Grapes of Wrath

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Grapes of Wrath

by EiriTheBear

Summary

An alien life-form of unknown origin crash lands on Earth, causing S.H.I.E.L.D to act and form a research team. Tony heads the operation, and the investigation soon requires the input of some of the most brilliant minds on the planet, including Reed Richards, Bruce Banner, and an unassuming scientist named Peter Parker.

Johnny Storm meets Peter, unaware of his superhero identity being Spider-Man, long time pal of the Human Torch. It's only a matter of time before Johnny starts putting two and two together.

"You know something, don't you? You know what Peter's hiding." Johnny pulled himself upright in his chair and fixed the man with an imperious stare. Tony didn't really seem to
register the look—he just carried on smiling that infuriating little smile, and Johnny wanted to reach across the space between them and shake the secret out of him.

"Only one way to find out." Johnny frowned as Tony cast his glance on the empty glass before him and issued the challenge. "Bottom's up, Johnny."

"God help me," he murmured to himself, scrubbing at his face before saying: "Screw it. Let's just do it."

Notes

A lot of canon things have been tinkered with, like age, timelines, everyone's comic book situation, etc. to suit my insatiable need to write this fanfic.
It took around five supers and a dozen non-super operatives to survey midtown Manhattan between Stark Tower and the Baxter Building.

"Area is secure. I think," came the voice of one Clint Barton through the comm. He was perched on a twenty-story building, looking bored and uninterested.

"You think? You sure you've swept the surrounding buildings thoroughly? Do it again. Make it a 100% sweep." This time it was Steve, and he wasn't satisfied with sweeping the radius just four times. Three others groaned through the comm.

Clint snorted. "I'm in a residential area--I'm not about to barge into people's private homes."

"Transfer alien life-form from point A to point B," droned Nick Fury, eyes steely as always as they looked at the screens in front of him. "And keep sharp. We have intel tipping us off that hostiles are around the neighborhood." As usual, he wasn't at the scene, but rather at S.H.I.E.L.D.'s headquarters, monitoring everything with his one good eye.

"And none of the Fantabulous Four can't spare themselves to assist us?" Pietro complained. He wasn't to keen on the task set before him. Transferring cargo wasn't part of his job description. "I have a life too, you know. Wanda's waiting for me."

"Hey, good one. Fantabulous? Maybe we should change our name to that."

"Wait--who's this kid?" Pietro looked up to see a streak of fire burst through the sky.

"One of the 'Fantabulous Four'." Johnny Storm snickered as he hovered over the busy street. So much for a covert operation. Everyone in the direct vicinity was staring at the floating, flaming human-shaped entity.

"At your service, bro. And thanks for this in-ear. Did one of you really dip this in unstable molecules just so you can all hear me?"

"Did we really need this guy?" Clint groaned.
"Spare us the quips, Clint, he was available, we needed a little assistance." Special agent Natasha Romanov strolled through the streets like any normal person, heels clicking through the pavement. Her movements were brisk yet fluid, and she had one eye on the road in front of her and another on an inconspicuous delivery truck. As usual, the traffic jam was mind-numbing, and it made the mission that much more of a drag.

Pietro grunted through the comm. "I should have stayed in. You know it takes a lot of time to put on the suit."

"I heard Mr Stark has taken to dressing other superheros Tim Gunn-style. How's that working for you, man? Made any progress on the time it takes to put it on?" Johnny asked.

"Stretchy spandex-y suit like this? It can't get any more efficient than wrestling yourself into it." He paused. "Plus I gotta make sure all the folds don't ride up and give me wedgies."

Johnny's laughter was loud in their earpieces.

At headquarters, Nick was scowling at the screen, listening as the comm quickly became a group chat.

"So where's the rest of the crew, then?" Pietro asked. He was feeling a little antsy in his suit, walking through New York. Not a lot of people stared, because a lot of people were used to costumed pedestrians. Things like that happened a lot. "I stay away from updates and just, you know, work on whatever Nicky wants me to work on."

Steve was the one who answered. He had his arm dangling out of the truck's passenger window, squinting at the traffic before him. "Janet's with Thor and Bruce at the site of the crash, investigating things. You know where Wanda is. As for Tony ..."

"Avoiding the grunt work as usual," Pietro scoffed. "Where is he?"

"He went on ahead, to our place." Johnny supplied. "I guess he wanted to butter up Sue or something."

"Can we please focus on the task at hand?" Nick interjected curtly. "This chitchat is giving me a migraine."

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In front of them was a 3D hologram of the alien life-form, projected from a floor panel in the laboratory head office. Reed Richards glanced at the current head of the investigations and research team, Tony Stark, trying to figure out where the man was in terms of unlocking the creature's secrets.

"This is, admittedly, beyond my expertise," Reed said, transferring his gaze back to the alien. "My laboratories, however, are a bit more equipped when it comes to dealing with extra-terrestrial life forms than yours are."

Tony shrugged. "We needed a space to figure out what this mega-cell is. My space is kind of full right now, if you get my drift. We'd keep it in the tower, but we can't be bothered to focus our resources on it, not until we know what it is."

"You're dumping the thing on us," Reed sighed. "Threat levels?"

"I'm surprised you're calling it 'the thing', when you already have a Thing here, walking around in stretchy pants." Tony ran his hand through his hair, then wiped the bottom half of his face with it.
"It isn't dangerously radioactive, though it's emitting some kind of low energy pulse from the nucleus..." Tony put his hand in front of him and used his fingers to zoom in on the hologram-cell's center, where a tiny bean-shaped light was. "We don't know what that is, and we don't know how to get to it."

"Are you saying that you can't penetrate the cell wall?"

"I'm saying that we can't penetrate the cell wall." Tony paused. "Through the use of currently available technology and scientific methods."

"But you think something else can penetrate it. Something super." Reed was only half there at this point--his mind had already gone to possibility land, sifting through all the things the alien could be.

"Good. I knew I went to the right person," Tony said, though there was no tone to his voice that indicated that he was happy about the same-wavelength, finishing-each-other's-thoughts routine they were doing. "How about it? I could provide a team of researchers, catering, the whole armada, we delve deeper into the thing's structure, we then start cracking this damn gelatinous egg open."

"Hmm, I'm going to have to ask my wife about this..."

Tony snorted, but just as he was about to retort, the door panels opened and in came Sue Storm, her stride confident, her hair tied up, her gaze hard and unyielding.

"I'm not too happy about a potentially dangerous alien life-form being housed a few stories below our home," she began. "What if the nucleus becomes a nuke? Or what if it grows legs and a mouth and starts eating civilians? And my sources tell me that people are after this creature. Bad sort of people."

Tony didn't want to admit that he was a bit cowed by the terrifying woman. He scratched the back of his head.

"We, uh, we'll make sure that all the proper precautions are taken. S.H.I.E.L.D. will take care of security and defense, our team will help in any way we can--Bruce and Janet are already on the case. Thor is back in Asgard looking through any ancient mumbo-jumbo texts that might mention giant balloon-like objects. We're still figuring out the logistics of it all--we're kind of disjointed right now, back to back missions and all. I'm sure you understand."

Sue didn't seem all that impressed, and Tony was beginning to feel as though he needed to provide more reassurances, but Reed held a hand between them and looked at his wife with a loving, patient expression.

"Sue, we talked about this. If there's anyone capable of handling potential threats to humanity as a race--"

"--it's us." Sue finished, her stiff shoulders sagging. "The kids are upstairs. This isn't a very safe place to begin with. And now we have that... thing here, and people will be going in and out of the place."

"Seriously, you call Ben 'The Thing'. Isn't that a little insulting to him, to be categorized in the same--"

"I know, I know," Reed ignored Tony's words, taking her arms and rubbing them with his hands. "We'll make it work. We'll be careful. Don't worry. And if worse comes to worst, we'll take the kids to my folks."

Sue knew, from the glint in Reed's eyes, that he was prioritizing science over his family yet again,
that he was growing more and more curious about the alien by the second.

"It's in your hands now," she said, not sounding satisfied with his words. "Though I'll still oversee the personnel. I don't want any villain sneaking in here and causing problems."

"I'll leave that up to you," Reed smiled, kissing her once on the cheek. She knew and Tony knew that Reed was just happy to be given free reign to tinker with the new and interesting puzzle before him.

As for the actual personnel Tony was assembling ... Reed looked at Tony, asking the silent question.

"Again, we're still going about the ins and outs of this new collaboration. Though we have picked up a few interesting potentials that may be able to help."

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Peter had three choices before him that morning.

The first choice was for him to slip out of the suit (which he had unceremoniously slept in) haul ass into the shower to rid himself of all the dirt and grime, and put on his work attire, using the fifteen minutes he had to web through New York traffic in the hopes of arriving at his new workplace on time.

The second, which was a little modified, involved him showering and getting into a suit and lab coat anyway, but the rest of the time would be used up swinging his way to the nearest boulangerie to stuff his face full of bagels.

The last choice was to stay in bed for another fifteen minutes and just let his sore muscles, sore joints, sore everything recuperate from the previous night's crime-fighting session. He barely survived an onslaught of genetically-modified thugs beating him to a pulp, and he was sure that one of these days, his luck was bound to run out and he would eventually end up just lying in an alley somewhere bloodied and bruised beyond recognition. That was the most tempting option. That would also leave him without any food in his stomach for a solid 24 hours and late for his job.

He figured that he wouldn't make a very good impression if he went through the third option.

A knock came from his bedroom door. "Peter? You told me to wake you up for your big day! Get up or you'll be late for work!"

He really should get his own place at this point. "Yes, Aunt May," he groaned into his pillow.

In the end he had to compromise. He stayed in bed for three minutes more, scrubbed himself quickly in the shower for another three, four minutes to dress up, and used his webs to swing through Manhattan, snatching some random passerby's hotdog along the way and throwing money back at his face.

He was five minutes late when he arrived at the Baxter Building, looking like a windswept bundle of nerves. Couple that with sleep deprivation, hunger, and bruises ... let's just say he wasn't at his peak form walking into the Fantastic Four's base of operations.

"Stark is gonna kill me," he muttered to himself as he reached the reception. He showed his I.D and stated his purpose, and the receptionist pointed him to a set of elevators. "Take that hall over there to the elevator, use this key card to access the restricted levels. Do you know which floor you're going?"
"Um," he thought, ducking his head. "The one with the alien football that was shown in the news?"

The receptionist gave him a mildly disapproving look. "That's floor fifteen, take the right-most elevator."

Peter smiled in apology, and then sprinted his way towards said elevators, wincing each time his steps sent tremors through his still-recovering body.

The calming elevator music did nothing to soothe his worries. He recalled, briefly, how it became possible for him to access this level of classified stuff at such an early phase of his career.

He was working as an intern in Stark Tower. No one knew how he landed an internship at one of the most sought-after workplaces in New York, but that didn't automatically mean he got in because of favors and pulling strings. He had no strings to pull, no money to throw around for leverage. He only got the job because he sent in his application, his theses, and his proposals regarding microbiology and biotechnology. Oh, and let's not forget the interview from a computer AI that he fumbled through.

He was the coffee guy. Gangling, skittish kid like him, no one trusted him with anything science-related, fearing that he might blow himself up or accidentally let loose a deadly strain of virus that could wipe out the East Coast.

It was when Tony Stark himself exited the elevators to his floor and went directly to his desk that he thought, hmm, maybe it was worth staying here after all, making espresso.

"Parker," Tony greeted. "You're looking swell."

"Mr, Mr Stark, I--" he nearly spilled his own coffee onto a pile of actual papers, actual work that was assigned to him. "Hello, Um, sir." He didn't know that Tony Stark himself even knew he existed, much less knew his name.

"Hmm, yes," Stark sat on his desk with one butt cheek as if he owned the place (he did) looming over Peter. "Are you having fun making coffee? Doing grunt work?"

Before Peter could open his mouth, Tony already continued. "I hate grunt work. Grunt work is for grunts, and assistant's assistant's assistants. That's basically what you're doing right now--assisting my assistant's assistant. The bottom of the barrel, so to speak."

Peter was so wide-eyed his eyes were beginning to dry. He blinked a few times.

"But see, I've read your stuff," Tony looked down and Peter just realized then that Tony had a few documents in his hands. "Really amazing stuff. It took a while for me to actually get to read them, seeing as my assistant--" he looked back to a girl waiting by the elevators, filing her nails and flirting with one of the interns, "--lost the copy that was supposed to make its way to my desk. I had to get it again from archives myself."

Peter made a high-pitched sound in his throat. Tony Stark was reading his paper on the technological applications of naturally-occurring biological structures.

Tony smirked. From his position, suit and tie, slicked back hair, laid-back expression, he looked every bit his billionaire playboy persona.

That was before Peter knew anything about Tony Stark apart from what the public knew, before he had fought alongside the man, back when he still worshiped Stark like an ironclad god. He quickly learned that the man, immaculate as he was, still had his flaws.
The elevator chimed, and the doors slid open, startling Peter out of his daydream. And thank God too—it seemed that his thoughts were going somewhere else with the memory. He didn't know where, but he didn't want to stay and find out.

Too busy looking at the floor panels (which looked like it was made from the latest glass and optical tech), he bumped into someone and was almost knocked down to meet said state-of-the-art floor. If it wasn't for his quick reflexes, he would have. But the pressure on his foot sent jolts of pain through his right side, that he fell down anyway. Was he really so beat up that his spider senses weren't working? On top of that, he couldn't even stop himself from falling on his butt.

"Oh, man, sorry--"

"Sorry, I'm sorry, I wasn't looking at--"Peter froze. Johnny Storm was extending a hand towards him. Johnny, whom he had fought alongside with just the night before. His closest super friend.

Peter took the hand offered to him and stood, dusting himself off. He carefully avoided Johnny's eyes. There hadn't been another situation since way back in the past that allowed for Johnny Storm and Peter Parker to meet outside of the Spider suit. Peter had a secret identity to keep, and Johnny was okay with beating bad guys together with Spider-Man without knowing who he was under the mask. In short, this was the first time since that one time in high school that Peter met Johnny as himself.

Peter was struck dumb, not knowing what to do in this situation.

Johnny thought the other man was starstruck.

"Hey, it's fine, no worries. You didn't damage the goods," he said, smiling brilliantly. "It's not easy getting used to running into people like me everyday."

Peter blinked a few times. "Um, okay, let's go with that." It was safe to say that Johnny had no suspicions whatsoever about Peter's double life.

Except Johnny was staring him down, squinting. "Why do I feel like I've met you somewhere before ...?"

Peter swallowed. "You must have seen me before in Stark Tower or something."

Johnny hummed in thought. "No, no. That's not it. I've never been to that place."

Peter had to get out of there. "Um, I'm already late so ..." He turned on his heel and went the opposite direction.

Johnny was hot on his heels. "No, for real, man. I feel like I know you. Did we like, run into each other at a club or something?"

"I don't go clubbing." Peter quickened his steps.

"Maybe I've seen you before in one of the parties or galas that I'm forced to suffer through."

"Yeah, no." Peter thought he was getting lost in the maze of halls that was the fifteenth floor. He rounded on Johnny and huffed. "Listen, I think I'm kind of lost." He took out his I.D and showed it to Johnny, who carefully examined it with furrowed brows. "I'm one of Mr Stark's aides? He told me to come here for work."

Johnny raised an eyebrow. "You? You're like, twenty-something. How's someone young like you
one of Tony Stark's scientists?"

Peter was starting to get annoyed. And he never got annoyed at Johnny. Usually he was busy saving his ass, or Johnny saving his ass. Either way, they were too preoccupied with crime-busting and fighting bad guys to even explore each others' annoying sides.

"Easy. You just have to suck up to him, laugh at his jokes, and hope his ego gets inflated enough. Now could you please? Mr ... Storm." The name felt odd coming out of his mouth.

"What's your name?" Johnny asked, crossing his arms. "You know my name, as does everybody. But I don't know yours."

"I literally just showed you my I.D! Didn't you see it?"

"Nah, I was looking at the picture of your scruffy mug."

Peter started walking again. "It's Peter." He said over his shoulder. Since Johnny didn't seem like he was going to help he was just going to have to find the labs himself.

"You're going the wrong way, Peter," Johnny called. Peter stopped and then did a 180. Johnny was smirking at him like he owned the place (he did, sort of).

"And how would you know?"

"I just came from the labs. Some of us super folks delivered that alien thingo from Stark Tower." He crossed his arms again. "That's what you came here for, isn't it? Unless you're planning to kidnap my niece and nephew instead. You're heading towards our home elevators."

Peter deadpanned.

Johnny waved him over. "Just follow me, Mr Too-Young-To-Be-A-Scientist."

Johnny started walking, not once looking back to see if Peter was following. Peter was on edge the whole time. He wasn't so much as annoyed at Johnny as he was annoyed at his current situation. He should have expected it, to run into Johnny Storm where Johnny Storm lived. He just thought that the man wouldn't have the attention span to stay near the labs where boring science-y stuff happened.

When they arrived at a pair of sliding doors, Johnny keyed in a code and they opened. Peter stepped in, and at once, all of his nervous energy started seeping back in.

It was a huge lab, furnished with huge computer panels and hi-tech desks. At the far end of it was a huge glass window overlooking a room which contained what seemed to be a giant, inflatable grape and several robotic arms. Some scientists littered about in the background, but most of Peter's attention was on the group of people in the middle of the lab, looking at a hologram of the creature beyond the glass.

Peter's heart was in his throat. Not only was Tony there, Reed Richards was next to him, holding a tablet projecting its own holographic interface. Bruce Banner was talking animatedly to Henry Pym of Pym Industries. Janet van Dyne was in front of a computer, going through several records. Supers.

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He was snagged by the arm before he could step back and flee.

"Oh my God, you're late," said Darcy Lewis, one of Tony's assistants. She dragged him towards a
work station. "Should have known that you were going to be slow. Your aunt said you already left the house when I called but of course, knowing you and the traffic in this city ... oh, Stark's going to kill you."

"Yeah, I know. I know. Just shut up and tell me what do do Darce," he hissed. She pushed him down onto a seat.

"Exqueeze me? Is that any way to talk to your superior?"

Of course, trust her to power-play right at that moment when Peter was already feeling shitty about being late and tired and everything. Peter gave her a quelling look.

"I'm sorry. That's the stress talking. And the nerves."

"Wonderful. You know what could help with that? More stress and nerves. Your assignment--"Darcy clicked through a few of the screen projections, opening files upon files. Peter's eyes widened when he saw what they were: bits and pieces of his thesis regarding cell structures and semi-permeable membranes. "--is to sort through your research. Mr Fantastic over there is using it as a base."

"He's what!?"

"Congrats, nerd. He likes your 'stuff', as Tony calls it," Darcy flipped her hair over her shoulder, scrolling quickly through her iPad. "I'm going to have to sign you in as late, though, sorry. I can't be doing anyone any favors when I've got at least five mad scientists breathing down my back."

She paused, her eyebrows drawing together. "That's weird--someone already logged you in. On time, too."

The two of them snapped their heads towards the main research team. Peter paled considerably. All of them were looking at him with varying expressions. Johnny in particular, lifted his eyebrows at him and grinned. Tony signaled him over.

"Ooh boy," Peter muttered under his breath.

Darcy covered her mouth with her iPad to hide her snickering. "This is hilarious. Isn't this one of your sex fantasies or something? Having one giant science orgy with the best of the best?"

He ran a hand through his face and then closed his eyes in resignation, before standing up. "Shut up. I'm never taking you out drinking again."

He walked over to the group, not the least bit happy about the current development. Sure, he was getting recognized for his scientific endeavors, but it felt like walking into a den of lions. A den of super smart, supernatural scientist lions. His spider senses only kicked in when there was an immediate physical threat nearing him, but somehow it felt like it was kicking in now. I think it's called anxiety, Peter, he told himself.

"Mr Parker. Where has Tony been hiding you?" Reed greeted him with a welcoming expression, holding out his hand. Peter took it, his head swirling at the idea of sweating all over Reed Richard's palm.

"Mr, Mr--I mean--Dr Richards. D-level, sir. Making coffee for the lab tech," Peter answered with a small voice. Keep it together, dude. "It's a huge honor."

"In my defense," Tony interjected, and then threw a nasty look at Darcy behind Peter, who just
shrugged and quirked her lips. "I wasn't informed that we had a genius in our lower levels."

Peter flushed instantly. "Why--that's not--I'm not--"

"Nonsense," Tony clapped Peter's shoulder and shook him lightly. "With that brain at such a young age, why, he reminds me of me. Of course, I applied myself better at his age. And I had a spine, too. You should work on that, by the way. I have a few ideas."

Peter had half a mind to tell him to shut up, but he figured that he wasn't at that level of casual with Tony Stark as he was with Darcy.

"Don't go hazing our new recruit now, Tony. We don't have time for your little side projects." The man, hair mussed and expression friendly, extended his hand. "Bruce Banner."

"I--I know," Peter responded, and then took a breath to mentally stabilize himself. "I mean, I know all of you. You, Mr Banner, your recent breakthrough in the field of biochemistry ... I have your books, most of them. The ones I can't afford I pore over at the Tower's library."

"You should start a religion," Tony rolled his eyes. "Hank?" He turned to Henry Pym, who had gone over to his wife to examine some weird alien life-form with spindly legs on the screen in front of them.

"Mr Parker, I'm going to need you to reorganize your research," he said as a way of greeting. "Your findings are detailed and up-to-date, but they're cluttered and all over the place."

"Hank, don't scare him off. Look, he's lost all the blood in his handsome face," Janet chimed, crossing her legs and giving Peter a wink. All the blood Peter had lost rushed back to his face all over again.

"Look at him, he's like a blushing fourteen year-old with a crush."

Peter turned to the voice and found Johnny hanging around, looking out-of-place in his brown leather jacket and dark pants. Peter narrowed his eyes at him. Johnny smiled winningly, and he faltered straightaway. Peter had to admit, it was hard to stay mad at someone who smiled in such a warm and charming way.

"Sorry, I'm just ... a little overwhelmed right now," Peter confessed, shoving his hands into his pockets, pulling them out again, crossing his arms, and then deciding to just put them flat against his body.

"You're going to have to get over it soon, because we need your thoughts on this thingamajig." Tony fixed his gaze on him, and Peter's breath went short. He looked serious, but not in the way that he did when Peter knew he was in trouble. It was as if a switch had flipped and Tony had gone into work mode.

"Yes, um, okay. About ... the alien's membrane? I guess you want me to elaborate on that?" Peter found a seat and sat on it, because his knees were threatening to give. Any other day, when he wasn't recovering from a nasty altercation with criminals, he would have been able to stand just fine, albeit shakily. But he needed to gather his thoughts and actually be of use. Bruce had already gone back to a team of scientists trying to get samples of the cell membrane, while the Pyms were scrolling through a new set of alien data sent over by their database.

"We need samples, which I guess Mr Banner is working on ... if we analyze that we can figure out what triggers the permeability of the membrane surrounding the cell." He bit his lip and looked at the hologram of the mega-cell, slowly rotating at the center of the room. "But we also need samples of
the cytoplasm. The light purply stuff inside. Problem is, we can't penetrate the wall in the first place."

Tony nodded slowly, never taking his eyes off of Peter. "What do you propose we do about that?"

Peter racked his brains for a solution. And then, it came to him. "We're going to have to do it the
super way. Either break through the cell using some brute force or figure out a way to permeate the
wall in a non-physical manner. Like teleportation. Or phasing."

"Why would we need to look into the structure of the membrane if we had a teleporter or a phaser at
our disposal?" It was Reed who asked the question, putting down his tablet and fixing his gaze on
him. Peter felt like he should be more nervous, being interviewed by two of the best minds in the
planet, but he wasn't, because he already knew the answer.

"I read the files. That low energy emitted by the core? The nucleus? It isn't natural. Our scans can tell
that it's energy, but not the kind that our instruments can measure. One candidate for that is--"

"Chaos energy, for one," Janet Pym said, looking up from the screen. "That in itself can make this
creature very dangerous. It might even be sentient."

"It might be the reason why we can't penetrate the membrane by physical means," nodded Hank.
"Which means we need to gather every information we can on its outer layer before we even start
dealing with the core."

Tony's mouth was a straight, tense line as he went through something in his own tablet. "I don't think
teleportation is possible. According to SHIELD's database, the only people we have at our disposal
right now use quantum teleportation, or teleportation through signal transfer. That wall doesn't allow
anything in."

"We aren't sure of that, yet," Bruce said. "We don't have a lot of information here. Maybe it will
work, maybe it won't. Either way, it could be dangerous. How are we supposed to convince any of
them, teleporter or phaser, to risk their lives for this research?"

Peter shifted in his seat. "I know this girl that I can maybe convince."

They all stopped doing what they were doing to stare at him. Peter figured it was a signal for him to
continue.

"I dated this girl once, back in school. She can phase through solid objects."

"You dated someone?" Johnny broke the silence. "Huh, I guess nerds do get some action."

Peter bristled. "I did, and she was pretty hot. Hotter than you, in fact."

It was Johnny's turn to look offended. "I need proof of this girl's existence."

"Fine! Look her up, Mr Stark--"

"--Tony is fine--"

"Her name's Katherine Pryde. Kitty, for short."

"And you can convince this girl to work for us?" Reed asked, mulling over the new information that
had been given to him.

Peter paused, and then deflated. "That, I'm not sure. I'm going to have to get a feel of things. She's an
ex. It could get pretty awkward."

In the sidelines, Darcy let out a laugh loud enough to disrupt the atmosphere. Everyone trained their eyes on her.

"Well, sooorry. But I find it funny how all of this--"she waved her hands around the complicated setup of their research lab,"--boils down to how good Parker's going to be at sweet-talking an ex-lover."

Peter thought that this was the appropriate time to bury his head in his hands.

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Chapter End Notes

This chapter was revisited and edited on the 26th of July. It used to be Scott Lang in the scene but I changed it to Pietro Maximoff because it's my choice what to do with this fanfic oops.
Peter swung around a tall skyscraper, freefalling for a moment more than usual so that he could feel weightless. He had to keep in mind that he had a box of pizza in one hand, but it wasn't so difficult keeping the pizza pristine, with his spider senses keeping it intact within its package.

He did a flip mid-air, and then shot a rope of webbing against a pole hanging off the side of a condo. He then tugged as hard as he could, and propelled himself upwards with the next forward swing, until he could reach a high enough peak to sling one last web. The end of it stuck firmly to a corner of the Baxter Building. He then went around the Fantastic Four's home, until he could find the only room in the upper floors where light was still filtering out.

"Yes--I am--into--that shit," Johnny said as he typed the words on his keyboard, grinning at the screen like the Cheshire Cat. Bored out of his mind, he had gone online (incognito mode) and went to Omegle, typing out 'Johnny Storm' in the 'shared interests' box. He wondered what manner of mischief and misdeeds those who typed his name in were into, and he wasn't surprised at all at how wild and positively sinful their proclivities were.

Distracted by his computer, it took a while for him to hear the telltale sound of someone knocking. "For Pete's sake," he groaned. "SUE, it's past midnight! What do you want?"

When no answer came, he glanced at the door in annoyance. *Whoever it is has got the worst timing.* He raised his eyebrows when he heard the knock again--it didn't sound at all metallic like the door panels, nor did it come from the direction he was looking at.

He swung his head to face the other side of the room, leaning back in his seat and craning his neck. *The windows? That's odd.* Johnny pushed himself away from his desk and stood, padding his way over to the large glass panes overlooking nighttime New York.

And then suddenly--

He launched back a few feet and cried out when a dark figure fell from above and then bounced back up. "Jesus Christ!" The figure was upside-down, swinging left and right like a pendulum. "What the ... Spidey?" He approached slowly, his eyes the size of saucers as he touched the glass.
between them.

"Johnn-ayyy! You up?" Spidey hollered, and although he was dangling off his webbing in a difficult position, the box of pizza in his hand was upright. "Let me in, man! I've got Ray's."

*What the hell ...?* Johnny let out a sigh of relief, and then beamed at the other superhero. "You almost gave me a heart attack, you creep!" With a quick flick of a finger he unlocked the latch and threw one of the windows open, stepping back and watching as Spider-Man let himself in feet first, swinging like an acrobat and landing on the balls of his feet without difficulty.

"Awesome, thanks," Spidey said, wrapping one arm around himself as he stood upright. "Can't say I like New York so much when New York's this close to freezing my balls off."

"Want me to crank the heat up a bit?" offered Johnny, and without waiting for an answer his body started radiating warmth that no heater could replicate. "What are you even doing here?"

Spidey shoved the box of pizza at Johnny's face. "I come bearing gifts. Hawaiian."

Johnny blinked, crossing his arms like he usually did. Like a signature pose. "That's nice and all, but I don't eat vegetables."

"What are you, nine?" Spidey opened the box. "It's half protein-overload, too," he singsonged, waving the box at Johnny's face and letting the steamy goodness waft around for the blond to smell.

Johnny stared at the half-and-half pizza in disbelief. "Not gonna lie, I nearly married you just now." He snatched the box from the other man's fingers and immediately took a slice from the meaty side.

"Marry me? Hmm. Not sure I can handle the celeb-y lifestyle. Me and the paps, we've got history." Spidey looked around, silently amazed. Johnny's room was easily five times the size of his room back at Aunt May's.

"This is all so sudden. I feel so ambushed," the taller blond said as he chewed. "Would've whipp't out t'good underwear if y'gave me the head's up," he said around his pizza.

"And candles and perfumes too, I bet. You Casanova, you." Spidey walked over to the guy's couch, plopping down and making himself comfortable. He whistled in wonder. "Nice place. I've never been to your pad before."

"If you come with good food you can come over anytime." Johnny put the box down on the coffee table and fixed a look on the costumed crawler. "What gives, Spidey? Why are you really here?"

Spidey threw his arms out and spread them over the couch's backrest. Johnny had the sudden urge to whip out his phone and take a picture of Spider-Man just chilling on his sofa.

"Wha--can't a guy just go to another guy's place and just, you know, hang? I mean, we're friends, right? Sure, I've never talked to you outside of yelling warnings and bad jokes at your face while all manner of projectiles come flying at us, but I thought it would be nice to drop by once in a while. Surprise the Human Torch with pizza."

Johnny's lips quirked. "I hear you. It's just ... it's surprising as hell, I'll give you that." He didn't say it, but he liked hearing that Spidey considered him to be a friend. He wasn't going to admit it to the guy, but the warm feeling was there, settling in his chest. He suddenly felt excitement seeping into him at the thought of a super-friend being in his room, which was weird, because honestly, was he really a nine year-old like Spidey said?
"Oh my God, was is that girl doing to herself?"

Spidey was pointing towards his desktop computer, which had a woman on display, doing outrageous things to one of her orifices.

"HOLY Heather Marie--" he almost tripped on his feet as he rushed over to his computer, feeling mortified that Spidey had seen what all of that.

Spidey's laughed himself breathless. "Did I catch you at a bad time? You look like you were just about to get freaky in here." Johnny felt his ears heat up as Spidey snickered at him. He hastily closed the tab and let out a breath of embarrassment.

"Jesus, Johnny. If I knew you were into this shit I would have called ahead," Spidey rolled down on the couch, shortling. "You should have seen the look on your face."

"Oh, shut up. That was ... I was just ..." Johnny couldn't believe himself: he was tongue-tied for the very first time in his life! What made it so bewildering was that Spider-Man was the one causing it, and the topic in question was naked girls on the internet, something that he would shamelessly admit he knew very well. He felt like he had stepped into an alternate reality. "Don't judge me."

"Hey, it's all good. We all get a little frisky sometimes. But damn son, just go out and get laid." the other man sat up again and reached for a pizza, before rolling up his mask. Spidey for his part, didn't realize what he was doing until half of his face had been revealed. When he did, he froze, pizza a few inches from his mouth. He turned to look at Johnny. The blond's eyes were wide, looking at him intently.

Or more specifically, his exposed skin. Johnny blinked. It was literally just a small amount of skin from the base of the neck to the tip of the nose, but somehow he felt as though Spidey had shown more of himself to him than he had ever had. For the longest time, Spidey's identity remained a mystery to the public, and although Johnny knew that some of the higher-ups in the super-fantastic world they were living in knew who the person was behind the mask, he was certain that the Avengers had no idea. As far as Johnny knew, he was looking at something that was private and intimate. An actual piece of Spidey's persona.

