissed off with him and had decided to get their revenge by making Tony think they liked him. Why else would Steve not look like his head was gonna explode? There was just no other explanation and seriously, how could the world hate him this fucking much? It wasn't like Tony hadn't been trying to atone for his sins and shit, this was just like Ty all over again and what if they also wanted to use Peter to get back at him for Siberia.

It would be the perfect revenge.

He needed to grab Peter and get down to the lab. What if Steve exploded like before and tried to— whoa, what the hell, what the hell?!

"Ugh..."

"I could see you overthinking this," said Steve after he pulled back from giving Tony a quick peck on the lips. "And you can punch me in the face if you want. We'd both deserve it if this isn't even close to what we thought it was. I mean, you are kinda hopped up on antibiotics right now, so Bucky shouldn't have just come out and did that like he did, but I didn't want you to think I'd be mad at you or anything like what you were clearly thinking."

"You're rambling, Steven."

"I know."

"And ugh, I'm feeling a little confused right now. What just happened?"

Steve's face was as red as a beet, eyes darting around to look for back-up that wasn't there. Instead, it was across the hallway, unable to give Steve the help that he so obviously needed. The blond looked like he was gonna lean forward again, but instead, he abruptly stopped and let out a surprised yelp.

"What are you doing?"

Behind Steve stood a very wet and disgruntled Peter, the little boy all wrapped up in a fluffy towel while his fist hovered in the air directly behind Steve's left butt cheek. If possible, Steve flushed even redder, leaping back a foot when Peter raised his fist as if to wallop Steve in the ass a second time. And yes, that was an over-muscled super-soldier cringing away from his eight-year-old son. What was Tony's life?

"Umm..."

"I could see you from the bathroom, so don't try to deny it."

"Uhhh..."

"You can't just go around kissing my dad like that," said Peter, index finger poking Steve in the stomach. "It's very rude. And you didn't even ask for permission! He's supposed to be sleeping, so knock it off."

Peter crossed his arms and just stared at them, left foot tapping on the floor like a disapproving mother. If the situation hadn't been so unexpected and weird, Tony would've been laughing his ass off. Seriously, who would've thought that so much disgust could be contained in such a little body.
"I'm not happy with you right now."

With that said, Peter marched back into the bathroom with a melodramatic huff, hopping from side to side whenever he stepped on the wrong part of his feet. Steve and Tony were both left gaping in alarm, neither quite knowing what to say in response to Peter's sound scolding. And then Peter's head poked around the corner, eyes narrowed at the both of them.

"No funny business! I'll know if you get up to something."

He was gone after that, the sound of splashing water a clear signal that Peter had returned to his bath. Steve stayed stock still even then, eyes darting between Tony and the bathroom door. It was only the telltale click of the bedroom door that knocked Steve out of his petrified stupor.

"Geez, I think I was nearly eaten alive in there. I know most kids tend to be on the messy side, but that boy really needs to organize his drawers or else—ugh, what's wrong?"

"Step into the bathroom and find out for yourself."

Bucky glanced between them before saying, "What'd I do? Did something happen to Peter?"

"Why don't you go find out?"

Comprehension seemed to finally dawn on the brunet, his brain obviously making the connection between Tony's bed and the position of the bathroom door. Not to mention the bathtub, which directly faced said door and offered a clear view of the bedroom. Evidently, Bucky hadn't thought about this before pulling his latest kissing stunt, as they were all about to learn.

"Uh oh."

Chapter End Notes

Just because Tony is getting along a little better with certain individuals does not mean other countries or people around the world are willing it place their trust in the Avengers again. Yet again, pissing off and disrespecting 117 countries probably isn't the smartest thing to do. And yes, Bucky confirmed Tony's kissing suspicions! Peter's not amused, though.

Almost done!
Peter was extra cranky the next morning. It was so bad for the first hour Tony couldn't help wondering if a gremlin had somehow infiltrated the tower and took over his son's body. And considering their recent encounters, that possibility wasn't as ridiculous and unbelievable as he'd originally thought.

"You need to eat something to take your pills, Petey."

"I'm not hungry."

"Uh, yes, you are," said Tony. "I can hear your stomach rumbling from here. Plus, you love Steve's French toast."

"Nuh uh."

"Do you want me to sic the Cyborg on you?"

"He won't do anything."

That apparently caught Bucky's attention because his head popped through the bedroom door and said, "You wanna bet?"

"You'll break a bone from your osteoporosis. Probably your hip or pelvis."

"Oh goodness, those would both be tragedies," said Tony around a snicker. "But seriously, kiddo, you really need to eat something. These pills tend to cause really bad nausea if taken on an empty stomach."

Peter just crinkled his nose and continued to glare at the pile of blankets in front of him. Aside from taking a bath and potty break, Peter had literally been glued to his father's side and refused to leave even when it was Rhodey coaxing him. Obviously, breakfast in bed was the only option at this point, but it appeared that the cranky brat didn't want anything to do with that, either.

Why did parenthood have to be so hard?

Two knocks came from the door a moment later, Steve's head popping through when Tony told him nobody was naked or fonduing. As expected, the poor idiot's face went bright red, sputtering about how they shouldn't talk about that kinda stuff in front of an eight-year-old. Peter just looked between them, eyebrows raised at the sound of Tony and Bucky's cackles.

Bucky didn't even try to hold back a snort before saying, "Then you shouldn't have said anything about it, you dunce. Now Petey's gonna be curious. Hey, you wanna know what fondue is, short stuff?"

"I know what fondue is," said Peter. "My aunt used to make the extra cheesy kind once it got cold out."

"Shit, Stevie, even the kiddo knows what fondue is."

"You know what, you're a real jerk sometimes, Buck," said the blond. "And what's this about
someone not wanting breakfast?"

"I'm not hungry."

"Not even for my mother's homemade French toast with extra butter, whipped cream, blueberries, and real maple syrup?" Steve held up the tray of food before moving away with an exaggerated sigh. "Oh well, I suppose your dad and I could eat all this on our own then. Bucky can help us ou —"

They fought back laughter when Peter surged forward with a loud, "No!", and tried to grab the tray from Steve's hands. Thankfully, the super-soldier had anticipated this and easily stepped to the side, giving the glaring child a crooked smile. When Peter's nose started to scrunch up in irritation, Steve decided the teasing was over and Peter really did need to eat something substantial as soon as possible.

"You're a meanie."

"I've been telling him that for years," said Bucky. "Keeping food from a child. For shame, Steven Grant."

"Hmmm, I guess I could be persuaded to share this," drawled Steve as he steadied the tray on his lap. "After all, I did make eight pieces. But make sure not to touch the oatmeal. That's for your dad."

"You're seriously gonna make me eat gruel, Rogers?"

"No, I'm gonna make you eat honeyed oatmeal with blueberries, cinnamon, and banana slices. Or do you want Bucky to eat it?"

"Get your hands away from my food, Mr. Robot."

Tony waved his spoon like a sword at Bucky's fingers, looking far more like a cranky Peter than he was willing to admit. And yes, just like everything else Steve made, the oatmeal was delicious and just soft enough not to upset Tony's stomach. Helen had pumped him full of enough antibiotics to drop an elephant, so he'd have to be careful about what he ate in the coming weeks.

"We missed Halloween," said Peter in the saddest voice imaginable. "Now all I've got to look forward to is a butterball turkey."

"If it's any consolation, your friends Avery and Mason collected a bagful of candy for you when they went trick-or-treating four nights ago," said JARVIS. "They were quite adamant that you'd want some when you returned."

"Really?"

"Yes. In fact, at the twins' insistence, their mother even sent me a picture to prove it."

A holoscreen popped up showing Avery and Mason in their living room, three pumpkin-shaped bags almost overflowing with candy laying on the coffee table behind them. The third bag had a little sign on it that read "Peter" in messy handwriting, probably Mason's if Tony was remembering his homework correctly. Seriously, the kid could pass for a doctor with that kinda chicken scratch.

"Oh, Milky Way bars and Reese's Cups. It looks like they got you the good stuff, kiddo."

"Avery probably took the Snickers. They're her favorite."
"Just as a forewarning," drawled Bucky as he stole a blueberry from Tony's bowl, "If there are any M&M's in there, you're gonna have to fight me for them."

"I'll have Steve beat you up."

The assassin released a melodramatic gasp and said, "Stevie would never do that. Would you, Stevie?"

"I'm sorry, Buck, but stealing is stealing. And you know I can't just overlook or condone that kinda behavior." The blond shrugged his shoulders and gave Bucky a sad little pat on the shoulder. "After all, what would my mother say?"

"That you're a traitorous idiot and you need to protect Bucky from a vindictive eight-year-old."

"Nah, I think she'd take Peter's side on this."

Everything was a little more relaxed after that, Peter finishing about two-thirds of his French toast while Tony managed to eat all of his oatmeal. Steve looked stupidly proud of this accomplishment, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed in a way that made Tony want to punch him. Honestly, the man was just ridiculous sometimes. And then there was the cat, who happily licked blobs of whipped cream off Peter's fingers.

"Okay, kiddo, how does watching some Dragon Ball with Vision sound?"

"Why?"

"Because I need to have a big-person talk with these two neanderthals and you've missed over two weeks worth of episodes," said Tony. "Plus, this is legit big-person talk, so I'm gonna have to be the uncool parent here and kick you out for twenty minutes."

"No, I'm staying right here."

Peter looked positively mutinous, one hand clutching at Bumble while the other rested over Tony's arc reactor. The poor kid had been touching it constantly since they'd arrived, as if making sure nobody had come along to remove it again. He'd even insisted on sleeping with his head against Tony's chest last night, ears and face tucked up close to the soft blue glow. Tony felt like a piece of shit for sending Peter out to the living room, but he really needed to talk with the two idiots in front of him. And it needed to be in private, because Peter would likely try to bite Steve or Bucky if he heard some of the stuff they were gonna talk about.

Tony needed answers and he was gonna get them, one way or the other. Peter didn't need to witness any of this.

Hell, last night had been a close call with Sharon, who had apparently cornered Steve outside the bedroom door and given him a really good talking to. Sharon had been on a brutal form of probation for the past year, nearly losing her job altogether when Fury returned as Director of SHIELD. For the life of him, Tony still couldn't understand why Sharon had done the stupid shit she did, but the blonde had apologized profusely and offered herself up for punishment after seeing the dreaded Siberia tapes.

Seriously though, Steve must've done something especially idiotic—perhaps even worse than the whole Siberia beat-down thing—for Sharon to get that vicious. Even when half-dozing and high on second-line antibiotics, Tony would recognize that angry hiss anywhere. Hell, he'd been on the receiving end of it enough times growing up to realize that Steve was in some seriously deep shit with her right now.
"So damned stupid," Sharon had muttered after coming inside. "Just another fucking mistake."

"Huh?"

"Oh, shit, I'm sorry, Tones. Did I wake you?"

"Kinda."

"Seems to be a pattern for me lately. It's half past midnight, so you should probably just go back to sleep. Are you in pain?"

"Not really, no."

"Then get some sleep. I'm just gonna work on some stuff over here."

Sharon had ran a gentle hand through his and Peter's hair before heading over to Tony's desk, fingers dancing over her Starkpad while Tony slipped back into a drug-induced sleep. He could tell something was bothering Sharon—and normally he would've bugged her until she spilled the beans—but Tony was just too damned tired to care about anything at that point.

When he'd woken up eight hours later, Sharon was nowhere in sight and Bucky was sprawled out on the bedroom couch. Not that Tony really noticed, what with his son's bony knees digging right into his spleen and kidneys. How a child could be so dangerous to your health was beyond him.

"It's only for a few minutes, okay, bud? Vision will be with you the whole time and I'll be right here, bitching at the super-soldiers like the decrepit old man I've apparently become since acquiring you."

Peter stared at him for a few moments, weighing the pros and cons in that dastardly little head of his. When he finally nodded in assent, Peter turned to Steve and Bucky and said, "If you do anything to hurt him, I'll have Uncle Rhodey kill you."

"Hello? You called, Tony?"

And there came Vision through the wall, as cool as a cucumber and not at all aware of just how creepy he was. Not that complaining was a right that Tony currently had; he needed a babysitter and Vision was his best bet. Plus, his kid appeared to be in a homicidal mood and Vision's calm demeanor seemed to soothe Peter in a way nobody else could.

"Yep, and you're just the android I need, Viz. Could you take Peter to the living room for a few minutes?"

"Of course. We can watch the Dragon Ball show."