Why am I so nervous seeing Spidey show some skin?

Johnny tore his eyes away and blinked rapidly.

"Was I allowed to see that?" Johnny asked, his voice soft and uncertain.

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Peter didn't know what to answer.

He didn't know if his mouth or jaw would be a dead giveaway to his identity. Johnny wasn't stupid. If given enough clues, he could put two and two together just as well as the next guy. Sure, Johnny was an airhead sometimes, but that didn't mean he was a complete ignoramus. He had met Peter Parker a few days ago. The memory would be fresh in his head. It wouldn't be farfetched if Johnny started getting ideas.

So he said nothing, and instead, just took a bite out of a Hawaiian slice.

He tucked his ankles under him and rolled back onto the couch, looking at the ceiling. It was domed and etched with intricate designs. It was too fancy for his tastes.
Peter was overcome with a need to get into Johnny's head. Did Johnny take a good look at him in the labs that it left an imprint in his mind's eye? Was he connecting the dots right then, at that moment?

"It's ... no big deal, I guess," Peter replied after a while, voice as quiet as the other man's. "I mean, I brought food to eat and all."

Oddly enough, he didn't feel nervous. He decided to keep the mask off of his mouth for the time being. He trusted Johnny to have a little more sense than he was known for. If he figured it all out, well then, he'd have to deal with that when it happens.

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Johnny carefully approached the other man, sitting down at the edge of the couch. He was at a loss for words. He didn't understand why Spider-Man had to keep his identity a secret, but he couldn't ask the man outright. Their busy lives didn't allow them to be. Or maybe ... maybe they just weren't trying to make the effort to get to know each other. Maybe they didn't even know how. Whatever it was that's stopping them, Johnny wanted to get past it, and he wanted ... something. Something concrete about Spider-Man to hold onto.

In the end, he just ate some more pizza. His mind was a sudden whirl of thoughts. It didn't help that Spidey wasn't saying anything, either. Just snacking on the rest of the food and shifting in his seat once in a while. Spider-Man wasn't slipping out or running away.

"Do you ..." Johnny turned and faced Spidey. "Do you play Super Smash Bros.?"]

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Tony forgot all about sleep-deprivation when Pepper Potts decided to call him at 3am.

"A call for you, Mr Stark," intoned Friday. Tony was flanked by a desk full of reports on one side and a view full of holographic computer screens on the other. He would argue that he wasn't swamped, but arguing with oneself was a sign of insanity.

"I'm kind of in the middle of something here, Friday," he told the AI as if it didn't know. He waved a hand and a projection of a proposal draft disintegrated and streamed smoothly into a virtual trash bin.

"It's Ms Potts, sir. I announced her call out of formality."

One of the screens winked out of existence, to be replaced by a view of a blonde woman looking troubled. He groaned. Trust Pepper to override his security system without so much as a warning. He didn't have the heart to take her out of the system's safe list even though they had broken up. He was going to have a long talk with his AI after this.

"Tony. You look horrible."

"You know very well that the more horrible I look, the more stuff gets done around here. Tell me, do I look absolutely terrifying, or would you say I could get some action in this state, still? Come on, I need to know if I should sleep."

He heard her sigh. He took it as a sign of exasperation.

"Even though I'm impartial, it hardly matters when it's 3am and normal people go to bed earlier."

"Yes, well. Normal people don't call at 3am, either." He glanced at her, and then cast his eyes down on his work. She looked beautiful, not at all a mess after their relationship had ended. It was further
proof that no matter how hard he tried to make it work, Pepper Potts wasn't his intended.

"I'm not trying to be rude, but why did you call?"

It was silent for a moment, until he heard her inhale.

"I've been informed that you have your eye on someone. Someone young and smart--" she stopped when she realized that Tony had turned sharply to look at her.

So she had caught wind of his recent exploits, if one can even call it that. His head immediately went to the image of a young man with unruly brown hair and an earnest face.

"By informed, you mean, you've been keeping tabs on me through one of my people." He hummed in thought. "Darcy, I would think. She's in the team, and she's been shooting me looks of disapproval all week."

It wasn't that Darcy was observant. He had to admit that he was rather blatant with the attention he had been giving. But he didn't understand it himself. If it looked a certain way to Darcy that she had to run to Pepper and tell on him, then was that really what this was? Was he making a move?

"I'm just ... fixating." He pinched the bridge of his nose with his fingers. "You know me. If something's interesting or intriguing, I fixate. I'm not trying to sleep with him."

"That's not what I'm getting from this footage I have," she said, and he was so thrown off-guard that his face was the very picture of flummoxed.

"Darcy did not."

Pepper's lips quirked. "Darcy did." She was looking off to the side, her eyes reflecting off light from another screen. She was watching some of the footage. Tony paled.

"Peter Parker's cute," Pepper remarked, glancing at Tony with a knowing look. "I'd say he's more your style than I ever was."

"That's not true--you were so my style." He couldn't believe that they were talking about this at this hour, with unfinished work surrounding him. He suddenly felt drained.

Pepper shrugged. "Tony, you have very different preferences when it comes to men. But this--" she swiped her hand in front of her and a small box appeared on the lower-left side of her video transmission. It was a video of Peter and him, their faces a few inches from each other. They were arguing over something. Tony remembered how it went like it was only an hour ago.

"Parker's ticking off your preferences for both men and women. It's fascinating yet eerie to watch."

It was actually two days ago. Peter wanted to be cost-effective with the investigation by minimizing his available resources, but Tony wanted to bring in all the state-of-the-art equipment for Peter to use at his leisure. The other man was stubborn. Tony fought with him, but only because it amused him to see Peter fired up over ultracentrifuges.

It also left him with an ache in his chest. Like his arc reactor was malfunctioning and it needed to fire an energy beam. Peter didn't want to be spoiled, and he wanted to work hard with what he had. Peter had a brilliant mind, and his brown eyes glowed with enthusiasm for his work. Peter smiled when he was satisfied and frowned when he was stumped. Tony noticed these things about Peter, but it only just came to him why he noticed them.
Tony watched the video in silence, letting the reality of it all sink in.

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Warm. Peter hadn't felt warm in months. He always woke up bundled in sheets and pillows and a quilt because his room couldn't insulate, but this time, he was warm, and not in the stifling way where his skin couldn't breathe and his limbs couldn't move.

There wasn't anything on him save for a big, heavy pillow radiating heat. He snuggled blearily into it, his senses not quite having woken up yet. He rubbed his face against it and hummed in contentment. Was it a revolutionary new product? A self-heating pillow that hugged the whole body? Where could he buy one of these things? Were they expensive, and could he afford one? The questions slipped in and out of his mind without being answered, until his eyes finally caught up to his waking state and opened into tiny cracks.

Consciousness came to him fully and at once.

He was face to mask with Johnny Storm, who was snoring quietly.

His eyes shot open, and a muffled sound escaped him.

Oh, crap.

Had he slept over? Why was he in Johnny's bed? It came back to him slowly, each piece of memory reconstructed in his head. They played a game on a Wii U, and Johnny was using Pikachu to beat up his Princess Peach. Johnny showed him a drawer full of sweets and a refrigerator full of carbonated drinks. It all came crashing down after.

I guess I ended up crashing from a sugar high and crashing at his place. So much crashing.

Peter heard Johnny mumble in his sleep as he extricated himself from the arm the blond had thrown around him at some point in the night. He slipped out of bed, limbs feeling stiff and uncooperative. His mask was still there as he touched his face, rolled all the way up to his nose. He had slept in the Spider-Man costume again.

I gotta stop doing that. But more importantly ...

He glanced at the digital clock that came with the nightstand. It was still morning, but he was late for work. So, so late for work. And he had to go back home first, before he could rush all the way back to the same building, which, now that he thought about it, was where he was working now. Literally just a few floors below.

An idea popped in his head just then. Maybe if he found something in Johnny's closet that he could wear, he could just jump out the window and come to work and be a little less late than he already was. That would mean foregoing a bath and basic hygiene. He had done it before and, with the way the circumstances played, it looked like he was going to have to again.

Before he could even think about it, he was already raiding Johnny's closet for a decent shirt and tie. This is bad. Why am I doing this, again? Every now and then he would glance at Johnny's sleeping form to see if the blond had heard him digging through his personal items, even though he knew that he was being extra quiet--with the way he operated, not even he himself could hear what he was doing.

Holy Heather Marie, why is everything in this damn closet by some famous designer? Jesus ... I could sell one of these and feed some homeless shelter in Queens for a month. Meh. It won't matter. Once I get myself into a lab coat no one would notice anything.
... and Holy Heather Marie? I need to not say that, ever.

To be safe, he rummaged all the way to the very end of Johnny Storm's big-ass closet to find the shittiest work attire he could find, which, he admitted begrudgingly, looked pretty much like something he would wear on a normal work day.

He slipped into them, deciding against wearing a tie, and then stuffed his costume in the empty pizza box. *I'll just wash it later. Whatever. God, this is such a stupid plan.*

Before jumping out of the room, he paused by the windowsill and looked back. Johnny still lay undisturbed, which made Peter roll his eyes. *He sleeps like a log.* It made him feel guilty, leaving Johnny like this. *Maybe I should leave a note.*

He tiptoed back in and took a Sharpie from Johnny's desk, scribbling a quick note on a napkin. *I wonder how he's gonna notice this one ...* He thought of an idea, a silly one that he shouldn't do for such trivial a task, but he did it anyway.

Before he knew it, he was smelling Manhattan's morning air as it hit his face, falling along the Baxter Building into an alley.

Johnny would later wake up to see a napkin dangling from the ceiling by a thin rope of web. *I borrowed some clothes. Late for work. Will return them ASAP. Catch you later, flamebrain.*

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Tony wore a gleeful expression as he wrote a quick e-mail to one of his associates at the board meeting. *I will not be able to attend this meeting. Send my regards to the directors. Tell them that I'm busy with pressing matters regarding worldwide security.*

Across from him, Peter Parker looked small. Tony knew how uncomfortable Peter was when it came to luxurious things, which was exactly why Tony had all but forced the young man into an Armani suit and a limo. He thought his plan had been brilliant. Kidnapping Peter right as he was stepping into the Baxter Building was a plan so simple it could have been conceived by Clint Barton or Ben Grimm.

The way they sat was starkly contrasting: Tony had his legs crossed, one arm draped over the backrest of his seat, his body in a relaxed position. Peter was taut, sitting upright, knees together. His expression was not unlike that of a caged animal. His eyes kept darting around and inspecting the interior. Tony thought his hand would shoot out at any moment and tinker with the many buttons next to the air-conditioning.

He flashed the younger scientist a smile. "You know, Mother Teresa once said, 'peace begins with a smile'."

"You can only smile for so long. After that it's just teeth," Peter answered, tugging at his collar with a finger. "Where are you taking me, and why are we in a limousine? We should be at work right now."

Tony rolled his eyes. "This is work. You stay cooped up in a lab for too long and your skin will grow its own ecosystem."

Peter made a face, but accepted the answer. "I guess I understand. I mean, you--you look horrible. Just saying. I've seen you look better."

Tony had to turn his head towards the window to stop the smile threatening to come back. Peter
echoing back Pepper's words was something only he would understand if he laughed about it now. It was true, he did look rather sick. He'd had zero sleep, thanks to a buttload of work and a video call in the middle of the night from Pepper, which caused him to watch over and over a video of himself and a certain young scientist with a lot of moxie arguing about lab equipment.

"Back at you. Work is taking its toll on us." Tony's thoughts didn't match his words. Peter looked fine to him. A little scruffy around the edges, but then again, most of the scientists he had ever worked with had that unkempt, just-got-out-of-bed look to them. Except maybe Reed Richards who was a neat freak.

"Is that why you decided to abduct me and take me to some party? I mean, that's where we're going, right? I'm not--it's not my kind of scene, it's great and all, Mr Stark--"

"--Tony--"

"--Tony, but ... wait, what?" Peter stopped, staring like a deer who caught a sound in the distance.

"Call me Tony. Mr Stark's my father," Tony leaned back and sighed. "When it's coming from someone like you ... yeah, I sound way older than I actually am."

It sounded like he was setting himself up for a witty retort from the other man (it totally did, he's going to say, but you DO look older, way older), but Peter said nothing about his age, and for that, he was grateful.

"Someone like me?" Peter pointed to himself.

Tony thought himself pretty young. He had a lot more miles to him, despite what the tabloids say. But the fact was, Peter, he's--

"Someone who is twenty-two and a generation or two ahead of me."

The younger snickered. "I actually don't know how old you are. Every time I look it up the number changes. You could have fooled me."

Tony wanted to ask if the sentiment was genuine or if Peter was just sucking up to his current boss, but he didn't want to sound so eager and hopeful that Peter didn't seem to give a toss about his age. Instead, he tapped on his tablet a few times and passed it to Peter, who glanced at him in confusion before looking at it.

The corners of Tony's lips twitched when he saw the bewildered look that followed after.

"You're joking," Peter breathed in disbelief. "You're taking me to a science expo?"

"Ehem, the science expo of the year, mind you. It's a collaboration event between Stark Industries and eleven other conglomerate businesses."

"This is nuts."

Tony shrugged. "Eh. Well, it's really just a place where the bigwigs show the big guns and try to impress everyone else. Competitors, investors, untapped potentials dressed as high school nerds."

"Yeah, I know," Peter snorted, and then blinked a few times, before fixing his gaze on Tony. "But you never go to these things anymore. You're busy all the time."

"And how do you know I never go to these things anymore?" Tony inquired, his eyebrow raised.
The man was right--Tony didn't have time to rub shoulders at a convention, even if it was the biggest scientific event of the year. He sent delegates and top scientists, but he never went himself, not anymore, at least. Not since that attack at the UN. And besides, the whole event seemed so small in comparison to a lot of things happening in Tony's life. Alien life-forms, saving the Earth from global threats ...

Peter ducked his head, carding his hands through his hair and rubbing his neck. "I may have been going to these things way back when I was still in school. Competitors, investors, nerds--you fell in the first group, I was in the third. Nerd full of ideas, eager to rescue myself from that hellhole called school." He shifted in his seat and looked out the window. "I remember going to one convention, thinking 'I'm finally going to meet Tony Stark', and then--well, I did. I met you. In the most random way possible."

Tony was too caught up in the first few words, spinning a hundred different scenarios in his head of Peter being absolutely fascinated by him in the armor. That was, until he registered the last bit.

"You did not. You met ... me? I met you?"

"I did," Peter muttered, going red in the cheeks. "Of course, you wouldn't remember me back then, I was just kid with like this goofy smile and a backpack. I got invited to the expo because of this essay I wrote ..." Peter buried his head in his hands and laughed. "Oh God, thinking about it now, it's so embarrassing to think of you reading it."

Tony furrowed his eyebrows in thought, his mind whirring with images. It was hard to sort through--there were a lot of memories that he would rather not go over, but it was there, somewhere. An image of a boy leaning over his incapacitated suit. Anti-Irontech units from Latveria. And Spider-Man.

"The fifth expo ..." Tony racked his brains for more memories. He uncrossed his legs and leaned forward to get a good look at Peter. "I remember now. Peter Parker. You said you were Peter Parker, and you got help ... and Spider-Man appeared."

Peter looked uneasy, but he nodded nonetheless. Tony didn't notice. He was too busy looking through an essay in his head that was more than six years in the past. Peter and Spider-Man had saved him then, before the Latverians could abduct him and reverse-engineer his Irontech technology.

Tony's arc reactor was doing that thing again, where it was itching to fire off a uni-beam.

So that was Peter ... How small a world was it that Tony met Richard Parker's son years before he knew the boy was going to be as great as his father? As if all those years that went by afterwards led up to the two of them being in a limousine car, reliving the memories together ...

Tony closed his eyes. He was trying to not be overwhelmed or dramatic or ... God forbid, emotional. It's not a big deal. It's just ... fate, I guess. If you could call it that.

"You wrote that piece about power and responsibility."

"Yeah. I--yeah, that was it."

Tony opened his eyes and looked at Peter in a new light, as if he was looking at the boy from years ago who admired him for his revolutionary work and wanted to be like him. The boy who thanked him in an essay for not selling the Irontech, and for using it to help people. The boy with the bright, idealistic mind that no influence or power or temptation could cloud.
The smile he gave Peter was genuine, the most honest one he had given in a long time. He was happy. "Yeah, I remember."

Chapter End Notes

The bit about the UN science expo was taken from Ultimate Marvel Team-Up.
Peter wasn't sure if he was even qualified to be there, sitting with the man. With just the two of them in the limo, he had arrived at the conclusion that Tony was inhuman. A one-man world power. Even if he never knew of Tony Stark, he would think, 'this guy in front of me, he's so good at what he does that it's terrifying'.

In the last few minutes, Tony had taken calls from a British undersecretary in charge of defense, Christiane Amanpour, some Victoria's Secret model that Peter couldn't catch the name of, James Rhodes, and a guy named Marc something from public relations. The calls lasted barely a minute, with Tony answering in curt tones of yeses and no's. All the while, he was reading documents on his tablet and scrolling through them faster than Peter could guess what they were.

He watched Tony the whole time, and the man kept shooting him what seemed to be looks of apology.

He wondered why, despite such a busy schedule, Tony was there in the car with him. Was the science expo this time around important? Maybe it was a PR move after that recent joint venture with China had gone awry? Maybe it was something else entirely and Peter was overthinking it.

He tried to make sense of the situation. One minute he was jumping out of Johnny Storm's room, and the next, he was shoving his costume behind some flower pots at the lobby of the Baxter Building as Tony Stark made a beeline for him. Why did Tony even bring him along? Wasn't he more useful in a lab instead of a public event?

When Tony dropped his phone next to him, Peter saw a glimpse of exhaustion slip through the cracks. He wasn't good at reading people, but the sagged shoulders, the tired eyes, they all told Peter of how stressed the man was and how remarkably well he was handling all of it.

"You look like you're stretched thin, like, paper thin," Peter said. "How about giving me the phone the next time a call comes and I can try to impersonate you?"
Tony raised an eyebrow in amusement. "Thanks, but no thanks. The baritone--we sound way too different. I sound like business and liquor and iron nails while you sound ... well, you sound the way you look. No offense." He sounded grateful for the offer though, ridiculous as it was.

Peter for his part didn't feel like Tony had insulted him. "None taken." *I think.*

"I turned my phone off," Tony informed him, tapping on the phone that was face down on the leather cushions.

"Is that a good idea? Don't you lose like, a million dollars with every call you reject?"

"I highly doubt stopping Rhodey from talking my ear off about protein shakes will force me into debt."

Tony shifted in his seat, fingers idly rubbing at the stubble beginning to sprout from his jaw. Peter couldn't quite describe it. He looked very casual, not at all intimidating. Peter relaxed a bit. It was intriguing how one moment Tony looked like the cover of Time's 100 Most Influential People, and the next, he was Tony--witty, playful, a little rough around the edges.

Peter bit his lip. "The British guy sounded crazy desperate, though. He could pull out of a trade agreement or something. Or was it that VS angel? I don't know. I wasn't listening, or whatever."

"You were so listening." Tony accused lightly. "But maybe you're right. I could use a break."

"CEO of one of the world's leading corporations, occasional superhero in an iron suit by day and scientist slash engineer by night? Nah, you could use a few more commitments."

"That sounds better than billionaire playboy philanthropist. My PR team could use a guy like you."

"I would, but I've got enough on my plate as it is." Peter grinned. "I've got pottery class and Zumba."

"You're a busy man," Tony agreed, the corners of his lips turning upwards. "I should tag along sometime. Zumba?"

"Would you really?" Great. Was he going to have to actually sign up for a course to cover up for his lie? "I was kidding. Can you honestly picture me in spandex, doing all sorts of aerobic exercises?"

Peter didn't miss the way Tony's eyes wandered. He felt self-conscious under the gaze.

"It would be quite something," he said. Peter didn't know what to make if it.

But for all the talk of aerobics, the man looked like he wanted nothing more than to curl up somewhere and close his eyes for a few minutes. Peter would let him, except they were almost at the plaza at 47th and it wouldn't be good PR for Tony if Peter pulled him out of the limo looking like a tired mess in his suit.

"Listen, about this whole taking me to the science expo thing," Peter glanced at the other, swallowing thickly and then casting his eyes down. The man's gaze could be suffocating sometimes. "I feel like you're just doing it because, uh ..." because *I'm* a charity case? Because you want to *impress me? But that doesn't make me sound full of myself at all. Where was I going with this?*

Tony looked like he wanted to say something, but the limo had pulled up by the curbside and flashes from a million different cameras started bombarding them, startling Peter. As soon as it happened, Peter watched in awe as Tony changed completely. Gone was the man who wanted to be tucked in bed, to be replaced by a man who could solve all the problems in the world.
"We're here for work, Peter." Tony put one foot out of the vehicle as the chauffeur opened the doors, stepping out into the open. Peter sat in his seat, stunned, as the flickering of the cameras intensified behind Tony. "I'll see you in a bit."

Tony closed the door behind him, before anyone could even get glimpse of who else was inside the car.

Peter sat there for a moment, frozen, confused as to what was going on.

"Um, shouldn't I be going with him?" he asked the driver when he entered the car.

"Mr Stark asked me to bring you over to the other side of the building. You will be entering from there," the driver explained, pulling the limo out into the road and turning a corner.

"Oh," Peter deflated. He thought, despite his better judgment, that Tony was going to show him off and walk with him to the entrance of the plaza, like Tony had been nominated for an Oscar and he was his all-important plus one. There was even a limousine and everything. Peter suddenly felt really, really stupid. Like a world-class nerd. A guy like him didn't get to be paraded by Tony Stark in front of the paps. Of course.

It's not like I wanted it to happen like that, but I thought ... well, it doesn't matter what I thought. Stupid, stupid ...

When they pulled over, there were no flashing cameras, no fanfare. He felt like he was going in through a service entrance. Stop feeling like you just got brushed aside. He said we're here for work. If we're here for work then you have no business feeling bitter about it.

Peter lost all ability to speak when Johnny Storm held the car doors open for him.

"Mr Parker," he greeted, peering into the car with a grin. "I hope you don't mind me being your welcoming committee."

Peter gawked. "I--Johnny Storm?"

"Stark told me about your situation."

"What?"

"He told me to meet you here." Johnny looked lost.

Peter realized that he had been staring for so long that it was bordering on rude. Who could blame him? He was just in the man's room that morning. In the man's bed. Peter couldn't shake the feeling that he was about to be compromised.

"Holy Hea--"No, no, don't. That's his line. "--ell."

Johnny snorted. "Believe me when I say I get that a lot. Now come on, they're expecting you."

Peter hastily stumbled out of the vehicle before he could make even more of an ass out of himself. He didn't know where to put his hands, so he shoved them deep into his pockets and followed Johnny as he escorted him into the building. Play it cool, play it cool. He doesn't know. He won't find out. What is he even doing here? Is Reed here? Sue Storm?

"So, uh," Peter started, before stopping and realizing that he shouldn't be talking to Johnny at all lest he wanted the guy to recognize his voice. But he had been talking to Johnny all week, both as Peter
the scientist and Spider-Man. He would have been outed by now if Johnny had noticed anything.

"You said Tony mentioned my situation?"

Johnny watched him carefully. "Yeah, he said to me that you were the only non-super member of their little science club and that you were going to need a bodyguard."

"He said that?"

The man shrugged. "Well, not to me, exactly. He told Reed that you needed protection, since it was a condition in your contract. That includes keeping you from the public, since, uh, they mentioned you had an aunt in Queens that you'd rather not see jeopardized? Yeah. So, if anyone saw your face next to Tony Stark, people would definitely start asking questions. Not just the media, but like the wrong sort of people. Big baddies. I overheard all of that and so I volunteered."

"Oh." Hence the back entrance where there was no paparazzi. It made sense all of a sudden. If his face had been plastered all over the papers, it would invite all sorts of questions about his identity. If anyone with bad intentions had found out that a team member of a highly classified investigation under Stark and Mr Fantastic had an aunt in Queens, then they could use that against him.

Tony was protecting him from the paps. Peter wanted to bash his head against a wall.

He understood now. It was a tried and tested truth that working for Stark Industries had huge occupational hazards. He never even tried to aspire to work for the company because he wanted his Aunt May safe more than anything else. But it was she who convinced him to take the job, because she knew that he wanted it, wanted to work for someone who approached life like Tony. Not the womanizing and drinking part, but the side that was responsible, the side similar to Ben Parker.

"You clean up well," Johnny said as he glanced at him. It was enough to keep Peter from spiraling into a pit of mortification. He stuttered in his step, head turning sharply towards Johnny's direction. He failed to notice that the other had slowed his pace enough so that they were next to each other.

"This isn't mine," Peter said quickly, automatically tugging at his collar. "Tony dressed me up."

"He dressed you up. In clothes that he picked out for you."

"What makes you think that I didn't pick this out myself?"

Johnny ignored the question. "That sounds awfully like he's showering you with gifts. Pretty suspicious. What does he get out of it?"

"Nothing! God, why do you always--" Peter caught himself as Johnny winced. He was raising his voice again.

The man had pestered him all week, and Peter had retaliated with a few choice words that he didn't really mean. Johnny was hard to deal with sometimes, but he was a nice guy. The reason why Peter went to the man's place with pizza was because he felt guilty about the whole thing.

Johnny wore a cloudy expression. "Sorry. It's hard not to think like that, when ..." He shook his head, shoulders tense and his lips a thin line.

"When what?"

Johnny shuffled uncomfortably.
Peter drew his eyebrows together. "Look, I don't think you're striking the proper tone here, but it seems to me that you're saying that Tony's doing this because I'm giving him favors of the unprofessional kind." He stepped forward, jabbing a finger at Johnny's chest. "He's not like that. I'm not like that. I'm just trying to do my job. So lay off."

Johnny crossed his arms. "So if he's interested in you, what will you do then?"

Peter's eyes blazed, but he didn't know what to say. If Tony was interested in him ... he didn't know what he would do. He figured the solution would come to him once it actually happened. If it actually happened.

He stomped past Johnny, not really thinking about where he was going. He couldn't believe that Johnny Storm was putting ideas in his head just like that.

"Wait!" Johnny went after him.

Peter turned swiftly, glaring at the other man. "What?"

"It's, uh, it's this way." Johnny had stopped abruptly, standing in front of a set of double doors in the middle of the hallway.

Peter knew that the expo would be at the back of the plaza where the open grounds were located, to make room for all the robotics and the air show. So what were they doing inside the building, in front of what seemed to be an inconspicuous conference room?

Johnny opened the door, entering first, and Peter followed hesitantly, his thoughts whirling. He was still frustrated with Johnny--appalled that the man would insinuate something without knowing all the details first--that he was completely thrown off-guard when he saw them. Tony Stark, having a drink with--he couldn't believe it--Kitty Pryde. And Mary Jane Watson. The shock of red hair surprised him. What the hell was going on?

"MJ? Kitty?" Peter paled. "What are you guys doing here?" The three sat at the end of a table. The place looked like an ordinary board room where meetings took place.

Mary Jane rose from her seat and crossed the room to throw her arms around Peter.

"You great, big idiot," she told him as she tightened her embrace. "I've missed you so much."

"I--" Peter was at a loss for words. It had been a long time since he even looked at a picture of MJ, much less met her face to face.

"You look like you'd seen a ghost," Tony remarked, tipping a glass of Bourbon between his lips. "A very attractive, redheaded ghost."

"I'll say," Johnny agreed, eyes alight with interest. "And this is the girl you used to date? The mutie?" He and Tony shared a slightly dirty exchange that Peter didn't at all approve of.

"Um, er."

From across the conference table, Kitty cleared her throat. "Mm, no. That would be me. Though to be fair, MJ used to date Peter, too."

"You dated them both?"

Johnny's disbelieving tone wasn't helping in salvaging whatever sliver of friendship Peter's Spidey-
side still shared with him. He shot the blond a glare, to which Johnny responded by looking like a kicked dog.

"Look, obviously you're more of a catch than I give you credit for," Johnny said as a way of apologizing.

"Unbelievable." Peter threw his arms out, almost hitting Tony in the face. Tony, who had walked around the table to hand him a drink.

Peter eagerly took it and downed it. MJ furrowed her eyebrows in worry.

"Can we just get back to business here, folks?" Kitty interrupted. "We're all busy. I want to hear what you have to say."

Tony glanced at Peter as he sat down. "I haven't told her what we came here for, but I've laid down the groundwork. It's all up to you, now."

Great. Peter took a seat and collected his thoughts for a moment. It was all going too fast. He didn't know that by 'work', Tony meant meeting with two of his exes in the hopes that the one with mutant powers would agree to join their shoddy research team.

He turned to Kitty, letting out a steadying breath. "We need you for something. To be specific, we need your power."

"My phasing ability," Kitty said. She pursed her lips, shoulders tightening. "So you only reach out to us after, what, more than a year of silence, because we're suddenly potentially useful to you."

Peter blanched again. "O-of course not! I was gonna come around to calling you eventually ... but, you know ... life and all that ..."

Kitty stood up. "That's real sweet, Peter. You didn't even come to my graduation. The professor wanted to meet you. You knew Logan and Hank and everyone and yet you couldn't even come!"

"Kitty ..." MJ tried to placate her. She went around the table, back to her spot next to the other woman, and put her hand on the other's shoulder. The small but meaningful gesture was too much.

"Look, it's not my fault that like my two exes started seeing each other, alright? It takes a little time to get used to!"

Silence followed his short outburst.

From the sidelines, Tony made a face. "This got way more personal than I expected."

"Did you just hear what I heard? The two hot chicks are an item!" Johnny whispered excitedly at Tony.

Peter felt drained for the day, and it wasn't even ten in the morning.

"Okay, we need to stop it with the loud voices. We're adults." MJ intervened. "I understand how unfair it was for Peter to just shut us out like that, but at the same time. I kind of understand his side."

Peter's eyes softened. MJ always did know how to empathize with him. It had always been like that, ever since they were kids.

"I mean, I felt the same way when you came out to me, Peter," she continued.
Peter's eyes fluttered shut as his soul left the building. "You did not just say that."

Behind him, the two other men shared twin looks of surprise.

MJ turned to them and realized her mistake, wincing. "Oh my. Did they not ... ? But I was trying to make a point here."

Peter's face met the table with one loud thump.

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No matter how long he searched, swinging from one street to the next, there were no evildoers to be found. No sign of muggers or pickpockets. No bank robberies. The one time that Peter was itching for a good old-fashioned buttkicking, New York was quiet. The city had failed him again.

In the end, he resorted to drowning his woes the real old-fashioned way: by calling Darcy down to the local bar.

Which was where he was at the moment, nursing the same kind of whiskey that Tony had handed him that morning, shoved in a booth with Tony's assistant and a hilariously conspicuous Thor in disguise. Peter had to remind himself that he had never met Thor outside of Spider-Man before, so he had to play it the way any random non-super person would.

"Why did you bring the thunder god down here? Oh my gosh he's in a baseball cap."

Thor was looking around in interest. Peter wondered if he was judging the establishment, comparing it to the halls of Valhalla or something.

"Jane asked me to babysit the thunder god," Darcy explained. Peter noted how she didn't sound inconvenienced at all. As far as everyone at the bar knew, she was dating the Asgardian trying to hide his identity under a baseball cap. "He wanted to try out the local booze. Told me he has an iron liver and a bottomless pit for a stomach."

"And where do I procure one of these silly refreshments?" Thor boomed. "I wish to be served!"

Peter rubbed at his face. "Jeez, Darce, just get him a Heineken already. Before he gets us kicked out."

Darcy slipped out of the booth, intending to get the god something stronger than a 5%. Peter was left alone with the other man, god, whatever, and he didn't quite know how to strike a conversation.

"You look sullen, comrade," Thor observed. "What troubles you? Are you, as Barton puts it, 'having lady troubles' like he is?"

There was too much to talk about that Peter hesitated dumping all of it on the god.

Kitty had agreed to assist them in their alien life-form project, at the expense of some of Stark Industries' facilities and investments. It was a rather clever political maneuver on her part. Though S.H.I.E.L.D. had negotiated with the government in the past to fund their school, there wasn't much leeway for Xavier Institute to expand since the government was strictly monitoring everything.