With a finger point at Steve and Bucky, Peter allowed Vision to pick him up and head out the door, ever mindful of the bandages covering Peter's injured feet. Tony waited until they were alone to turn his gaze on the super-soldiers, both of whom were looking more nervous than that twitchy kid from South Park. It would've been hilarious if Tony didn't know about the causes behind it.

"Okay, you two, what the hell's going on? And don't try to bullshit your way outta this, either."

"We didn't mean to confuse you."

"And the timing was really bad, we know," said Steve with a contrite look. "But seriously, Tony, we thought you were dead for several days and when we finally got to the base and it was"
"Wait, you thought we were dead?"

"That son of a bitch Stone sent Pepper a half-dozen pictures of you without the arc reactor and a video of Peter being smacked around." Bucky was almost growling as he said this, fingers flexing as if he wanted to strangle someone right that moment. "The cables weren't attached, so we had no idea if you were alive or dead. It took two fuckin' weeks to find you."

"Unfortunately, despite how much I like to call Ty an arrogant idiot, he's no slouch in the brains department," Tony admitted. "If Ty actually wants to disappear, he's more than capable of doing it."

Bucky flexed his metal hand and said, "We'll see about that."

"Okay, no creepy Winter Soldier voice when we're having an important and emotional conversation. That's a new rule." Tony wagged a finger at the brunet and tried to wriggle into a more comfortable position. "I'm not saying you can't rain bloody murder down onto my ex or anything, but that voice isn't allowed in this household."

"Whatever you say, Stark."

"My word is law in these hallowed halls—stop giggling, Steven, it's very unbecoming—so I expect good behavior and an explanation about what the fucking hell you two morons are trying to pull with this."

Tony gestured between his face and the super-soldiers', hoping to get his point across without having to say the words. If he said the words, then everything would become real and Tony just wasn't ready to face that possibility yet. Or he just didn't feel like being the brave one for once; for too long, it'd been Tony who'd made all the sacrifices and quite frankly, he was damned tired of it.

"We're not trying to pull anything," said Steve. "It's just that... well, we just thought that maybe..."

After a few more seconds of pathetic sputtering, Bucky had obviously had enough and marched over to sit beside Tony's knees on the bed. Steve didn't even attempt to hold back a blush, looking more than a little frustrated by his inability to communicate with Tony, which, let's be honest, was nothing new. Thankfully, Bucky seemed more than willing to pick up the slack, even if he gave Steve an exasperated side-eye before turning to face Tony.

"I remember the first time I saw you after everything happened," said Bucky. "The Wakandan king told me I'd been brought outta the cryo-sleep because Tony Stark had found a way to lock down the Winter Soldier's triggers. I was kinda leery at first, I'll admit, but then me and Stevie got into a gigantic argument over my ability to still make decisions for myself and I marched right on down to see you about the operation, anyways."

Tony snorted and said, "I'm sure that went over well."

"Not really. I told Stevie to go fuck himself," said Bucky with a rude smirk, "And then to go find someone else he could coddle like a brainless schmuck. It was kinda rushed and blurry after that, but I do remember being more than a little creeped out after I got to the operation room."

"Uh oh, what was I doing?"

"Running around like a mad scientist while jabbering to yourself in a language I didn't understand. The King tried to tell me it was English, but I'm still not too sure about that."
This pulled a snicker out of Steve, who then gave an awkward cough when Tony glared at him. Honestly, just because everyone else was too stupid to understand the words coming out of his mouth didn't mean Tony was speaking a foreign language. His English was just on a much, much higher level than un-science-y heathens like Steve and Bucky were used to.

"When I woke up, your head was literally right here," Bucky held a hand about one foot in front of his face, "Asking if I felt any urges to shoot little puppies or beat the snot outta stupidly annoying blonds with superiority complexes. And then, like a suicidal lunatic, you said the triggers and started insulting my hair. I've got no clue why you did the second thing, but my brain didn't tell me to kill you and that was kinda amazing and huge right then."

Tony shrugged and said, "Your hair gets gross and greasy if you don't wash it every day."

"I'm well aware of that, so no need to rub it in, Mr. Fluffy Hair."

"You were saying, Buck?"

"Oh, yeah, we were at the part where you said the trigger words, right? Well, I had no reaction and didn't try to kill anybody, which is always a huge plus in my fucked line of work." Bucky leaned forward and rested a hand on Tony's left knee. "You must've taken this as a good sign, because you started rattling off words and phrases faster than I could think them."

"I'd had a long morning," justified Tony, "And I was tired of looking over your weird ass brain scans."

"Whatever the reason, it was nice to finally have someone not treating me like I was made of glass, or about to destroy everything in a ten mile radius. And then you started rambling about a new arm, took my measurements, and I didn't see you for another three weeks."

"I was kinda busy with the whole Peter situation. And you really did need a new arm, that last one was terrible," said Tony with an annoyed sniff. "It was an affront to modern engineering. Not to mention that red star was tacky as hell."

"Heavy, too."

"Bastards could've redesigned and updated the thing on a regular basis, but nope, HYDRA employs a bunch of half-assed mechanics and engineers. Not that I'd have expected any better from fucking Nazis. They didn't have as much respect for technology as historians would lead you to believe. I mean, the neural connections were at least two decades behind what I could've built! How do you expect your best soldier to—"

"As I was saying," interrupted Bucky before Tony could descend into a full-blown rant, "You reappeared from out of nowhere three weeks later with a whole new arm, jabbering a mile a minute while attaching the thing without a backwards glance. I could tell you were nervous, no matter how much you tried to hide it, but that didn't stop you from helping someone who was obviously in pain. Even if that person had murdered your parents."

The last part was said with no small amount of pain and self-hatred. Bucky never skirted around the terrible deeds he'd done as the Winter Soldier, often snapping at Steve when he tried to rationalize and excuse HYDRA's decades-long brainwashing. It was clear to Tony that in Bucky's mind, it was his own hands that had done the killing, so he bore some responsibility whether Steve wanted to believe it or not.

"Not many people are willing to do that," said Bucky. "Even fewer are willing to allow that person"
into their home and life."

Tony squirmed under the attention, uncomfortable with the words Bucky had used to describe him. When it came to feelings and anything associated with them, Tony was way out of his depth, even at the best of times. Add in the bizarre mixtures that were James Barnes and Steven Rogers, and Tony Stark was downright confused and more than a little wary. He'd been hurt one too many times and although Bucky hadn't done anything to hurt him before—working through the deaths of his parents was slowly allowing Tony to separate Bucky from the Winter Soldier in his mind—Steve had done his fair share of damage in the recent past.

So, yeah, Tony was leery of where this conversation was going, even if he was the one who'd instigated it. He just didn't do emotional or heartfelt talks. Well, except when it came to Peter, but everything was easier with his sassy Petey-pie.

"I know you had no reason to trust me," said Bucky. "Hell, you had every reason in the world to hate me, and I wouldn't have blamed you. I dearly loved my parents and sisters, and I honestly can't say that my reactions and feelings would be any different if our positions had been reversed. Everybody says they'll take the higher road until they're actually faced with it."

Bucky reached out and took Tony's left hand, metal fingers cool to the touch in a familiar and welcomed way. Machines were so much easier to work with than people, no matter what Pepper said.

"You confused the shit outta me—and stop it with the snotty snickering, Stevie, it's not cute—running around like a twitchy gremlin while the King's scientists tried to fetch everything you demanded. I'm surprised they didn't mutiny at some point."

"Hey, I'm not that bad," grumped Tony. "And I love Wakandan engineers. They're almost as good with machines as I was in my high school years."

"And you two accuse me of rambling..."

"Well, damn, here comes the pouting. Did you have to deal with the pouting, too?"

"For the past five years. He always whips it out when he doesn't get his way," said Tony with a pout of his own. "And then Captain Boy Scout here accuses me of doing the exact same thing when he's literally standing right there with an enormous pout on that stupid face of his. It's offensive, I tell you."

"Ah, there it is again. So predictable."

"You know what, I don't need to take this," said Steve. "If I wanna be abused, I'll watch cartoons with Peter. At least he's upfront with it."

"Very melodramatic, too."

Bucky tightened his hold on Tony's hand, drawing the engineer's attention back to him. For a moment, Tony considered the possibility of this all being a giant and cruel ploy, but he dismissed that thought as quickly as it formed. Yes, Steve had made some really stupid decisions over the past year, but none of it had been malicious and Tony knew being purposely vindictive wasn't in Steve's repertoire. And that applied doubly so to Bucky, who wasn't the type to bullshit or play mind games, instead preferring to tell someone to their face if he didn't like them.

No, there was no joking to be had here.
After letting out a gusty breath, Tony leaned back into the pillows and fixed both super-soldiers with a level stare. He had two major questions for them, and it would likely determine their whole relationship—be it platonic or romantic or whatever this was all about—for the foreseeable future.

"Why?"

Brunet and blond eyebrows raised in question, obviously looking for more clarification on Tony's rather vague question. Damnit, this was why he hated emotional conversations. When it came to feelings, nothing ever came out as planned in Tony's world.

"Don't give me that look. Neither of you have any reason to want to be with me, in any way, so don't act like you're shocked that I'm so skeptical. None of this makes any sense and you can't blame me for wondering what the hell's up with both of you."

"Fair point," said Steve while straightening his back and shoulders, almost as if he was going into battle. "I liked you before everything happened. It wasn't an instant thing, since I was still mourning Bucky and Peggy and everyone else I'd lost, but you made things a little easier and less painful as time went on."

"Huh, I thought you hated me there in the beginning."

"I never hated you." Steve looked aghast at the thought. "I just didn't understand you. And I know you hate to hear it, but you also reminded me so much of Howard, which just made me miss my past and everyone in it even more. Those were my issues, not yours. But then you gave me a new home and pop culture classes and an unlimited supply of punching bags and things just... changed, I guess."

Steve looked to Bucky once or twice for guidance, but the brunet ignored him every time, obviously believing this was something Steve needed to work through on his own, just between him and Tony. For perhaps the umpteenth time, Tony was amazed that Bucky was the more emotionally mature of the two of them. It wasn't something he ever would've imagined.

"I can't really pinpoint the time I started liking you as more than a friend, either. It just kinda happened," said Steve with a shrug. "And I'll admit, at first your attitudes and personality reminded me of Bucky, but that was before I started seeing beneath the mask you always wear. Yeah, you know which one I'm talking about. By God, do I hate that fuckin' mask."

"All the better to fool the paparazzi with."

"Well, I hate when it's used on me. You're always hiding yourself, even in your own home."

"Home doesn't always equate to being safe, Caparoo."

Steve glanced over to look at Maria's picture and said, "Yeah, I know. But then I found out you were with Pepper again and I thought my chances were just gone since, you know, it's Pepper and she's beautiful and amazing and sharp as a whip."

"Damned straight."

"Then everything blew up with SHIELD and Bucky and I still don't know how things got so fucked up so quickly."

"Diplomacy has never been your strong suit."

Steve nodded in agreement, letting out a sigh before scooting forward to sit closer to Tony. He
picked at the loose strings on his shirt sleeve, a nervous habit the blond just couldn’t seem to shake. Bucky flicked him before the sleeve could further unravel.

"I spent those first months last year hating myself for everything I’d done," said Steve. "With Bucky in deep freeze and the team in tatters, I had a lot of time to think and second guess every stupid decision I’d made. Fuck, my shield was literally three inches from smashing the reactor and I couldn’t stop having nightmares about it. How the fuck could I do that? How?!

The vehemence behind Steve's words showed that he'd spent a lot of time thinking about their battle in Siberia, blue eyes wide with self-hatred as he muttered and cursed at himself. Normally, Tony would've reached out to comfort Steve in some way, but not this time. No, Steve needed to show that he regretted Siberia and also knew another incident like last year's was completely unforgivable. Tony Stark had a child to live for now and if anyone threatened his life again, he'd blast their head off.

No second chances anymore.

"If I could turn back time, I'd punch my past self in the head and tell him not to be such an irrational moron. I let my emotions rule everything and didn't bother to think about the consequences, something my own mother had always warned me about. I just... don't know how to say anything else besides I'm so sorry, Tony, so fuckin' sorry and mad at myself for becoming everything I was raised to despise. I don't..."

"What about the two of you?" asked Tony when Steve trailed off. "Why would either of you want anything to do with me when you have each other?"

"Believe it or not," said Bucky as he gestured between the two of them, "This whole thing is pretty new to us, too. Anything that wasn't opposite sex wasn't accepted back in our day, and neither of us were willing to take any chances with each other or our families, so things have been moving kinda... slow since I was de-iced, what, seven-ish months ago."