Having a multinational company like Tony's pour its money into the Institute's side projects without the White House knowing was pretty complicated, but not as difficult to pull off as Peter had initially thought. S.H.I.E.L.D. kept a lot of secrets from the government. What difference did a few more make?
Peter had promised he would take care of Phase 1 of the investigation, but instead Tony had been the one to pull through in the end. It left him feeling guilty and useless, even as Tony assured him that it was going to come down to those kinds of negotiations anyway. Better someone they knew and trusted, he said.

Of course, afterwards, Johnny had to bring up the issue of Tony being too loose with his purse-strings when it came to Peter, causing him to blow up at the other man without intending to. He didn't like yelling at Johnny. It felt like getting angry at Aunt May or Mary Jane, when he knew that deep down they were all just looking out for him.

"I hate my life," he muttered, staring at his drink as he swirled it over and over.

Thor shook his head. "There is this one insightful adage that a woman in one of your technological boxes once said: 'it's better to be in the plastics, hating life, than to not be in it at all.' Be glad that you are surrounded by your comrades, man, and all your troubles will be but a speck in the great cosmos."

Peter couldn't help but chuckle in his drink.

"What's so funny?" Darcy asked as she slipped back in the booth, a tray of different kinds of alcoholic drinks in her hands. Thor eagerly took the one with the foamiest rim.

"You've got Thor over here quoting Mean Girls as a way of advice." Peter laughed again. "I gotta say, it kinda worked."

Darcy flashed him a smile. "He gets bored at the Tower and borrows some of my DVDs. It's the best way to assimilate himself into our modern lifestyle."

"Trust you to introduce a god to slice-of-life high school movies."

"He likes it. He likes the kind of movies that show humans in their natural, honest forms."

"It is very entertaining and insightful," Thor agreed. "I would never have guessed that males wrapped rubber seals around their phalluses to prevent fertilization."

This had Peter and Darcy curling into themselves.

"I love this guy," Peter said in between snorts of laughter and sips of Bourbon. "You should let him tag along every time we're down here."

"I would very much like that, er ...?"

"Peter! God, I forgot I haven't introduced myself yet," he offered his hand to Thor, who shook it firmly. "Peter Parker."

Thor's eyes lit with recognition. "Ah, of course! The man that has been the talk of the Ultimates for quite some time now."

Peter quirked an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

Thor leaned in, as if he was revealing classified information and they were conspiring in secret. Darcy of course was listening to every word, curious as she sipped her drink from a straw.

"The group is fascinated by this mortal who possesses no supernatural ability. They always butt heads as to why Tony always mentions you in any conversation. Why, I just came from dining with
him tonight and he had expressed his extreme satisfaction at having to see you in a suit that he
selected."

Darcy was looking at the both of them like they had gone and switched heads. "I'm assuming that
most of his anecdotes are work-related?"

Thor thought for a moment, and then shook his head at her. "While it is true that most of his stories
revolve around the work place, their themes center more on Peter Parker's appearance or demeanor at
the time."

This was information that Peter didn't quite need at the moment. Johnny's words came back to him
full swing. What if Tony had indeed taken an interest in him? If he looked at things that way, it all
seemed to make sense. It was overwhelming. And he recalled how Mary Jane had let it slip that he
wasn't quite the person that he used to be, that he was into guys now. How did that factor into all of
this?

"Oh God, what do I do?"

"Do you ask for my advice or are you referring to Steve Rogers' God?"

--

Spidey, a bit drunk—okay, more than a bit drunk, made his way over to the Baxter Building with a
set of neatly pressed clothes under his arm.

He was surprised to see that one of the windows leading into Johnny's room had been left open, as if
Johnny had been waiting for him to arrive. Spidey swung his way into the narrow space, foot nearly
catching on the metal frame as he slipped in legs-first. He wobbled on his feet as he made his
landing. He had to take a few seconds to orient himself, his head clouded by alcohol.

*It's amazing how my powers don't give me super tolerance to booze. Damn shame.*

"Johnny? Where are you?" he slurred, thinking that the blond must be in the bathroom or in his
closet. He stumbled away from where he was standing when a pile of blankets shifted on the bed and
a mop of unruly hair stuck out from the pillows.

"That you Spidey?" he mumbled from beneath the sheets.

Spidey nursed his head. He couldn't see straight. He might just throw up, but he had to ask. "Why're
your windows open? 'Sdrafty in here. You could get sick, y'know."

Johnny stuck out a hand that promptly lit on fire.

"Right, right. I forgot you're a walking, talking campfire," Spidey made his way over to the bed,
setting the clothes he had borrowed that morning on one of the nearby chairs. He let his knees give
way as he sat down, almost losing his balance and falling off the bed. He then patted what he
assumed was Johnny's leg somewhere underneath a quilt. "You alright there, buddy? You look like
you've had a rough day."

Spidey had his suspicions as to why Johnny looked like a mess, but he was simply too inebriated to
make sense of it all. However, the guilt that had been building up all day was throbbing at the back
of his head, made worse by his current state.

"I'm such an ass, Spidey. I don't know why I'm acting like this."
"What do you mean? What happened?"

Johnny appeared, sticking out from the nest of pillows he had surrounded himself in. Spidey got a view full of bare chest, well-defined collarbones, and broad shoulders. His throat went a little dry. Trust him to try and take a peek at Johnny when he was at his most vulnerable. *Get your head out of the gutter, Peter.*

He tried instead to focus on the man's face. Johnny looked downright miserable. Spidey had never seen a man mope as much as the guy in front of him. It sent an ache through his chest.

"I don't know," Johnny ducked his head, watching as his fingers danced with tiny sparks of fire. "I'm not good at this sort of thing. Like, sharing. I usually only have Sue to share things with, but most of the time my problems are about the Four, or some unimportant chick troubles. I can't talk to her about those kinds of things. It's weird and it makes me sound like that's all I'm about."

Behind the mask, Peter wore a pained expression. The blond was not at all the same man who always lifted his spirits up, and it disconcerted him.

"You can talk to me, champ. I'm a good listener. I'm not very good at giving advice, but hey, you can let it all out if you want. I won't judge."

Johnny huffed, looking at Spidey through his thick eyelashes, and then rolled back on the bed until he was on his stomach, elbows hanging off the side of the mattress. He looked so lost and confused, that Spidey couldn't help but reach a hand out to console him.

"There's this guy. And before you say anything, I don't want you to be, like, judgmental or anything, but yeah. I'm kinda into both persuasions." Johnny buried his nose in his arms, his voice going soft. "There's this guy that, you know, comes in and out of this building. He works for Stark. You know, Iron Man. So yeah, he works for him, and I think he likes the guy. Like, likes him in that way that's more than just boss and employee. I ... I don't know if they're a thing. And you know, I'm normally okay with that. As long as they keep things professional and all.

"But, man, I can't stop thinking of this guy, Spidey. I don't know what it is about him. He's just so ... like, I feel like I know him. I can't stop thinking about him. Have you ever felt like that about someone?"

Spidey's breath had caught in his throat. Johnny's eyes were big as they gazed back, deep as wells and all too open.

"And I keep trying to catch his attention, you know? So we could talk. Of course, stupid me has to do that in the most annoying way possible." Johnny's voice sounded impossibly small. "And now I think he hates me. It feels awful. I don't know what he's thinking, but I think I might have said a few things that went over the line. And I just ... I just want him to like me. Like, God, not even in *that* way or whatever. I just want to get to know him better. He seems like a great guy."

Spidey was frozen on the spot, unable to find the right response. He felt lightheaded, his vision swirling before him. *It couldn't be. Is he ... is he talking about me?* Before he knew what was coming, he lost his grip on consciousness and fell, body flopping down onto the bed. The effects of the alcohol in his system had finally caught up to him, robbing him of any coherent thought.

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Johnny soon realized that Spidey was piss drunk the whole time he was pouring his heart out. In the end he thought that maybe it was for the best. He wasn't ready to face the reality of his situation just
It was difficult to assert herself when she had the Men's Club encouraging each other and undermining her input every now and then. It took every ounce of consideration for her husband Reed not to emasculate him whenever he considered Banner's word over hers. As if she wasn't the most gifted female biologist in her time. But Sue Storm-Richards managed to get a word in, anyway.

Janet was a big help. She was unforgiving with her words and supported her contributions to the investigation. Janet, however, became irrational and angry when she argued with her on-again, off-again ex-husband, Hank.

Everyone around her was frustrating to deal with. If there was anyone actually worth having a conversation with on the team, it was the new guy. The young scientist who seemed to have turned rapid arm movements and stuttering into a new language. Peter Parker.

He was polite with her, unlike Stark and his excessive use of innuendos. He didn't try to compete with her every step of the way like Banner did. He wasn't a creep like Hank Pym. He was a regular scientist in every sense of the word, no money in his pocket to make him arrogant or super-serum in his veins to make him crazy volatile. She liked him.

Johnny liked him, too, but that didn't surprise her. Nobody would have ever guessed it, but Johnny warmed up to scientists fairly quickly. She attributed it to his upbringing, being surrounded by thinkers and geniuses who had a logical, rational approach to everything. From a young age, Johnny knew how to deal with smarter people. He knew how to push Peter's buttons enough to get his attention, and then cool him back down when he overheated from irritation.

Peter was close to Johnny's age, he was privy to a lot of classified information about S.H.I.E.L.D, the think tank, the Ultimates, and he was a smartmouth. Peter definitely hit the right spot with Johnny.

It was evident, with the way Johnny trailed after him all the time and teased him, made bad jokes and tried to be his friend. Peter tried to brush him off, acted cold and distant and uninterested, but Johnny, he had always been a warm, charming person. Sue would catch the little smiles that Peter tried to hide, the small gestures that showed he was faltering, failing miserably with his tough guy act.
It was heartwarming to see Johnny making friends. With his high-profile status as a superhero, it was a surprisingly difficult task.

Sue had Peter labeled and categorized into an exclusive set of people who were worthy of being called friends by the Fantastic Four.

Now, she thought, maybe she had judged him a little too quickly.

Alone in the surveillance room, she didn't have to hide her shock at what she was watching.

All around the Baxter Building were various micro-cameras—a security measure built into their home to help prevent future infiltration and attacks. Which meant that she knew that Spider-Man had been dropping by, keeping Johnny company during the nights. She knew that he slept over sometimes, and was pretty sure, although there were no cameras in Johnny's room, that they weren't up to any shenanigans. No hanky-panky happening. She gave Johnny the benefit of the doubt, letting those few instances slide. Spider-Man was a vigilante, but he was not a bad super-person. He had helped them countless times, saved them during sticky situations.

It was when she saw Spider-Man without a mask that she began to question him. When she saw Peter Parker, the young scientist in their team, dressed in a spider suit, nursing his head as he crawled out of her little brother's window, almost peeling off the wall he was sticking to and throwing up in an alley.

She was flummoxed, and she wanted answers. She saved the video in a flash drive and erased it from the system. She decided she had her own investigating to do.

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"You know what's crazy? We're so busy trying to find a way into the thing that we still don't know what will happen if we go into the thing. Crazy. And we've got tax payers funding this."

"People have got to stop calling it the thing. Seriously. Am I the only one bothered by this?"

"Yes, I think. Yeah. Case in point, after everything I said that's all you heard."

"Well, you got a whole bunch of other words to call it. But Ben's code-name is 'The Thing'. So saying 'we've got to penetrate the thing'? It needs work."

"Uh, I didn't say penetrate? What are you on?"

"You were thinking it."

"But you said it. Why? Didn't need to be said."

"Why not? We aren't getting anywhere. We've run out of bagels. Nothing is coming to me. I'm going off-tangent. I'm ... distracted."

"Add 'drunk' to that, too. You should stop spiking your coffee."

"You saw that?"

"I did. Poured something in there and spiked it. Don't do that, by the way. We're professionals."

"Only if you call it something other than 'the thing'."

"Just don't--don't say it in front of Mr Grimm, then. And don't think of penetrating 'The Thing'."
Seriously. I'm so judging you right now."

"You're so bossy. Did you boss around your previous boss?"

"Whenever I did that, they fired me. Will you fire me?"

"Will you hate me if I did?"

"A little, maybe. Yeah. Yes."

Tony was hovering close with a mug of what Peter assumed was Irish. The man looked like he was in his element. He looked like post-workout Tony, except he was dealing with equations and reports instead of weights and a treadmill. Peter was only paying him half a mind. The rest of his head was a mess, trying to making sense of the Psy-Division reports fanned out on the large work desk.

"I--so yeah, it took half a dozen psychics to figure out this thing's got a mind of its own. But we can't figure out where the mind is because we can't even crack the thing--object. Sorry. Alien life-form object."

Peter was trying to think that it was normal. The closeness. Except it was two o'clock past midnight and Tony was reading the reports over his shoulder, close enough that Peter could smell him. Was it cologne or his natural scent? A combination of the two? Did he need to know? No. Why not? Because they were both trying to jam as much of the information in front of them into their heads for future reference. It wasn't the right time. Except--he had to get it into his head that there was NEVER a proper time to take a good long whiff of Stark.

Was it normal to be up at two with one's boss, going over papers on alien life-forms? Maybe not. His life was never normal. But this was probably normal for Peter Parker, relatively-speaking.

Maybe he was going off-tangent, too.

"Let's make a list. A list of all impervious, impenetrable substances currently known. Maybe we can figure something out." Tony's voice was sandpaper on silk, and his breath ghosted over Peter's shoulder. Peter shouldn't have noticed because half of his mind was supposed to be on the reports. That would mean that actually less than half was working on the reports while the rest was ...
dawdling.

Peter coughed, rubbing the back of his neck as an excuse to back away a little. Tony slinked past to lean against the table with his arm. His head tilted to the side to scan Peter's face, as if the answer to his query had magically tattooed itself on the young man's nose and he hadn't noticed.

Don't look don't look don't look. "Let's see, uh ... er. Hmm."

Tony's warmth traveled the small space between them. The presence of that warmth in the large, cold laboratory pressed against Peter like a quilt. And with the thin shirt Tony was wearing, the arc reactor could cast its dim light on Peter's arm. Peter felt like a moth drawn to a flame.

It's cool. It's all good. This is--this is--this is normal. This is not normal, but Peter tried to believe it was, because confronting the situation, if one could call it that, would mean that he had noticed it. Noticed Tony hovering within his private space. Noticed those eyes and how deep they were.

He wouldn't even give this so-called situation the time of day if stupid Johnny hadn't put the idea in his head and stupid Thor hadn't supported it.

But what bothered him the most was that ... that it didn't feel uncomfortable in the usual sense. He
could sense Tony's presence, and it made him feel anxious, but it didn't give him any discomfort. It was the nervous feeling that came with anticipation, like something was going to happen that would make him jump out of his skin. The same feeling one got before a storm came in ... or before lightning struck.

"Let's see ..." His voice came out a little tight as he tried to mull over the man's suggestion. He shook his head to clear some thinking space. "I don't know a lot of super hard objects. Dr Richards, he, er, built that ship once--the one with the super tough tiles. He, uh, also worked with you on that fire-proof, shock proof, everything-proof prison cell you used to keep Dr Banner in check. I know Captain America's shield is like ... like made of super-dense, lightweight steel or something. I don't know. You would know. You have clearance."

He saw Tony shift in his periphery. "Clearance. I should get you that. S.H.I.E.L.D. should allow you. But ... let's just say I already got you that clearance. So back to that shield--it's made of two of the most durable substances on Earth. There's a certain process, but the shield alloy was made accidentally. It's near impossible to replicate."

Peter didn't tell the other that he already knew about Adamantium--he busted a criminal once at Roxxon Labs who was trying to get his hands on some. It was such a long time ago that Peter was surprised he could still remember it.

He searched for one folder that contained a trial phase in breaching 'the thing'. As he flipped it open to see its contents, Tony put down his mug, reached in front of Peter, and then leafed through them until he got to the one Peter was planning on checking.

"How did you know I was--"Peter cast his eyes on the man, and Tony was staring at him, eyes searching. Memorizing.

Peter caught himself doing the same. He was doing it all the time now. Every second spent looking at the man, he'd map out a line, a crease in the skin, a feature uniquely Tony. And with each new discovery he could piece the man better in his head.

Tony blinked, glanced at the files, and then cast his eyes on Peter again. "You're an open book, Peter. Yes, we did do trial tests using Adamantium. We also called T'Challa for some Vibranium, but the metal is more of an absorbing kind. It's not the kind that penetrates itself."

"M'not an open book," Peter mumbled, but he was already scanning the test results. "Huh, we ended up wasting money on those tests."

"We figured out that the thing can't be penetrated by anything softer than Adamantium. I wouldn't call it a waste."

"You said 'thing' and 'penetrate' in one sentence. Hah."

"That's real mature."

"Says the guy who immediately thinks of something dirty when the word 'penetrate' pops up."

A different voice interrupted them.

"Sir, Mr Banner and Ms Romanov are requesting to be let in the laboratory," Friday said from his wristband.

Peter raised an eyebrow at Tony. "Why do they need permission?"
Tony looked guilty. "We're working."

"They're co-workers."

"Bruce, maybe, but Natasha ..."

The sliding doors opened. Bruce and Natasha entered, the man looking like he'd rather be in bed and the woman looking like she was on an important mission.

"Tony. It's two in the morning." Natasha folded her arms in front of her. She eyed Peter for a moment, and he knew, without any exchange of words, what was going through her head.

Tony was four feet away from him the next second, tinkering with a computer panel.

"Why do all the women in my life think I have to go to bed by ten?" Tony sighed, before throwing a folder onto the table. "Bruce. We're on a schedule. Try to dumb down your molecular reports. Dealing with Reed is already hard enough as it is."

Bruce slipped around Natasha, picking up the folder as he went to Tony's side.

Peter watched as the Black Widow ran her fingers along the table, pretending to be interested in the papers before her. "Oh, you can sleep anytime you want, with anyone you want, just so long as you actually sleep."

It wasn't difficult to figure out what she was insinuating, not when her eyes were trained on him as she said the words. Peter regarded her carefully. What is her deal? Is she the contraception police or something? NOT that they were headed towards that direction, no. But Tony should have caught the words, too, heard the meaning behind them, but he had his hands full with Bruce.

"One of the smartest people in the world, and you can't be bothered to go through a few technical terms." Bruce sneered as he peeked at a few formulas on the holographic display in front of the billionaire. "What're you working on?"

"Biology. The complicated mumbo-jumbo you sent. Biology is my Achilles' heel."

"I thought blondes were your Achilles' heel. Kind of like that Leonardo Dicaprio guy. Blonde, skinny, not a day over twenty-five."

She's using Dr Banner as a screen. Peter couldn't help but be on his guard. It was a clever plan. Tony didn't seem to suspect the two. He decided to drop all pretenses and let her do what she needed to do.

"Can I help you, Miss Widow?" His voice sounded strained. That's what happens when you try to act tough. You end up sounding like the spineless new weatherman on Channel Six.

She took a few steps around the table with her polished heels clicking, blocking the two geniuses from view. Even though she was standing where Tony stood just a few minutes ago, no warmth emanated from her. Peter wasn't easily cowed. He used to deal with Mary Jane, and he was still living with his Aunt May.

Her lips quirked, but her expression remained unreadable. "The boys have been going on about you nonstop. Like you're the newest piece of prime meat in a pencil skirt to walk around this place. I wanted to see you for myself."

"I am the newest piece of prime meat in a pencil skirt to walk around this place." It didn't sound like
"I know. Why are you here so late?" He wondered if this was how the super-spy interrogated people. If she asked the questions sincerely, with no apparent ill-intent, and then hit them in the back of the head with the butt of her gun afterwards.

"My aunt told me I could--I could stay at work if I took out the garbage the next day." He closed his eyes and withered. He sounded so lame just then. He decided to pretend to read. Everyone here's suddenly in pretend-mode. "Knowing you, you knew that already. You probably know more about me than I do."

"Yes," she admitted. She leaned on the table with one hand, the exact same position Tony was in before they had arrived. Had she been watching us? "But I like it when my information comes from firsthand experience. You understand. No matter how much you trust someone, they could end up stabbing you in the back."

"If you're talking about Nick Fury, he's not the back-stabbing kind. He's the kind that informs you beforehand with a gift basket then shoots you in the face." Nick would have kept his secret. It was part of the deal. No one got to know who he truly was while he was working under Tony Stark, and nobody got hurt. The mere fact that she was here giving him the third degree must mean that his secret was still intact, albeit hanging by a thread.

"Oh, Nick, I can trust. but you, I can't. Peter could hear her say it, even though her lips didn't move and the words never left her mouth. "But Nick doesn't know everything. You seem to know a great deal about Fury. How long have you been working for him?"

She would know that this was his first job under Stark Industries. His file would have told her that prior to the internship, he was working for a newspaper called the Daily Bugle. Her question was so obviously loaded that Peter had half a mind to fake a slip, but she didn't sound like the type to respond kindly to those kinds of jokes.

"Everyone in America knows that Nick Fury is a dick like that. But people like him. People like me. He gets the job done."

Her hand came up to tuck a hair behind her ear, but not before knocking Tony's mug off the table. He didn't think, just acted on instinct. Time slowed down. His fingers curled around the ceramic handle. Not a drop of coffee reached the floor. It took a second for him to catch onto what she was doing.

His sharp gaze met her cool expression.

"Yup! I'm through. I'm done. I'm sleeping this off," Tony huffed in exasperation. He seemed to be fed up with Bruce' penchant for big words. "Send that over to Reed. He'll know what to do. As for me, I need a shower and a solid three hours of sleep."

"You know, that checklist used to include a woman in your arms," Natasha quipped, tossing one last glance over her shoulder as she walked past Peter. "Nice reflexes," she whispered to him, before making her exit.

Bruce slipped by Peter, handing over the same folder Tony was having trouble with. "You'd have more luck figuring this out, I'm sure." His parting glance was warmer than hers.

Peter set the mug down on the table, frowning as his eyes trailed after them. Tony, unaware of what had transpired, stretched his arms over him as he approached.
"What do you say we hang our lab coats and call it a night, hmm? I'll call you tomorrow? Let's do this again. I'm feeling doughnuts next time. And maybe less booze."

He nodded, unable to shake the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

--

"Did you really have to do that to the poor kid?"

Bruce let Natasha think he was helping her for her benefit, but in truth, he was more concerned about Tony and the Parker guy. And maybe Natasha, too.

"That 'poor kid''s got a secret he's not telling us. I don't completely trust Nick's judgment."

"You can use national security as an excuse all you want, but I know what you're doing. You're jealous."

The clicking of her heels stopped, and she turned to look at him. Bruce stepped back. Never in a million years would he think he would see the super-spy so flustered.

"Tony and I used to date. Keyword 'used-to'," she told him forcefully. "That doesn't mean I'm not allowed to be concerned."

"I don't know what the problem is. He seems like a good person. He's friendly with that Johnny kid. Thor seems to like him."

She continued down the hall. Bruce matched her pace.

"I know ... but seeing Tony locked in his office day and night for months, without so much as a word, and then seeing him out and about, working with others and making public appearances, and then cozying up to this random man who used to be his intern ... it seems fishy."

"He's fine. He's gone back to normal."

"No, normal is one woman for each day of the week. He hasn't tried to sleep with this guy yet."

"This reminds me of Betty and Freddie Prinze Jr. See, if you had the super-serum in you, you'd be big and green and destroying Midtown right about now."

"You've got poor taste in jokes."

"Sorry."

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Johnny found himself in the middle of a record store tucked at the edge of Manhattan. The place was so small that his shoulders kept knocking onto shelves and display stands. He ran his fingers along a row of records, feigning interest. It wasn't his scene. He had no interest in vinyl when he could download any song he wanted on iTunes.

But Mary Jane insisted upon the location of their meeting. She was walking down the other aisle, doing the same idle perusing as he was, except she had a smile on her lips and two records under her arm. He could never understand girls like her, girls who collected things that were old and held more sentimental value than actual worth.

"Are you done yet? I tell ya, I don't know if this is worse than Sue taking me shopping for baby
stuff." He wore down his sneakers with the way he shuffled uncomfortably.

"You still haven't guessed why I called you here," she slinked another record off the rack. "I can't believe you forgot," she sang under her breath.

Johnny pulled a face. "I don't even know how you got my number. I'm assuming that you're a huge fan and that you called the paps on us so you could get your fifteen minutes of fame on the tabloids. I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt because, well, you're hot, and I wouldn't mind being caught by the press with you."

MJ sighed, turning to him and leveling him with a look. "I thought you would realize it the second Peter and I were in the same room together. I mean, I'd never forget you, granted, you're in every freaking magazine I pick up. But you forgot all about us! I'm very upset." She shook her head in disappointment.

Johnny threw his hands up. "What exactly did I forget, huh? That you're Peter's ex? That you're dating his other hot ex? That Peter's a ladies' man who's dated more sensible, hot girls than I have? What? What is it?"

MJ crossed her arms, looking like she was about ten seconds away from boxing him in the ears. "Midtown High. Ring any bells? No? How about Liz Allen? Blonde who had a hobby of showing her midriff?"

Johnny furrowed his eyebrows, his shoulders sagging. "I don't--"

"Bonfire at the beach in Coney Island. You talked to us about Spider-Man. You caught fire. Liz freaked. Tell me you're not repressing this and you're just being an ass about it."

MJ huffed in annoyance, slipping past him and heading towards the counter.

Midtown. Liz. Spider-Man. He knew what she was saying. It was there, in his head, buried under memories of the N-Zone and Victor Von Doom and Gah Lak Tus and every other pile of crap that life threw their way. Johnny was rooted to the spot as memories came flooding back to him. He would be fifteen back then. Fifteen ...

He tried school once at the insistence of his father and sister. He fought against it, but he had to, they said. Had to integrate himself into a school system or risk being a has-been with no future once their powers ran out. It was back when they were still figuring out the extent of their abilities and trying to cling to anything that could make their situation less abnormal and terrifying. Back when they thought that the change in their bodies was only temporary.

He chose Midtown High because it was unassuming and it had a lot of students. He would blend in. He wouldn't be looked down upon if he just acted normal. He didn't expect anything to come out of it until he met Mary Jane Watson, a redhead who looked too hot to be fifteen. He met Liz Allen, too, another girl too hot to be fifteen, and Kong, a Spider-Man fanatic.

Johnny's jaw dropped to the floor. He felt like he needed a paper bag to breathe into, punctuated by a sharp tightening in his chest.

He met him, too. A lanky guy named Peter Parker, Mary Jane's nerdy boyfriend at the time. The small epiphany knocked the wind out of him.

"Holy Heather Marie," he croaked, dashing after MJ a second later. "MJ! Oh my GOSH, MJ! Christ, how can I be so stupid?"
Mary Jane rolled her eyes as she paid for the records, giving him an exasperated look.

"Took you long enough." She snatched the paper bag of vinyl records from the cashier, and then pulled him out of the shop. "I'm guessing you remember now. What happened to you? You come to school one day and the next, you're driving out of our lives in a convertible talking about not fitting in."

Seven years, and Johnny felt like it was only yesterday. Mary Jane looked more mature, but she still had a mouth on her, along with a no-nonsense attitude. He rubbed his temples, wiped a palm down his face. It was all still sinking in. I've met them before. Oh my gosh. "You know what happened. My powers--they got in the way. Liz freaked. You were there. I couldn't handle the way she reacted, I--"

"It seems to me like it was a pretty defining moment in your life. Pity you forgot all about it." Her light tone didn't hide her disapproval.

"That was like, a billion years ago!" he exclaimed. "Don't hold it against me if I forgot one day out of what, seven years?"

MJ frowned at him. She clung to his arm like a vice grip, keeping him in place in case he decided that it was all too much for him. "Well, sooorry. I just thought that we'd be, you know, like, relevant enough to leave an impression. I mean, you don't remember those two days at all?"

Johnny's face scrunched in frustration. "You were too, relevant! I just--I remember that time, I swear. Something just--"

Couldn't they sit somewhere for a moment and think? His thoughts were all over the place and he needed to sort them out. Information was flooding into his brain faster than he could process them. It was times like this that he wished that he had Reed's brain-stretching power.

"I ... I remember, but not because of school or Coney Island or Liz Allen. There's just --just that one memory that stuck. Left more of a mark that it buried everything else."

MJ pulled him aside and sat them down in a table outside a coffee shop. "What do you mean?"

There was concern etched on her face, the same look she had when he told them all those years ago that he was leaving for good. Mary Jane cared. She had been his friend, at some point, even though it was miles away and a pile of calendars behind them.

Johnny let out a steadying breath. "The day after that bonfire, there was ... there was a fire near the school, in a residential building. I--I didn't tell anyone. I wasn't supposed to be using my powers because the government hadn't announced us to the public yet. That was the first time I helped out. You know ... the first time I used my powers to save people. And he--that guy, I met him that day."

"Who?"

He could picture it all in his head. How he had put out the fire by siphoning it from the building, and how the red-and-blue vigilante he knew so well had burst into a window to save a baby. It was also so clear.

"Spidey," he breathed. "We saved people together. First time I ever felt like I could be useful for something, y'know? Like--like I wasn't just a teenager who mutated and caught fire whenever I liked. I felt less shitty about the accident that changed my body. I--I could do something, be someone who wasn't--wasn't just the son and the brother of a couple of geniuses."

The stream of emotions caught him off-guard. He hunched over the table, biting his lip. he had never
said those words out loud. Not even to Sue. Especially not Sue.

"Wait--Spider-Man? You're friends with Spider-Man?" MJ's interest was piqued. The sudden change in pace left Johnny a little confused.

He nodded slowly. "Yeah. We still beat the crap out of criminals to this day. He ... he came over a few days ago. He was falling down drunk and he returned a suit he had borrowed. It was ... it was pretty funny. And you know, he hasn't changed at all. Not at all. He's still such a dependable guy."

MJ's expression became cloudy. He could tell that she was thinking about a lot of things, maybe coming to a lot of realizations of her own.

"I thought you knew ..." she said quietly to herself. "I thought, because you're Peter's bodyguard and all, that you knew you two had met before." There was something in her words and her behavior that told Johnny that she was keeping something else tucked away from him. Johnny could see her guarded expression, the way her body had curled into itself.

"Peter knows? He remembers me? Wait--is that why--" is that why he's been acting so cold towards me? Because I forgot all about him? I'm such a bonehead. That MUST be it.

Oh god, I am such an asshole. I might as well have 'asshole' tattooed on my forehead.

The day I met him at the Baxter Building, I told him that he looked familiar. I didn't recognize him. That must've ticked him off ... But how could I? He's changed so much ... And he looks a LOT more handsome than I last remember. He filled in quite nicely, too ... wait, shut up, brain!

MJ heaved a sigh. "You're kind of hard to forget, Johnny. You were a literal flash in the pan of our lame, ordinary lives. He doesn't forget friends. He didn't have a lot of them."

Johnny's face fell. Peter knew him when he was fifteen and arrogant and a walking dick in a leather jacket. Despite all that, MJ said Peter considered him his friend. Johnny felt an overwhelming urge to turn into flame and fly all the way back to home. He had to apologize. He had to. All this time that he was tagging along Peter, watching him do his experiments and his reports, teasing him, trading banter, he never thought of the reason why Peter was so vexed by him. And now he had his answer.

He stood up, jaw tightening. His frustration was draped over his tense shoulders. He was frustrated at himself, at the situation, at everything.

"I--I gotta go."

Mary Jane let Johnny walk away, piecing together her own version of the story.

Out of all the words that came out of the blond's mouth, one sentence in particular stuck. Peter was still seeing him. He kept Johnny around as a friend after all these years, fighting bad guys together as Spider-Man and the Human Torch. She was surprised to find that it hurt to think about, that Peter cut her off but kept Johnny Storm.

MJ had been the one to tell Peter to chase after Johnny that fateful day. She knew that Liz wouldn't show up to talk to Johnny, so she sent her boyfriend over to help him out with his issues. Peter hadn't told her what came out of their little talk. She had a feeling, a nigging at the back of her head, that something deeper had gone down during that time, more than Peter let on, but she had shrugged it off, passed it as the same jealous tendency she had with Gwen. She never knew until now that that day had been significant and life-changing to Johnny.
It was power that made all the difference. Power to keep up with Peter and his superhero life. Johnny
had the power.

And he didn't even know that Peter and Spider-Man were one and the same.

She stared at the palm of her hands, blinking repeatedly. Her eyes were dry. There was a pang in her
chest, caused by the small, dull fragments of affection she felt for Peter. But there were no tears. She
was over it. She had found love. She had moved on.

She took out her phone and began to dial Kitty.

Chapter End Notes

In issue #98 Spider-Man briefly reveals his identity to the Fantastic Four and Johnny
recognizes him from Midtown High. So yeah we’re throwing that timeline out lol. Same
goes for Tony--he found out Spider-Man is named Peter Parker in that issue where
Spider-Man rescues the CEO of Roxxon Labs. In reality a lot of superheroes know that
Spider-Man is Peter. But for this fanfic's sake, let's say none of the Ultimates or the
Fantastic Four know (except Sue just now).
Peter sneezed into his morning cereal.

He stared at the bowl for a moment, eyes hooded and crusty, eventually coming to the conclusion that he was sick.

The days were getting colder as autumn stepped aside to give way to a sudden, persistent winter. Peter didn’t feel any transition between the seasons, busy as he was with work and his duty as Spider-Man. His costume didn’t come with insulation, and swinging through the skyline of New York in nothing more than thin spandex the previous night, he was not surprised to have crawled out of bed that morning feeling like half-frozen coleslaw.

_I have to admit that I lucked out with pretty cool super spider powers, but couldn’t that have come with a free pass from the common cold, too? Did spiders even catch colds? Dunno. This is ridiculous. I feel like Jell-o._

He dragged his feet back into his room and threw on whatever outfit he could find that could fend off the cold, donning a coat and a thick scarf along with his usual work clothes. He then pushed himself down the stairs towards the front door, hoping for a quick, unnoticed exit.
"M'off to work," he called to Aunt May through his stuffed nose. In hindsight, he shouldn't have said goodbye, because Aunt May swooped in and reached for his arm just as he was turning the doorknob.

"You're not going anywhere, young man," she lectured. "I'm not going to pretend like I didn't just see you contaminate your breakfast. You sound sick, you look sick. You're staying put."

She turned him around and pushed him towards the living room, pulling at his scarf and coat.

"But Aunt May," he rounded on her and protested. "I can't call in sick. My job's like a round-the-clock thing, you know? I can't. They'll fall apart without me. They're hopeless without me."

She clucked at him in disapproval, stripping him bare and then shoving him onto the couch. Peter didn't really have energy to fight her over this, but he whined nonetheless.

She folded his clothes faster than the human eye could see and then made her way up the stairs. "I'm getting you some warm clothes and a quilt. You're not calling in sick. I'm calling in for you. Now lie down and get comfortable. Because you're not getting off that couch until you can say 'Norman Osborn'."

"Dorbadosbord," Peter tried. "Dorbadosbord. Cripes." Resigned to his fate, Peter buried his face in the nook of the couch and groaned.

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*Aunt May, she said she'd take half the day off and come back ... she doesn't have to, I've survived worse on my own ... like a bullet to the arm, or a shard of steel clean through my foot ... M'not in the mood to cook, but there's instant stuff in the cupboards ... man, my head won't stop pounding ...*

Confined to the living room and buried under what seemed like a hundred sheets, Peter refused to be any more of a vegetable and sat up to watch some daytime television. There was nothing stimulating to watch, save for a soap opera re-run that seemed to have an interesting but predictable plot.

He could flip past the cable channels and watch the news instead, but he made the mistake of flinging the remote control onto Uncle Ben's recliner after mistakenly thinking that the show he had paused on was good. Despite his present, sudden need to be updated with current events, he couldn't quite get any of his limbs to cooperate and retrieve the item from a few feet away.

*If only I had a smartphone, he thought idly. I could look things up online. Or maybe I could talk to someone for a while ... kill some boredom ...* But who would he even contact? The reason why he didn't have one was because he had no use for it. He had a computer for any and all web-surfing that he needed, and he wasn't a casual gamer who downloaded the latest trendy applications. He didn't feel like skimping on a few hundred bucks for the newest model in the market, either.

He tried to avoid the real reason for it, that being he didn't really have anyone to talk to through text or call. Ever since he broke up with Kitty, he had cut off all contact with Xavier Institute, and ever since he and MJ had been through, no one in Midtown High was really close enough or interesting enough to reconnect with.

He sank back into the sheets and sniffed noisily. It didn't take a genius to realize that he had turned into a workaholic. He remembered how stressful it was to juggle a normal school life with his job at the Daily Bugle, with his powers on to top it all off.

It was for the best that he realized how unhealthy his lifestyle had been--how it damaged his relationship with Aunt May on a daily basis and more often than not put his friends' lives in mortal
peril. It had been a logical decision to cut off the less important commitments he had in his life. He told himself that every now and then, but he still couldn't help but feel empty about it as a consequence.

_I hate being sick. It makes me think about things that I'd rather not think about. I hate this._

There were only a few things happening in his life--the web-slinging and the endless researching being the two most significant--yet it seemed to him that life was telling him to slow down for a moment and catch a breath. Or a cold. Anything to stop himself from running out of fumes before his time. In his hazy state of mind he thought that maybe it was God or some higher power interfering. Or good karma in the form of a bad situation. That maybe, maybe it was a good thing he got sick.

His thoughts were all over the place. He decided to blame the bad TV.

_I'm justifying my runny nose by telling myself I deserve rest. This is stupid. I'm going cuckoo. Ack, this show is pigeon turd. How is this still on air? An ape with a concussion could write a better script. Though that leading man ... suave, mischievous--he's really good-looking and really filthy rich ... kind of like ... like ... oh, great, now he's in my thoughts ... back up ...

Cocooned by the warm covers and lulled by the sound of the TV, Peter drifted in and out of sleep, his senses going dull and unfocused. He could vaguely register two characters in the midst of a heated conversation, lovers perhaps, or siblings. He couldn't tell. He thought he heard a noise, but it could have come from the TV. After all, they were throwing things around--why were daytime dramas so melodramatic?--and exchanging a more words, delivered with urgency and frustration.

He blinked a few times, looking at the man on screen--the actor who looked uncannily like his boss--wondering why he seemed to be projecting out into the living room like one of those holographic displays at work. One moment he was standing inside the television, and the next, he was right there in his living room, as if he had had enough of his adversary on the show and had jumped out of the TV set to quarrel with him instead. Except the actor wasn't angry or wildly gesturing like in the television--instead he was eyeing him, looming over ...

"What're you doing here, Santiago ...? Ambrosia's gonna flip if she finds out you ran away from her ..." Peter rolled on his side, squinting at the man.

"You know, funny enough, I did once go out with a girl named Ambrosia. Wily sort of dame, had one hand on my ass and the other on my security codes ..." Tony scratched his stubble and sighed. "And it's Antonio, not Fernando. It looks to me that you really are sick. How about that?"

"Antonio ...? Tony?" _In his house?_ Peter mustered some of his reserve energy to sit up, but Tony pushed him back down by the shoulder. "What are you doing here?"

Tony got on one knee and eyed Peter curiously, considering the man's predicament.

"I decided to take one of those 'day-offs' I've been hearing so much about. It's boring. Doesn't live up to the hype. I got bored as hell."

"A day-off?"

Tony nodded, continuing to eye him.

"How did you get in here?" Peter wanted to sit up and be at an eye level with Tony, but the hand on his shoulder didn't budge, keeping him pinned down.

"I tried knocking. Rang the doorbell, too. Nobody answered, but I could hear the TV. So--"
"So you let yourself in?"

Tony's gaze became steely. "I didn't know you were going to be alone."

"M'not alone. My aunt's coming home any second now."

"Okay. Not alone. But you look horrible."

"Thanks. Just the words I wanted to hear. And you--you look ..." Peter's eyes darted quickly to the man's body. He was wearing a knitted burgundy sweater over a white collared shirt, and a careworn expression that took Peter by surprise. "... normal." Loathe was he to admit that even in casual clothing the man managed to look rich.

"Normal. I hope that's code for something more flattering." Tony took away his hand, and with it gone Peter missed how the thumb was rubbing soothing circles at his joint.

Peter sniffed. "Hate to break it to you and all, but if you're spending your day-off visiting the sick and the bedridden, then I'm sorry but this is kind of how it is. Boring and ... and pretty risky, actually. Aren't you scared you might catch something?"

Tony smiled. "You know, for a sick person you sure do have a lot to say. No, I won't catch what you have."

"How do you know?"

"I'm not the type to get sick. If I was, I'd be sick every other day from all the work. Now," Tony stood and surveyed the place. "--is there anything you need? Hungry, perhaps? Got any Campbell's soup? Crackers? Maybe I can whip you up something nice. Maybe something with tomato."

"What I need is a cure for the common cold." Peter wedged his elbow in between the couch and his body and pushed. He drew his eyebrows together, frowning. "I'm fine. Peachy. What are you doing here, really? This isn't a day spa or a bar or a country club."

Tony averted his gaze, stepping back and plopping onto Uncle Ben's couch. He made a face when he realized he had come down on something hard and pointy, tugging out the remote from under him. "Maybe I can just keep you company. I didn't know you were into soaps. Anyone been thrown off a horse onto an electric fence, yet?"

Peter narrowed his eyes. "Hey Tinman, I asked you a question. Stop changing the topic."

Tony cast his eyes down, hunching over with his elbows on his knees. When his gaze flickered back to him, Peter saw a glimpse of the worry and concern in them. His breath caught in his throat.

"You're sick, and I got worried. Is it too much of me to check up on you? You didn't even call in sick. Your aunt did. I thought it was something serious."

Peter couldn't keep eye contact for long when Tony switched to that look—the one that made blood rush to his face and his chest tighten like crazy. He groaned, rolling back down on his spine and nursing his head. He couldn't deal with Tony right now, not when his head was pounding and fluid was oozing out his nose.

"Well, it isn't serious." His voice came out smaller than planned. "It's just a cold. I'm not a kid, you know."
"No. No, you're not." Tony was on his feet once again. "But you're too stubborn and independent to ask for help when you need it."

Peter shook his head. "I'm not. I'm--I--you're offering to cook me food even though I didn't ask you to. Why? Why are you doing all of this? Just tell me. He met Tony's eyes bravely, silently urging the man to come up with a solid answer.

Tony drew close. Peter's heartbeat quickened in his chest. Wh-wh-what is he doing? The man got down on one knee next to him, and Peter held his breath. Tony's eyes were so deep that it was like peering into another universe. Peter couldn't look away. Tony inched closer, one hand making the couch dip next to Peter's arm, and for a moment, Peter expected Tony to come clean, to tell him why he had been acting the way he had, not through words, but through action... Tony's face hovered nearer, Peter closed his eyes, anticipating--

--and then Tony pressed his forehead onto Peter's, humming thoughtfully.

"You're burning up," Tony told him.

"W-What?" Peter's eyes shot open. His whole view was blocked by Tony's face.

With the man so close, Peter didn't see a third person come in, but he heard her the next second.

"What in the world are you doing to my nephew?"

Just as Peter's face was about to burst into flames, he was doused with mortification when he heard his aunt from across the room. Tony tripped over himself, scrambling away and putting as much distance between them as possible. It was amusing yet astonishing to watch the confident man looking like he had been caught with his hand down his pants.

"Aunt--Aunt May!" Peter shot forward, holding himself steady on the couch's backrest. "I--I, you--this--"

"Mrs. Parker. I'm dreadfully sorry to intrude--I was just checking Peter's temperature--he looked feverish--had to get close..."

"--this isn't what this looks like--he was just--he had his--he's..."

"...a walking thermometer--I'm very sensitive to these things--"

"--he's my boss, Tony--I mean, Mr--Mr--Mr Stark, he decided to come visit--"

"--Tony is fine, Peter--"

"--it's his day-off--"

"--my day-off--"

"I get it. No need to explain further," Aunt May eyed them carefully. "Another second of that and I would have had to shove socks in your mouths." She carried with her a bag of groceries, dropping one bag onto Peter's lap.

"I saw the car outside. I know what to expect when cars like that come rolling around in this neighborhood." Aunt May gave Tony a pointed look before disappearing into the kitchen.

"What car did you bring?" Peter's head snapped to Tony, who ducked his head sheepishly.
"Just a modified Benz is all. It's not *that* extravagant."

Aunt May called from the other room. "I'm assuming you're staying for lunch, Mr Stark? Care to help me in the kitchen?"

Tony glanced sharply at Peter, as if asking him what to do. Peter shrugged. He had no power when it came to Aunt May, and he was beginning to realize that Tony was just as easily cowed by her.

"I--yes. Sure." Tony sidestepped the couch, eyes reflecting the slight panic in them.

"You've done it now," Peter's snicker came out as a bout of wheezing. "You come into Queens with an expensive car and you get lip service."

Tony didn't feel the need to inform Peter that the last time he had put work on hold was roughly thirteen years ago. He had downtime, he had breathing time, and time in the sick bay he would rather not call to mind, but he never took a leave, not even for a day.

He couldn't figure out how else to explain it to the younger man, but there was no progress with the grape investigation, and Tony didn't want to be bogged down in a laboratory trading scientific jabber with the man who was presumed smartest in the world and the man who thought he was the second smartest. Peter--and oddly enough, Johnny Storm--kept the mood from feeling too much like work and responsibility and duty. And with them missing from the team for a day ...

In the end, he manipulated both sides of his commitments, by telling the board of directors through Pepper that he was preoccupied with a classified project for S.H.I.E.L.D., and telling Nick Fury that he was spending the day monitoring Stark Industry stocks and military assets. All elaborate lies and pretense, just so he could drop by Queens to see a young man who apparently had the sniffles.

What he didn't expect was the browbeating from a forty-something year-old woman. He found himself mincing carrots and onions for a tomato soup, while Peter's aunt looked on, eyeing him like a hawk.

While he worked on preparing the greens, Aunt May was pressing tomato chunks into a sieve and washing the parsley. Something inside Tony once yearned for such a domestic life. It was still there, a small sliver of hope that maybe one day he could live like this, and he was tugging at it now, using it to focus on his task.

"I didn't know you could work cutlery so well, Mr Stark. I always pegged you for a man who had all his meals cooked for him." Aunt May wore a small smile that told him she was impressed with his work.

"When I'm busy, Mrs. Parker. Not today. Sometimes it's good to slow down, do things for yourself every now and then. It's a fine kitchen." Tony was a bachelor, and bachelors knew how to do everything as time went on. But Tony was putting in extra effort to impress her--he was trying to make up for the stunt he had pulled earlier.

"Thank you," Aunt May replied, a bit stunned by Tony's words. "At least someone appreciates the lengths I go through to make this place livable." She arched back to look into the living room. "That boy hardly ever stays in long enough for me to smother him."

Tony could appreciate the raw emotion of concern coming from her. It told him that Peter had a family who loved him, even though that family comprised of just her.
"And now he's got a cold. Why do I have the feeling he isn't going to be at work for a week?"

"Oh, you're going to have to wait until I'm through with babying him, Mr Stark," she laughed. This isn't so bad. Tony was relieved that Peter's aunt wasn't too high-strung. She was protective, but she didn't perceive Tony as threatening. It was good. He didn't want to scare her off.

"So when are we going to talk about you coming onto my surrogate son?"

Tony nearly slipped and cut his finger with a knife. He turned to her, gaping. "Pardon?"

Aunt May smirked. She smirked! What a conniving little woman.

She took the knife from his hand and nudged him out of the way, proceeding to mince the parsley and handing him a bowl of tomato pulp. "Oh, the look on your face pretty much confirms it. I would never have guessed that I could catch a man like you off-guard. But then again, you wear your feelings so openly."

"A man like me?" Tony furrowed his brows.

"'Billionaire playboy philanthropist' is what the media calls you." She worked the knife as one normally would, but Tony couldn't help feeling a bit apprehensive.

He glowered at her, slipping a hand into his pocket to hide his nervousness. "I--I really need to talk to my publicist about that."

"Be that as it may, my true concern is that you're a superhero, Mr Stark. You've saved the world on many different occasions. I'm not sure how it all works, but I'm pretty certain that you've made quite a lot of enemies at this point." Aunt May pointed to the pot where pieces of chicken boiled in, indicating to the bowl of tomatoes in his hand. Tony poured them in.

"I know that news these days are all sensationalized, and shady, underhanded dealings happen behind the scenes. Not every news piece can be trusted just like that. Sometimes, they report things that are downright unfounded, and sometimes they ring true. I just want your word. I want to hear from you. Do you see where I'm going with this?" She eyed him once again, regarding her with a critical eye. Given his record, Tony couldn't blame her for being cautious.

He remained silent, his thoughts reeling. What was he supposed to say to her? He was a public figure with a dangerous job. Someone like her would like nothing more than reassurances, but Tony couldn't promise her any of those. Peter was a civilian who had no way to protect himself. Could Tony at least promise her his safety?

Tony sighed in the end. He ran his hands through his hair, facing his current situation for once.

"I assure you, Mrs. Parker, that I have Peter's best interests at heart." His arc reactor warmed as he glanced at the living room. "But my life, as you pointed out, is hectic and unpredictable. Just employing Peter in my company already puts him at risk. I'm sure you know, and I'm sure you've talked to him about it."

Tony fixed his gaze on her. "But personal feelings aside, he's doing good work with us. I'd hate to let his talents go to waste. He's a good person, very well put-together. He's a brilliant man, Mrs. Parker."

"I appreciate that," she told him. "But don't set your personal feelings aside. I'm more interested in what you have to say about that. I want to know how this is playing out. You, him ... Peter, my nephew--he's lost a lot in his life. He's an orphan. He lost his uncle whom he loved so much. He hasn't got a lot of friends. His poor heart has dealt with so much misfortune--" Aunt May turned
away from him, busying herself with making the soup. "Forgive me for being terrified by you and your ... personal feelings."

Tony nodded in comprehension. He didn't know much about Peter's life, but hearing about him from her, he couldn't even begin to imagine all the things Peter had gone through. She was right to be apprehensive.

"I'm sorry. I don't ... I don't know what this is yet. I'm still trying to figure things out for myself. I'm still trying to get to know Peter ... But know this: I would never do anything to hurt him. He ... he means a lot to me. He's starting to mean a lot to me. I'm still working it all out. I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say because I'm not there yet."

He didn't anticipate any of his words, but he believed them to be earnest, and he wanted Aunt May to know that he was being honest with her. He hadn't expected her to make him confront his inner thoughts. With everything laid out in front of him, he felt relieved, almost purged to an extent, that he had managed to sort his emotions out. He now knew where his interests were, and what his heart had been telling him, what his mind had been trying to catch up to for the past few weeks.

"Tony!" Peter's raised voice interrupted them, knocking him out of his reverie. "Tony! You've got to see this!"

Tony and Aunt May shared a meaningful glance, an exchange that silently communicated they would continue with their talk in the future. Tony nodded to her, ducking his head and stepping out of the kitchen.

Tony soon found out Peter's cause for panic. He was tuned in on Channel Six, where a news crew was filming on scene, reporting on an intense battle playing out in the streets of New York.

"--we're here live in front of the Baxter Building where-- where civilians have reported a battle is taking place--oh my goodness--between the Fantastic Four and an unknown group of hostiles--as you can see folks, soldiers have been deployed to contain the masses--we're getting conflicting reports--but it seems that this is an act of terrorism--either that or a planned assault on what is known as the nation's Think Tank--reporting live right now, on the scene--it's getting pretty dangerous Mark, we should take cover--"

Peter grabbed Tony's arm, knocking him back into reality. Tony snapped his head towards him.

"Do you have your suit?"

Tony nodded briskly, pressing a few buttons in his wristband, trying to get in contact with S.H.I.E.L.D. "It's in the car. I'm always prepared."

"Go," Peter urged him. Tony didn't need to be told twice. He was out of the Parker residence in two seconds. Of all the rotten times for this to happen ...

--

A streak of fire mowed down two hostiles coming in from Sue's blind spot. It was Johnny, covered in flames as he stopped next to Sue. "Who the HELL are they and why are they blowing our house up?"

"Johnny! I don't know--but cover us from the air! Ben has the ground--Reed, where are you?" Most of the attacks were streaming in from the ground, but there were more enemies in the air, bombarding their building with explosives.
Sue looked around, frantic. She soon saw where her husband was, stretching his arms into vine-like whips and keeping some of the enemies at bay. She decided to help protect the civilians still running from the scene, using her force fields to cover them from the shrapnel and the gunfire.

Johnny left her side and burst into the air like a rocket, and she watched for a few seconds as her little brother took down the levitating hostiles.

They didn't expect the ambush. It was a pretty uneventful day, and Sue was just getting ready to go out shopping when their alarms started blaring and the left side of their building started being barraged by bolts of energy.

*It was always like this. Getting hit when we least expected it. We always have plans and defensive strategies, but it takes a while for everyone to respond. Now we just have to wait for reinforcements--*

Reed had sent out a distress signal. Johnny had taken flight. Ben was already clobbering. With most of the civilians gone and the first wave of the response team handling the rest of the stragglers, Sue turned to the offensive, smacking the enemies in the face with solidified plates of air, conjuring force fields from under the enemies' knees and knocking them off their feet. *Subdue them, don't kill them, subdue, don't kill--*

It was in record time that the first line of reinforcements showed up. Iron Man soarved through the air space and fired pulses of energy from his palms, knocking clusters of foes apart. Sue dived into the foray, running around fallen boulders and debris to get to Reed.

"What's the deal now? What's the situation?" Tony grunted as he hovered next to Mr Fantastic, his annoyed voice distorted by his mask. Sue flicked her wrist and protected Tony's right flank from bullets. The stretchy superhero meanwhile coiled his arms around an unsuspecting foe and let him spin free like a top, before turning to the billionaire.

"It's an ambush by a strike team, but they don't seem to be well-prepared. They have enough numbers, but they're disorganized. It's almost as if they didn't research the kind of defenses we have." He ducked as Tony aimed a particle beam behind him, hitting more of the hostiles. Some of them were using guns and weapons, while the rest used different kinds of superpowers.

"Who are they? I can't be bothered to waste any energy blasts on these grunts." Tony zipped past them to grab a fallen street light, swinging the steel bar around and hitting foes with it. "When are Nicky's boys gonna get here?"

"He gave us a window of five minutes," Sue answered, keeping close to her husband and holding a line of defense between the building and the street. "He said his men were caught in the middle of downtime. It's taking them a bit longer to mobilize. Funny, that."

Johnny spun in the air, his flames swirling in front of them. "Sue!" he hollered. "Civilians at the other side of the building--they need shields--can't escape--"

"I'm on it!" she pushed past Reed and sprinted, rounding the corner of the building, pummeling baddies along the way. She had a force field close to her skin, a trick that she had learned through practice, so that no bullets penetrated her as she made her way to the other side of the block. She could render herself invisible, but the ability took too much out of her.

She put shields up to cover a few injured civilians as soon as she turned the last corner. Johnny hurled fireballs at a group of enemies coming in from the intersection, and a few cars exploded from the blast. "Sorry 'bout that!" he yelled.
She ushered some of the civilians towards a crew of medics and soldiers off to the side of the street. *Who are these hostiles? Why are there so many of them?*

She didn't have much time to think on it. From where she was standing, a huge chunk of the Baxter Building's wall was about to come down, and there were still civilians hiding behind the rubble underneath, about to be crushed. She ran, dodging and weaving and jumping over obstacles--she was a biologist, goddamnit, not a soldier--and summoned a sloped plane of air to keep the wall in place for as long as she can. She struggled to keep it up, her focus wavering. She couldn't even cry out to them, tell them to run, to make a break for it--

But she didn't have to--a streak of red-and-blue swung through the air in an arc, taking two civilians in his arms. It was Spider-Man. He threw the two civilians towards the medics on hand, firing webs past them as a safety net before they fell to the ground.

"Spidey! Hell of a party, am I right?" she heard her brother call out to the agile superhero as he zoomed past.

*He called in sick. I thought he was sick.* She couldn't yell out to Peter. The wall was still coming down, and it took all of Sue's concentration to support the weight. Spider-Man continued to clean out the space underneath, firing web after web and pulling civilians out from the scene. The webbed wonder didn't seem to show any sign of fatigue or sickness at all.

When she was sure that everyone was safe, Sue made the force field vanish, and the huge slab of wall came down with a reverberating crash, covering the whole street in dust. Spider-Man circled over her head and then descended, landing and crouching on top of a boulder.

They came under fire the next second, a barrage of bullets coming from enemies in the opposite building, throwing dust into the air until the line of fire reached them. Sue had her shield up and ready, the bullets deflected towards the ground.

Spider-Man, on the other hand, wobbled. Her head snapped towards him. Why didn't he jump away?

Sue gasped loudly when he dropped from his perch, falling onto the rubble underfoot.

She watched in growing horror as blood started to pool under him.
"I've got a question." Johnny cornered Peter on a Wednesday morning, wearing the kind of expectant look he usually put on when catching the man off-guard.

Peter let out a long-suffering sigh, silently blaming the jammed photocopier for his situation.

"It's not about piercings, and it's not about your hot ex-girl."

Peter eyed him suspiciously.

"It's important."

Peter racked his brains for the things he knew were important to Johnny, frowning as he did. "You're bothering me. Are you aware that you're bothering me?" he asked.

"It's more along the lines of 'boosting employee morale', or some other lame HR business crap Reed uses, but yeah bothering is good, too," said Johnny, blocking Peter's only exit and smiling. "So?"

Peter found that Johnny's success rate when it came to striking up a conversation shot to the sky whenever he curled his lips to one side.

The photocopier started working. Peter huffed, and waited. For the photocopies, not Johnny's question. But the latter would come before the former even finished.

"'So' what? Scram, Torchy."

Johnny's smile turned into something else, something a bit more nervous and uncertain. "Okay, so. Question. Don't freak out. When were you going to tell me that we met in high school for like, a day?"

Peter stiffened. "Yeah ... I don't know what you're talking about."
"You know exactly what I'm talking about."

"Are you sure you went to school? Like a learning institution?"

"Ha ha, funny," Johnny frowned, stepping closer. "No, seriously. We met. At Midtown High. Why did you lie just now?"

"I didn't lie," Peter muttered. He busied himself with the many buttons of the photocopier.

"Ah, but you did. Your pants are on fire as we speak, and that's not a Torch pun." Johnny crossed his arms, leveling Peter with a look. "Dude, MJ told me. She thought we were hanging out now because we met then, walked down memory lane, and then hit it off, picked it right back up. I remember, she remembers. Why don't you?"

Peter took a steadying breath, cursing, not for the first time, MJ's penchant for running her mouth. An image of teenage Johnny Storm came to mind, shorter than the one standing before him yet still taller than Peter, wiry, confident, handsome. A certain uneasiness settled over Peter that made him feel like he was going through high school all over again.

"We did meet once, for like, two seconds," Peter admitted. "You came and went, like, you know, a blip in my teenage years. Like a zit," he told Johnny calmly. "I mean, you yourself wouldn't have remembered it if MJ didn't tell you. So why should I bring it up?"

He could have sworn he was trying not to sound bitter, but he did, he was bitter as a gourd, and he cursed himself for it. Maybe he did feel a little resentful. It was Johnny Storm. Half the time he was jealous of the way the Human Torch got to walk around as a superhero and got paid for it, and half the time he wanted to talk to him for hours, because he knew what it was like to beat up bad guys at that age.

"So you were mad, huh?" Johnny questioned. "That it? The day we ran into each other right here in this building, I told you that you looked familiar, but I didn't know who you were, and now you're ... you're like this," Johnny gestured to him, "because clearly I'm a numbskull who has memory problems."

"I wasn't mad, I was late," Peter corrected him, but Johnny hit a nerve with his words. "And you were making me even more late by talking to me. I'm not the kind of petty person that would just brush you off because you forgot like, one thing way back in the past that wasn't even important."

"Then why are you being like this?" Johnny asked with a beseeching look. "Ever since MJ told me, I've got total recall of Midtown High. You were a nice guy, Peter. You helped me with Liz. We were friends--"

"I'm not exactly jumping to make any more friends, alright?" Peter blurted out. Backed into a corner, forced to justify himself by someone as persistent as Johnny, it didn't take too long for him to burst out with pent-up frustration. "Do you see me eating with anyone in the cafeteria? Do you see me hanging around the water cooler being Miss Congeniality? You don't. Because I don't do the 'friend' thing. It doesn't work. I'm not Sandra Bullock--I'm the FBI guy who does his job. You should get that through your head."

Peter grabbed the photocopied documents from the machine chute and then stormed out of the room before Johnny could say anything.

Of course, the guilt he felt for blowing up at Johnny again followed him like a storm cloud for the rest of the day. He was angry at himself and his shortcomings and fears and insecurities, and
frustrated that he couldn't even be nice to anyone anymore, especially Johnny, who always went out of his way to talk to him and be friendly and be there.

He was a horrible person filled with more bitterness and resentment than someone twice his age. The realization made him want to throw himself off a building even more.

It was a surprise then, when Johny came by the labs later that afternoon, looking like a drooping, snuffed-out candle. Every time Peter saw the man looking dejected because of him, he wanted to tear his heart out.

Johnny didn't beat around the bush. "Look, Peter, I--"he clamped his mouth shut, and then opened it again. "I'm sorry. I didn't want you to be upset. I just wanted to know why you were always so ..." Johnny swallowed the last word, casting his eyes down and shoving his hands in his pockets. "And you told me. I didn't think you'd tell me. The only reason I could think of as to why you would, is that you wanted me off your back."

Peter felt a chill go through him, as if the warmth was seeping out of his bones and leaving his skin slowly.

"I'm not very good at making friends," Johnny smiled sullenly. "I don't have much practice. It's kind of pathetic, really. I grew up asking a lot of questions because I was surrounded by people who were smarter than me." He gave a small shrug, trailing his fingers over a table filled with reports. "It's my way of getting to know people better, I guess ... and I'm starting to understand how it can get kind of annoying."

Johnny looked at him then, eyes blue and expressive. "You were right. You're working, and I'm only disturbing you. I'll shove off, leave you alone and all that."

The blond ducked his head and turned to leave, having said what he wanted to say.

Peter reached out and grabbed his hand.

Johnny froze mid-step.

Peter didn't know what to say to the other man--he was too choked up to say anything that made sense. But he knew that he didn't want Johnny to go, because what he said made a lot of sense to Peter, and he truly was an ass for being so cold and short-tempered. He understood where Johnny was coming from. He's Spider-Man. Superheroes always had a hard time forming relationships that were healthy, because of all the circumstances that prevented them from being normal. He should have considered Johnny's feelings. He should have known.

He was Peter Parker right now. Peter wasn't supposed to have any baggage that stopped him from being normal.

"Look--I should be the one apologizing," Peter said quietly. "I haven't been fair to you at all." He pulled his hand back.

Johnny swiveled back, eyeing him with furrowed brows. Peter sighed helplessly.

"I've had a lot of bad experiences with friends," he admitted, his voice going small. "It's not because of them. They're awesome. I--I was lucky to have them."

He turned away from Johnny and closed his eyes. Behind his eyelids he saw Gwen and Harry, Kitty, Mary Jane, Liz, Kong, Jessica ...
"It's me. I ... I keep ending up hurting them without meaning to, and I end up drowning in a lot of guilt for it. The worst part is, even though I push them away, they only keep coming back, and it becomes this ... this like, vicious cycle that just ..." He paused for breath. "I don't do friends because it's not normal to be this poisonous to the ones you love. But really, I'm like this," he gestured to himself in much the same way as Johnny did that morning, "because I'm selfish. I don't want to feel guilty. I don't want the responsibility." I don't have the power for it.

He had to be vague. He couldn't tell Johnny that most of his friends' misfortunes were due to him being Spider-Man. Who knew what would happen if Peter confided in him? It would only lead to disaster, that's what. Peter was trying to prevent that. But some part of him couldn't take it anymore. He had been brewing in his own despair for a long time now, and Johnny, what he was offering ... it was too tempting to resist.

"Man, that's ..." Johnny scrubbed at his face. "That's dumb."

Peter turned to him sharply, eyes narrowing.

Johnny shook his head and held him by the shoulder. "You can't decide for people if they want to be friends with you."