"Well, I hope you're not looking to me for advice on this," said Tony with a snort, "Because in case you forgot, Ty's the only long-term relationship I've ever had besides Pepper, and you know how well that turned out."

Okay, probably not the best time to bring up Ty or his past actions, and damn, how was it possible for someone to look as murderous as Bucky did right now? And that didn't even begin to cover Steve, who looked equally pissed off at the mere mention of Tony's ex-boyfriend. If Ty hadn't found a really good place to hide, he was going to be in a world of hurt in the near future.

"That son of a bitch is living on borrowed time," said Bucky. "I'll rip out his fuckin' spine next time I see—"

"Whoa, whoa!"

Tony grabbed Bucky's flesh hand and gave it a tight squeeze, hoping to pull the brunet back from full Winter Soldier mode. A regression like that was the absolute last thing they needed right now.

"Simmer down, Terminator. I've got an eight-year-old down the hall and lots of fragile tech around this room."

Mentioning Peter snapped Bucky right out of his funk, eyes widening when he realized his metal fingers were clutching Steve's hand hard enough to break bone. The blond had snatched it from Tony's when the shift started, slotting himself up into Bucky's side while also keeping close to
Tony for protection. Although BARF kept the Winter Soldier under lock and key, bits and pieces of the weapon still bled into Bucky's demeanor from time to time. When Tony had asked a Wakandan psychiatrist about the after-effects, he'd summed it up by saying that nobody could go through what Bucky had without retaining some aspects of their altered self.

So, despite what Steve wanted to believe, some parts of the Winter Soldier were here to stay. It wasn't an easy thing to accept, but Tony knew BARF would keep the less favorable parts of Winter under Bucky's control. The Bucky of today was different than the Bucky of the past, and Steve needed to accept it.

Knowing that Ty was a dangerous subject, Tony decided to skip right to his next big question. The answer to this one would determine everything, at least from Tony's perspective.

"What about Peter?"

The super-soldiers both blinked before Steve asked, "What about him?"

"I need to know where you stand with him," said Tony, voice hard and unforgiving. "Because what happened last year? When you supposedly already cared for me? That cannot happen again. Ever. I have a child to worry about now and I'm not about to put anyone, even a significant other, above his well-being. If you can't accept that Peter will always be my first priority, then we can just stop right here, right now."

It was Steve who reacted first and said, "We already know that and would never ask you to put anything above Peter. If it came down to me or Peter, I would want you to choose him first. I don't think I could live with myself if anything happened to that little boy when I could've prevented it."

"Same here. Peter always comes first. No matter which of us is in danger, it'll always be Peter we choose."

An enormous weight lifted off Tony's chest at those words. After the way Steve behaved last year, he'd been skeptical of the blond's willingness to put anyone before Bucky when it came to safety. For decades, Tony had put himself last in his relationships, but that wouldn't cut it anymore. He needed to live for Peter, and absolutely nothing was allowed to supersede the importance of his son's welfare. If the super-soldiers didn't understand this, then any relationship they'd attempt would crash and burn.

"Good, because if you ever choose anyone else over him, I'll kill you myself."

Bucky met Tony's cold smile with one of his own and said, "And I'd let you. Hell, I'd hand you the pistol or arsenic myself."

"At least we're on the same page."

They all went quiet after that, glancing between each other and just generally acting like clueless idiots. Seriously, Tony didn't remember things being this awkward or fluttery in his past relationships. Of course, aside from Pepper, it was probably best not to even think about said past relationships, but was a reference or comparison too much to ask for?

"Stevie likes to suck people off."

"What the hell, Buck?!"

"Or maybe it's just me since I'm the only person he's actually been with," said Bucky while scooting right up into Tony's side. "And he's a major voyeur. No, I'm not even kidding, I never
knew someone could get so horny just from watching stuff."

"Are you serious? Our Steven? Oh là là! Who would've ever thought?"

"I know, right?"

Steve gave them a sour look, but also didn't bother to deny it. That last part was especially telling and Tony tried not to giggle like a schoolgirl. Despite what the paps and Ross had to say, Tony Stark wasn't actually the emotional equivalent of a fifteen-year-old in the throes of puberty. He totally passed that stage after his thirtieth birthday.

"Here, watch this."

Before Tony knew it, hands were framing his face and lips were pressed up against his, warm and chapped and just a little more toothy than was comfortable. Okay, someone needed to tell Bucky that wasn't very—whoa, never mind, that was a lot better. A little bit of tongue was much appreciated and wouldn't mind a little bit of handsy play if it was—

"Wait, you can't just stop in the middle of something like that! I'm pretty sure that's against the law."

"Calm down and look, you goof."

Tony followed the metal finger and nearly choked when he saw Steve, face flushed and knuckles white as he watched Tony and Bucky together. It was a wonderful and delicious picture and wow, Steve really was a giant voyeur. Seriously, who would've ever thought?

"Awww, I think we broke Steve."

The poor guy eventually shook his head and glared at them, looking none too pleased by the cackles they didn't even try to hold back. Tony considered this to be a good form of revenge for every heart attack Steve had given him over the last five years.

"So, is that a yes?"

Startled out of his giddy laughter, Tony turned to look at Bucky's dead serious face, all traces of humor gone as he awaited Tony's answer. And damn, this was all so much in such a short period of time. A few years ago, Tony would've said yes without even thinking, overjoyed at the prospect of having not only Steve but also the infamous Bucky Barnes at his fingertips. It was almost a dream come true, at least to a younger Tony Stark.

But now?

A whole lot of things had changed in the last year. He'd been betrayed and beaten into the ground by his own team, including Steve, who Tony had cared for far more than he was willing to admit. He'd broken up with Pepper and then been confronted by Ty, a nightmare in and of itself. He'd lost JARVIS and then managed to salvage some of his code, knowing the whole time that his greatest creation would never be the same again. He'd learned the truth behind his parents' deaths, giving such a shock to his system that Tony had become physically ill. He'd nearly had the arc reactor crushed into his chest, eyes staring into the unfeeling gaze of someone he'd considered a dearly trusted friend.

And most importantly, he'd acquired a child, something Tony had never anticipated happening in his lifetime. It was kinda strange, suddenly becoming a parent to an eight-year-old, but Tony liked to think he was doing an okay job of it so far.
"It's a... tentative yes," said Tony, "For now. I can't just blindly jump into stuff anymore."

Steve nodded. "Slow works. I mean, with everything that's been going on, it's probably for the best. And it's not like I have much experience with this kinda stuff, either."

"You don't have much experience with anything, Stevie."

"We also need to think about Peter," said Tony while poking at the arc reactor. "His therapist warned me about future... romantic or sexual relationships and that I'll need to approach them carefully. He'll probably be scared you're trying to take me away from him."

"I didn't think about that," Steve admitted. "Well, at least we've made some progress. He isn't trying to bite or stab me with a fork anymore."

Bucky laughed with a hand on his forehead and said, "We'll figure it out. No need to rush anything. Just do what we're comfortable with and... let things go from there, I guess."

The three men glanced between each other before Tony said, "You know, we really suck at this talking stuff. It's kinda pathetic."

"Yeah, it kinda is."

"I've always sucked at this. Nothing new here."

"For some reason, I don't feel like we ironed anything out here."

Tony didn't argue when Steve scooted onto his opposite side, flicking Bucky's hand when it got a little too adventurous. "But this tends to be how my life goes, so yeah, nothing new here, either."

"Dad!"

Peter hobbled in just as Steve pressed a kiss to Tony's head, the little boy's eyes narrowing when he saw all three of them on the bed. Both soldiers froze, eyes going wide as Peter stumbled over to glare at them.

"What're you doing?"

"Uhhh..."

"This isn't appropriate," said Peter before scrambling over to crawl between them. "And my dad's not feeling good right now, so no kissy faces are allowed. What if you have a disease?"

"We don't get diseases."

"That's not the point. And Dad, you know better than to do this. Do I need to get Bruce?"

Peter's finger swung back and forth between their faces while he lectured, even poking Steve on the forehead when he tried to lean away. Well, this wasn't the best start, but Tony could also imagine much worse. At least Peter wasn't screaming and crying about the soldiers being too close to his father. And he hadn't threatened anyone with Matika yet, which was always a plus.

"You're a terribly bossy child, you know that?"

"Someone needs to be the responsible adult around here," said Peter with a flail of his arms, "And it definitely hasn't been the three of you lately. Plus, Dad's due for his late morning meds."

"Damn, this kid's brutal."
"I know, I can literally feel my self-esteem plummeting into the abyss."

Peter just stared at them for a long moment before saying, "JARVIS! Get Bruce!"

"Little traitor."

Chapter End Notes

You can thank my residency and patients for the long wait on this chapter. Work has been brutal in my ward lately. And yes, only one more chapter, but I will be doing a few other short (emphasis on the short) stories in the future. A realistic relationship between these three dolts + Peter would be incredibly complex due to all their past issues, so this and the next chapter will just barely scratch the surface on it.

P.S. - Tiberius Stone's comeuppance will come in one of those stories. He's being hunted as you read this.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Peter cornered Steve and Bucky two days later while his dad was showering, arms crossed and eyes narrowed when he spotted them in the kitchen. It'd taken some fancy waddling not to step on his bandages, but Peter managed it without anybody seeing him. Well, except for Bumble, but she didn't really count since she couldn't talk about it.

"Is Bucky eating pickles again?"

"They're a perfectly good source of fiber," said the brunet. "Don't judge."

With a grunt of dismay, Steve dropped the slice of cheese he'd been eating and rushed over to grab Peter beneath the armpits. Already knowing there would be no escaping the super-soldier's hold, Peter just went limp and allowed himself to be settled on Steve's hip. The blond fussed and tutted, large hands checking Peter's feet once he'd been deposited on the kitchen table.

"Bruce said not to walk on your feet, Peter," scolded Steve. "We don't want you reopening those cuts again."

"I can walk just fine."

"Says the kid who was waddling down the hallway."

Peter glared at Bucky, nose scrunched up in a way that made Steve want to tweak it. However, the blond wisely held back, fearful Peter might finally make good on his promise to bite Steve's hand.

"At least I don't look like a racoon."

"You know what, that seriously hurts, kiddo. I'm wounded, I really am. Right here."

"Eh, you'll survive."

When the brunet held out some scrambled eggs as a truce, Peter only side-eyed them for a moment before grabbing the bowl and scarfing everything down in less than a minute. Aunt May probably would've yelled at him for eating like a swine, but Peter lived in a tower of guys now, so the chances of him being scolded were a minuscule probability. Besides, Steve and Bucky always ate like they were starving, which meant they had no room to scold Peter about it.

"Hey, slow down. You're gonna choke at this rate and then Papa Stark'll kill us."

"Not if I get you first."

Bucky raised an eyebrow at this, waving his flesh hand outward in a signal for Peter to continue on. Eyes narrowed with suspicion, Peter watched as both men settled against the kitchen counters, sipping on Turkish coffee like they'd known this conversation was gonna come sooner rather than later. It was disconcerting and Peter wanted to throw an apple at their stupid, over-inflated heads.

"Why are you after my dad?" said Peter. "Just last year, you were trying to kill him!"

"Peter, I know what you saw—"
"And none of you were very nice to him before that, either." Peter pointed right at Steve's pale face before swinging over to Bucky. "Maybe you don't count since you weren't here yet, but the rest of you didn't care about him. I know because I've been listening and watching and I don't like it."

To make them suffer a bit, Peter shoveled another blob of eggs into his mouth, glowering in a way that would've made Aunt May proud. She sometimes used this tactic on Uncle Ben when he did something particularly stupid, a thick wave of disappointment radiating off her person. Overall, it was a pretty effective ploy and Ben usually behaved himself for a few weeks afterwards. So yeah, let the fossilized stupid-heads stew in suspense and think about what they'd done, even if it was only for a short while.

"You do realize that kissing him won't just make everything better, right?"

"Of course not."

"And I thought you two were together," said Peter, nose scrunched up in confusion. "I saw you smooching in the hallway just a couple days before the crazy soldiers and aliens kidnapped us. Isn't going after my dad like, cheating or something?"

Steve and Bucky just stared at him with wide eyes and open mouths, neither knowing what to say about the... romantic and sexual situation they'd found themselves in with Peter's father. And yeah, that was exactly the response Peter had been expecting from them. He'd asked JARVIS some questions while in the bathroom earlier that morning, so he at least had a general idea of what the two men wanted with his dad relationship-wise. It was something Peter had never heard of before and he didn't quite know what to make of the arrangement, either.