Peter shrugged away Johnny's hand. "You don't understand--"

"I get it. You turn them away because you don't want to hurt them," Johnny said. "You think someone with superpowers doesn't understand that? Half this building can do crap that hurts people. Hell, the Ultimates are going through the same thing you are. And you think Sue and Reed don't worry everyday that their children are going to end up in enemy hands? Tony Stark, he's putting all his money into making sure normal folk don't die as because of us, because of all the crime-busting alien-fighting we do. Worrying is a thing, Peter. But don't let it consume you."

Peter bit his lip. Johnny was right. He wanted to argue, but he ran out of excuses.

"It's okay to feel protective," Johnny told him, eyes staring deep into Peter's and driving it home. "We're people, too. But if we don't make friends, we shrivel up and die. It's part of being human."

Peter threw down the gauntlet. He didn't realize how persuasive the man could be, and how insightful he was. Johnny grew up. He wasn't the same kid Peter met all those years ago. Maybe I should grow up, too.

"You know, you're a lot smarter than you look, for a kid who went to school for all of two days," he blew out a breath, stealing a glance at Johnny. He couldn't look at the guy yet. He was different. Peter didn't know him at all.

Johnny's answering grin was warm and reassuring. But in many ways, he's still the same guy. "I'm a lot tougher than I look, too. I can handle being your friend."

"I give up," Peter threw his head back. "Your HR business crap wore me down."

Johnny was stunned, a smile flickering back into his face. "Well, if you watched all the way to the end of movie like a normal person, you would know Sandy and that FBI guy were chums at the end," Johnny teased lightly.

"Yeah, I was afraid you were going to say that." Peter's smile was small and tentative.

Johnny blinked expectantly. "Sooo ... does this mean I get to take you out?" He shook his head briskly. "As friends. You know, a night out. Painting the town red. Barhopping, or I don't know, a
walk in the park. Basketball. Your pick."

Peter visibly withered. "I haven't even signed anything yet. And I don't think alcohol and a human lighter in a building with civilians is a good idea."

"You're a buzzkill. I can cure that." Johnny moved closer, buoyed by the progress. "It'll be fun, I promise."

"Can I bring anyone? You know, a witness? Or someone who'll call for help when I'm dead in a ditch somewhere?"

"You'll live," Johnny assured. "But why not? The more the merrier."

"When?" Peter asked.

"I don't know. Friday night. Let's make it a TGIF thing."

"Fine. Just ..." Peter gestured to the many papers in his desk that weren't really important, but were conveniently there as an excuse so that he could shoo away Johnny for a while so he could think. "I'm working."

"I'll call you," Johnny beamed brightly. "Or, you know, wait until work hours are done. Friday?"

"Okay," Peter groaned. "Friday. I hope to God this isn't me biting into a lightbulb. Now skedaddle."

Johnny left the labs in high spirits, and Peter, loathe as he was to admit it, felt warmer than he had in a long time.

--

The Present

What did I do?

What did I just do?

Shit, am I gonna die?

Why isn't life flashing before my eyes? Isn't that ... isn't that what's supposed to happen?

I've done a lot of crazy things, but this ...

God, I'm so stupid ...

It hurts ... hurts like crap ...

I'm gonna die, aren't I?

Aunt May ... Aunt May ... I've been so stupid ... I'm sorry ...

I don't want to die ... not yet ...

--

"O-Oh my--" Johnny's hands shook violently as he loomed over Spidey's prone form. His vision
blurred. Spidey convulsed as more blood came out of him. Staining his costume, spilling onto the asphalt. "Sue," he snapped his head towards his sister. "SUE! Do something! God, he's--he's dying!"

Sue snapped out of her frozen state and was beside them in a heartbeat. Johnny tried to remain calm, but they were in the middle of a destroyed street battling god-knows-who while Spidey, his friend, one of his few friends, was bleeding out from multiple gunshots.

Heart in his throat, Johnny watched Sue conjure small, precise force fields to stop the blood from draining out of Spidey. He never thought about someone close to him dying before--it never once crossed his mind because his peers, his family could take any normal bullet and still survive. He assumed that Spidey was just as invincible.

Sue rolled the man's mask halfway up and Spidey sputtered out a word that sounded like 'Friday'. The blond's breath hitched.

"H-Hey--buddy, Spidey--hang in there, alright? You're gonna be okay," he promised, cradling the man's head.

"Johnny, I need--we need to get him to the sick bay, I--I need to operate--quickly--" Sue's voice trembled. Her hands had blood in them. She usually commanded authority with her tone, but not this time. She was terrified, just as Johnny was.

Johnny forced the air out of his lungs and scooped up Spidey's body.

'I got his wounds patched but I can't keep them in place forever." Sue conjured a force field beneath her. "Thirty-first floor. Put him on an operating table--I'm right behind you."

Johnny didn't dare look at Spidey's form. He knew the man's state from the way his whole body had gone limp.

"FLAME ON!"

He took to the air with a burst of flame from his feet, the wind howling in his ears and drowning out the gunfire, the explosions, the screaming ... He didn't need to count the floors. He'd flown by the building so many times that he could guess where the sick bay was.

Senses in overdrive, Johnny saw it in his periphery less than a second before it came: a rocket from a bazooka, aimed straight at him. He had to make a quick decision. He killed his fire and stopped his momentum, going into a free-fall. It zoomed past him, tail-end fizzing.

The rocket hit the thirty-first floor a second later.

Johnny drew Spidey close to him as they were blown back by the force of the explosion. He growled in frustration as the incendiary left a huge gaping hole in the side of the building and covered the airspace in ash and smoke. But his hopes weren't dashed. The whole floor was a sick bay--it sustained damage, but there would be parts of it still operational. He let his flame flicker on again and pushed into the cloud of dust.

Half the place was covered in soot and debris, with the ceiling threatening to fall apart, and there were bodies on the floor, but the rest--there was still electricity and the computers were still online. Some of the personnel were scrambling, dragging bodies back to safety, tending to the wounded, and Johnny was bewildered by the flurry of activity that it took him a few seconds to snap back to reality and do what he was supposed to do.

He found an empty section with a steel table surrounded by various operating equipment and gently
laid down Spidey, calling weakly to someone, anyone with the right medical experience to fix his friend.

Sue came through the large, blown-off section of the wall and landed on her feet, barking out orders.

"Hughes, get Fury online, tell him Spider-Man's been shot down. Vanderpol, I need you to get Janet-we got ambushed so fast we didn't have time wear a comm."

Sue caught up to his brother. "Johnny--listen to me. The area has been breached--it's a dangerous time to operate." She brushed past him and flicked various switches and equipment to life, along with a computer interface that showed Spidey's readings and vitals. "SOMEONE--Gerold, I need him sedated! We got a man down, gunshot wound to the shoulder, two to the abdomen--someone cut his costume, fast--"

Johnny felt like he was going to throw up, the distress clear in his expression. Sue grabbed his face between her hands and looked him in the eye.

"I need you out there--I need you to keep this floor safe," she asked urgently but calmly. "We're not out of the woods yet. Can you do that baby brother?"

Johnny glanced sharply at Spidey. The guy was a few minutes from being dead, he was sure of it, and it terrified him, even as an attendant put him to sleep. He was trying very hard not to succumb to the panic. He swallowed, forcing his lungs to fill up slower and more evenly. "Is he gonna be alright?"

Sue's bob of the head was twitchy and abrupt, but it wasn't reassuring, because Johnny could see the fear in her eyes, the uncertainty. "You know him. He's a fighter. We'll get him fixed. But we can't do that if they get in and start shooting."

Johnny didn't need to be told twice. He took one last look at Spidey before bursting into flame, storming out of the room and flying out of the crumbling walls. Out in the open air, his anger fueled his fire. He wanted to hurt the enemies.

A quick, silent battle took place inside Johnny as he flew like a sentinel outside the building. He wanted to burn someone to a crisp, watch them scream in agony, but the other part of him, the sane one fighting against being buried by his emotions, told him that it wasn't right.

A few of the airborne foes came to view, coming from the rooftop of the building across the street. He held back his tears and fought like a superhero should.

--

"I've got the knitting serum," Janet announced as she fluttered into the room, clad in her Wasp outfit. She grew back to normal size and gasped when she saw who it was on the operating table, being attended to by Sue and two nurses. "Good Lord, that's--that's Spider-Man!"

She didn't have time to be shocked, because Sue was already yelling orders at her. "Jan, I need codes for the database! Not for this building, but for the Triskelion. Get me Peter Parker's file. Hurry!"

"Parker--" she whipped her head around, trying to find Peter. "Why his file? Where--"

Sue pushed past a nurse and moved to Spidey's side, yanking his mask off completely and revealing Peter's face, devoid of any emotion. Janet gasped for the second time that minute.

"Quickly! He needs a transfusion and I don't want to put in anything that might react badly with his
Eyes the size of plates, Janet raced towards the nearest computer panel and went to S.H.I.E.L.D.'s database via her personal access codes. She typed swiftly and efficiently, muttering to herself and casting glances at the bloodied man in a half-costume.

"Peter--our Peter from the labs is Spider-Man. Of course--should have seen it coming--how can I be so stupid--Nick wouldn't allow just anyone into a project like that ..." She turned to the large screen displaying Peter's vitals, waving her hand over the holographic panel so that Peter's info flashed for Sue to see. "I've got his data on the big screen. Sue, he's got specialized blood in the store--Nick had it prepared, it's in the Baxter database--C4XSD--"

One sharp glance from Sue turned into a wordless order, and one of the nurses was already racing off towards the storeroom.

"Brief me, Susan." Janet left the computer and put on some gloves and a mask, bracing herself for the ordeal before her. "You realize we just threw surgical procedure out the window, right?"

"You've got the serum for any possible infection; we don't need procedure. We got bowel injury--that's the priority--but there's no time ... I've got everything clamped with my force fields--we've got Gerold here cauterizing--should have asked Johnny to burn some of the wounds ..." Sue shook her head slightly as she explained the situation through her mask.

She was too focused on her work that she forgot for a moment that she puncturing Johnny's friend with heated needles. Yellowish-purple skin, blood everywhere, Peter wasn't in good shape. Adrenaline had long taken over her senses and motor skills. She hadn't completed training as a doctor, but she was a genius, just like Reed. She could do this, she told herself over and over. Don't let panic take over.

"We're working with very little blood here, and I'm stretched thin--so you're going to have to work on the shoulder. The one near the ribs is just a graze, sort of. I'm keeping it clamped. The bullets went clean through, which should be a blessing and a nightmare, but ... you see how scary this is?"

"I'm about ten seconds from pissing my panties, yes," Janet answered, voice shaking as she took tools from a surgical tray. "I'm not a surgeon, but we all pick up stuff along the way. Probe for defects, cauterize, probe, repeat, serum, seal, serum. I got this. I think."

"Good. We got Spider-Man's life on our hands," Sue's voice trembled, too.

Janet blew out a steadying breath and then set to work. "Peter. He's Peter. He's a good kid. I still can't believe all of this. Spider-Man ... And you know, he'd be dead if it wasn't for your powers."

--

Friday

=-Listen, Peter. I heard that you have the flu? I'd drop by but ... well, one of my friends is in the sick bay. He's really hurt. Things aren't looking too well for him. Seeing as you're sick I guess I'd have to cancel tonight. I can't say much, but yeah, call me back. =-

Peter wasn't picking up. Johnny figured that he was resting, taking a break. He hoped it wasn't anything serious, Peter's sickness, because he had his plate full with a lot of shitty things at the moment, and it felt like he was one bad news away from a heart attack.
Johnny wanted nothing more than to talk to someone like Spidey or Peter at the moment, but a day had passed and nobody was telling him anything. Not Sue, not any of the attendants, not the team... Johnny was teeming with frustration mixed with dread. It was a waiting game, and he was quickly tiring of it.

"The situation progressed into heavily classified status," Sue told him. He was waiting outside the sick bay, sitting on one of the sofas, head bowed, looking miserable. Sue's update didn't help with his growing sense of foreboding. He smelled coffee, and Sue had a paper bag in her hand that promised food, but Johnny didn't have an appetite.

"Sue, is he breathing?" Johnny pleaded. His bloodshot, sunken eyes showed how little sleep he got from fretting over Spidey's condition.

Sue sat down next to him and enveloped him in a protective hug. "He's safe. He's stable. He's past the critical stage. The serum did wonders. We don't use it a lot because we can take actual, life-threatening hits from bullets and suffer nothing more than a scratch, but it was a life saver."

Johnny sank into her embrace, relief flooding in fast. Spidey was safe. He was going to live.

"Can I see him?" Johnny asked immediately.

Sue pulled back and shook her head sadly, squeezing his arms with her hands. "I'm sorry Johnny. But you heard Fury--he has a secret identity to keep. You need Pi Clearance."

"Fuck Fury," Johnny spat, and Sue narrowed her eyes at him for the foul language. "You got to see him, didn't you? You know who he is."

"It was inevitable--I operated on him. I had to stitch him up from the inside, and I needed to know his medical info from the database to do it." She eyed his brother worriedly, thinking about how upset he had been the previous day. "You should go upstairs and get some sleep."

Johnny's situation prompted him to recall Peter's words, the one about friends suffering all around him. The pain of it was plain and sharp, and he was starting to comprehend Peter's misgivings, why Peter wanted to avoid the kind of misery he was feeling now.

His phone, which he abandoned at the edge of the tabletop, began to buzz. It was an incoming call. Johnny peered down on it and read Mary Jane Watson's caller ID.

He left Sue on the couch, walked over to the windows and picked up the call.

"Johnny--Oh, Johnny, answer me. Is he safe?"

A crease formed between his eyebrows. MJ sounded very desperate; she was practically bawling through the receiver. "What? MJ, what are you--do you mean Spider-Man? How did you--"

"Just answer me. Is he alive?"

"He's had surgery. My sister told me he's recovering."

Johnny heard a cry of relief through the phone, punctuated by sobbing and someone else's voice. "MJ, how did you know?"

"I'm with Kitty. She overheard everything--here--"

He heard the phone being passed around.
"How did you know?" Johnny asked again.

"Johnny--I overheard it this morning. Nick Fury stopped by the Institute and I--I thought to eavesdrop. The professor knew I was listening in but he didn't stop me."

Johnny's expression rippled with the mention of Fury. He had already started to put the blame on the eye-patched S.H.I.E.L.D. director.

"What was he doing there?" Johnny's mouth was dry, making his voice low and raspy.

"I didn't hear much. And most of what I heard, I didn't understand. But Fury mentioned--listen--he mentioned the Church of Shi'ar Enlightenment. It's this, like, religious group. They're a crazed bunch of people who worship this sort of Phoenix god. The X-Men has had a run-in with them countless times. Johnny--we saw what happened in the news. I think--I think they were the ones who attacked your building."

Johnny face scrunched in confusion. A church sent armed men to destroy their building? "Who are they? Why--why would they attack us?"

"Fury said they were after something in the Baxter Building. He didn't tell the professor. I think it's classified. Would you know anything about it?"

For a moment, Johnny was stuck thinking of what they could have been after, but then it all clicked, and a veil of confusion was lifted in his mind. Only one classified object had come into the possession of the Think Tank over the last couple of weeks. The Grape.

"Yeah," he breathed, struck with realization. "Yeah--I'll call you back." He heard sputtering on the phone that died when he ended the call, but he didn't pay attention to it, for he was already stomping back to Sue, his expression dark.

"Sis, did Fury tell you anything about why we were attacked?"

Sue's eyes flickered with surprise, but she shook her head slowly. "We're still being kept in the dark about it. Dad's about to blow a fuse. Nick's men and the Ultimates are in discussion, but they still haven't told us anything concrete. I tried to piece together some clues by asking Carol Danvers, but it's still classified information."

Johnny tapped his phone against his temple. "I've got your info right here. Fury knew he was putting us in danger by bringing it in. I don't think you know. Reed wouldn't know, either. You guys wouldn't have agreed. You wouldn't be poking and prodding it a few floors below the children."

"What do you mean? What are you talking about, Johnny?" she asked with growing trepidation.

Johnny's face turned hard. "It's because of that giant spleen alien camping out in our labs. A group called the Church of Shi'ar Enlightenment is after it. An X-Man called me. Said Nick Fury stopped by to talk to Charles Xavier. Sue, a bunch of religious fanatics blew up our building to get to that alien."

Johnny watched the play of emotions on his sister's face. A mixture of shock, betrayal, anger. He understood how she felt. Valeria only came to their lives this year. Franklin was two years old. She had children in the building.

"But why would he ...? He knew? And he didn't tell us?"

Johnny sat down, dropping a heavy hand on Sue's shoulder. "We need to tell Reed. There are a lot
of things Fury isn't telling us. I bet you he knows more about this Grape than he's letting on. He got my friend shot thrice and he's not getting away without an explanation."

Chapter End Notes

I sort of crammed this lol. Will fix. I'm watching Miss Congeniality.
Chapter Notes

This is short, yes, but this is a follow-up to the previous chapter that should have been included there. But I was too busy. Hopefully we get a normal-length chapter on Friday. I'm still not sure about that. But hey here you go. Wonder Webs.

The Same Friday

"Clint--Natasha--mimosa?"


"My walking, talking animatronic clock, everyone," Tony said, shooting the woman a peevish look. He looked worse for wear but still impossibly immaculate in a crisp shirt and vest. He waved a limp hand towards the cocktail. "Yes, I am aware it's morning. Not like it matters--if I could drink alcohol through a drip I'd stick one in me so I wouldn't have to whip up a batch every time things go to shit."

"Bad night?" Clint asked as a light way of greeting, even though the dark curtain hanging over all their heads was a pretty clear indication of how their evening went. After the cleanup in Midtown, everyone got up on the wrong side of the bed, with their beds on fire and flipped over them.

Nobody answered and Clint's face fell into a sulk. He plopped down onto a seat and reached for a jug and glass. "Spiked OJ it is."

"We're a few heads short," Natasha observed. "And a vigilante short too, if I heard what I heard correctly."

"We're here for a briefing about Thor and the others. And maybe a pathetic excuse for an apology in regards to the vigilante." Among the members of the Ultimates, Steve looked the most likely to
punch a hole in the wall, with the way he was scowling. At the forefront of his mind was Janet coming out of surgery with Spider-Man's blood all over her. "I don't really expect anything from Nick at this point. But I hope to God he's at least a little bit sorry for what happened."

"He's been itching to give the General a piece of his mind since yesterday," Janet explained, hand smoothing down the Captain's arm. Steve's scowl deepened, but he didn't shy away from the touch. Hank stared at them impassively.

"Is the kid alright? Still in one piece?" Tony inquired, his lips kissing the rim of a glass. "I did not know he was susceptible to guns. Could've sworn he had this buggy bug alarm system genetically-wired in him. Hmm." He paused to take a sip, then smacked his lips thoughtfully. "You know, he still won't let me analyze that power of his."

"The guy's pretty much spooked by anyone attempting to poke and prod him," Janet replied, thinking back to a time when she drove all the way to some random high school to provide the serum to a stammering fifteen-year old kid who got shot in the arm. It had taken an hour of convincing on her part and an hour of excessive rambling on the kid's, just to set him straight. It was a long time ago, but the memory was fresh in her mind now that she was in on Peter's secret. "He's fine, he uh--he had a problem with wiring, so he fought without a radar. We used the serum on him. Wonder Webs should be up and scuttling again by Monday."

"Just in time to waltz right back in to work, I presume." Natasha locked eyes with Janet, waiting for any telltale response. Janet's eyes widened a fraction.

"So is this an issue of national security now? This Grape?" Bruce asked. His tone of voice conveyed his distaste for the term, his recollections of destroying Midtown and eating people making his throat griped. "It took hundreds of thousands in damages and multiple casualties for Nick to get a clue?"

"I think we should give Fury a break, what, with the standards you set for him, Brucey. New York has seen worse from you," Hank taunted, feeling the need antagonize the scientist as an outlet for the show he was privy to, which was his wife dangling an incredibly attractive super-soldier in front of him. The color drained from Bruce's face.

A few minutes ticked by in tense silence, until Nick Fury came in through the doors with the kind of heavy, purposeful stride that told everyone he had five-hundred other things to do after this meeting.

"We're moving that damn Grape to the Triskelion," Nick rumbled as an opening statement. His shoulders were taut and he glowered at everyone menacingly. "That will eliminate the risk of any dumb degenerate storming in through the streets, guns blazing."

Steve shot up from his seat, temper flaring. "You know, you've got a lot of nerve sending that kid out onto the field without backup." He bore the brunt of the steely glare Nick sent him.

"Sit down, Steve." Nick smoothed a hand down one side of his face. He did not anticipate that Steve would feel so strongly about Spidey coming so close to death's door. "Spider-Man's hardly a kid--and being caught in the middle of a large-scale attack? That was no one's fault but his own. Guy doesn't take orders from me, no matter how much I throw them at him. I don't make rash, idiotic decisions like he does."

"Then why isn't he part of the team? Kid could have handled things better if he was taking orders--"

Nick intercepted him. "It's his choice," he said forcefully. "Last I checked all of you had to sign consent forms to join this ragtag group of supers. The man's lucky I got his sorry ass saved. We'd be driving to his funeral right now if I didn't have the damn foresight to stock the Baxter Building with
blood compatible with his. Park it, Steve. This is not the time and place."

Steve, unwilling to let go of the issue, snapped his head to Janet.

"He's right," Janet said, pursing her lips. "We checked the database and there was blood in the stores just for him. Guess Fury thought he'd muck up somewhere and come running to the Fantastic Four."

"Captain's got a point though," Clint interrupted. "That spider's a vigilante. He needs to be corralled, if not supervised by the proper authorities. One wrong move and he could kill someone."

"Waitwaitwait, slow down." Tony laced his fingers together and propped his chin on his knuckles. "Come on, folks--Spider-Man? A killer? You might as well call Steve Buscemi a supermodel. Kid could dish out a nasty punch, sure, and is incredibly nosy most of the time it's like a disease, but he was saving people back there. He pulled civilians out from a crumbling building. Kid's got heart."

"He also got himself shot. He may have twice the heart but he sure lacks the intellectual capacity for strategy," Hank said with self-satisfied smirk. His was a technically true statement, but it got him a look of hostility from Janet and a few more glances of annoyance from the rest.

Steve crossed his arms, face determined. "What he needs is convincing. He'd be less of a liability if he was here, with us, fighting--"

"I did not come here to waste my damn time listening to you yak about recruiting a new club member," Nick put his fist down. "If you want to convince him, do it on your own time. I've got exactly twelve minutes to update you on why Pietro and Wanda are in the Savage Lands, and why I've got Thor hopping into another realm for a recon. I'm here to tell you about the Church of Shi'ar, and why they terrorized the Baxter Building."

Tony sat back and regarded Nick with a sneer. "Is this where you tell us why we're keeping this Grape here on Earth instead of throwing it into another dimension?"

Heads swiveled simultaneously towards Tony.

The man shrugged casually. "I could be wrong. Correct me, Nicky, if I miss the mark. But if the Grape truly was a threat, the protocol should be to get it as far away from the planet as possible. But we haven't proceeded with protocol for weeks now. I wonder why that is? What does S.H.I.E.L.D. get from playing baby-sitter to a potential time bomb the size of a Macy's Thanksgiving Day balloon?"

Nick did not move, but he stared at the billionaire with a hard gaze. "Seems to me you already got your answer."

Tony tried to avoid going for an arrogant smirk. Instead he fished out a drive from his pocket and plugged it into a port built into the table. The flat surface of the table shifted into a large holographic panel, projecting the Grape out into the space in front of them. The rest of the agents spent a few seconds gawking at it.

"With the collective efforts of the team, and thanks in large part to the contributions of young scientist Peter Parker--"his voice took on an uncharacteristically fond tone here, "--we hashed together a telemetry device that could penetrate the shell," he zoomed in on the alien's interior, the shell dissolving into nothingness. "It's not a single-cell organism as originally hypothesized. The suspension we previously thought to be a cytoplasm is comprised of billions of cells, a soup of organisms, so to speak, of alien origin. Bruce?"

Bruce took over. "By measuring the magnetic fluctuations inside the shell, we deduced that the
suspension is highly unstable. Probing further--"Bruce swiped his hand in front of him, and the Grape was replaced by a cell structure, "--we came to realize why. Each cell is, in layman's terms, a battery. But this my friends, is an understatement." Bruce tilted his head, waiting for the animation to proceed. "Each cell is capable of generating twenty-thousand kilowatts of power for an entire day, by estimate. Put it in perspective and that's around sixteen Thors calling down constant peals of lightning onto a rod for one whole Thursday."

"It's no Zero Point Module, sure--it's countably infinite, a non-renewable energy source--but we're not equipped to provide every household in the US with Reed Richards' technology, and the overall output of these mini-powerplants projects to thousands of years of potential energy," Tony added. "It's understandable how something like this, however dangerous, would cause for a double take."

"I think I've heard enough." Steve transferred his gaze to Nick, his dissatisfaction evident in his scowl. "This is what's S.H.I.E.L.D.'s been up to?"

Nick didn't seem all too pleased to be figured out. He stood like a stone gargoyle, looming over them. "The government wants a quick and easy fix to the world energy crisis. What the government wants, the bureau provides."

"Hold on a moment, I'm not following," Janet's eyebrows creased together. "How did you know all of this when it took the world's best scientists a little over three weeks to figure it out?"

"I didn't. But The Church did. Now, if you will allow me to explain," Nick ground out. He took down the projection of alien cells with a flick of his wrist and replaced them with a hardbound, ancient book. "The Church of Shi'ar Enlightenment, founded around 2000 BC in Ancient Egypt. It was said to have been founded by bipedal extra-terrestrial visitors, imparting upon the unsuspecting Egyptians science and technology considered advanced beyond five millennia. All knowledge they imparted was lost during Achaemenid's dynasty, save for the chronicles of one shaman who wrote this tome. This is the closest thing they have to a bible."

Clint pulled a face at his mimosa. "Oh, no. Don't tell me we're fighting against a bunch of bible bangers. I take it that these Shi'ar folks sleep with personal copies of this book under their pillows?"

"I wouldn't put it past them," Nick answered, annoyed at Clint's input. "According to Special Intel, the tome foretold that a seed from the heavens will crash into the Earth and bring about its destruction. Absolute load of bull, if you ask me, but we've got everything from a specific date to its geographical coordinates, and quite conveniently, the same power estimate Bruce had just mentioned." The tome opened to a certain page, and a passage typed itself out in the empty space above. "However, due to a mistranslation, they got the information wrong. Wrong time, but the right coordinates."

"No wonder the attack was three weeks delayed," Natasha snorted. "This is doomsday ala-Aztecs all over again."

"This is one line, but there's a whole page," Steve squinted, as if in his head he could comprehend the ancient Egyptian writings.

"Intel got the whole page from yesterday's Church captives. We got a copy of that tome today."

Bruce saw what Nick meant. "What does the rest of it say?"

Nick's expression grew dark. "More dates, more coordinates. The mistranslation was from the next entry--" Nick did a few gestures and more passages were decoded, spilling down into a long list. "And as you can see, you'll be going on missions until at least March."
"That second one was yesterday," Tony voiced out, flummoxed, even though all of them could see what the list implied. "They thought yesterday would be the first Grape."

It occurred to them, quickly and all at once, that there would be more. A lot more, over the course of the winter. The thought stunned them all into silence. And then, a moment later--

"Second one's off the coast of Australia ... the coordinates are pointing to the southern hemisphere--"

"The Savage Lands. You sent the twins to take a look."

"Nick, we should be hitting these balls right out of the park before they even make contact with the ground."

"Where are they even coming from? You sent Thor to find the place?"

"Latveria? For Christ's sake I'm tired of that dump--"

Nick held up a hand. There was a vein sticking out of his forehead that spelled an incoming migraine. "Twelve minutes is all I had, folks. We'll do this some other time. Since this ragtag bunch has enough brains to process all this information, we can all safely conclude this briefing. We'll continue to interrogate the Church initiates. We're seeking to haul the rest of the Church's asses to prison before Thanksgiving--raids on all compounds and hideouts, background checks--I'm giving Steve and Clint command of that operation. As for the Grape we currently have in possession--the government will have to live with the energy crisis for a little while longer. Tony and the rest will continue on with the research--"

Nick was halfway out the door when Tony raised a slightly loopy hand. "And what about the FF?" He leveled Nick with an intense look. "You asked for their cooperation, withheld information, and half-destroyed their home. Oh, and got Spider-kid nerfed."

"We've got the damages covered," Nick said firmly and impatiently. "Any more questions, you talk directly to Carol Danvers. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got a playdate with a very irate President." He was out the door and on the way to a helicopter on the roof a second later.

"Meeting adjourned, I guess." Bruce stood up, plucking his glasses from his nose and wiping them over with his shirt. The rest followed, muttering about the grievances associated with another impending world crisis.

"I thought I would get to spend Christmas without a bunch of terrorizing mormons for a change," Clint bemoaned. "Guess I was wrong. Steve? want to stop by the prison cells? Get a head start?"

They filed out of the room, thoughts whirring with the many information squeezed into their brains. Tony in particular was thinking about the empty mimosa pitcher. Preoccupied with his next fix, he realized a few halls later that he had forgotten his flash drive, still plugged into the port of the high-tech conference table. He turned on his heel to retrieve it, eventually stopping when he heard whispers filtering through the slightly open door.

"--need Pi Clearance. This is a very sensitive situation."

"I'll get the clearance. Technically Nicky should hand it over to me once I tell him."

Tony trained his ears, his curiosity piqued. Two women whispering in secret was too tempting to ignore. He decided to eavesdrop. Juicy. I wonder what they're whispering in the shadows about?

"This does not bode well for him. Nick told me he's too scared of what will happen if more people
find out who he really is."

"You should give me credit for figuring it all out on my own. That Peter Parker's a sly fox--wait, scratch that. A fox, at least, has some sense of self-reservation."

_Tasha and Jan talking about Peter? What have they all got in common?_ Was Peter even close to either of them? The mere mention of Peter had him thinking of the man, how innocent and endearing he had looked wrapped up in sheets, nose red and eyes shuttered. He thought about dropping by Queens again. Smile tugging at his lips, he regained focus and pressed his ear to the door.

"He had the flu. That's why his Spider sense wasn't working--"

Tony's smile died at the last phrase. _Flu ...? Spider-sense ...? What? No ... I must be hearing things. It ... it couldn't be. No. It was the alcohol. Damn you, alcohol. Natasha was right--booze for breakfast did nothing more than cloud his judgment and make things sound utterly ridiculous. The arc reactor warmed in his chest, his heart hammering. He flipped the words over and over again in his head, but Janet continued, and Tony feared the worst._

"--One would think Spider-Man without his most important power would stay at home and recuperate, but I've known that kid for a while. Parker's more moth-to-a-flame than a spider when it comes to saving people."

And there it was. The words typed themselves in his head slowly, painstakingly, as if his mind was being extra careful not to misspell anything. Eyes quivering in turmoil, muscles locked in place, Tony processed the words. _Parker's more moth-to-a-flame than a spider when it comes to saving people._

_Peter Parker has the flu. Peter's a spider, saving people. Peter is Spider-Man?_

No matter how much he pored over the words, he couldn't reconcile himself to the thought of the two different, opposing ideas of Peter Parker the scientist and the friendly, neighborhood Spider-Man being one and the same. He wouldn't have believed it, but Janet was with Spider-Man the day before. She would know.

He barely realized through the rush of blood pounding in his head that Spider-Man almost died yesterday. Peter _almost died._

Tony jerked back suddenly as the thought struck him that this wasn't really happening. He was dreaming. Except it _was_ happening. Grapes shall fall to the Earth, Midtown was in shambles, and Peter Parker was Spider-Man.

A thousand questions ran through Tony's mind, but only one came out of his mouth.

"How?" he rasped.
Cold and Warm and Hot

Chapter Notes

!! WARNING: There is a scene. A 'not for kiddies' scene. You'll know it when it happens. Just avert your eyes if it isn't your cup of tea. Note the change in the fanfic's rating.

I don't know what happened--but because of internet connection failure I've accidentally deleted like half this chapter with no backup in my laptop (since I make the drafts here) IF ANYONE like, saves this fic chapter by chapter or has read it before and has it open to when it had 6k words, please hmu because I'm hyperventilating.

update: I've rewritten the last scene of this chapter completely. It's not as good as when I wrote it before, but it's lengthier. Obviously I'm bummed out about it but what can I do, really?