Adults were way too complicated, if you asked him.

"Besides, I don't think you've apologized enough yet, either." Peter leaned over to grab an apple out of a nearby basket. "Aunt May always said you don't need to cater to someone who's hurt you really badly before. And saving us doesn't get you more than twenty-five forgiveness points—maybe thirty points at the max since it's your job to save people—so you need to do a lot more than that to redeem yourselves."

"Points?"

"Yeah," drawled Peter in a duh manner, "Haven't you ever heard of the point system before?"

He didn't even bother to hide a devious smirk at the looks on their faces. Peter needed to make sure they were good enough for his dad, and if they wanted the boy's compliance, then they needed to follow Aunt May's apology and forgiveness system for the foreseeable future. Well, Steve more so than Bucky. The former had a lot more to make up for than the latter.

"It works like this: depending on what stupid or reckless thing you did, you have to earn a certain number of points to earn the other person's forgiveness. It can be freely given if the wronged person's okay with it, but you should still do nice stuff for them, anyways. To show that you really mean it."

"Sounds like you're familiar with this system."

"Not any more than Uncle Ben was," said Peter with a sniff. "He's the one who claimed Nerf guns were allowed in the house. And then he stuck me with dish duty, too. My poor hands were so wrinkly and prune-y and—hey, stop laughing before I stuff my bloody bandages up your noses!"

Both men promptly shut up.
"Okay, that's better." Peter reached into his back pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. "Now, let's get down to business. This here is a list of different tasks and activities and the forgiveness points that come with each of them. The other five pages are in my room. You need to earn at least 3000 points before I'll consider you even remotely worthy of being anywhere near my dad."

Bucky took the list with a raised eyebrow, quickly skimming over the contents while Steve looked over his shoulder, head cocked further and further to the side with every new bullet point. Normally, Peter would've found their reactions hilarious, but since this involved both his dad's well-being and Aunt May's brutal point system, Peter needed to treat it like the serious business that it was.

"Just 20 points for doing the dishes? But 120 points for sitting through a Star Wars marathon?"

"That's with the prequels."

"C'mon, that's just cruel, Peter. You need to be offering at least 250 points for anyone to suffer through 8 hours of Anakin and Jar Jar Binks."

"Then consider it a necessary sacrifice."

"What's he talking about?"

"Oh, don't worry, you'll learn soon enough," said Steve with a grimace. "And 50 points for teaching Dummy how to make a proper smoothie?"

"It's kinda impossible, but good luck."

Bucky flipped the paper over to continue reading and said, "I feel like tramping through Italy was less dangerous than this. But I can survive smaller explosions, so that's at least a minor consolation."

"Just make sure Butterfingers is on fire duty. He's got the best aim."

None of them heard the sound of clumsy footsteps until Tony was standing at the kitchen entrance, arms crossed as he said, "Okay, is there a reason why the Powerpuff Soldiers look like Darth Vader just challenged them to a duel?"

"Tony! You're not supposed to be on your feet yet."

"I swear, if you even try to—Steven! Put me down or I'll kick you in your stupid, perfect teeth!"

"Nope, I'll take my chances if it means your feet won't start bleeding again," said Steve, easily carrying Tony over to the island bridal-style. "And we were just having a nice conversation with Peter. He's like a bottomless pit."

"And you expect me to believe that?"

The sudden thump of an aircraft touching down on the tower's landing pad alerted them to their guests' arrival. Peter scrunched up his nose at this, none too happy about so many Avengers running around his home like they owned the place. Only a handful of them were permitted to live there, and Peter really couldn't care less about the others.

"Why're they here?"
"Because we need to actually have a detailed discussion about all the crazy shit that's been going on lately," explained Tony with a resigned sigh. "Plus, I'm only half out of it from the antibiotics, so we might as well just get it over with."

Grumbling about stupid archers and witches, Peter allowed himself to be scooped up by Bucky while Steve carried his still-protesting dad into the living room. None of them paid any attention to Tony's threats, although Steve did grunt when the engineer almost elbowed his nose. Apparently, being carried around like a princess was an insult to Tony's manhood.

"If Clint says a damned word, I'll disembowel him."

"Don't worry," said Bucky while snatching some blankets off a nearby table, "I'll knock the shit outta him if he does. I've just about had it with—whoa, that's my kidney there, kiddo. And believe it or not, I wanna keep it in a fully functioning shape, too."

"Your super juice will just heal it."

"So, my comfort doesn't matter at all because the super serum automatically heals it?"

"Nope."

"Okay, something is very wrong with this child, Stark. I think we might have a future dictator on our hands here."

"You just figured that out?"

The soldiers placed their cargo on the couch, Peter wrapping himself in a blanket before curling into his dad's side. The Avengers slowly filed in from the helipad, some of them looking more than a little awkward about being in the penthouse. It had been nearly nineteen months since they were last all together, and there was definitely still tension and distrust between many of them.

"Oh, this is gonna be so much fun," grumbled Tony. "Maybe I should set up an appointment with my therapist ahead of time. Just to be safe."

"Tony..."

"Don't get your panties in a twist, Spangles. I'll behave myself." To prove his point, Tony cuddled Peter extra close and pouted in a ridiculous manner. "And, J, could you put on something Peter-appropriate? I'm gonna need any distraction I can get to survive the next half-hour, or however long this shebang's gonna last."

"How to Train Your Dragon!"

"For the love of God, why is it always dragons? And dinosaurs!"

"Cause they're cool."

To emphasize his point, Peter explained all the merits of owning a Monstrous Nightmare or a Terrible Terror. Nothing beat a Night Fury, of course, but they were in short supply and it was always best to have a backup plan when it came to hoarding reptiles. Peter said this last part while giving his dad an innocent look, but the engineer pretended not to see anything and continued talking with Bucky about new adjustments to his metal arm.

"I think I've finally figured out a way to reroute the servos in your fingertips to the nerve-endings in your shoulder. It'll give more dexterity and sensation without that awful numb-y feeling."
Bucky wiggled his fingers in front of Tony's face and drawled, "Sounds good, but should I suspect there are ulterior motives behind this surprise project?"

"Get your mind outta the gutter, Ice Cube. My child is sitting right here."

It took about fifteen more minutes for all the Avengers to take their places in the living room, Peter watching each of them with suspicious eyes while also staying firmly attached to his father's side. And if Peter occasionally reached out to poke at the arc reactor, then it was nobody's business but his own. He only trusted a few people in the room right now, so they could just keep their mouths shut or get the hell outta his tower.

"Couldn't you just do this over the phone?" asked Peter. "Why do they gotta be here?"

"Sadly, speaking face to face with people makes for better communication," Tony lamented. "Or so Jarvis and Ana used to always tell me. Trust me, kiddo, I'm not any happier about this than you are."

"Is the Cyclops coming?"

"Not likely. He'll probably send Agent to do his dirty work instead. That's how it usually goes in these kinda circles."

Peter grumbled at this, not at all amused by how disordered and stupid everyone in the so-called Avengers seemed to be. He'd idolized these people since he could remember, asking for toys and pillows and shower curtains in their likeness every birthday and Christmas. And although Peter still thought their superhero identities were cool, he now found their not-superhero personalities to be severely lacking in multiple areas. All in all, the real-life Avengers weren't nearly as courageous or noble as Peter and his friends had thought they were.

Of course, Peter probably would've felt a little bit better if he'd known his father was thinking almost the exact same thing.

For Tony, suddenly having everyone in the same room was overwhelming, especially since he'd barely said a word or even interacted with the Avengers in over nineteen months. An air of palpable tension hung over them, making Tony want to stand up and just walk away until the meeting officially started. But thankfully, the weight of Peter at his side and Bucky's hands on his shoulders was grounding enough to pull him through it.

"Hey, you feeling okay?"

Tony tried not to shudder at the feeling of Bucky and Steve so close by, the former's mouth right next to his ear. It was more comforting than he'd expected, especially given their current band of guests. Tony wasn't used to having so many allies nowadays.

"Yeah, just a little tired," was his raspy response. "Probably the antibiotics. Dr. Schaeffer prescribed me the good stuff."

"If you start to feel sick or anything, just let us know," said Steve. "I'm sure Phil would be willing to take your statements one-on-one if that's the case. And you let us know if you're not feeling good either, Peter."

"Nah, I'm fine."

Steve leaned down to look at Peter and said, "You only have to tell us what you saw and that's it. Nothing more. And if you're uncomfortable at any point, we'll just write it down sometime later
and I'll give the statement to Phil instead. Okay?"

"Okay."

With that said, Steve and Bucky took up spots right behind the Starks, leaning against the couch in a way that also put them in Tony's peripheral vision. He couldn't help wondering how this looked to the other Avengers, who likely still viewed Tony as a liability to their cause... or whatever the hell it was they were now doing for SHIELD.

Damnit, this shit was giving him a headache. Not that that was anything new, but an extended vacation was looking more and more tempting all the time. Maybe Peter and him could skip off to Switzerland or Vermont over Christmas. Nothing was better than outsmarting the paps by vacationing somewhere unpopular or just unknown to the usual celebs. It drove the bastards nuts.

"So, when are we gonna start?"

"Once Phil gets here," said Natasha. "He needed to finish up a few things with his agents before heading over."

"Ah, yes, the minions."

Everyone had settled in the living room when the elevator's familiar ding went off, several eyebrows raising when they realized nobody was missing from the group. It took an insane amount of self-control for Tony not to cringe when JARVIS announced Bobbi's presence. He'd forgotten to call her last night before going to bed and, well, it figured that she'd make good on her threat and catch the first morning train going from Philadelphia to New York City. If there was one thing Bobbi had always excelled at, it was sticking to her word.

"—relieved to hear you're doing so much better, JARVIS," came Bobbi's voice when the elevator doors opened. "I was quite concerned when Tony and James told me about that terrible ordeal. Not hearing your voice first thing in the morning has taken some getting used to. But you're feeling alright now?"

"My reintegration and code assembly is progressing at an expected and acceptable pace."

"Well, that's certainly a spot of good news. Jeanie nearly had a heart attack when she checked her phone and saw that you'd gone completely off-line. When we last talked, Tony said he was gonna try reintegrating you into another of his properties. And I know it sounds kinda selfish, but it'll be real nice to have you completing my tax forms again, that's for damned sure."

The elevator closed with a quiet thrum and then the tell-tale click of high heels started moving through the penthouse. Huh, that was kinda odd, considering Bobbi had given up wearing heels at least fifteen years ago. Maybe she'd decided to—

"Anthony Edward, how dare you not call me!"

"Uh oh."

The Avengers scattered like a swarm of squirrels as the soft pit-patting of sensible flats echoed across his marble floors, far more menacing than the sound of gunfire and explosions could ever hope to be. Tony wondered if it was too late for him to make a run for it, or use Steve as a human shield. Then again, if Tony went with the latter option, then Bobbi would be even madder at him and that just wasn't acceptable.

"I've spent these last two weeks in total freakout mode," said Bobbi as she came charging into the
living room. "Do you see all of these gray hairs? Yeah, at least half of 'em are from you! I swear, if you had any idea how—oh my God, what did you do to my baby?!"

Bobbi was in front of them not five seconds later, walking right past everyone else in the room—except for Rhodey, who was given a light smack on the shoulder—like they were manure-eating flies on a decrepit donkey's ass. And yes, that was a phrase Mama Rhodes herself had used many times in the past. Face worried and hands fluttering, Bobbi examined every inch of Peter's exposed head and torso before moving on to Tony, muttering to herself the entire time about how reckless and stupid all of her children were.

"Just look at your nose," lamented Bobbi, fingers running through Peter's hair to get a closer look. "And your lips! No wonder your father didn't wanna call me. Where are the sons o' bitches who did this?"

"Either dead or in hiding," said Rhodey. "But the whole in hiding part could be in outer space, so that's a bit of a problem at this point."

"Why the fuck are these assholes here?"

Jeanie stood at the couch's opposite end, arms crossed and glaring daggers at every Steve-oriented Avenger in the room. The youngest Rhodes sister had heard quite a bit about Leipzig and the Accords, her nosy and persistent nature slowly but surely yanking some very unpleasant details out of both Tony and her brother. To say that Jeanie had been pissed would've been a vast understatement.

Hell, she'd threatened to rip Steve's eyes out if she ever saw him again.

"Watch the language," scolded Bobbi. "And there's no need for that kinda talk just yet. Peter, darling, how're you feeling?"

"Like horseshit."

"So much for telling me off about bad language," said Jeanie with an eye-roll. "Well, it looks like we interrupted something important. Not that I personally care about whatever you folks were gonna talk about, but this shouldn't take more than a few minutes."

A wave of Jeanie's hand towards her mother was apparently all the explanation anyone needed, because everybody else wisely kept their mouths shut and a minimum distance of fifteen feet away from her. Only Sam and Bruce had ever met another member of the Rhodes family, so Tony wasn't surprised to see them snickering at their teammates' behavior. However, none of them had met Jeanie before, and Tony wasn't sure whether to be terrified of this or not.

"Hot damn, you look awful, Tones."

"Thanks, Jeanie, I'm really feeling the love here."

"Just calling it as I see it."

While Rhodey made introductions, Tony sat through Bobbi's poking and prodding with a serenity borne of experience. Despite his grumpy protests, it really was nice to have someone fretting over his well-being, Bobbi's hands soft and motherly as she inspected every injury with a critical eye. When it came to affection and warmth, few people were better at giving it than Roberta Rhodes.

"The reactor?" whispered Bobbi. "How is it?"
Tony shrugged and tried to give her a reassuring smile. "As good as you'd expect."

"We're talking about this later," said Bobbi with a wag of her finger. "And don't think you're gonna bullshit me about it, either. I know when you're lying, young man."

"Yes, Mom."

"Don't take that attitude with me, Anthony. I'm serious about this."

Not wanting to bring Bobbi's mama wrath down onto himself, Tony just kept his mouth shut and nodded along with every request she made, completely ignoring the Avengers and any odd looks they might be giving him. Not that they had the gumption to actually shoot him any odd looks, what with Jeanie glaring at half of them like they were bugs beneath her feet. It appeared the younger Rhodes sibling was a lot more pissed than Tony had originally thought.

"I have a modeling gig with Ralph Lauren for the next two weeks," said Jeanie, long nails picking lint off her brother's shirt. "And then I get a week off for Thanksgiving, so I'll just take up residence in my usual room."

"And I'm to assume that Happy's already been told this."

"Of course."

"Well, there goes my Turkish coffee supply. I still haven't forgiven you for last time, just in case you were wondering."

Jeanie gave him a shameless smile while twirling her hair, looking every bit the haughty and not-so-innocent fashion model she really was. All Rhodey did was roll his eyes, well aware of just how manipulative his sister could be. Hell, he was probably happy that she was targeting Tony instead of him for once.

"Traitor."

"Flights from the West coast are just horrible, so I'm gonna turn in for a short nap," said Jeanie. "If you need me to ram a stiletto through somebody's foot, just have J or Fri give me a holler. I'll even give you a free pass for waking me up this time. No flying projectiles, I promise. C'mon, Mom, I think we need to let 'em get back to their supposedly heroic scheming."

Bobbi looked none too happy about leaving them with the rogue Avengers, but she eventually conceded defeat when both Tony and Rhodey waved her off. Tony knew he'd be getting an interrogation later tonight, although that didn't bother him as much as it would with almost anybody else. Because believe it or not, not even Tony Stark was capable of brushing off or ignoring the closest thing he'd had to a mother in over two decades.

"I'll unpack my luggage and then start an early dinner," said Bobbi, smile just this side of unhappy. "I can just imagine how much take-out food you've been eating over these last few months. Your arteries are probably clogged five ways to Sunday."

"Nah, just three ways to Wednesday."

"That doesn't make me feel any better," said Bobbi, face pinched when Rhodey helped her back to her feet. "Goodness, my knees really aren't what they used to be, and this damned cold isn't helping matters, either."

"Weren't you just lecturing me about—"
"Shut up, Tony."

And yes, for once in his life, Tony did just that. He also held back snickers when Jeanie walked past a very interested Sam Wilson without a second glance, her entire demeanor as unwelcoming and blase as humanly possible. Not that Wilson's reaction surprised Tony in the slightest—he knew Jeanie was a very attractive woman, even if he only saw her as a little sister—but there was also no way Jeanie would look at or touch him with a ten-foot cattle prod. When it came to grudges, Jeannette Rhodes was the queen of holding them.

"Just give us a shout if you need anything. And do we have any pasta or noodles in the pantry, JARVIS?"

"Eight boxes of each, Ms. Rhodes."

"That'll do."

Nobody said a word as their teammate's mother and sister disappeared down the bedroom hallway, the latter speaking quite loudly about how stupid one of her new managers was. Apparently, the guy had no idea how painful high heels could be after five hours, nor could he book appropriate runway venues without someone there to hold his hand through the whole process.

"Must suck not to have your own Pepper Potts."

Tony's joke seemed to break some of the tension, Peter giggling while several others tried to hold back snorts of laughter. The sensation of soft fingers on Tony's nape was also soothing, a reminder that for once he wasn't the proverbial enemy in a room full of superheroes. It was an odd occurrence and although Tony wanted to look on the bright side, he also knew the Avengers were a fickle sort when it came to loyalties.

"Says the man who's too lazy to remember his own social security number."

"You know what, nobody likes a tattletale, platypus. It's a terrible look. And need I remind you about the password incident of '04? You have no room to talk about not remembering basic numerical codes."

"Dad forgot my teacher's name last month."

"And you weren't supposed to tell anyone about that. No hot chocolate for blabbermouth little boys."

Peter gave him an unrepentant grin, hands patting his lap when Bumble moseyed her way across the living room. As usual, the cat didn't give anybody else the time of day, snobbily ignoring Clint and Scott when they attempted to reach out and pet her. Tony probably would've said something obnoxious if he hadn't also noticed Bucky watching the bedroom hallway.

"Something wrong, Buckaroo?"

The Soldier blinked at him with owlish eyes, a slight flush of embarrassment coloring his cheeks from being caught. It baffled Tony at first, but then he noticed that Steve looked much the same way, eyes darting back and forth between Tony and the hallway. When the puzzle pieces finally clicked together, all Tony could think was: hot damn, were they actually scared of Bobbi? Sweet, motherly, criminal prosecuting Bobbi?

Wow, that was kinda adorable.
"No."

"You sure? 'Cause you're looking a little peeked there."

Bucky responded by poking Tony in the head before saying, "You sure the half-pint should be here for this?"

"I can handle grown-up talk!"

"Normally, I'd exile him to his bedroom," said Tony, "But considering what he saw and heard while stuck with Ty and his cronies, I think Petey might know just as much as we do at this point. Besides, Agent asked if he could—"

"Ah, good, everybody's here then," interrupted Phil as he came in from the helipad. "All of you read the briefs I sent out last night?"

"How the hell did you get here so quickly?"

Phil strode right past Clint and said, "That's for me to know and for you to never find out."

"That's not creepy at all."

"In respect to our more bruised and drugged colleagues, we're going to get right down to business and keep this as straightforward as possible.‖ Phil signaled for the AIs to pull up several holograms. "Of course, that shouldn't be too difficult considering the overall lack of information we have at this time. That old friend of yours is quite the hacker and escape artist, Stark."

"That's a nice way of putting it."

"He temporarily disabled our systems and then wiped almost everything from the Pakistani base," said Phil. "Whatever Stone and his alien buddies were trying to hide, he destroyed most of it. Do you think you'll be able to recover anything?"

Everyone looked at Tony, causing him to let out a gusty sigh. "I'll have to take a look at it myself. Ty might be an asshole to the nth degree, but he's a good hacker and learned a lot of his skills from me. I know his style and he's a sneaky weasel at the worst of times. What do you think, honey bear?"

"He definitely has some tells," said Rhodey. "Even if I hate the bastard, I'm also willing to admit that he's a genius when it comes to engineering. He can't really hold a candle to Tony, but as you can see, having even half those brains can be extremely dangerous."

"I guess it's a good thing you're not a super-villain then," joked Scott. "We'd be up shit creek if that was the case."

And wow, that was some seriously awkward silence, right there.

"Ugh, whoops, maybe I shouldn't have said that. Just forget those words came outta my mouth. Yep, never said a single thing. Not a word... Aww, damn."

A few of the Avengers gave Tony sidelong looks, obviously having thought of this themselves at some point. Hell, Tony had found SHIELD's files on him right after Fury's first proposal, openly scoffing at the various warnings on every single page. Aside from diagnosing him as an irresponsible narcissist who couldn't be trusted, they also worried that Tony would turn rogue someday and use his unparalleled genius to subvert governments all over the world. In the eyes of
Fury and SHIELD, when it came to switching sides, none of the Avengers were more dangerous than Tony Stark.

"If I were a super-villain," drawled Tony, "None of you would even be here, 'cause you'd already be dead. It wouldn't be hard, trust me."

Tony gave them a toothy smile before waving for Phil to continue. Let them have that as food for thought. If Tony really did want to destroy the Avengers, he could've done it years ago and they would've been none the wiser. He could've easily killed Steve and Bucky last year with a single blast of his repulsors—they'd given him at least nine opportunities to blow their heads off, but Tony had restrained himself every time. Despite what everybody else thought, killing the super-soldiers had never been his desire or plan when going to Siberia.

"Well, as riveting as that is," said Phil in an obvious attempt to curtail any arguments before they started, "We're gonna need you to work through everything me and my agents have been able to salvage from the site. Our own agents have tried to—"

"Already on it."

Phil gave him a sly grin. "I figured as much. Now, does anyone know when Thor might be returning from Asgard?"

"No idea."

"Does the meathead ever tell us when he's coming and going?"

"He probably got stuck again."

"In that case, we'll just have to work with what we've already gathered from the Pakistani site," lamented Phil. "I must admit, your testimonial was very helpful, Peter. We actually have a starting point now."

Peter's response was to partially hide in Tony's shoulder, fingers holding tight to the blanket and his dad's shirt when the adults turned to look at him. Rhodey and Phil had spoken with him yesterday afternoon, taking extensive notes about everything Peter had heard and seen while stuck in the alien compound. It wasn't as much as they'd hoped, but Ty also had a bad habit of underestimating those he deemed less intelligent than himself, and Peter fell squarely into that category due to his young age and quiet demeanor.

"To sum up and keep things simple, I think we can safely say that HYDRA's on the verge of collapse. Our agents were able to apprehend and interrogate over a half-dozen guards who'd chosen to take up with the aliens—please stop snickering like a toddler, Agent Barton, it's very unbecoming—and from what they were able to gather, something very big and nasty is on our horizon."

"Oh, I'm feeling so reassured."

Tony only half-listened after that, mostly because he already knew everything Coulson was talking about and Steve's fingers were very lightly massaging the back of his neck. Aside from his own and Peter's experiences, Tony had spent several hours hacking SHIELD's systems while FRIDAY rummaged through every tiny fingerprint his dear old friend had left behind. Apparently, some galactic overlord known as The Mad Titan—and for God's sake, did any of these self-important morons even think about their goofy-ass titles before they took them?—was collecting Infinity Stones and had sent a bunch of his minions to Earth searching for them.
And to prove that Tony's luck was just as grand as ever, he currently had one of those damned Stones living in his tower. Not to mention the arc reactor, which Ty and his alien buddies had somehow figured out was immune to the Mind Stone's manipulative powers. They'd likely gotten that information when Ty hacked SHIELD's piss-poor databases, so nothing new there.

How Ty had gotten involved with a bunch of Star Trek ripoffs was still anybody's guess, but Tony wouldn't be surprised if Thanos' minions sought Ty out because of his past connections to Iron Man. It also helped that Ty was one of the few people besides Tony who could understand how the arc reactor worked.

"Unfortunately, we haven't yet been able to pinpoint Mr. Stone's whereabouts yet," said Phil about an hour later. "He has been exceptionally good at covering his tracks so far, although I'm sure he'll make a mistake at some point."

"Do we have time to wait for that?" asked Sam. "I mean, if Stone's as smart as you're implying, what happens if he waits us out?"

"He'll get cocky," said Tony, "And think he can outsmart me. If there's one thing Ty despises, it's being outmaneuvered by someone he deems less important than him. Just give it time. The asshole will eventually reappear and try to put me back in my place."

"And you're comfortable with that?"

Tony didn't need to turn around to know that Bucky and Steve were sporting equally potent expressions of murderous rage. And for God's sake, if those lunkheads left giant dents in his furniture again—which Tony suspected was the case—then neither would be getting any goodies any time soon. Hell, Tony wouldn't be surprised if local furniture stores started salivating whenever they saw the slightest commotion at Stark Tower.

"Not really, no, but until I can find Ty's digital footprints, just keep your fingers crossed that he does something stupid."

"Well, I guess we can't be asking for too much too soon," said Phil with a dry smile. "And at least we know Secretary Ross wasn't involved in your abduction. I suppose his high-profile position would've been a detriment to Mr. Stone and the aliens' original plans."