Friday Night

I'm dead. So dead. Screwed. Dead and screwed wouldn't even begin to explain the pile of limbs Aunt May would leave behind after she's dragged me to hell and back.

Peter swung forwards, his head swimming in delirium under a small, translucent plastic bag. It was the single-most mortifying and at the same time nauseating feat he'd done, flying blindly and feverishly through nighttime New York in a hospital gown. He was terrified that he'd lose focus and smack face first into a building. And starkers underneath, he feared that a random tourist would take a chance snapshot of his bits and sell them to the paper.

Hole jeebers, it's cold. I'll probably die before I even get home. Brr. Teeth chattering. I should have pilfered actual clothes from somewhere.

Why am I doing this? Why do I always take risk after risk after risk and mess up big time? I always go home feeling like I'm headed for an electric chair. Whywhywhy? What am I even doing anymore?
I'm tired, so tired of cleaning after myself.

He had awoken with no recollection of where he was or what had happened, his body stiff as a board and radiating pain everywhere, like he had been beaten to a pulp with a four by four and left in a refrigerator for days. Certainly not the first time it's happened, he'd thought in chagrin, but what made that incident more worrisome was that he'd most definitely been close to death, so close that he could still feel the frigid grip of it in his bones.

The notion had almost thrown him into a panic attack, but the crisp white lights, sterile air, and chrome fixtures told him that he was in some sort of hospital. He was alive, his lungs filled, and he could feel the smooth sheets, hear the beeping of a heart monitor. He'd struggled for a few minutes to even his breathing, shaken badly by the reality of his ordeal.

Once he'd gathered his bearings, he'd dared to move and sit up, and finding himself able to, but not without pain wracking his nerves, he'd thrown his blanket off and swung his legs to the side of the bed. The pain hadn't been excruciating, but it gave him a headache and a chill that wouldn't go away.

He'd pulled out his IV, using a finger to stop himself from bleeding out through the needle's entry point, and then yanked off the monitoring equipment they'd stuck underneath his gown. And then, he'd realized with a start that he wasn't in costume, and his webshooters were by the bedside. It had all come crashing down afterwards.

I was such an idiot. I ruined everything. Now they know. They know my secret. They KNOW. Damn it all. I don't who could have found out, but at the very least the FF knows. Probably. I was in their building and everything--in their infirmary. They would know. Crap, and Johnny ... I don't know how Johnny would handle this. I never planned to tell him, ever. OR OR they might tell the Ultimates and I might get fired by Tony. Crpes, I'm triple dead. This is a huge nightmare. No. I love my job. I love my job. Whoa, dizzy ...

He was close to home, but he was also close to passing out and careening towards the pavement. His body felt like a furnace against the cold air, never mind the throbbing, blossoming pain in his shoulder and stomach. How did he even survive the gunshots? Did Reed do anything to him? Sue? Did they patch him up okay? What if he made a wrong twist of the body and blood squeezed out of him like a punctured juice box? Maybe he shouldn't have left.

He'd remembered what had happened as soon as he'd seen the gauze, three of them, clean patches of mesh and bandage that covered his wounds. He'd been shot at, because he couldn't react fast enough to the enemies. The memories had come back to him fast, snapping back into his head like a rubber band. He'd been shot at, because he couldn't react fast enough to the enemies. The memories had come back to him fast, snapping back into his head like a rubber band. He got caught under a blazing trail of gunfire. Because he'd gone straight into the foray with a cold. *Flu, my clipboard said. Not just a cold. That's the last time I'd go to Dr. Google for a check-up.

His house looked deserted, and the looming dread came back to him like a vicegrip around his throat and chest. More than his fear of Aunt May was the overwhelming guilt for doing something foolish and risking his life. He'd sneaked out the day before, slipped into his costume and jumped out the window when Aunt May had gone to the bathroom. He was sick, and he still went out there. He didn't have to, but the insatiable need to be where civilians were in danger had niggled at the back of his head until he couldn't take it any longer.

*It could get me killed one day. Sooner or later, my luck will run out, and I'll be dead.*

The grim notion, accompanied by his weak, feeble state, made him feel wretched as he shivered in the night.

He crawled back into his room, swaying dangerously on his feet once he'd landed on the
floorboards. He was exhausted, wracked with pain, and plagued by new demons, that he collapsed onto the bed, toppling like a demolished building, only just managing to slip into the sheets with every ounce of willpower left in him. He wanted to sleep. Sleep for a long time until everything was okay again.

When Aunt May had heard noise in the upper floor, she made a mad dash for Peter's bedroom. Peter was awake, but quickly slipping out of consciousness.

He saw her grave, desperate expression and sniffled. He wasn't going to cry. He wasn't.

"Peter! Oh, my Peter ..." Aunt May cried, racing to his bedside as soon as she saw him. She was frantic. She had dark circles round her eyes and she look like she'd been crying. She ran a hand through his forehead and hair, smoothing them down, petting him like he was the most precious thing in the world.

"You didn't come back. Oh, honey, you didn't come back ... I feared the worst. I didn't know who to call. I thought something terrible had happened to you ... I look away for a second and you're gone, and oh, you're still sick. Dear Lord you're burning. My poor baby ..."

"M'fine, Aunt May ..." Peter rasped, shifting to get more comfortable in bed. He tried not to wince when his muscles and injuries protested, making him tremble. "Still sick, s'all."

"What are you doing to my poor heart, Peter? One of these days I'm going to die waiting for you to come home. Oh, I can't even protect you like a normal parent. How am I supposed to sleep at night when my only family can't even take care of himself?" Aunt May looked down at him like he was in his deathbed. He couldn't bare to look at her any longer. The shame, the guilt ... He shut his eyes and tried to will himself back into warmth, and focused on Aunt May's soothing words, the feel of her hand petting down his fringe.

"'M'sorry ... I'm safe. Not dying, I promise," he lied. He had just escaped death, all thanks to the FF. He had a lot to deal with in the future, but for now, sleep was pushing down on him smothering him. "Won't do it again ... sleep now, yelling later ... I'll eat and drink medicine ... M'fine ... yell at me later, Aunt May ..."

Knowing that he wasn't--not fine at all, he was barely holding onto his sanity--he slipped out of consciousness with a troubled, haunted expression.

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Johnny had taken the car out for a spin after a heated argument with Reed.

He switched gears, and then stomped on the gas, ripping through the freeway like a maniac. The only thing keeping him from killing himself was his innate ability for observation and his quick response time as a racer. His thoughts were a blur, just like the scenes flashing past him. He was frustrated, and his only release was to either go Supernova some place deserted or to drive like there was no tomorrow.

_It's not fair. I should be in the know. I know him better than anyone else in the damn team._

Earlier in the day during lunch time, Johnny had approached Reed in his lab with the discovery regarding the Church of Shi'ar Enlightenment. Reed had looked at Johnny with a tiny hint of surprise, as if Johnny had correctly guessed what was running through his thoughts. He hadn't seem shocked by it however--he'd been a little too unperturbed by the revelation that they were struck by a radical group of Phoenix worshippers trying to get to the giant football alien in their home.
"I know." Reed blinked at the blond owlishly. "They're moving the Grape to the Triskelion. We were just informed about it, Sue and I."

Johnny was flabbergasted. "What? Wait a second--just now?"

"An hour ago. Carol Danvers came by and told us that the Ultimates had a meeting this morning and--"

"We? Us?" Johnny threw his hands in the air. "And where was I? Why weren't Ben and I included?"

Reed scratched his cheek. "Er, Ben was there." Johnny's offended toss of the head did not in any way make Reed feel like there was anything wrong with the youngest team member not being included in a very significant meeting. When Reed didn't add anything else, Johnny's temper flared.

"And you didn't think I should be there? You know, listening to what S.H.I.E.L.D. has to say? As a team member? One of four of the Fantastic Four? Is my input even worth anything around here?"

Reed blinked patiently at him, taking his glasses off and rubbing one side of his face. "Look, Johnny--you haven't slept in almost twenty-four hours. Sue and Ben and I thought you could use a bit of a break. It's been an exciting day. Everyone's still cleaning up Midtown, we just heard news that more Grapes would be coming, and now with Spider-Man's identity--"

Johnny's eyebrows shot to the sky. "Spider-Man? You know who Spidey is?"

It had escalated into Johnny storming out when he'd discovered that Reed had been given P.I. Clearance, on account of Spider-Man recuperating in the premises, and Reed standing as the head researcher of the Think Tank along with Johnny and Sue's father. It only irked Johnny more when he'd been told that Spidey's identity was only revealed on a need-to-know basis, and Johnny, as far as S.H.I.E.L.D. cared, did not 'need-to-know' who Spidey was.

Johnny had tried to look for Sue, but the staff informed him that she had taken her children to a safe location.

Fatigue was catching up to him, having not slept for more then a day just fretting over Spidey and wallowing in his own anger. He needed some place to crash, but crashing at someone's place meant that you had to be friends with that person, and sadly Johnny was lacking in that department.

Well, there is one person, but he's sick. He won't be very chipper about it if I visit him. Then again, he isn't very chipper to begin with.

He glanced at the digital clock set on the dashboard, reading the time. 11:14pm it blinked. Well, it's still Friday. Maybe we can still hang out.

Johnny made his decision and left the freeway, heading for Queens. He wasn't going to admit that he'd dug around for Peter's file and took note of the guy's address. He acknowledged that it was kind of a creep move on his part, borderline stalking, really, but he wanted to know where Peter lived for reasons he couldn't quite explain, not until now. If Peter let him, maybe he could stay for a while, let off some steam, be in the presence of someone calming.

I mean, isn't that what friends do? Let other friends sleep over? Like, that's a thing, right?

It was risky and impulsive--he had only just began to chip into Peter's defenses, see glimpses of the man's true self. They were only starting to talk to one another without getting on each other's nerves. Peter was opening up to him. There was a lingering doubt in his mind as he drove past buildings and
entered suburbia. Surely Peter wouldn't be so prickly as to send him away if he pleaded? He thought of a bunch of scenarios where he had to convince Peter to let him sleep in his house for a night, and he frowned, because knowing the man, it would be quite the challenge.

He tried to justify his decision by thinking about Spidey sleeping over at his place. Spidey swinging by at God knows what hour with pizza, or chapchae, or crepes. Playing video games with him, making jokes. Spidey came and went as he pleased, and Johnny allowed it, because they were chums. It didn't feel awkward. The thought of the superhero made him drop into a sullen state. Spidey always listened to him and gave solid advice as a friend. He wasn't overbearing or apathetic. He was a nice guy. He hit that sweet spot of friendship that Johnny always craved.

*And he almost died. I couldn't protect him.*

He drove down a dark and dreary lane, looking at the numbers of the houses, counting down to Peter's place. His frown turned into more of a scowl as he cruised on silently.

What made him so angry about people knowing Spidey's identity was that people could now look after Spidey's regular, everyday self, help him stay out of trouble, and generally be at another level of relationship with Spidey. Johnny wanted that. He wished for superheroes his age whom he could turn to and who could turn to him when things got tough and unbearable, and he wanted to be able to do something nice for them, too. Was it really so much to ask for?

*Maybe it is. Maybe turning to non-superhero friends is for the best.*

He found the place, killed the engine, and waited in the freezing car, outside Peter's house. There was still room to back out. But he didn't feel like driving anywhere else, and he was running out of fumes. Peter would be inside, sleeping, probably. Whether he would welcome Johnny or not, Johnny would never find out unless he went through with his plan. He stamped down some resolve into his decision and stuck with it.

He let the car door swing out, blew out a gutsy breath, and then stepped out into the night. The nights round the east coast really did take a turn for the worse. Johnny would have been shivering in his thin clothes, but his inhuman tolerance for temperatures never failed him. He turned after locking his car and stood there for a minute, looking at Peter's unassuming house. *This is what a normal life looks like. None of the security mainframes or the laboratories or the hostiles or the aliens.*

Should he knock? Would anyone even answer? Johnny knew Peter had an aunt--if she were the one to open the door, Johnny would have a difficult time explaining himself.

*Well, Spidey never walked into the Baxter lobby or talked to the receptionist. He came in without notice. It's a terrible idea. Spidey's called a vigilante for a reason. He does vigilante things, and breaking into people's homes unannounced is one of them. He got to do what he wanted because I was okay with it. Would Peter be okay with me just barging into his room through the window like Spidey?*

Johnny tilted his head back, blinking at the lone window. How was he supposed to go up there? Maybe he could use his powers, let out a short burst of fire from his feet. *But that would ruin my Chucks. And I don't want to go home tomorrow barefoot.*

He threw caution to the wind and climbed the nearest tree: it had branches that spread out and canopied over the Parker roof. He struggled to find a foothold, and struggled even more to hoist himself up, but with effort, he was shimmying up a tree with the intention of breaking into his friend's home. All in all an absolutely insane performance. The wild child in him found some satisfaction in doing something so raving mad.
He tried to make as little noise as possible as his feet met the roof tiles. It was colder up there, and he felt more exposed. He wondered if Peter had ever been on the roof of his home, if anyone had ever even attempted what he was doing. *Probably not. This is insane on so many levels, even I'm starting to think this is a bad idea.*

He crept up to the nearest window, peeking in slowly. It was dark in a muted kind of way, and there was little else to see, but he found a room that looked altogether like the kind of room Peter would have. There was a bed, a desk, a spinnny chair—all normal items found in a bedroom. What told him that he had found the right bedroom was that it was quite a messy room, with clothes strewn in places, books open and spread out on the desk, and various personals that looked very science-y: a small globe by the desklamp, a model of the solar system dangling from the ceiling, a microscope, and various figurines ranging from a small R2D2 to a miniature Charizard.

"Peter," he hissed through the window. He tried not to sound like the Grundel in *Ghostbusters* who tried to lure kids out to their deaths saying 'come out and play, child'. He didn't want Peter to freak out or call the police, or worse, welcome him with a baseball bat to the face.

He tried whispering urgently again, tapping his fingernail to the glass. Still, nothing. No response came, and Johnny was beginning to feel anxious. What if he had gotten the number wrong and he was creeping in on some teenage girl's room like a perv?

Before he could make a dash for it, however, a lamp turned on by the bedside. Johnny craned his head, trying to get a look see as to who it was. He sighed in relief when he saw the familiar mess of hair and sour expression of the young scientist. Peter was barely awake, having stretched towards the lamp on his nightstand with difficulty. Johnny's eagerness melted into concern. Peter looked terrible.

Johnny pressed his palms against the window and slid it open a crack, jamming his fingers underneath and opening it the rest of the way.

"Johnny?" he heard Peter croak. Johnny climbed inside feet first, being very careful not to trip or catch his foot on anything and knock it over. He had never clambered through a windowsill in his life, but there was a certain thrill to it that Johnny just might do it again soon.

He stood up and dusted some of the tree bark caught in his clothes. It was an awkward meeting. He stared at Peter for a moment, and Peter stared back with hooded eyes and a corpse-like expression. The room was cold, colder than he had anticipated—it was nearly the same temperature as the air outside. Johnny's face fell.

"I can explain," Johnny started, stepping forward and holding his hands up, but Peter sank back into the sheets feebly, like a snail retreating back into its shell. Peter didn't say anything, but he burrowed into the bed, shivering slightly.

Johnny crossed the room and stood close to Peter's bedside, hovering and examining the man. Under the lamplight Peter looked liked he was suffering from the effects of something worse than a cold, but he was suffering silently, almost as if he had given up on living and was just waiting to die, not unlike an animal who knew that struggling against death was futile. Something tugged at Johnny's chest, and his hand flew forwards to meet Peter's forehead.

Peter, unlike the room, was sweltering. His skin was damp from cold sweat. He was trembling.

"Jesus Christ, Pete," Johnny breathed, face morphing into alarm. "Are you okay?" He felt stupid for asking the question when he could see with his own eyes that Peter was sick.

Peter whimpered slightly, nuzzling further into his bed. "M'cold ... So cold ..."
"Maybe I should take you to a hospital," Johnny suggested, going down on his knees and eyeing Peter carefully. This looks worse than a cold. Maybe he has pneumonia or something.

But Peter shook his head feverishly and desperately. "N-No. I'll be fine, 'swear ... Just, so ... so cold ..."

An idea came to Johnny, then. Why didn't I think of this before? I do it a lot whenever Spidey came over. He turned on that part of him that emitted wave upon wave of heat, making sure to not overdo it—he didn't want to flame on in Peter's room and suddenly be responsible for arson. Warmth traveled through the air between them, and some of the tension in Peter's brow eased, but he was still shivering, his breathing shallow and ragged. Johnny bit his lip. It was helping, but Peter was still in a worrisome state.

Johnny turned the lamp off, pulled off the covers and climbed into bed, ignoring whatever rule of privacy Peter kept and crossing the line entirely. I don't care, it's for your own good, he told the mini-Peter in his head. If he heated the whole bed with his body, it would certainly help Peter get better, he told himself. This is what he needs right now.

He settled in, shifting awkwardly to find a comfortable-enough position. It was a bit difficult—he was taller than Peter and he hardly fit the bed, and what's more, Peter was in the middle of the mattress, leaving little space for him to maneuver around.

"I'll uh ... I'll turn the heat up, okay? Just ... yeah. Go to sleep, Pete."

He kicked the warmth up a notch, until he could actually feel the whole bed turn into a larger version of a heating pad.

And then--his breath caught in his throat--

He couldn't hide his surprise when Peter huddled close to him, so close in fact, that Peter was practically shoving himself right under his chin. Johnny froze like a statue. Peter's short breaths blew against Johnny's exposed collarbone, his nose tucked right into the crook of Johnny's neck and shoulder. His arms were folded back into himself, knuckles pressing against Johnny's broad chest. His legs brushed against Johnny's, bare and awkward and curled by the knees, and his thick hair tickled Johnny's nose and lips.

Johnny felt Peter reflecting some of the warmth back. He could smell Peter faintly, a damp mixture of sweat and musk. Peter's scent.

Johnny felt a myriad of emotions then, ranging from batshit panic to soaring through the skies in elation.

A thousand questions formed in Johnny's mind, questions asking about privacy and intimacy and other questions addressing whether what he was doing was right or appropriate ... but his heart thudded in his chest like a drum, and blood rushed to his face in a pleasant, incredibly satisfying way ...

He had wanted Peter for a while now, had grown terribly attracted to the man. He had never lied to himself about his feelings for Peter. And so because of that, he felt as if he was borderline abusing Peter's weakened state. But Peter needed the warmth, needed the comfort, and he stuck to that justification, resolved not to dwell on the propriety of the situation. So what if it was a little inappropriate? Peter needs me. He needs my heat.

He shifted closer and pressed his lips to the top of Peter’s head, inhaling softly. Peter smelled
incredibly comforting; like taking a whiff of his mother’s old perfume, of story books cracking from overuse, of hot chocolate and rain on asphalt. It was another scent to add to his select few favorites.

Peter slept soundly in his arms, his breaths evening into an almost imperceptible rhythm. Johnny found himself slipping his hands round Peter’s slim waist, sinking into the man’s bed. Drowsiness overcame him, and the weight of all the fighting and worrying and arguing pushed down at every vestige of willpower in him to stay awake and experience Peter. His eyes fluttered shut, and thoughts of Peter turned into vivid dreams, dreams of keeping the man warm and safe forever.

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Saturday Morning

The next time he reached consciousness, Peter immediately felt the glow and warmth ebbing and flowing against him like a tide. Though his body ached and his muscles cracked with each tiny movement, it felt as though he had broken through a prison of iceberg, and was now swimming in warmer waters. It felt good. Peter sighed in contentment. When the night before was plagued by the fear of not being able to live through the cold, the morning dawned with sunlit clarity.

He tried to test his limbs and pinpoint which parts of him still hurt, and then froze in place when his arm grazed against skin. Skin from another person's arm.

He realized all of a sudden that he was fitted like a puzzle piece against a very warm, very hard body. His eyes cracked open then, and he had to blink a few times to get rid of the dryness in them.

Johnny’s face invaded his view, still and dormant and expressionless.

If it were the first time that this happened Peter would have scrambled out of bed and yelled obscenities, but he had been in that exact same spot before at Johnny’s place, wearing the Spider suit. It didn’t seem as awkward now, or as bewildering, but the questions still popped up in Peter’s head. What is he doing here? How come he’s in my bed? When did he arrive?

He searched Johnny’s face, trying to wrack his brains for answers.

Oh, that’s right. Johnny had come in the middle of the night, right when he had stirred awake, unable to settle into deep sleep. He kept tossing and turning and groaning in misery, and that was when he’d heard Johnny from the window. Peter couldn’t remember much after that, but Johnny must have slipped into his bed.

He didn’t particularly mind it, this time. He had to admit, Johnny was a terrific cuddling partner. It didn’t hurt either that Johnny was easy on the eyes. Fan-like eyelashes, straight nose, soft, plump lips —Peter’s eyes memorized them all, from the top of his head where bright, sunlit blond hair grew, to the strong jaw that shaped his face, where a light dusting of stubble was beginning to form.

Johnny looked warm and innocent, even in his sleep. Peter’s eyes softened. He recalled briefly that one time in the labs when Johnny had walked in, head ducked and face more open than Peter had ever seen it, and apologized to him for being a bother. Something inside him stirred. Johnny was a lonely guy, but at the same time Peter knew that he didn’t just extend a hand of friendship to anyone. He wondered what the man even saw in him, why he was so intent on making friends. Peter felt a dull pang of guilt. He didn’t deserve someone like Johnny chasing after him.

But Peter had accepted him nonetheless, because in the end he was selfish, and he couldn’t resist the offer. They were friends now. And with this recent development, Johnny must have come to his
house because he needed a friend to talk to. And all Peter could show him in his time of need was a sick man, shaking in his own bed because he was cold and stupid and had escaped death by the skin of his teeth.

*Anyone would be lucky to have him*, Peter thought in admiration.

He sighed, lips curling. It was high time he stretched, and so he left his mindscape and propped himself on an elbow, pulling away.

But then—Peter stopped moving when his knee brushed against a strange object. Something warm and heavy, situated right between Johnny's legs. It plopped down on top of his knee like a warm-blooded snake.

Peter's train of thought went off the rails and exploded.

Johnny was naked.

And Johnny was excited.

The appendage gave a lazy twitch.

Peter flushed in an instant. *Oh my God he's got a stiffy. Ho-oly morning wood.*

Peter urgently told himself that scrambling out of bed now and yelling obscenities would not only wake the whole house, but also make the situation five-hundred times more awkward.

*That's his dick. Jesus that's his dick.*

With bulging eyes, Peter eyed Johnny's face as he slipped his knee out from under the heavy flesh, trying to move as little as possible. *Don't think about it. Don't think. Don't look. NO peeking. God, Peter, get your head out of the gutter.* Peter edged away until he was almost hanging from the bed, and then began to think a mile a minute.

*Why the hell is he naked? When did he even start stripping?* He seemed to recall with perfect clarity that Johnny had arrived yesterday with a full set of clothes, and had slipped into bed with him wearing the same full set of clothes. He was *clothed*. *Was he always like this? Did he always sleep in his birthday suit?* Peter couldn't recall if Johnny had been naked in his bed the last time they were in this situation, but then again, Peter had slept in bed with Johnny a total of one time, and Peter had woken up too alarmed back then to even investigate.

Peter held his breath in a death grip when Johnny stirred.

The blond sucked in a deep breath, sighed sleepily, and then stretched his arms over his head. Peter didn't dare move until he could once again hear Johnny's light snoring.

*This is bad.* Peter tried to force back down the unmistakable coil of desire unfurling in his lower belly as he took in the scene before him, but it was useless.

Hands stretched towards the headboard, Johnny had never looked more exposed: long, muscled arms curving down towards broad, solid shoulders and firm pectorals, followed by a flat, sinfully ridged stomach that tapered off into a V as Peter's eyes descended. He was thankfully (or was it unfortunately?) spared the rest of the view, when the sun-kissed skin ended abruptly. Peter's thin blanket was to blame— it covered the rest Johnny, haphazardly draped low on his hips, covering the
telltale outline of swollen flesh. Peter's mouth went drier than it already was. He looked amazing.

Had Johnny always looked this tempting?

The question was at the forefront of his mind as he gazed shamelessly at the man before him.

Peter bit back the urge to moan softly.

What is wrong with you? You've known for long time now that Johnny looked good. He always looked good. That was part of the reason why you were always so jealous of him. He had the money, the fame, AND the looks to back it up. But now, this ... naked on my bed ... like, who allowed him? Who gave him the right to be naked and all skin in MY bed? Where I sleep? Who does that? Seriously. Johnny, for Chrissakes ...

Peter tore his gaze away and caught his breath for a moment, thoughts reeling. Johnny was naked and hard in his bed. Reality had still not sunk in, and his arousal was not letting up, not after the painfully arid, dry spell in his sex life that spanned eons.

I need a shower. Or someone to spray me in the face saying 'bad Peter'.

He realized with foreboding that what he really needed was to masturbate, bad, else he was going to be stuck with an itch so severe that he wouldn't be able to function the rest of the day.

Muscles protesting, he slipped out of bed and went around the room on his tippy toes, eyeing Johnny carefully. He missed the warmth of the bed almost immediately. That was Johnny's doing, no doubt. The man was a walking furnace, and Peter found another reason to crawl back into bed, maybe let his hands wander a little ... SHUTUP brain. Don't let your other head do the thinking.

He snatched a fluffy white towel from his closet, along with a set of everyday clothes, and raced out of the room while making as little noise as possible. Breathing a sigh of relief, he crossed the hall and locked himself in his bathroom, already ashamed of what he was about to do.

Within the confines of the private space he touched himself through the fabric of the hospital gown he was still wearing, letting out a stifled groan. This is insane. It's like I'm a teenager all over again. He tugged at his cock a few times, and then stopped, pausing for breath.

He turned and looked at himself in the mirror, frowning. He looked appallingly sick. It was no wonder people took one look at him and inquired about his health without question. Deciding that he wasn't going to look any better than he already did, he tugged at the gown and pulled it over his head, struggling as his shoulder throbbed in pain. Eventually, the fabric had slipped off, and his cock was freed, hard and throbbing like never before. He gave it a few languid strokes, biting his lip.

Bandages still covered his body in places where he was shot, and Peter wondered doubtfully if he could even take a bath. There's only one way to find out, he said to himself, and, bracing himself for the possibility of more pain, he started with the one on his shoulder, pinching the edge of a gauze with his thumb and index and peeling it off, very very slowly.

He winced at the tiny sparks of pain that came with stripping adhesive material off from skin, and he watched anxiously as more and more of his injury was revealed. The skin underneath was mottled with yellow-and-purple bruising, but the wound had closed, leaving behind an angry, jagged red scar.

Confident that he wasn't going to bleed out in his bathroom like a juice box punctured with holes, he set to work with the rest of his bandages and gauze, noting with fascination how each time a crusty gauze separated from his tender skin, his cock twitched in excitement.
He touched himself again, letting his fingers graze against the bottom portion of his member. *God, I need to get off. My balls are about to explode.*

_Glad I won’t have to look at myself too much in here_, he thought as he hopped inside the stall and turned on the shower head.

As he felt the steaming water sluicing down his back, Peter began to feel his arousal build. He held himself by the base of his cock, the other hand fisting and coiling around his shaft in slow, languid strokes. He groaned. With no other material to entertain him in his head, his thoughts started to flit back to his bedroom, to Johnny’s body. To Johnny’s mast of a cock, tenting in the sheets. _I should have taken a peek, _he thought disgracefully, _just a tiny peek. Oh God, Johnny ... why'd you have to be so sexy?_

His thoughts alarmed him, but he couldn’t find it within him to stop, not when he had his own throbbing length pumping into his fingers. He looked down at himself, watching as he was thoroughly doused in water. He could imagine the feel of Johnny’s flesh in his own hands, could envision how hard it would be. _Fuck, this is so wrong ... so wrong ... but Christ, it feels so good ... soap ... soap is your friend ... use it ..._

He let go of himself for a second and plucked a bar of soap from somewhere, running it up and down his hard body. His cock bounced as it was hit with the shower, and he threw his head back, closing his eyes. His body was in raptures from touching himself. The contradicting sensations of the aches from his injuries and the building heat in his groin sent him into a dizzying spiral.

Dick soapy, he trained his attention towards it yet again, thrusting his hips up to meet his curled fists. He started slow, making sure that ever nerve ending created friction against his fingers, and then slipping back out before starting the process all over again. It was torturous, and it was sublime. Fucking his wet fists made him salivate with need.

_It did not escape him that he was thinking of Johnny the whole time, thinking of the vast expanse of skin that Johnny had inadvertently showed him. Thinking of his beautifully exposed neck, his taut nipples. His armpits. The trail of hair leading down beneath the blanket._

_There was something inherently unscrupulous about thinking about his friend as he jacked off, as if he was crossing some line and walking straight into forbidden territory. It made him painfully horny._ _This is nuts ... insane ... crazy ... crazy GOOD, but crazy ... the regret would come later ... it would ... but for now, fuck, I need to come ..._

_His stroking had become erratic, and his wrists transitioned into the merciless treatment of his erection. His body became stiff, like a tense wire held taut. The pressure inside him built with each frantic tug._

_He was thoroughly taken by surprise when the coil of tightening tension sprung and unleashed, making him buck and come as a wave of sheer pleasure overcame him. He rode out his orgasm with a wordless cry, rutting upwards and painting the opposite tiles with his release._

_Heart pounding in his ears, body relaxing, the trip down from the top, he quickly realized, was sobering. Thoughts of Johnny naked had transitioned into feelings of guilt and shame and mortification, and he stood there brooding as water soaked him. _Oh boy, oh no. I just ... did that, and did that while thinking about Johnny. Holy crap._ He ran a wet hand down his face, thinking about the ramifications of what happened. Johnny was his friend now. Was he even allowed to do what he did? Wasn’t there like, a rule that worked against thinking about friends while buffing the banana?_

_It felt great, having washed and relieved himself of his pent-up sexual tension, but he was more_
focused on the trade-off that transpired. He turned the shower off when the droplets of water turned into cold, unforgiving needles. He didn't know what to think, other than conflicting thoughts about what he had just done.

He stepped out of the shower and quickly dried himself. He blamed himself for the mess, cursed his own raging libido, but he also put some of the blame on Johnny. *Why did he have to come here? Why did he have to sleep naked? Why did he have to be so ... so ...* He shook his head furiously, his hair sending droplets of water in every direction. He didn't think he could look at Johnny the same way after this. Not when he had thought of Johnny in such a vivid, downright dirty way. He wanted to hit the man. But at the same time ...

At the same time, he wanted to thank Johnny, too. The thought startled a quiet laugh out of him. He was grateful to Johnny for sneaking into his house in the middle of the night. For warming his bed. For giving him something to think about as he whacked off. It was a strange feeling, but something inside him inflated like a bubble, buoying him.

He wondered with a smile how Johnny would react if he gave him a Hallmark card that said: 'Thank you for being hot (in more ways than one)'.

He had plenty to think about, a lot of new information to sort through. He had let Johnny into his life outside of Spider-Man, and the blond was tearing through his life in new and exciting ways.

Wrestling himself into a shirt, awareness of his bedroom situation snapped back to him with full force when he heard his aunt from across the hall.

"WHAT IS THIS? WHO ARE YOU? PETER? PETER! WHERE ARE YOU? WHY IS THERE A MAN IN YOUR BED!?"

*Oh, no.* The shrill, raging voice of his aunt was shortly followed by the indignant squawking of a male voice.

*Johnny. Aunt May. This is not good.*
Overwhelmed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Peter raced back to his room with the speed of a man who did not get shot two days before, nearly tripping over his legs as he put on his PJs mid-scramble.

He didn't know why he expected anything other than the scene before him: Aunt May stood with her back to the door, arms crossed as she loomed over Johnny, while the blond ... well, the blond would have looked hilarious in any other situation, with the way his face took on a gobsmacked expression and the way he hugged Peter's blanket close to his chest in an effort to make himself less naked in his aunt's eyes.

It was all in all uncomfortable for all parties, especially Peter.