"He's definitely not one for subtlety, that's for sure."

"It figures that we'd end up fighting a bunch of vomit-colored aliens," sighed Clint. "Aside from your old buddy, of course. He's just the usual sleazy human type."

"Narcissistic bastard of epic proportions would probably be a better description."

Clint opened his mouth to say something, but then sputtered off when he seemed to think better of it. Tony had a pretty good idea of what the asshole was about to say and barely managed to hold back a glare when the archer's eyes darted behind him. At this point, all Tony wanted to do was disappear into his bedroom and not come out until Bobbi was done making him her fabulous homemade spaghetti. Phil had already been debriefed on T'Challa and Tony's search for the Infinity Stones, along with everything related to Ross and the Winter Soldiers, so he could inform the Avengers if he deemed it necessary.

As far as Tony knew, the Mind Stone was with Vision, the Space Stone with Heimdall, and Dr. Strange was currently studying some type of Eye Thingy that may or may not be reality-warping. It'd been several weeks since Tony last spoke with him and that creepy-ass cape, so he couldn't say
too much on that subject right now. Where the other three Stones were, Tony had no idea, but hopefully this Thanos fellow hadn't found them yet.

"Dad, I'm hungry."

"Why does that not surprise me? I'm beginning to think you have a hollow leg or something."

"It's been three hours since breakfast."

Bruce immediately came over to check Peter's temperature and feet while saying, "And it's probably time for your medication, too. I assume you took yours at the same time, Tony?"

"The walking armory over here threatened to shove 'em down my throat if I didn't."

"Oh, the joys of finally having someone else to ensure you don't succumb of deadly yet preventable infections," said Bruce. "Now, c'mon, I'm sure James' mother will be more than happy to feed you. She's already in the kitchen."

If anyone felt slighted by Tony's early departure, none of them said anything. Bruce and Vision were quick to assist Tony in hobbling towards the kitchen, the engineer far too proud to let Steve carry him in front of the Avengers. Peter, on the other hand, had no problem stealing a piggyback ride from Bucky, who scooped the little boy up with a melodramatic groan.

"You should be okay over here," said Bruce. "Just don't tip over like you did last year. Brain surgery isn't my forte, remember?"

"Nonsense, Brucie-bear. I think you'd make an excellent brain surgeon."

"That's the drugs talking."

Bobbi bustled around the kitchen while Tony and Peter sat at the kitchen island, only half-listening to Phil's lecture in the living room. Bucky hovered nearby the whole time, occasionally fetching something for Bobbi when she requested it. The poor guy was twitchy and nervous around her, saying "Yes, Ma'am" and "No, Ma'am" like a new recruit while also keeping a safe distance from her. If Bobbi noticed, then she gave no sign, posture relaxed as she asked Peter about his schoolwork and how the twins were doing with their new baby sister.

"Avery says all she does is poop and cry," said Peter with a shrug. "Neither of them have been getting much sleep since she was born in August."

"That sums up the first few months pretty well, I'm afraid." Bobbi signaled for Bucky to fetch her some parsley and thyme from the top shelf. "James and Joanna were quiet and content babies, and Janine was great once we managed to correct the whole night and day mix-up, but Jeanie? Dear God, that girl was an absolute hellion for almost her entire first year. There's a reason why she was my last child."

Peter wrinkled his nose and said, "I don't think I wanna baby brother or sister. I like my sleep too much."

"Good to hear, 'cause you're not getting one," said Tony. "At least not from me. So unless you got another parent hidden out there somewhere, you're gonna be an only child for the remainder of your existence, Petey-wheatie."

"Dad gives really stupid nicknames."
"Yeah, he's been doing that since he was able to talk. Probably before that too, if Edwin was to be believed. Have you seen The Look?"

"He looks like a duck when he does that."

Tony sighed as Bobbi and Peter went through the long list of nicknames he tended to give people, including some that Tony hadn't used since his teenage years. Those in the living room must've also been able to hear since Rhodey made a few wise-ass comments, even poking his stupid, bald head in at one point to comment on Tony's godawful eating habits in college. Tony shot them the middle-finger at least a dozen times, so whatever.

"Yo, Bucko, come over here."

The brunet was at his side in about two seconds, flesh hand resting on Tony's lower back while the other settled on his forearm. It was kinda comical, how nervous the other man was, but Tony also felt an inherent need to assuage whatever concerns were plaguing Bucky's mind.

"Sit down before you pass out," said Tony while pulling out the stool next to him. "And stop looking so scared of Bobbi. She's not gonna bite or shoot so long as you don't give her a reason to."

"I think I've already given her dozens of reasons to want me dead."

Tony rolled his eyes. "I can't guarantee she won't give you a good talking to in the near future, but I do know she's not gonna maim or murder you."

"How?"

"Because you haven't been arrested or stabbed with a butcher's knife yet. And I know Rhodey's already ratted out our possible... relationship to her, so if you're not locked in a prison cell or entering rigor mortis, then we're doing pretty good so far."

"If you say so."

After tossing one more glance towards Bobbi, the Soldier sat down on the stool to Tony's left and tried to make himself as inconspicuous as possible. This was pretty difficult considering how much taller and broader Bucky was than Tony, his over-muscled frame easily visible around Tony's slumped form. The eventual addition of Steve just made everything funnier, mostly because he looked even more terrified than Bucky.

"I didn't hear any gunshots or screams, which I'm gonna take as a good sign."

"Would you wanna argue with Phil?"

"Hell yes! Agent's one of the Wittiest argument partners out there. For shame, Steven, wasting such an amazing opportunity."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Tony didn't argue when Steve's hand settled on his leg, out of sight just in case Bobbi felt like beating him over the head with a skillet. The soldiers were a fuzzy, warm presence on either side of him, quiet and content to watch Bobbi putter around and detail her recipe steps to Peter. His son had hobbled over to the island's other side with his stool, setting it up a few feet away from the stove. It made Tony a little nervous, but he also knew Bobbi had everything under control. She'd never let anything happen to Peter.
"You feeling okay?" asked Steve, large hand coming to rest on Tony's forehead. "I doubt Dr. Schaeffer would say anything against you taking your meds a few minutes early. Do you want me to go get 'em?"

"Nah, I'm good for now. Just a lil' tired."

Steve didn't look convinced, but kept his mouth shut, anyways. It was kinda nice, just sitting here with the super-soldiers and Peter and the Rhodes family to keep him company, the familiar bounce of Jeanie's riotous curls signaling her arrival into the kitchen. It would've been even nicer to have Pepper and Happy there, but both of them, as they loved to remind Tony, had jobs they needed to perform. And he knew it was only a matter of time before Bruce and Vision wandered in, the latter curious about what ingredients Bobbi was using for her spaghetti squash recipe.

Where the other Avengers stood in his life was still a mystery to Tony, especially since he still didn't feel comfortable around several of them yet. But he wasn't gonna worry about that right now, because Peter was attempting to mix the sauce for Bobbi and it was adorable and seriously, that kid knew better than to get that close to the stove. He was gonna burn himself!

"Peter..."

"He's fine, Tony," assured Bobbi. "And I'm standing right here. Don't be such a worrywart."

"I'm anything but a worrywart."

"Uh huh, whatever you say, sweetheart. Peter, could you please pass me the feta cheese. It's right there next to the olives."

"I don't like olives."

"Then you can pick yours out and give 'em to your dad instead."

"I very much second that motion."

Tony tried not to meep when a certain hand dipped a little lower on his back, just barely skimming the top of his pants. In retaliation, Tony reached over to pinch Bucky on the thigh, grinning when he felt the thick muscle tense beneath him. The two lumpheads were obviously too terrified to do anything remotely indicative of their new relationship in front of Bobbi and Jeanie, so secretive gropes and footsy appeared to be their only option at the moment.

Oh well, Tony would take whatever he could get, especially since he'd be passing out again in an hour or two. And seriously, he had two super-soldiers at his beck and call right now, and who in their right mind wouldn't take advantage of that?

"What're you doing, Tones?"

Aww, damn, he'd forgotten about Rhodey again. This probably looked really incriminating from behind them and yeah, Bucky was definitely gonna have a heart attack before dinner was even finished.

Huh, he really was on the good drugs...
Last official chapter! There will be an epilogue with a very short time-skip after this, and I know you guys will enjoy it a whole lot. ;) I purposely left stuff open-ended because of the upcoming *Infinity War* films. I wanted to keep things as close to canon as possible, so trying to answer or resolve every question and plot-point just didn't seem feasible given the 6 month time-frame of this specific story. Steve, Tony, and Bucky also have a lot of work ahead of them, but no worries, I'll be showing more of that in my side-stories.

Thanks again for sticking with me so long! I've already posted a side-story called *Think Before You Speak*, which means I'm not totally ditching you guys, either. Sadly, being an MD is a massive time-suck, so only short stories from here on out.
Tony's immune system was fucked up, as Dr. Schaeffer oh so eloquently put it.

A bacterial infection had crept to the surface later that night, leaving Tony with a high fever, shortness of breath, painful cough, and shaking chills. It immediately sent Bruce into full-blown doctor mode, brow furrowed and lips pinched as he took several sputum and blood samples and demanded that Dr. Schaeffer get his wrinkly old butt upstairs as quickly as possible.

Then Peter started coughing, too.

"We'll need to do some more chest X-rays just to make sure," the doctor has said. "Combined with everything they've been through over the last few weeks, I can't say I'm surprised that this would happen."

Bucky had looked genuinely frightened, hands massaging Peter's chest from where he was seated behind the boy. It took a while for Tony to realize he was probably remembering Steve's pre-serum illnesses, which was a pretty horrible thing since from what Tony had heard, Steve used to be so sick and puny that a strong summer breeze could've blown him away.

The next few days were a blur after that, both Tony and Peter being confined to their own rooms to prevent any chance of cross-infections. The doctors even insisted on doing the same with people, restricting Steve, Bobbi, and Rhodey to caring for Tony while Bucky, Jeanie, and Happy tended to Peter in his bedroom. Vision was the only non-doctor allowed to go between the two, although even he wasn't allowed to touch either of them for fear of fomite transmission. It was a long, terrible couple days, and Tony was kinda thankful that he didn't remember half of it.

Unfortunately, some of the bits and pieces he did remember weren't pleasant, like coughing until his chest felt like it was gonna implode or shouting at Steve and the rogue Avengers while caught in a delirious fever. Tony wasn't quite sure of everything he'd said, but he did know that after the fever passed, Steve had been awfully quiet and withdrawn but also extra attentive, even taking his meals and showers in Tony's room just in case something happened.

"Only the Starks would manage to get pneumonia at the exact same time," Rhodey had grumbled at some point. "I swear, it's like you two devils are trying to give me a heart attack or stroke. Do you know what your lungs look like right now? They're jacked up, man."

"What about Peter's?"

"They're not too pretty, but not as crappy as yours. The doctors think being under-dressed in a cold room for weeks and then getting tossed into freezing water contributed to most of this. Not to mention all his usual asthma problems."

"I should be with him."

"Not right now, you shouldn't be," said Rhodey. "You're fighting off pneumonia and a staph infection, Tones. You know that's a recipe for disaster."

Steve had then appeared from the bathroom to smear more Vick's vapor rub on Tony's chest, voice confident when he said, "Bucky's a master at taking care of people with breathing problems. He
literally kept me alive for years when we didn't have half the medicine you do today. Peter's in good hands."

"Doesn't make me feel any better about being separated from my sick son."

"You heard what Bruce said, that once you're both past the contagious stage then we can move you back into the same room." Rhodey shoved another pillow under Tony's back to help keep him elevated. "Or do you wanna end up in the infirmary again?"

"Don't even joke about that, platypus."

"Well, don't fall asleep yet. Mom's whipping up some cream of potato soup for you. Homemade and everything."

"I feel so spoiled."

Rhodey had flicked him on the nose before heading out to join his mother in the kitchen. Unfortunately, he also left the door partially open, which allowed Tony to hear the awful, wracking coughs that were coming from Peter's room across the hall. It almost killed him, hearing his son in so much pain but not being able to care for him.

"Ugh, I can't take this. Fri, bring up a screen for me."

"Sure thing, Boss."

A holo-screen popped up next to the bed, Steve adjusting Tony's pillows so he could better look at the projection. The camera angle allowed him to see Peter from the upper left side, giving Tony a good view of the entire bedroom. He tried not to laugh when he saw Jeanie trying to catch Peter's hacked up phlegm with a coffee cup, looking about two seconds away from puking herself. It was kinda hilarious, especially since Jeanie missed twice and gooey phlegm ended up landing on Bucky's hands.