"--I'm a friend of Peter's I swear," Johnny's voice was hoarse from sleep and cracking with alarm. "I slept over, I--"

"And where are your clothes? I'm assuming it's that pile over there by the end of the bed?" Aunt May, on the other hand, sounded stern and unforgiving. Peter stepped in to interrupt.

"Aunt May, let me explain," he squeaked. The woman turned fast, and Peter saw her ire for the first time, saw how her eyes swept over him in a swift glance, as if half-expecting her nephew to look like he had been terribly debauched beyond recognition. When she saw him looking freshly-washed and dressed, she seemed resolved to think that Peter had gone and quickly disposed of any evidence that could allude to their shady bedroom activities the night before. She rounded in on Peter and he shook like a leaf.

"Need I remind you, Peter, that we have rules in this house? Rules about ..." she glanced at Johnny with menace in her eyes, "... guests?"

Peter could read what she was implying and swallowed down his growing mortification. "It really isn't like that!"

"Peter Benjamin Parker," she warned, shaking her finger at him. "Don't lie to me."

Peter raised one hand and drew a cross on his chest with another. "I swear on Brangelina's kids that no such activity transpired here last night. Scout's honor."
"I can't sleep with clothes on!" Johnny blurted out, eyes nearly popping out when he'd realized his timing. The two of them snapped their heads towards him, his aunt glaring at him with intensity, and Peter firing an unspoken 'good God man, don't make it worse' look his way.

"He--He really can't!" Peter hastily added, grabbing his aunt by the shoulders. "He's the Human Torch, Aunt May. You know, the Torch? One of the Fantastic Four? Sets himself on fire and flies around like a rocket? He's got this--got this weird condition," Peter giggled nervously. "Like, like--he can't sleep with clothes on because his body gives off too much heat."

It was a pitiful excuse--the kind of excuse that got horny teenage boys shot by overprotective fathers. In any other universe where powers did not exist, that excuse would have gotten Peter locked in a tower and Johnny executed in the backyard.

Peter shook his aunt slightly. "You have to believe me Aunt May, we did not have--"

"Hanky-panky?" Aunt May stared him down. "Because if you did, while I'm in this house--"

"--NO, for Thor's sake, I would never--"well, not in this house at least,"--attempt to do any hanky-panky."

Aunt May's lips were a thin line on her face. "You promise?"

"I promise," he said earnestly. Technically, it was true--what he did in the showers a few minutes ago was not in the 'Hanky-Panky' agreement clause.

She looked pretty unconvinced, but Peter tried to convey with his eyes that nothing really happened. He breathed a sigh when Aunt May's shoulders began to sag. He glanced at Johnny and shrugged, scrunching his face. "Johnny's just ... a weird guy, 'sall. He can't help it."

Johnny's visible relief was replaced by an offended pout.

"Okay," she said. "Okay. If you promise." She sandwiched his face with her hands for a moment, and then glanced at Johnny with an unsure look.

"You." She gave Johnny a sharp, disapproving glance. "Put some clothes on and come down for breakfast," she ordered him, and Johnny straightened his spine immediately. She then eyed her nephew again. "As for you, Peter. I need a moment in the kitchen."

She left without another word, and Peter buried his face in his hands. He felt like it was Thursday all over again, except instead of bullets, he had just endured multiple rounds of sheer mortification to the chest. He turned to Johnny, who was blinking fast and processing what had happened. Obviously he had just been violently woken up, looking bewildered beyond anything else, but he looked fine for a guy who had just survived his very first inquisition at the hands of May Parker.

Peter rubbed the back of his neck and coughed. Johnny turned to him with wide eyes. The subtle play of muscle behind the blanket was a clear indication that Johnny was still very much nude behind the fabric.

"So. First impressions," Johnny smiled hesitantly. "Glad that's out of the way." He rubbed at his eyes, shook his head, and sighed heavily. "She hates me, doesn't she?"

"Not exactly," Peter muttered, before averting his eyes quickly. "Look, just--just put some clothes on. She'd warm up to you once you're--yeah," Seeing Johnny naked in his bed vividly reminded him of what he had seen moments prior when he had woken up. It was indelibly etched in his mind, and he thought he wouldn't be able to face the man for a while without going red in the face. "Clothes.
Go. I'll--uh. I'll be walking to my execution now."

He stepped out of his room and left Johnny before things got any more awkward, taking the stairs down to the first floor. He dreaded what his aunt was planning to say to him after that incident. She was not past castrating someone if it meant getting her rules across.

When he arrived in the kitchen, Aunt May was just starting to busy herself with preparing breakfast. Eggs, bacon, buttered toast, the works. The table was set and there were fruits in a bowl, too, along with a carton of milk and a jug of OJ. Peter realized how famished he was, his stomach growling in response to what he was seeing. As if she had heard his hunger, she turned. She came to him then with renewed fury and hit him in the arm with a spatula.

"OW! That hurt!" he yelped, hand coming up to rub his arm. Aunt May looked ready to tear him apart, just as he had predicted the night before.

"Don't think for a moment that I forgot what happened yesterday, young man!" she snapped, the reprimand sounding harsh in Peter's ears. "You could have died. What made you believe that you can go out rescuing poor civilians when you yourself were in a sorry state? Ben would be whipping you with a belt right now if he had a violent bone in his body. I am deeply disappointed in you."

*I did almost die*, Peter almost told her, but he didn't want to give her another cause for worry. She was right, of course she was--what he did was unbelievably stupid and beyond inconsiderate. If he had died in that battle, he would have subjected Aunt May to the worst possible nightmare. His throat and chest tightened at the thought, but he didn't say anything, instead just letting her go off at him.

"--didn't raise you to be so thoughtless and foolhardy, Peter. I thought you had grown up. I thought you were past that. I'd accepted a long time ago that this is our life now, and I was resigned to deal with whatever fate handed me from then on, but this ... oh, this frustrates me a great deal. If I could ground you, I'd ground you so hard you'd be a hundred feet under--"

Her next words were bowled right out of her when Peter lunged and pulled her into tight embrace.

"I'm sorry, I really am. I was stupid, I know. So, so, so, so stupid. I realized it when--when it hit me that I wasn't at my best out there. I was weak, and I was stupid. I'm sorry. I'll be more careful."

He was almost begging her with his words and with how tightly she clung to her, that Aunt May's wrath all but vanished as she sank into the embrace. Peter scrunched his eyes closed to stop the tears from welling. He didn't want her to be upset, and at the same time he wanted to be reassured by her. His heart was already breaking at the thought of her crumbling without him. He already had an idea about how it would be like. He had lost important people in his life, too. And he was pretty much the only important person in Aunt May's life. Sometimes he forgot about that.

She pulled back and eyed him with concern, running her fingers through strands of his hair and touching his face with care and attention.

"I can't control you," she stated, her eyes shining with worry. "But I'm begging you--please be careful next time. Don't push yourself if you can't do what needs to be done. You're not the only superhero out there." As if to prove her point, her eyes darted towards the staircase.

Peter followed her gaze and saw Johnny coming down, fully-clothed and looking like a storm had hit him. His hair was a mess, and his shirt was wrinkled in that distinct 'previously discarded on the floor' way. Peter nodded to his aunt, eyes gleaming with an intent to keep his promise.
"Does he know?" Aunt May then asked in a pointed tone that Peter understood to be referring to his identity. The question led Peter back to the events of yesterday, to him recognizing the interior of the sick bay shortly after getting on his feet, to him seeing the view outside his one-way window. He'd realized that he was in the Baxter Building, and he'd remembered how he ended up feeling like a semi had hit him. The logical conclusion he came to was that his identity was now known to the Four.

But thinking about it now—Johnny, the person whom he expected would have the most dramatic, outrageous reaction to the news, was acting like he was none the wiser. If anything, Johnny seemed like he'd picked up his disposition from days ago in the labs, as if the attack on the Building had never happened. Johnny wasn't good at pretending—he was always so painfully honest that he wouldn't be able to lie about knowing Peter's sideline gig as a wall-crawling vigilante. He could lie, sure, but he was never capable of doing it convincingly.

"I don't think he does," Peter said, eyes widening as the reality hit him. Johnny didn't know. His secret was safe from his friend for now. But someone from the Four knew, probably Reed or Sue Storm.

Aunt May's eyebrows furrowed. "You said he was 'super'. And a friend. So why—?"

Johnny chose that time to walk into the kitchen timidly, hands in his pockets, shoulders hiked, and arms stuck to the side of his body. He was biting his lip and was wearing, in Peter's opinion, his most adorable expression yet.

Peter yanked the train of thought out of his mind and blinked twice.

"We'll talk about it later," he whispered to his aunt hurriedly, before leaving the center island and making a beeline for a table seat.

Johnny watched him cross the room and joined him shortly after, blinking expectantly as he plopped down on a seat.

"How did it go?" he leaned in and inquired. Peter wasn't sure what Johnny was referring to exactly, and he didn't know if Johnny even knew what he and his aunt had discussed, but he nodded to the blond all the same, then shook his head minutely.

"It's fine. We're fine. You're ..." fine, he almost said, which wasn't false, but was omitted from his sentence anyway because it led to dangerous territory and Johnny might read it wrong. He coughed instead.

"She isn't going to try to like, poison me or anything, is she?"

Peter's lips twitched, but then this was Aunt May they were talking about.

"To be safe, I think you should let me have the first bite of whatever she's serving you."

Johnny snorted, but then at Peter's no-nonsense expression his face shifted into a look of deep perturbation. After a few seconds, the corner of Peter's lips turned up again, and Johnny was gaping at him like a freshly-caught sea bass.

"That's not funny," the blond grimaced. "I'm telling you, I have zero luck when it comes to meeting other people's folks."

Peter blinked a few times. "What do you mean?"
"Oh, well, there's the 'I sleep in the nude' thing, for one," Johnny started with a roll of his eyes, expression brightening as he smiled crookedly.

"Yeah? Didn't notice," Peter tried to tease, but the talk with Aunt May was still fresh in his mind that he couldn't quite brighten up. Johnny was helping though, with his usual infectious smiles.

"Yeah. And then there's me catching fire in a flash. Now that used to be a constant problem."

"How?" Peter shook his head. "I mean, I get how, since, you know, fire and combustion powers, yikes, but how did that treat you?"

Johnny threw a glance at Aunt May, who was just finishing with the food preparations, and then leaned closer to Peter. "A father of this ex of mine once asked me to prove I had powers by lighting his cigar. I lit his house on fire instead," Johnny smiled as if he wasn't reliving such a shocking memory. "That was way back when I was still this clueless kid fumbling around for the controls like an idiot. 'Course, after that, the situation became this classified, government thing and I was banned from dating until I got this like, "Proficiency and Control License"\textsuperscript{,}" he punctuated the absurdity of the title by doing air quotes with his fingers. "I went without a single date for over a year. It was horrible, I had the bluest of blue ba--why are you looking at me like that?"

Peter raised an eyebrow when he said: "Nothing. What happened? Did Johnny Storm's fandom go berserk? Bet they made a change.org petition and everything."

"Give me a break, Peter! I was a very fragile boy. I had my needs. Lady needs. And fragile, as you may or may not know, made for a very effective strategy when it came to the ladies. The government ruined my formative years as a certified lady killer."

"Really? I thought it was your inability to find synonyms for 'lady' that did it."

"Yeah, you got me. It was, but it's easier to blame the government for, you know, everything bad that's ever happened ever."

Peter had become so engrossed in the exchange that he forgot himself for a while, a smile beginning to form on his lips. He wasn't aware that he had leaned towards Johnny, his chin resting on his propped arm, that when the conversation abruptly ended Peter caught himself and snapped back, straightening in his chair and blinking fast at the table.

He was at a loss for words. He'd expected that facing Johnny was going to be an uncomfortable undertaking, after the things he'd seen upstairs and the naughty stuff he'd done in the shower and all, or at the very least thought he was going to be an awkward, fidgeting mess from just being in the same room as him, never mind that his talk with Aunt May had left him more somber than ever ...

But the way Johnny had fallen into conversation with him and narrated his past experiences made Peter feel so at ease, that it also ended up making Peter feel slightly disconcerted. It was a paradox of reactions. He had this strange sensation that he was blossoming under Johnny sleep-thickened voice and casual, almost thoughtless way of speaking, that it left him quite bemused. How does he do that? Was he always good at making people feel comfortable?

"You look like Reed when he's trying to solve a really difficult puzzle," Johnny pointed out, knocking Peter out of his reverie. At Peter's inquisitive eyebrow, he continued: "I mean, he solves them eventually, but you know, you're making that face he wears a few seconds before he does."

"O-oh? Am I?" Peter felt his face heat. Johnny's scrutinizing gaze was making him feel stuffy, and it didn't help that Johnny was still giving off a very palpable warmth.
"Yeah. Like you're thinking too much or something." Johnny grabbed a glass and poured himself some orange juice. "Just a tip--don't overdo it--unless you can stretch your brain like he can," Johnny nodded sagely, grinning afterwards. "Wouldn't want you to turn into a complete carbon copy of him."

"I'll keep that in mind," Peter said distractedly. He was certain now, that Johnny had absolutely no clue he was Spider-Man. It was too big a thing not to bring up in conversation. Johnny would have asked him about it by now, sent out countless hints through his mannerisms, pried until Peter told him everything.

Peter was about to probe him out for information, but Aunt May chose that time to appear and set down some plates of freshly-cooked breakfast.

"Dig in," she said, training an eagle eye on Peter. "Finish all of this, or else."

Peter didn't need telling twice--he filled his plate and began to eat. Aunt May took a seat across from them and looked like she was gearing up to ask them some more questions, and Peter's eyes darted to Johnny now and then, watching as the blond's shoulders did a dance between tense and relaxed and his eyes looked down on his plate warily.

"So, whose idea was it to have an impromptu little sleepover in Peter's bed last night? Was it your idea Jonathan?" she leaned forward, eyes narrowing. "I'm assuming Jonathan is your name." She stretched to the side to reach a magazine rack next to the island, and then slapped down People onto the table like it was filled with incriminating evidence. "Coming in at #2 on People's 'Sexiest Super' under 25 list, right behind Spider-Man. Jonathan Storm, a.k.a. The Human Torch. That's you, right? I thought I recognized you. When you pose for a magazine like this, young man, it's not very reassuring on my side. Hence why I have to ask these questions."

Johnny's face looked comical as he froze, half a bacon sticking out of his mouth. He threw a panicked glance at Peter, who didn't really want to do anything about his aunt because he also wanted to know why Johnny decided to crash. Also, Peter might have found it amusing that Aunt May was using a photo spread of Johnny's semi-naked form as blackmail.

Peter gave the magazine a surreptitious once-over, deciding to look through it later.

Johnny swallowed as quickly as he can and then said: "I didn't know where else to go. I had this ... had this thing with my family. They were keeping secrets and keeping me out of the loop. I don't know if I should tell you the details ..." he glanced at Peter, since he knew what exactly Johnny's family as like. "But I needed to be away for a while. Even if it's just one night. And Peter, I knew he was sick but I ... I don't know. He was the first person that came to mind."

"I think you should tell us all about it," Aunt May said without missing a beat. Peter gave her a quelling look. "What? I'm always missing out on a few things and I'd like to be in the know, for once. Especially if it's about Peter's work. Don't you work there, Petey? That Tony Stark told me two days ago that you transferred to the building temporarily."

Johnny blinked at him in surprise. "Tony talked to your aunt? When?"

"It was a thing. This random thing. He dropped by--" Peter tossed his head and changed the topic. "Look--okay, just--just answer the question. I wanna know, too."

"Yeah, yeah ... I guess I should." Johnny shifted in his seat. "Well, you know how our building got attacked, right? It was on the news and all--maybe you heard about it, but this isn't about that. It's about Spider-Man, when he got--"
"JOHNNY," Peter interrupted a little too loudly, panic rising to his throat like bile. "Zip. That's too classified. Steer clear of classified stuff."

Aunt May looked between the two of them, puzzled and a little apprehensive. "When Spider-Man got what?"

Peter shot the both of them that an anxious look, and Johnny, to his relief, didn't go into the details. The blond took a sip of orange juice and continued: "Well, long story short, Sue and Reed know who Spider-Man is. Like who he really is. You know, under the mask."

"Oh," Aunt May eyed Peter for a quick second.

"Yeah," Johnny nodded slowly, his eyebrows creased in a way that Peter knew meant he was displeased. "It was this whole classified S.H.I.E.L.D. thing, like Peter said, and Sue found out because she was there with Spidey--but Fury--Nick Fury--he told Reed the truth, too. And Ben. I don't even know why he did, but they said it was for Spidey's protection."

Peter was starting to understand where the man was headed. The only reason why Johnny would be upset enough to run off and sleep somewhere else was because--"they didn't tell you. Is that it? Just flat out barred you from the club."

Johnny didn't say anything and stopped touching his food.

"But this is all for Spider-Man's safety, isn't it?" Aunt May said slowly. "The less people know, the better. Or so I've heard."

Johnny took one long overwrought breath through his nose. "I know. I--I see that now. But I wanted to know. Not because of something stupid like being in on the secret or being in the loop or ... being included," he tossed his head, looking lost and doubtful and unsure.

"Spidey's my friend. I don't think I've told you that, but he's one of my few friends." Johnny's eyes shone with affection. "And I want to know who he is because I want to be able to be there for him, not only while he's out there being Spider-Man and busting crime but also outside of that. I know him. He's kinda dumb in that he has to jump in and save people without thinking about himself. He usually falls on his face trying. He needs someone to look out for him."

Johnny's long declaration was met with silence. Aunt May was staring intensely at Johnny as if the man had transformed in the middle of breakfast, and Peter was too floored with the weight of Johnny's words to say anything.

No one had laid it out for him like that before. Aunt May got close a few minutes ago, but hearing it again from Johnny drilled it into his head and gave him a lot to think about. He didn't know that people were worrying, that they cared enough to actually think of his well-being outside of the suit. He didn't know that his actions were affecting people. That Nick Fury was forced to cave in and sell him out to the Fantastic Four because he was too reckless and impulsive to watch his own back.

Aunt May was right. He had a lot of growing up to do. Peter transferred his gaze from his food to her. Aunt May looked conflicted as she worried at her lip--her eyes quivered as if she was considering something serious in her head. Peter grew ever concerned for her. He wondered what it was like for her to hear other people's consternation about Spider-Man, to hear them say the same ideas she was always thinking about.

"I think that ... your heart's in the right place," Aunt May said finally. Johnny's head snapped up to meet her gaze. "You're right--this Spider-Man needs someone watching over him in case he does
anything too dangerous. Spider-Man, the true one, the man behind the mask, could use a friend like you, Jonathan."

Peter realized that it was a message to both of them. *Does she want Johnny to know everything? Is that it? Does she want me to tell Johnny?*

He couldn't say for sure. He didn't react to her words, but Johnny's expression showed just how glad he was to have heard Peter's aunt's opinion, that he continued to eat his breakfast with renewed vigor.

"You're welcome to stay here when things get tough round the family," she added stiffly, tucking away the magazine she'd used to.

Johnny stopped chewing and gaped at her. "I--thank you, ma'am," he sputtered. Peter thought that it was a bit too much an offer, but he supposed that Johnny had just unknowingly bought himself Aunt May's approval for saying the stuff he said about Spider-Man. Peter was at least thankful for that. It had bothered him that Johnny and his aunt had started off on the wrong foot.

"BUT. We do have an extra room for people who stay the night. Why stuff yourselves in one cramped bed when you could each have one? Especially when you have this, erm, condition ..." Johnny had the gall to look embarrassed and Aunt May pursed her lips. "Although, you'd have to give us notice. I don't appreciate anyone breaking into my home without my consent. And *don't* think of using this place as a hotel. If you come around here a lot you're going to have to work around the house once in a while."

Johnny nodded dutifully with each condition she set, and Peter could see him getting ideas about faking internal conflicts in the family just so he could stay over a few more times than allowable. Peter sighed, and then continued on with his breakfast. He didn't know what to feel about this recent turn of events, but there was something inside of him that liked the idea of Johnny stopping by frequently. *It was like having Gwen around again. Or having someone like MJ passing by. I mean, I hope it doesn't come around to that. I don't need Johnny and my aunt gossiping about me behind my back. That would just be all kinds of weird.*

They didn't say much throughout the rest of breakfast, but Aunt May's disposition towards Johnny had changed, and the blond looked a lot more at ease in the room with them. He figured that his aunt's advice had been very encouraging to the man, with the way Johnny seemed to look at her with more respect and reverence.

They migrated to the living room after the meal, with Aunt May muttering something about doing the laundry and leaving the two alone on the couch. Johnny had switched the TV on for him and they watched Saturday morning cartoons in silence.

Peter figured that he must have been indirectly deterring Johnny from saying anything, with how tired and exhausted he looked and how he had buried himself in piles of sheets. He was, after all, still slightly sick, and the stress of the events from that morning coupled by the sheer number of information thrust into his brain had taken a lot out of him.

He appreciated the space Johnny was giving him. He had a lot to sort through--from images of Midtown and too-vivid memories of dying, to Sue and Reed and possibly other people knowing his identity, to Johnny's presence in the house ... he was overwhelmed by everything. He didn't even know where to begin. He was daunted by the task, and he was afraid of being left to his own thoughts for even just a moment. *Could use a break from all of this. I need to step back and think and breathe. I'm giving myself a headache just thinking about think about it.*
"I'm sorry about this," he muttered. His voice sounded so quiet that he thought Johnny hadn't heard, but the blond turned to him, gaze transfixed on his face.

"Sorry about what?" Johnny asked, face open and earnest. He sat there with his feet tucked under him in the couch—it was reminiscent of how he sat in his own couch back in the Baxter Building, and yet again Peter was grateful for the man's comforting presence.

"M'not good company right now," Peter said sullenly. "My head hurts, and I'm just, I ... I have a lot to think about."

Johnny knocked shoulders with him, or rather tilted towards him and nudged the pile of sheets between them.

"Oh, shut up, dude. It's okay," Johnny replied, smiling faintly. "We're okay. Your aunt's great. A straight-up dame. Fiesty, just like you. And you two have been very cool about everything. It's me who should be sorry for barging in and dumping all of this crap on you two. You're still clearly a vegetable, and I've been very selfish."

Peter shook his head, but he was in no mood to argue about who should be apologizing to who.

_It's okay. It's gonna be okay._ He thought it was more wishful thinking than an actual statement of truth, and he sank into the comfort of the sheets wanting it to be the latter, lulled back to sleep by Tom and Jerry fighting on the TV.

Chapter End Notes

I know that a lot of people are starting to get impatient with the pace of the 'relationship' part of the story, but I just wanted to write this work at my own pace, and I didn't want to rush into this kind of whirlwind romance that a lot of fanfics seem to fall into. I wanted there to be a reason as to why Peter would end up falling for whoever he falls for, and I wanted more substance and characterization built into the central players of the story.

I'm always unsatisfied with what I put out and I pore over my writing over and over hoping that it's at least satisfying enough for my readers, so please be patient. Thank you so, so much for reading this work as far as you have, and please leave lots of comments since they help clean out a LOT of my mess and they also motivate me :D. There's still a lot of loose ends to clean plot-wise, but I'm working on it, I promise. Also I'll back up my chapters from now on lol since I don't want a repeat of last week when Chapter 8 got half-deleted (please re-read that one because it changed slightly).
Tony watched a few birds ritualistically peck at their fallen friend, thinking, listlessly, that there must be something in the way they cannibalized their comrade that would eventually translate into his next new thing if he looked hard enough. The future of Stark Industries, left in the hands--er--wings of a few desperate pigeons. Nothing came to him. He was picking apart a flock of birds, morbidly fascinated as they ate another bird. Nothing good could possibly come out of the sad activity.

*That one's Barton, swaggering around and shoving at the other birds. He wants to leave nothing for the rest of them, because he's a bastard. Thor-bird isn't allowing him--look, he's slapping Barton-bird with his wing. Nice. The one that looks like a major bummer is Banner, for sure--little guy looks like he'd rather eat his own feathers. And then the one looking woebegone at the sky, Steve Rogers, he's got that forsaken look. 'Why have you done this to us, God?' he coos. Shouldering every misfortune upon birdkind like it's a disease. That one's got a sharp twig up his ass.*

Clearly, he'd gone insane.

He started when the door to his office clicked open and Darcy took a peek in.

"He's here," she announced. "What should I--"

"Cancel everything." The two of them shared twin looks of surprise. And then, realizing how crazy he sounded, he nursed his head. "Wait--no. *Don't* cancel everything. That's stupid. Cancel my morning."

Darcy eyed her tablet. "You've got a meeting with your legal officers at ten, and if that goes well you can make it to PR assessment before lunch--"

It was Monday. Monday's were manic, just as the song said. He turned to the wall clock, read the time. It would be ten in five minutes. He always had so little time in his hands.

Tony bent forward on his desk and bit his lip behind two curled, callused hands. "Here's what you
need to do. Bump ten up to ten thirty--tell them I want a quick rundown of the sea of crap we're in, nothing more, nothing less, and tell them to send the rest via e-mail. I'll try to make the tail-end of the PR review. And also, free my lunch."

Darcy's eyes dropped down to her tech-y tech version of a clipboard, ran her fingers against the screen as if she was playing some mini-game, and then nodded briskly. "Already done."

"Good. How is he?"

Darcy blinked at him a few times, and then looked towards the ceiling, choosing her words. Tony waited patiently. Inside the cool façade was a restless clusterfuck of emotions he kept under lock and key.

"To be honest? He looks like a garbage person. But don't tell him I said that."

"I'm telling him you said that," he replied, and then stood, giving the unforgiving birds one last empathetic glance.

He then strode out of his office, all business and power and official.

There was a strange buzz in his head, one that he couldn't attribute to Scotch or a headache. Excitement, or anticipation. He wasn't sure which, but it was the first time since Thursday that he was going to see him. The first time since he found out last Friday. He felt bubbly and loose, like he was working a room full of pleasantly-inebriated fancy party attendants. He wasn't. He was walking through grey halls and an office setting.

He reached the elevators. The labs were situated below the recreational floors, above the corporate law offices, public relations, and human resources. He was, from an office worker's standpoint, going about his rounds like a chief executive officer should. It was the perfect excuse. Not that I needed any; I can do whatever I want around here.

Darcy accompanied him inside the lifts. She had an all-knowing look about her, as if Pepper had been grooming her into the perfect assistant-slash-busybody. But she was different--she was younger, more current, and had a bigger bra size. He thought about it in passing, and he was entirely unsurprised to find that she, despite her allure, did nothing for him. None whatsoever. He wasn't perturbed by this recent development. Everyone grew up a little with each day and with each crisis. Everyone moved onto different things eventually.

Tony, for example, was moving towards the labs. He left the elevators when it reached the right floor, Darcy hot on his heels. Bluish chrome features and blinding lights welcomed him, telling him that he had left the dull greys of business and was entering the halls of science.

He made a beeline for the head scientist's office. It was all to keep up appearances, he told himself. That was the purpose of this schedule, to establish some form of control in an otherwise completely reinvented playing field. He entered without waiting for the man's assistant to announce him. After all, he didn't need announcing, not when the walls to the man's office were made out of transparent glass. Darcy fell back to chat with her fellow assistant, and Tony sauntered in with all the lope and grace of a king.

If his memory served him correctly, the floorplan would allow Peter to catch a glimpse of him from the man's spiffy new lab office.

"Mr Stark." The man at the desk was stocky, built like a rugby team, not at all the type you'd find in these floors. He was startled by Tony's presence, shooting up from his desk. "To what do I owe the
pleasure?"

His name was Burbank or Burberry or something of the like. Tony didn't care to remember—in his periphery he could see the mess of brown hair, buzzing around the opposite office like a trapped fly. He focused on that, and consequently forgot what he was going to say.

"Nothing. Just pretend we're speaking," he told the man, losing his cool for just a little bit. The young man's presence already cost him his perfect control over himself.

Mr Bur-something, unfamiliar with Tony's habits and quirks in the office, blinked like he was having an aneurysm. "I don't understand ..."

"Relax," Tony snorted. "You're not in trouble or anything. Talk to me for a bit. I don't know. Tell me about your day. Make yourself animated. Engage me in conversation. You'll get a raise after this."

He had to forward the commendation to finance, go over some paperwork ... it will take too much time. Darcy will do it, that was, if he even remembered the task afterwards.

The scientist began to talk slowly, going into a detailed account of his wife and kids, and Tony nodded cordially, as if taking in every word the man was saying. He wasn't. He stood at an angle, his gaze halfway trained towards the other room. The office with an adjoining lab equipped with the latest, state-of-the-art machinery, perfectly customized for a bio-engineer of Peter's caliber. He nodded again, turned his head slowly, until he was casting his gaze across the hall.

Peter had stopped flitting about the room and was staring back at him, eyes wide and expression stunned. Tony lifted his head in regard.

Darcy was not exaggerating when she'd described Peter, but he would have to take a better look at the man to pass any judgment. Still, from the looks of it, Peter did not get enough rest through the weekend, and that made the bubble inside of him pop, to be replaced by something sappier.

"That's enough, thank you," he told the man, giving him a strained but grateful smile. "You can thank Mr Parker for the raise. But thank him in a way that he doesn't find out it's because of him."

He left before the man could so much as open his mouth to say something in gratitude, making his way over to the other man's office. He pointed to the ground when he met eyes with Darcy, silently telling her to stay and keep everyone busy while he did his business, to come at the right time and take action from whatever visual cue he sent afterwards, just as they had discussed. She caught on fast. She always did.

Peter Parker. The name did not escape him for a second throughout the weekend. He spent every waking moment coming to terms with the fact that he had been working with Spider-Man's normal, civilian self for nearly a month. He watched videos of the hero that made his stomach lurch, read articles from the Bugle that ignited him from the inside, went through report after report from S.H.I.E.L.D.'s database, yet still, he couldn't fathom it all.

Peter, all tacit and innocent, occasionally snarky and sarcastic, more often than not a bumbling mess, and Spider-Man, brave, reckless, recalcitrant, talks too much that he often performs less than ideally because of it.

It shouldn't add up. None of it should make a lick of sense, but it did, and once Tony had considered it in his head, approached it like law instead of theory, he began to think past identities and delve deeper.
Tony had thought about how young Peter must have been when he started wearing the mask, for him to have a seven-year long career full of hits and misses, feats of bravery, and narrow scrapes that led to near-death. How immensely exhausting and draining it must have been, physically, psychologically, emotionally.

The Ultimates had a world-class team of doctors behind their backs, ready to debrief them after each dire mission. He didn't know if Peter even had anyone close to that. Did his aunt know of his double life? Did other people? He seriously doubted it, not when the superhero was so intent on keeping his identity secret that even Nick Fury was inclined to grant him assistance.

He let himself into the man's office, coughing slightly to grab the man's attention. Years of being a vigilante could break a man, turn him into something else entirely, something dark and sinister, and yet here Peter was, a twenty-two year old genius in Microbiology and Biotech who still cowered at the thought of crossing his aunt, working for him, and doing a damn good job, too.

Tony was, quite simply, amazed. The Amazing Spider-Man, in the flesh.

His lips quirked in amusement when Peter turned sharply to face him, sending pens and paper clips clattering across the man's desk.

As Peter hurried to clean up and save face, he wondered how easy it would be to just grab the man's by the waist, press up against him, and claim his lips.

He entertained the whim for a moment.

It wouldn't be the first time he thought about it, and certainly not the first time he bit back the urge. You're in control. Get a grip.

They would need time. Peter would need a lot of convincing. And Tony ... he needed to be more forward, not in a way that would scare Peter off or make it look like he was pursuing a conquest, but in an open and honest way. It was difficult; Tony didn't do open and honest, but he had finally found someone that made him willing to go for it. Chivalry was not dead inside of him. It's Cap. He's rubbing off on me.

He stepped closer and peered over Peter's shoulder.

"I didn't expect your aunt to let you off until, oh, I don't know, next month." He watched Peter as his hands scooped up the office supply carnage and dumped them all into a Stark Industries mug. "Or Wednesday, realistically. I take it you're well enough?"

It was a weird stars-aligning situation for Peter. He could use his flu as a pretense to hide what was otherwise a far worse condition, that was, healing from a handful of slugs to the body.

Peter huffed quietly, and then turned to him, all bright-eyed and young and ridiculously disheveled. Peter's handsome face hit Tony like a truck, that he was taken aback for a moment. Despite Darcy's accurate observations about Peter's status, the man still managed to clock him with a face full of gorgeous.