Huh, Tony wouldn't be surprised if she did that on purpose. Jeanie had always been a vindictive lil' weasel when she put her mind to it. And Tony would know since he'd been on the receiving end of it plenty of times.

On top of the pneumonia, Peter's nose was also still bandaged up from where Ty had broken it. Apparently, the kid had tried to attack Ty to escape, even biting the blond's leg when he grabbed Peter around the back of his neck. This meant that with every cough, his son was in extreme pain, clutching his battered face and crying out until actual tears followed it.

Tony nearly got sick just watching it, but for now he had to console himself with the fact that Bucky, Happy, and Jeanie were caring for Peter like he was their own. Every cough was accompanied by Bucky reassuring him, metal hand resting on Peter's nape or forehead. The engineer knew from personal experience that Bucky's hand was nice and cool against fevered skin, chasing away just enough of the discomfort to be soothing. Peter took the aid without complaint, holding on tight to Bucky's arms whenever another coughing bout reared its ugly head.

"See, I wasn't kidding when I said Bucky would take good care of him. He's always had a soft spot for sickly runts."

"My child is perfectly average-sized, thank you very much."

He could see Bucky's hands massaging circles on Peter's heaving chest, the soldier using his own body as a giant pillow for Peter to lean back on. Bruce had said the position and presence of
another person would help regulate Peter's breathing, although Tony had refused all similar attempts for himself so far. C'mon, there was no need for coddling at his age.

Plus, it was obvious that Bucky found Peter's presence easier to be around than other adults. He was much more physically and emotionally open, even with Jeanie and Happy in the room. Tony wondered if it was because Peter had none of the expectations everyone else had, especially Steve and the Avengers. Maybe little kids really were just that much easier to talk to.

Well, either way, it didn't change the fact that the next couple days absolutely sucked donkey balls.

Tony didn't even remember the fever taking over, but it must've done it fast and hard because he went from freezing cold one minute to scorching hot the next. And then the nightmares came, easily as vivid and realistic and traumatizing as the day he'd lived them.

Howard screaming and yelling at five-year-old Tony about being a piece of shit who couldn't tell a circuit board from a refrigerator. His fury when an eight-year-old Tony had dropped a blowtorch on his newest project. All the times he'd hidden behind Jarvis or Ana, eyes watching as his parents screamed at each other about anything and everything under sun. Romantic affairs, long weeks abroad, secretive projects, constant searches for a man long dead, it didn't matter what it was, because Howard and Maria could argue over it.

Body wracked with shivers, Tony tried to pull himself away from the dream he was falling into, but as usual, that didn't work nearly as well as he'd hoped. Before long, the smell of strong liquor seemed to invade Tony's nose, alerting him to his dad's looming figure. It took less than a minute for the accusations to start flying, Howard cursing the day he'd ever given Tony a soldering iron.

A vodka bottle had nearly collided with his head that night.

The scene twisted around and around until Tony could barely recognize it, Peter's face replacing his own at several points, eyes wide and terrified as Howard screamed at him in a drunken rage. Sometimes Maria was there, grabbing at Howard and demanding that he leave Peter or Tony alone. Then Ty would appear, his father's angry scowl and dark hair morphing into a lecherous smirk and golden blond, always scheming about new ways to manipulate his stupidly naive boyfriend.

"Oh, Tony," said Ty in faux sympathy. "Don't you understand? Nobody will ever love you like I do."

It was impossible to move, Tony's legs and back glued to his workshop chair. Ty moved like a big cat, slinking up to Tony's side with a quiet tut. A large hand grabbed the back of his neck, soft and gentle in a way that Tony craved.

"The board is expecting those new designs, you know. And I doubt they'll be willing to wait this time around," said the blond. "Or do you need help with the schematics again?"

"I already drew them up last night."

"Good, Sunset was beginning to worry and gave me a call this morning."

"She's not on this project."

Tony tried not to think about last month, when he'd caught Ty and Sunset fucking each other in his own bedroom. He'd thought the latter was his friend; after all, she'd been there to help him with several labs after Howard and Maria's deaths. Instead, she'd turned into Ty's occasional fuck buddy, even smirking at Tony once or twice in their Building 20 laboratory. But as usual, all anyone wanted from Tony was his money and brains.
"Huh, I never took you for a plagiarizer, Tones. Or did you forget about the radiation shielding?"

"My dad came up with that idea."

Without warning, fingers dug into the back of Tony's neck, shoving him face first into the metal work table. He fought back a yelp, knowing that any sign of pain or weakness would just egg Ty on. He seemed to feed off it at times, especially when the person showing it was Tony.

"You're always doing this," scolded Ty. "Always taking credit for stuff that other scientists helped you create. It never fails. And to think, I'd just told Obadiah Stane this morning that everything was in working order."

"What the hell're you talkin' abo—"

A glass tumbler slammed down next to Tony's head, causing him to yelp and jump in terror. Pieces of glass were now scattered across the table, one large chunk laying less than an inch from Tony's right eye while another was pressed against his cheek. Tony couldn't stop himself from shaking, only half absorbing the cruel yet saccharine words coming out of Ty's mouth.

"Don't act like you're the innocent one in this," said Ty. "Everybody knows what you do for a living, just like your old man. Do you think I enjoy punishing you? I mean, it's not like anyone else is gonna do it."

Tony just focused on not moving, already knowing that if he responded in any way then Ty would just make it worse. The blond wasn't stupid enough to leave a mark on him, but there were plenty of ways to hurt a person without directly hitting them in the face. That was a nasty truth Tony had learned over the years, mostly thanks to Howard and Ty. If there was one thing Tony was good at, it was attracting people who loved to hurt him.

And then he felt the blond's hand drift lower, just barely skimming over his chest and towards the arc reactor. Tony's breath hitched, eyes widening in terror despite the fact that he knew the arc reactor shouldn't even exist yet.

"What's the matter, Tones? Feeling a little light-headed?"

A finger tapped random patterns on the arc reactor, occasionally skimming around the edges before returning to the center for another tap-fest. Meanwhile, Ty's other hand pushed harder and harder on the back of Tony's neck, pieces of glass pinching into his exposed cheek and forehead as he slid across the metal table. It made Tony's eyes water, breaths coming fast and hard with every word out of Ty's mouth.

"You just always have to push me, don't you, Tony? I wouldn't have to do this kinda stuff if you didn't push me to do it."

The sound of Howard's voice didn't startle Tony as much as it should've, the hands on his neck rougher and more calloused than Ty's had ever been. Tony swallowed around the lump in his throat, ears ringing as Howard accused him of being a useless failure, too stupid and arrogant to even make Captain America care about him. Everything that had happened over the last three years was his fault, be it Ultron's rampage or the destruction of the Avengers Initiative. He'd made an enemy of Captain America, and as Howard gleefully pointed out, that made Tony lower than scum.

Who would give a shit about an ungrateful, pathetic mass murderer like him, anyways?

The verbal abuse continued for several minutes before fading away, Tony's body stuck to the chair and unable to move despite his efforts to run away. His breaths were erratic when he was finally
able to raise his head, hands shaking when the broken glass cut up against them. Everything had
gone quiet, the only sound being Tony's desperate gasps for air, heart beating a staccato as ominous
shadows moved across the walls.

"Why didn't you save us, Tony?"

Bruce's voice startled Tony out of the stupor he'd fall into, whipping around to stare at the
destruction behind him. Instead of staring at his workshop wall, Tony was greeted with the sight of
an endless wasteland and pulsing skies full of stars and mangled debris. Bodies were strewn across
the ground, blood seeping out of heavy wounds while dead eyes glared at Tony with accusation and
betrayal.

"I didn't know this—"

"Stop making excuses, Stark!"

Tony looked to the left and saw a blood-covered Clint glaring at him. The archer's face was filled
with hatred, fists clenched as if he was ready to attack his teammate at any second. It made Tony
take a step backwards, hand automatically coming up to shield the arc reactor from Clint's sight.

"You destroy everything you touch," Clint hissed. "Your best friend, my family, everything the
Avengers have ever stood for."

"I never meant for—"

"Cap should've just killed you when he had the chance. God knows it would've saved us from this
hell. You don't care about anyone but yourself, do you?"

"You should've known this would happen, Tony."
Glares of betrayal forced Tony to take another step back, eyes widening when he felt someone
behind him.

"Always causing trouble, aren't you, Tony?"

Obadiah's fist connected with his head, throwing the engineer a good ten feet across ice-covered
stone. And just like that, Tony was transported back to Siberia, hands frantically grabbing at the
repulsor watch as he was forced to face his old father-figure. However, before Tony could hit any
of the buttons, Obie was upon him.

"I should've just killed you when you were a boy," said Obie as he grappled for the arc reactor.
"Hell, your dad and all your little buddies probably would've thanked me for it."

Tony tried to flip Obie over, but the older man had at least 60 pounds on him and was much
stronger than he appeared. And Tony's arms weren't working either, which didn't make sense since
he'd just—

"I'll make sure to take good care of your son when you're gone," said Obie with a wide smirk. His
right hand was now pulling at the arc reactor. "He seems like a smart kid with lots of potential.
Should be good for the family business, since, you know, children always want to live up to their
dead parents' expectations."

"No! Obie, please, no—"

The arc reactor clicked and pulled out of Tony's chest, lights flickering as the cables were
disconnected from the reactor's electromagnetic core. Obie held it in the air, giving Tony a smile that he once would've found familiar and comforting. Now, all it did was make him feel sick and stupid.

"You've always been soft, Tony. People like you don't make it long in this world. But don't worry, I'll make sure Peter has what it takes to run Stark Industries and restore its weapons program."

"Fuck you, you goddamned son of a—"

Tony yelped when his head was pushed into the ground, vision blurring for a few moments before he was faced with a shocking sight.

"Steve?"

Across the room stood Steve and Bucky, both watching with blank faces as Obadiah stood and walked away, arc reactor in hand. Neither did anything to help Tony as he struggled to turn over, breaths coming sharp and shallow as the shrapnel moved closer and closer to his heart. Tony managed to pull himself to his knees before falling over, head hitting the ground again with a loud thud.

"He's going for Peter," gasped Tony. "Please, Steve, you have... to stop him."

The super-soldiers just stared at him, eyes as cold as the weather surrounding them. For the first time in far too many years, Tony felt tears well in his eyes, salt stinging against the bitter Siberian winds. Obie was gonna hurt Peter and there was nothing he could do about it.

"He'll hurt Peter... like he did me. Please, Steve, you can't let—"

Steve didn't say anything in response, instead turning on his heel and walking away from Tony's prone form. The engineer cried out, fingers clawing at the frozen concrete, desperate to protect his son from the monster who'd somehow managed to con his entire family. It was only a few seconds later when Bucky moved to follow him, not giving Tony even a second glance.

For reasons he couldn't fathom, Tony's heart felt like it was breaking into a thousand pieces.

"Coward! You're supposed to... protect people!" shouted Tony, tears rolling down his numb cheeks. "My dad... said so! Please, Steve, please, you need to... save Peter. Please..."

Before Tony could say anything else, the world started to blur and he was suddenly blinking awake in his own bedroom. Or at least he thought it was his own bedroom. The lines between reality and fantasy were really blurred and Tony wasn't quite sure if his brain was actually working or not. He clumsily tried to rub at his face, but was annoyed to find something holding his hand back. Thankfully, all it took was a sharp tug to pull whatever was holding him loose, although Tony was a little dismayed to see hints of blood left behind.

"Huh, that's never happened before."

Images were still flashing through Tony's mind, some of them so unpleasant and traumatizing that he actually considered hitting the bottle again. But no, that wasn't something Tony wanted, even if he couldn't quite remember the reason why. Howard had always turned to alcohol when life wasn't going his way, so no, Tony wasn't about to just roll over and fold 'em like his old man had done.

The tear stains on Tony's cheeks were another thing he didn't plan to give further consideration to, either. Tony had spent decades perfecting the art of nightmare ignorance and he wasn't about to renounce such a hard-earned mastery now.
Nope, nothing to see here, he was perfectly fine.

And God, was it ever cold in here. Tony was desperately craving a cup of coffee, but walking to the kitchen seemed an impossible task in this kinda cold. His vision wasn't the best, so it took a couple seconds for Tony to locate the electric blanket at the bottom of his bed, several other towels and a hot water bottle stacked next to it.

Tony poked the hot water bottle and said, "Awww, it's cold."

Nearly tumbling out of bed, Tony fumbled for his missing slippers and then wrapped himself up in the blanket, forehead and neck clammy for a reason he couldn't quite figure out. Ugh, he really needed to stop pulling three day inventing binges down in the workshop; it always left him all nasty and sweaty if he didn't take a shower before falling asleep. And yeah, the lights were clearly on under the bathroom door, so Tony figured that he'd never made it back into the bathroom before passing out.

With a wide yawn and shivers, he skirted around some kinda pole thingy—seriously bad habit of his, just leaving lab stuff laying around—and then ambled across the room to seek out the beautiful, delicious liquid gold known as Turkish coffee. A couple coughs and some achy bones weren't gonna keep Tony away from coffee and those cinnamon biscuits Rhodey always brought when he stayed over.

"Shit, I need to stop standing on my feet for so long," said Tony around a hacking cough. "Feels like I got screws in 'em or something."

He stumbled into the kitchen with another wave of coughs, quietly cursing his other bad habit of getting sick and then ignoring it until he was almost dead. Tony felt something on the edge of mind, kinda like he was forgetting something really big and important, but to be honest, there would be no practical thinking done in Tony's brain until he had at least one cup of coffee. And wow, he didn't remember leaving such a mess in the sink, mostly because he hadn't really ate in—

"Tony! What the hell are you doing outta bed?"

Oh, well, that was a voice Tony hadn't expected to hear in his home. Actually, he'd totally forgot Sam Wilson even existed. That was kinda weird...

"I'm gettin' some coffee, what's it look like?"

"You're supposed to be resting," said Sam. "And shit, look at your feet. Bruce told us not to let you walk on 'em."

"They do kinda hurt." Tony looked down at his bare feet, more than a little surprised to see bandages wrapped around both of them. "I don't remember putting those on. Did you do that?"

"No, but Bruce and Dr. Schaeffer did. Hey, come over here and sit down. I'll finish making that coffee for you."

Tony didn't fight when Sam led him over to an island stool, too tired and fuzzy to resist the soldier's quiet words of encouragement. He just kinda sat there in a daze, shivering from the cold and slumping under the coughs that kept wracking his body. It sounded like Sam was talking to somebody else, but Tony couldn't be sure. Maybe Rhodey had decided to come over for the weekend again.

"What's going on?"
A flinch seemed to instinctively pull itself out of Tony, fevered eyes whipping around to stare at Clint. However, it wasn't Clint who truly startled Tony, but the person standing right behind him. Meanwhile, about one hundred feet down the hallway, Bucky was just refilling Peter's hot water bottle when he heard shouts and crashes coming from the kitchen. He looked out the bathroom door to stare at Happy with a raised eyebrow. Jeanie startled awake from her position on the overstuffed Star Wars couch. Dropping what he'd been doing, Bucky signaled for both of them to remain with Peter while he went to see what the hell was going on.

It took about ten seconds for Bucky to reach his destination, a lump forming in his throat when he heard the distinctive sound of Tony shouting at whoever was with him. Bucky stopped just outside the kitchen doorway, hands clenching when he saw Tony standing behind the island, shards of his favorite Star Trek mug littering the marble floor. It took less than a minute for Bucky to deduce what had triggered this outburst.

"You two had best leave," said Bucky in a firm tone, "'Cause you're clearly makin' this worse."

"She's doin' it again." Tony looked near hysterical from his hiding place, face sunken and clammy with fever. "Tryin' to get into my head and make me hurt people. I won't do it, I can't do it again. I can't live through that again."

"Tony, you know Wanda won't try to—"

"No! You're wrong. She hates me and my entire family," shouted Tony as he stumbled closer to the shards. "All of you do. And I'm not fucked up stupid like you think, I know what she put into my mind. Gettin' me to create Ultron and then gettin' your trust. I'm not doin' it again."

Wanda was frozen next to Clint, hands covering her mouth as the engineer continued to voice his complete distrust towards her. With his mind lost in fever, Tony was saying stuff he'd normally never admit to, but it was pouring out now, painful and direct and not sugar-coated in the slightest. Tony was hissing at his former teammates about Nazis and backstabbers and a Mad Titan when Steve finally came running into the kitchen, clad in only a pair of sweatpants while the rest of him was naked and damp from an evening shower.

"Fuckin' hell..."

Yeah, that pretty much summed up this whole situation. Bucky didn't know what to do, especially when Tony accused the Avengers of being just like Obadiah Stane, always wanting something from him until he was useless and needed to be disposed of. The way he protectively covered the arc reactor with his hand almost made Bucky sick, hands grabbing Steve when he moved to approach Tony. Steve briefly tried to fight him, but Bucky held tight and gave him a warning look. With Tony delirious and distraught, the last thing he needed was a direct confrontation with people who'd hurt and wronged him in the past.

He also purposely ignored Natasha, who was hiding in the living room shadows. Bucky didn't have to see her to know that she was effected by Tony's harsh words. Not even assassins like themselves could hide every single emotion or thought, despite what the redhead liked others to believe.

"Tony, please, we don't mean any harm, I promise you," said Sam, counselor voice in full effect. "I understand why you're so upset and angry, but I also don't want you to get hurt. Look at the floor, Tony."

"No, no, that'll just... you'll just try to..."
"You have my word, nobody's gonna try anything. I just don't want you to hurt yourself, Tony. Remember how I was making coffee? The fancy Turkish blend. Well, your Spock mug accidentally dropped to the floor and broke into pieces. See, it's scattered all around your feet."

"Sergeant Wilson is correct, Sir. If you step even one foot to the left, you will cut your feet open again."

The sound of JARVIS' voice seemed to snap Tony out of his defensive huddle, head tilting down to stare at the ceramic shards right next to his unprotected feet. Thankfully, just as Tony noticed his precarious position, Rhodey and his mother came rushing into the kitchen. Bucky stepped aside without protest, figuring that if there was anyone who could coax Tony back to bed, it'd be a member of the Rhodes family.

"Oh, Tony, darling..."

Bobbi didn't hesitate to approach the shivering engineer, tone maternal and concerned in a way that reminded Bucky of his own mother. Although his memories were often fuzzy at best, Bucky could clearly remember Winifred's soft touches and bright smile, willowy form standing behind the stove as she prepared a large pot of stew for her growing children. To this day, she was still the most beautiful woman Bucky had ever seen.

When those memories finally resurfaced several months ago, Bucky hadn't wasted a second in writing them down, terrified they would disappear like so many others had before them. Bucky had so few memories of his time before HYDRA that he couldn't help but cling to what little was left. Fragments and slivers were better than nothing, he tried to tell himself.

Hell, even Steve felt like a stranger most days.

"Where's Peter? I need to find him," said Tony when Bobbi pulled him into a gentle hug. "They'll try to take him from me. But I have to pay, I can't do what Dad did and not pay. They could kill him and then I won't be—"

"Tony, sweetheart, I need you to calm down, okay? Peter is just fine in his bedroom with Jeanie and Happy. You don't have to worry."

"But what if they—"

"He's alright, Tony. I literally just checked in on him and he was sound asleep. Ah, ah, be careful. There's all kinds of broken pieces on the floor." Bobbi took Tony by the hands and slowly led him around the shattered mess. "Was that your Spock mug? Oh dear..."

"Aunt Peggy bought that for me."

"I know, but she'd understand what happened. We all get a little clumsy sometimes. Do you remember that one time Joanna forgot her homework and tried to..."

Bucky and Steve blended into the shadows as Bobbi slowly led Tony past them, Rhodey reaching out to support Tony's other side since the engineer was leaving bloody footprints in his wake. The arrival of Bruce and Dr. Schaeffer stopped their progress for a short while, the latter insisting on an examination of Tony's feet right that moment. This was met with a few grumbles from Tony, hands batting at Dr. Schaeffer's until Bobbi told him to knock it off.

"He's reopened two of the cuts," said the doctor. "I'll have to redo the sutures on both of them."

Bruce removed the thermometer from Tony's mouth and said, "It's back up to 104.2°F. We'll
probably have to adjust his medications again."

"I don't feel good."

No sooner had Tony said this did he lean forward and vomit all over Rhodey's feet. The pilot just rolled his eyes and let out a long-suffering sigh, hand patting Tony's head as the doctors finished their examination. For some reason, Bucky suspected this wasn't the first time Tony had vomited on his best friend.

"And that's probably from the antibiotics," said Dr. Schaeffer. "Could somebody please carry him? I really don't want him walking on those feet."

Steve immediately stepped forward and held his arms out, face anxious as he and everybody else waited to see Tony's reaction. When nothing came, Steve bent down to get a closer look, posture slumping when he realized that Tony was practically passed out. He was still mumbling to himself, but also appeared to be oblivious to the world around him.

This both comforted and upset Bucky, who was relieved that Tony was no longer caught in a terrified delirium but at the same time also feared for his health. If Bucky could've transferred some of his super serum to the engineer, he would've done it in a heartbeat. Watching Tony and Peter suffer was almost unbearable and he wanted nothing more than to take away their pain. What good was being a super-soldier if he couldn't even protect the people he loved?

"I don't think he'll be recognizing anyone for a little while," said Bruce, "Though it'd probably still be best to keep Tony's visitor list to a minimum. Stress like this isn't good for his heart or lungs right now."

Schaeffer finished listening to Tony's heart and said, "Blood pressure's 151/96. A bit better than I'd thought it would be, but his pulse is still very elevated. I guess we should at least be happy that those new pills seem to be working. I'll take another reading once we've got him calmed down and in a comfortable setting."

"Finally, some good news."

Clint and Wanda had beaten a quick retreat into the living room while Sam stayed behind to clean up the kitchen. It looked like Tony had knocked more off the island than Bucky first thought, but he didn't really care about broken cups and plates. He was much more concerned about Tony and the fever wreaking havoc on his body.

"Be careful with his shoulder, Captain. We don't want that laceration to start bleeding again."

Steve very gently picked Tony up from the plush chair, cradling the engineer's head on his shoulder while Bucky helped adjust Tony's legs. A damp cloth was placed on his forehead by Bobbi, her face drawn with worry as they took Tony back to his bedroom. JARVIS gave them whatever information he could about the few minutes Steve had left Tony alone to shower, detailing what sounded like a terrible nightmare and even worse awakening. To Bucky's frustration, Dr. Schaeffer didn't seem surprised and even admitted that he'd been expecting this to happen.

"How long's the fever gonna last?" asked Rhodey. "His body can't keep this up for much longer."

Bucky didn't hear a whole lot after that, instead focusing on Tony and the incoherent mumbling he produced every couple seconds. By the time Steve had deposited him on the bed, Tony was turning his head from side to side, even crying out at one point for a woman named Ana. Thanks to
his time as the Winter Soldier, Bucky knew exactly who Tony was asking for.

"Don't listen to..." mumbled Tony, head turning away from Steve's gentle whispers. "I didn't mean... It was Ty... promise..."

"You know, I don't think words can properly describe how much I utterly despise that son of a bitch ex-boyfriend of his," Bucky admitted. "I've killed my fair share of people, but that bastard deserves worse than I've ever given. And that's saying a lot."

"Welcome to the club," said Rhodey while helping Dr. Schaeffer insert a new IV into Tony's hand. "I would've ripped Stone's dick off years ago if Tony wouldn't have been upset with me for doing it."

"I don't think that applies anymore."

"Since Ty hurt Peter, I'm pretty sure Tony will want to do the disemboweling himself."

"Ouch."

It was the needle stick that finally dragged Tony out of his own delusional mind, eyes aching as he forced them to open and look at whoever was invading his space. Everything was awkward and painful and whenever Tony tried to move his hand, someone would pull and tuck it against his side. Tony tried to ask what was going on, but words couldn't seem to form around his tongue, instead sticking to the back of his throat like they'd done in his last dream.

Or was this a dream? Tony couldn't really tell anymore.

When Tony tried to speak again, he felt something cool and damp being pressed against his forehead, a welcome relief Tony hadn't even known he'd wanted. This was then followed by a soft touch on his left cheek, which was accompanied by gentle fingers running through his sweaty hair. It felt so good and Tony wanted to kiss whoever was doing it.

"Just sleep, Tony," whispered a familiar voice in his ear. "We'll be here when you wake up. Just sleep and get better, okay?"

"Okay."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, somehow the epilogue morphed into three chapters. I'm not quite sure how this happened, but it did. And for those of you that predicted Tony getting an infection from the arc reactor being exposed and Peter being neglected, here it is. There's literally no way either of them would've came out of that situation without getting very sick. Plus, fever dreams suck and Tony has a lot of things to have nightmares about.

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