"I--I--hi," Peter said eloquently. "I'm fine, I--I'm good. I got out before she could lock me up and throw away the key."

Tony's eyes went up and down, regarding the man critically. Despite the man's state, Tony could feel his attraction flare to life. Gods, but he looks. And he. God. And he looks so vulnerable and breakable. Why didn't you get all the rest you need, my sweet? I was sure your aunt was going to keep you in a dungeon of her own design ...
"Seriously. I did not expect you until Wednesday. I wanted you to rest." His voice was straining from the sheer willpower it took not to succumb to the temptation to just pull the man into a hug. *Have I gone mental? I'm going mental.*

Peter wore a stubborn face, clearly the default choice of expression when met with concern. "I know, I know, I know--but I got excited. A new office? A *lab* of my own?"

Tony laughed at that, just a small, incredibly fond chuckle. He liked the man's enthusiasm. It filled him to the brim with satisfaction. He had his doubts that the man might reject the new position, the new gears, but he knew that one way to the man's heart was access to more science and more work. And independence. The man was terribly self-sufficient.

"You like it?"

Peter eyed the place in wonderment. Truthfully, it was a standard office, and a basic lab with just enough personal touch from Tony to make it, incidentally, the next best-furnished laboratory in the building after his own.

"It's like--it's like winning the lottery. And Miss America. And ... winning all kinds of cool stuff."

"Good. You deserve it," he said, tone filled with sincerity. He tried to stop his hand from moving, but it was up before he could send the signal, and his finger was lightly running down the length of Peter's arm. "I wanted to see your face when you came in to see it, but I didn't expect you today, like I said. Neither did the lab crew, so you don't have actual work until the middle of the week."

Peter had noticed Tony's hand, and was beginning to feel flustered. Tony wanted to reach up and touch the flushed skin underneath the man's chin, run his finger along Peter's pulse. He forced down the urge and let his hand drop.

Peter ducked his head and shrugged lightly. "I guess I could, like, chill for a while and make myself at home. But ... why all this? I erm, I still don't know everything that's happened."

Tony blinked. It came to him that Peter had been recuperating all weekend. Far from S.H.I.E.L.D., the Baxter Building, the Grape. The thought sobered him a little. "That's ... that's right. I should catch you up to speed. Sit down."

Peter eyed the spinny chair meant for the owner of the office, and the chair that was there for the visitors the owner of the office entertained. Tony sat down on the latter seat before the man could protest. With no other choice, Peter made his way around the desk and sat gingerly. He looked amazed by such a simple office dynamic.

"Right. So." Tony leaned forward on the chair and propped his arm on the desk. "I take it you watched the news? You must have seen what it looks like outside the Baxter Building."

Peter nodded apprehensively, eyes flickering. Seeing firsthand how the man would skirt his way around the whole secret identity, it gave Tony a thrill. Of course Peter would know what happened at the site of the attack. He was there, and he nearly became a casualty. Tony tried hard not to think about that bit, because Peter was *fine* now. He was *safe*, and Tony had made a promise to himself that he was going to be there the next time Spider-Man decided to be No-Self-Preservation-Man.

Maybe he could have fun with all the secrecy for a while, push Peter's buttons, but he didn't want Peter straining himself mentally and making an ass of himself.

Instead, he continued. "Since we've made progress with the Grape, and it has revealed itself to be a precious commodity, valuable enough that people are willing to arm themselves and kill for it, the
Think Tank has relinquished custody of it. It's at the Triskelion now. We're still figuring out the logistics of moving back and forth between here and there, since we've still got a lot of poking and prodding ahead of us, but in the meantime, we're on standby until the team figures out what to do."

Peter's eyebrows almost hid behind his fringe. "The team? The research team?"

"The Ultimates," Tony said with a hint of seriousness. "The situation has become an issue of global security."

Tony watched as Peter's face shifted into a grave, intense expression. "I don't know what's happening. But there must be a reason for the attack."

He pursed his lips, and then nodded briskly. "I'm still trying to get you clearance." _It should be easy. You're Spider-Man. But you still haven't revealed yourself, and doing so would make it a whole lot easier on the outside._ Tony started to realize that feigning ignorance was going to be quite the task. It was hard not to let it slip that he was aware of everything, to just tell Peter that he knew. Nobody knew that he'd found out who Peter was. It would take some clever wordsmithing to keep up the ruse.

"I've got contractors helping with the repairs, and I'm embroiled in a bunch of legal disputes that shouldn't even involve me. But I'm supposed to be dealing with them in a bit--so if you want the not-so-authorized rundown, I can tell you everything over lunch."

It wasn't the smoothest excuse towards a meal invitation, but Tony had the option, and he decided to use it. "I'm free today," he added.

Peter's eyes widened, and then he broke eye contact, stared at some corner of the office. Tony was hoping that it was a casual enough invitation, but a clear enough indication of his intentions. Peter seemed to be considering his words, but his eyes flickered with indecision.

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"Wouldn't that be going against S.H.I.E.L.D. and Nick Fury if you told me all about it?"

Tony's answering smile was cheeky at best. "I'm sure ol' Nicholas wouldn't mind--he's got a lot to deal with himself. The White House, New York, the press ... And you know more than the average civilian, anyway. You worked with us. You're just one step away from being in the Ultimates, really."

"Really."

Tony watched the play of emotions on Peter's face, watched as the man realized what his words meant. Tony remained stoic this time. Peter would think that Tony had just made a passing comment on the situation, because how could Tony know he'd been enhanced genetically? But Tony knew, and he was using it as leverage to convince Peter that it would all be smooth-sailing if he just confided in them that he was in fact a super-person. It was a lot more complicated than that of course, and Tony didn't think Peter would be that easy, but he was patient. He would wear down Peter eventually. All he needed was the opportunity.

"Yes. Basically, you'd have to be a super soldier," Tony smiled innocuously. "Or some form of super."

"Funny," Peter said nervously. "You think I could maybe concoct something in here and turn myself into another Hulk?"

Tony's lips uncurled a little. He didn't expect anything at all from his little trap, but he wanted Peter
to give some hint in regards to his secret, at least. Tony had his work cut out for him in the 'earning Peter's trust' department.

"I wouldn't put it past you. But I'd say it's a bad idea."

Peter nodded absently. His hands were on the desk and he was staring at the woodwork, deliberating on his options. *His thoughts would be reeling right now, thinking of the best course of action. He would be considering his aunt's safety, his own personal feelings on the matter. It's amazing, how I can read all of it through his face alone. Peter is Spider-Man. Funny how that one bit of information could make him so easy to read all of a sudden. It's like reading a children's book with big, colorful letters on it.*

As Tony grew impatient, he decided to look a little dejected. He reached over and touched the end of Peter's fingers. The man visibly started from the contact.

"I mean--you don't have to. It's--it's just, you know. Lunch. We can get into more details about the ... the situation we're in right now. The Grape. And ... and other things, too."

He hid his eyes behind long lashes and shuttered eyelids. He was doing bashful remarkably well, as evidenced by the way Peter's eyes snapped towards him in response, stunned and wide as globes.

"Other things?" The question came out as a whisper. Tony noticed that Peter lost control of his hands whenever he was anxious--he pulled away and he started touching everything: the pens, his desk, his nameplate, his face, his elbows, his hair. Tony, of course, found everything endearing, and it stirred him forward to drive the message home.

"Us," Tony breathed, managing to turn it into a kind of forlorn sigh. Peter's eyes snapped to him. "I ... it sounds sudden, I know--heaven knows this isn't the right time for it. But ... but the present is as good a time as any. And I've been thinking about you non-stop. Non-stop, Peter. I ... I'm not good at expressing myself, I've gotten awards for having the expressive capabilities of a toaster, but I'm not a robot. I hope I haven't been ... misleading up 'til now, or anything."

He stopped short and froze, holding his breath. *I can't believe I just said that.*

"Wait." Peter blinked rapidly, and there was a spark of understanding there, somewhere, that Tony could hold onto. "You mean, you mean, you mean--"

"Yeah."

"You--and me ...? Like, me? As in, as in--"

"You. Yes, you. Peter Parker. God, Do I have to spell it out for you?" Tony shot from his seat, let his emotions take over for a moment. It started as a subtle manipulation on his part but quickly warped into an outburst of pent-up inhibitions all derailing into a cliff. He stirred around the room restlessly, paced nervously for a bit, and then sat down again. He leveled Peter with a genuinely pained expression.

"I figured our time together should have led to all sorts of signs. If you didn't pick up on them, then I'm an ass for beating around the bush and making it a freaking Where's Waldo game," Tony confessed, swiping at his face and rubbing his palm harshly against the side of it. "But yeah, you."

Peter went scarlet, burying his face in his hands. "Oh, my ... so, so it's true, then?"

"What is?" Tony's eyebrows knit with a deep yearning to comprehend.
Peter shook his head, hair flopping. "This is sudden. Like, like *Christ*, Tony. It's ... it's a kimchi slap to the face, sudden."

Tony didn't understand the reference, but his heart was thumping in his chest because he had forgotten everything. There was a plan. A plan, and somewhere along the way Peter messed with his head and it all went to shit.

"I know, I know--this wasn't part of the plan. Not part of it at all. The Long-Term, Detailed Plan that I had cooked up, but I ... I see you now, and I see you ... and you don't know, you don't know, but I want you."

"Oh my *god*."

It was as far as he was going to get when it came to an admission, and it all but ripped out of him in a crazed, desperate way that he was both mortified and disappointed. He wasn't like this. He was suave, and confident, and not a sixteen year old girl juggling hormones and drama. It all spiraled so suddenly. *Peter does that, makes your head and your heart go numb ...*

What if he had been so consumed by being straightforward that he had gone *too* forward, raced around too many laps and left Peter behind? His throat tightened as it went dry.

Oh no.

*Reset button, reset button, reset button.*

Tony held a hand up and closed his eyes. "I'm sorry. This was random. An Adamantium wrench into a hyperdrive dryer. I--" Tony thumped his head against Peter's desk, embarrassed beyond belief. "Just end my misery. I did not expect this whole thing to go down the drain so *fast*--"

"--know."

"No?" Tony croaked. Something inside him lurched to a dead stop.

"I want to know. Tell me all about it during lunch. I want to know."

Tony stiffened, and then tilted his chin up, propped it against Peter's desk. "What?"

Peter had a determined look on his face, but his skin was still flushed from Tony's sham of a declaration.

"I'm still ... floored, like ... I could say a few things right now that would probably be best left unsaid because *wow* ... but *wow*. WOW. I'm ..." Peter couldn't even make eye contact with him, and he looked more uncomfortable than he'd ever looked since Tony knew him, but the mere fact that his answer wasn't an outright 'no way' already made Tony's emotions soar. *Peter had agreed to talk about it. He wants to know more.* The thought made him inflate inside like a blimp.

All in all, Tony thought it was a diplomatic answer. He tried to not look too excited, but he did smile then, in a thankful, earnest, almost relieved way.

"I'll call you."

Peter gawked back at him, and then closed his mouth. He opened them again to say: "I ... I don't have a phone."

As if on cue, Darcy entered the room with an unassuming box in hand. She gave Tony a
surreptitious look, and then smiled brilliantly at Peter. Tony had forgotten that it was originally part of the plan for her to come in, that he was confused and disoriented, as if he was waking up from a dream.

"Hey, Parker. Looking great," she greeted, before sliding the box over to Peter, who also looked bemused by her sudden appearance.

"Darcy," Tony moaned into his hands. He didn't say anything else, earning him an annoyed look from his assistant. "Cripes. Okay, it's fine. It's okay."

But Peter wasn't listening; he was blinking at the box on the table, quite obviously taken aback.

"I can't accept this," he said firmly, while curiously eyeing the words written on the box at the same time.

"Of course you can," Darcy said dismissively, digging into some hidden, inexplicable pocket in her pencil skirt. She fished out a Stark smartphone, which would be identical to the one in the box. "We all have it. Well--not all of us. Just some of the people Mr Stark considers important enough to call."

"I--I can't. I'd have to pay--" he stammered, but Tony got hold of himself again and raised his hand.

"Consider it a company phone," he insisted. He was still reeling from being interrupted by his assistant. "For work purposes. I'd like to be able to reach you without worrying about which medium to use. Not her fault, my fault. I went for a different plan. It wasn't even a damn plan. Just me making an ass of myself. But it worked. It worked."

Peter glanced at him, clearly overwhelmed by everything, the office, the phone, Tony. His eyes shone with emotions.

Tony could tell he was hesitating about the phone, and his arc reactor warmed because of it. It was one of the many things he appreciated so much about Peter. He had no interest in money or luxuries, no matter how useful they were in life. The thought just made him all the more sure of what he was doing, what he was pursuing.

"Oh my God, just take it, loser," Darcy said, taking the box and opening it for him. "Here--I'll teach you how to dismantle the browsing blocks. I could never get good porn until Fred from tech support showed me." She took out the phone, looking new and pristine in its bubble-wrap and packaging.

She then paused briefly, and then glanced at Tony. "Oh, and Sir--it's ten twenty-five," she informed him.

Tony stated at her for a moment, and when comprehension dawned, he sighed. He would have loved to watch Peter play with his new gadget, would have loved to stay and just bask for a while, but work was still work, and Monday was still manic Monday.

He stood up, straightened out his suit, and then regarded Peter with the usual fondness, cranked up a notch because of their recent development. He was going out to lunch with Peter, and he had managed to make his interest in the man clear as the light of day.

"I'll call you," he promised, putting as much weight on the words, and then glanced at Darcy with narrowed eyes. "Stay off the gutter sites--there's a reason people pay for the good porn. And teach him everything there is to know about the phone."

"I hear you, I hear you," she answered and then turned to Peter, who was, to Tony's delight, actually starting to get excited about the phone. And consequently, starting to forget the monumental thing
that just happened between them.

*I hope he doesn't get too caught up in that,* he thought sadly, *because this, all of this, it's going to be following me for the rest of the day. But at least I have him for lunch. That should be something to look forward to.*

He made a swift exit, and consequently missed the subtle way Peter's eyes followed him out of the office.

Chapter End Notes

Like the title says, this was not part of the plan HA HA
This chapter got away from me--suddenly Tony was doing this and that and I just went with it. I couldn't help myself.
Panic

Chapter Notes

Trigger WARNING: Panic Attack

This is probably the longest chapter I've written, and even then I still had to cut it down.

For the fifth time counting, Peter splashed water onto his face to cool himself down.

*I got this. I know exactly what to do when it comes to these things.*

--was what he would have said if he had an inkling, or even a lick of a warning beforehand. He shook his head vigorously. He'd once dived headfirst into a skirmish between the Moon Knight, Elektra, and a bunch of Kingpin's goons without knowing who any of them were or what they could do, and still he'd been more prepared for that than *this*.

Really, there was no preparing for the spontaneous, uncharacteristic declaration of--what was it? yearning? desire?--that Tony Stark had thrust upon him.

It wasn't the man's style, first and foremost. Not that Peter had any idea what constituted Tony's style in regard to romancing the unsuspecting, but Peter assumed that a lot of wining and dining was involved, along with money, more wine, and copious amounts of dirty sex, if the holy words of the chief gossips of the company were anything to go by.

Tony had been pleasantly drunk half the time Peter had known the man, but as far as he knew, all he got from the man was a company phone and a compilation of wildly inappropriate jokes.

Something like bitter disappointment accompanied the train of thought.

He splashed more water onto his face.

And moreover, he wasn't Tony's type. Peter knew this, because he used to work for a newspaper, and also maybe flipped through Cosmo whenever he saw one lying around. The amount of photos in circulation, photos of the man with an angel-haired, blue-eyed walking twig on his arm was clear evidence of Tony's type. If that wasn't enough, Tony had said as much on record during interviews: he liked girls who were pretty, young, and talented.

Peter eyed himself in the mirror--he was pale, shabby in dress, and genetically-engineered to stick to walls. Also he had a dick.

*I'm overreacting.* He let out a small, slightly unhinged giggle as he loosened his tie. *Totally bugging out.* For years he'd cultivated a tendency to overreact when it came to anything involving attraction, a disability that stemmed from years of self-esteem issues, failed attempts at relationships, and grief over dead loved ones, punctuated by a dry-spell that put El Niño to shame. He usually dealt with it by hiding, freaking out, and then reclaiming his inner calm afterwards. It was a thing, but it wasn't a frequent thing. This did not happen to him frequently.

And also, Stark Industries did not equip the employees with a kit for this emergency, nor did they post notices along the walls to warn people: "Bear in mind that the managing director of this
company is prone to random proclamations of the romantic kind towards the employees. Thank you."

There should have been something like that in big, bold letters posted somewhere in the building where the socially-inept could see. It should be written in the newsletters. Or e-mailed as part of the announcements. Peter never read those, but then Tony would have an excuse for his behavior, and Peter wouldn't have to hole himself in the bathroom trying to gather his bearings. There was no excuse, and all clues and signals and hints aside, Peter was blindsided.

Of course, there was the underlying excitement and thrill to it all--Peter could feel his heart tap-dancing in his chest for quite some time now, that he was sure the palpitations would kill him any second.

Tony wanted him. Peter's insides quaked at the thought. The man, after all, was sexy--dark hair, piercing eyes: he was handsome, debonair, and wild, in that classic, carefully controlled way. He wore a suit like he was born in it. He laughed without a care and put people at ease with his words. Frankly, Peter could make a list, write lyrics, and compose a mega-hit pop single about Tony's attractive qualities, and it would earn him millions.

He had always been nonplussed about the empire built out of gold bars, not to mention the power and influence that came with the wealth, but God, Tony was a genius, too. He couldn't even imagine the kind of pillow talk a brain like that was capable of. It lit a fire inside of him, and he wasn't sure if anything short of the Atlantic could douse it.

Peter stepped back until his bum met the opposite wall, and then slid down onto the floor. Should he follow through and see where everything goes? Was it the right thing to do? Did he have a choice? It was a stupid question. Of course he had a choice. Tony gave him the wheel. But Peter, for the life of him, didn't know where to steer, or where they would even end up after.

His phone buzzed, a muffled trilling noise coming from the right pocket of his pants.

It took him a second to realize someone was calling, at which point he scrambled to his feet in a rush, flailing for his phone.

"Shit, shit, what if it's him? What if it's--what if--"

He held the phone close to his face, reading a string of numbers followed by 'unknown number'. He was sure Tony would appear as 'Tony' if he called.

He sagged against the bathroom wall, taking long, steadying breaths.

The phone rang in his hands, still.

Blinking stupidly, he answered the call.

"Uh, hello. Who's this?"

"Nice of you to get a phone, finally." Peter knew the voice well--heard it talking down to him on several occasions. "I've been telling you for months that you needed one."

"Nick?" His eyebrows knit together. How did Nick know his number? He literally had the phone for all of thirty minutes. "How did you get this phone number?"

"It's not anything sensitive. Took me a second to get."
"What do you want?" Whatever the answer, Peter was sure it wasn't good. The amount of times Nick Fury popped his head into his day was equal to the amount of times he was forced to do something that he really did not want to do.

"It's nothing bad. You don't sound so good. You alright, Parker?"

A pause.

"What do you want?" He didn't like Fury calling him on his thirty-minute old phone like it was a thing he did. Like checking up on him was an established habit. "This is Nick Fury, right? Head honcho of S.H.I.E.L.D.?"

"It's a serious question, Parker. I'm calling about your health. You got up and bounced from the ICU just a day after a life-and-death surgery."

"I'm fine," Peter said automatically. "I'm at work. I'm working."

"File says you don't clock in 'til Wednesday."

Peter didn't even want to ask how Nick knew that.

"What do you want?"

He heard a sigh through the phone. It surprised Peter, because he always thought that Nick, heartless robot that he was, did not breathe.

"I got a request from Sue Storm. She wants you to drop by."

"Drop by? Why?"

"You know why. Your health. She wants to check you over. You sustained a lot of damage, Parker."

Peter bit his lip. He didn't want to see Sue Storm. Not after Thursday. Not after the stupid thing he'd done that led to more people knowing about his identity.

"I can't. I'm busy."

"Not 'til Wednesday you aren't."

"So when? Tomorrow?"

"No, now. While she's not busy with other things."

Peter bristled. "What, like, now? Like, now, ASAP, now? No, it's short notice. Jesus, hasn't anyone heard of a week's notice?"

"She flies east tonight on a S.H.I.E.L.D. excursion. You go now, or we haul your ass using special ops--"

"--special ops!?"

"--it's been long overdue. Stop giving all kinds of stupid flack. You could be rotting as we speak. Not to mention your mental health, what with the amount of shit you just went through--"

"If I had no choice about it, then why did you even call!?"
He hanged up, and somewhere at the back of his mind Aunt May was admonishing him for yelling at his elders--how old was Nick Fury anyway?--but then he thought he had a valid reason. His phone read 11:15 on the clock. He couldn't go, not now, because going there meant not going to lunch, and not going to lunch meant ditching Tony.

He hadn't even signed anything yet. Peter's cursor still hovered over the 'go out on date' button.

And now, it looked like the option had expired.

He wondered if he should test Nick's promise on the special ops.

He let out a tiny, frustrated growl. He wasn't even on the team. Nick Fury shouldn't have power over him. He didn't have a right to be concerned.

Times like this, he turned to his Uncle Ben. As always, in his head he imagined the man saying something along the lines of great responsibility including responsibility to his own welfare. It sucked, because the man was always right. Going to the Baxter Building would mean swallowing his pride and doing something he needed instead of doing something he wanted.

He sighed for what seemed like a hundredth time that day, face scrunching in frustration and misery.

Maybe it'd be like a routine check-up, like one of those short visits to the pediatrician Aunt May used to take him to. It didn't have to be long. He could just walk in, suffer a little poking and prodding, and be on his merry way. It didn't have to suck. Maybe it'll be quick, and painless, and not at all mortifying. He didn't know how Sue Storm operated as a physician, but going by his experiences with her while working at the Baxter Building, he quickly disposed of any hopes that it would be something other than thorough and most likely invasive.

He didn't look forward to it at all, but he couldn't complain if Sue wanted to pick him apart and make sure he was okay, not when he practically owed the woman her life. Sue had rescued him, She did what was technically a miracle as far as emergency surgery went. She wasn't getting any awards for it, either, so the least Peter could do was show up, let her do what she wanted, and thank her for everything. It was the right thing to do.

He needed to go. He knew that. This was a serious issue, and if he didn't allow anyone else to take care of him, he could crumble to dust or implode or push himself to the point that he'd be unable to get back up again. He'd basically decommission himself. And he couldn't very well let that happen. He couldn't do that to the people who were counting on him, and certainly couldn't put Aunt May through another harrowing experience.

With just enough resolve, he wiped his hands down his damp face and dried them on his pants, unsophisticated person he was, and then pushed past the bathroom doors to get his things from his office.

He was resigned to the fact that he was going to have to sacrifice the date with Tony. Peter didn't have the heart to tell him straight away--the man was probably busy doing business things, and Peter was too much of a coward to call the meeting off anyway. Tony would undoubtedly ring him to tell him where to meet, anytime during his travel from Stark Tower to the Think Tank, and he would just have to deal with it then.

--

Peter had taken a cab, because he didn't think he could handle shouldering through a sea of people rippling through the city like hungry ants. All the while, he'd been waiting with bated breath for The
Dreaded Call, knee bouncing restlessly throughout the ride. He'd even rehearsed what he was going to say, though he knew that when the time came his head would empty and he'd end up being tongue-tied.

Once he'd arrived at the Building, he entered through the main lobby, palming the Stark smartphone like a lucky charm. He had not anticipated the traffic when he should have, and it was already a little past twelve, but no calls came, no text, no notice, and Peter was a knot of nervous energy.

He went over to the receptionist and stated his business, middle and index fingers tapping 'let me die' in Morse code over the counter. He knew the woman recognized him, but she didn't comment on it. Instead she logged him in and then gave him a key card--a visitor-version of the one he got day one, and then pointed him to the elevators.

"Use the card to access the--"

"--restricted levels. Yeah, I've been here before."

Interrupting her earned him a rather cold look. He swiftly moved to remedy his curt attitude by smiling, but from her answering grimace, he must not have looked all that pleasant.

Feeling that he'd abused the hospitality required of her job, Peter quickly moved to the hall with the elevators, phone in hand. He caught an empty one just as it was about to close, jamming his hand in between the sliding doors at the last second, and then stepped inside, anxiety squeezing in with him and filling the compartment. He was as nervous as the first day he came to the building, and it did nothing to help his already exhausted mental space.

The gap between the doors attempted to close, but yet again another hand wedged in between them, and the doors lurched to stop before allowing entrance.

Peter nearly dropped the gadget in his hand when Johnny stepped in, wearing a shirt, sweats, and a satisfied smile on his face. Shock set into the blond's features when he saw who occupied the elevator.

"Pete? What are you doing here? I thought you were taking it easy at home."

Peter peered over Johnny's shoulder, any hopes of escape dashed by the click of the shutting doors.

"I--uh--work." He racked his brains for a proper answer, distress evident in his unsteady eyes.

"Yeah, Tony sent me. He uh, he needs a file delivered."

Johnny raised one perfect eyebrow, and Peter noticed the temperature in the compartment spike. The blond was windblown and flushed; sweat made the plain white shirt cling to his body like wet paper. He'd clearly been somewhere jogging, or out doing some other physically-demanding activity. Johnny evidently liked the outcome of whatever activity he did. Peter hid his probing eyes by blinking fast. He'd never been claustrophobic, but right then the walls felt like they were closing in and drawing them together.

Peter stood firmly in place.

"Liar. First day back from the plague and Tony treats you like a courier? You sure you're not working for a douche?"

"It's very sensitive information," Peter said in defense. "You know, science stuff."

Johnny's arms crossed over a perfectly sculpted chest. "Nice try. Could have fooled me, but I know
you, man. For one, you don't make eye contact when you're lying."

Peter backed away, glanced over Johnny's face--missing his eyes by a few inches--and then dropped his gaze again, down to his phone. Johnny followed the movement, saw what was in his hand, and frowned.

"You have a phone. Why didn't you tell me you have a phone?" Johnny reached for it, and like similar-poled magnets Peter's arm swung back, his curled fist hitting the elevator wall. They locked eyes for a moment--Peter looked apprehensive, and Johnny looked momentarily stung.

"I just got it today, actually. What--"

"Gimme it." Johnny stepped forward and quite suddenly he was close--so close that the tiny, infinitesimal gap between them made Peter lose focus. He caught a whiff of Johnny as the air in front of him was displaced; the man smelled woody and strong, like burning spice, punctuated by a warm, almost steaming musk. The heady scent filled his nose, assaulted his senses.

Before long, the phone slipped out of his sweaty palm, having reacted too late to Johnny's deft fingers.

"Don't--" As Peter tried to snatch it back, Johnny turned around and wedged himself in the corner of the elevator, scrolling through Peter's contacts quickly. Peter huffed in annoyance, unable to get past Johnny's wall of a back.

Johnny's eyes glinted with mischief as they scanned down the list--it was a very short list, which meant that Peter wasn't lying about getting the phone recently, but as he read the few entries, one in particular stood out like a sore thumb.

Aunt May
Hot n' Sexy Friend
Tony

"Hot and--dude, what the hell!?" Johnny did a 180 and waved the phone in front of Peter's face. "What is this? Hot n' Sexy Friend?"

He gave the blond an incredulous look before eyeing the screen. His mouth formed into a weird shape when he read the name, an explanation ready to dive off the tip of his tongue.

"No, no, wait. Don't tell me. You ran into some guy who gave you his number, but you didn't catch his name so you wrote this because he's--"

"That's Darcy." Peter's eyes withered. "I don't know what her deal is. It's like her idea of a joke or something--give me my phone--"

Johnny turned to the side and eyed him suspiciously, holding the phone out of arm's reach, and Peter stood there, eyes narrowing. They stayed like that until the doors opened to Peter's floor, but Johnny moved quickly and tapped the button that made the doors close. Peter followed the movement, eyes bulging in bewilderment.

"What is wrong with--"

"Tell me you're not seeing anyone."

Peter froze. Johnny's words struck him dumb. His voice ... his voice had come out low and deep, and he was staring so intensely that Peter couldn't move. Any air he'd taken in stayed trapped in his
lungs, his muscles locking in place. Johnny looked ... he couldn't describe it, but he felt himself quiver involuntarily.

There was a tense pause that followed where neither man budged an inch.

"Tell me."

Peter found his voice after wrenching himself away from the murky thoughts in his head. "I told you-it's Darcy. She taught me how to use the phone and put her own number in."

Johnny searched Peter's face for a second, looking for a crack in his facade. Finding nothing, his shoulders sagged and his expression softened, and just like that, Peter could move again. What the hell was that? Peter thought, head reeling. The next second however, the blond was going through the phone again as if nothing had happened. With the piercing gaze gone, Peter bristled fast, frustration flaring back to life.

"Johnny, I swear to God, if you don't give it back--"

"Alright alright alright, I just--" The doors opened again, and they struggled for a bit, with Peter side-stepping around Johnny and Johnny spinning on his heel to keep the phone away. Peter grew weary of Johnny's behavior, but before he could say anything about it, the blond held the phone up, and Peter craned his neck back. Shortly after there was a noticeable ping that came from the pocket of Johnny's pants. They shared a look.

"What did you do?" Peter drew his eyebrows together.

"Sent myself a message." Johnny beamed at him then, and it was like the man, the dark and imposing man just seconds ago was someone Peter had imagined. "Got your phone number. It'll come in handy this Friday."

Before Peter could speak, Johnny took his hand and placed the phone gently on it. The light brush of fingers along the back of his hand made Peter's heart skip a beat.

The elevator door started to close yet again, but Johnny caught it this time, and he stepped out, Peter following his every move. He was still a tiny bit dazed. His mind kept going back to the look Johnny gave him, the intense one, the one that looked like if they had stayed a minute longer in the elevator something might have happened beyond his control--

"You stepping out? You still haven't told me what you're doing here," Johnny said as he turned to face him.

Peter regained his wits and then stumbled out, nearly tripping on the closing doors. Johnny's hands came up to catch him, but he'd caught himself with the toe of his foot before he could barrel forward.

He could see that Johnny was waiting for an answer, the man's expression going wide and expectant, and Peter was running out of brain cells to use, of excuses to concoct, that his breaths started coming out short--

At that exact moment, Peter's phone interrupted the silence by ringing loud through the hall.

And in the next second, Sue Storm rounded the corner and found them. Peter's eyes snapped to her, and a thousand thoughts flew into his brain at once.

The phone vibrations sent shocks through Peter's body. Johnny began to swim in his vision, things began to look blurry, and there was a pounding in his head that wouldn't stop ... Tony--Johnny--Sue--
Tony--Johnny--Sue--they all went back in forth in his head, and it felt like he was in a life-or-death situation, facing a terrible conundrum of swirling questions; who to answer first, who to talk to first, where to turn, what lie to tell ...

Assaulted by several harrowing tasks at once, his brain shorted out into a singular point. He pressed a finger to his phone, swiped the call towards the red phone symbol.

He swayed on his feet then, realizing that he had panicked and shut out Tony's call.

Johnny caught him when he fell forwards.

"Pete--hey--hey! You alright? Peter!" Johnny shook him lightly, steady hands keeping him on his feet. Peter felt oxygen-depraved and thirsty and cold all at the same time.

"What's going on? Peter?"

Sue was next to them in a second, but he saw her as an afterimage, a figure standing next to the man he was clinging onto for dear life. He struggled for air, but he found the task of breathing impossible, trembling as his chest lit on fire. The hall veered sideways, and he could hear them, hear the increasing distress in their voices, but he couldn't respond, because there wasn't even any air in his lungs to push through his vocal chords--

"Johnny--he's having an attack--"

"A what?"

"A panic attack--get him on that chair--Peter, listen to me--breathe, honey. Calm down. And breathe. Follow my lead, alright? Inhale--exhale--come on, you can do it--"

He was hauled off to a seat, and he tried to do as she instructed, sucking the air into his squeezing throat, and then forcing them back out again in a rush. His eyes, glistening round the edges, were forced shut, but he felt her hastily undo his tie, felt Johnny slip his fingers into his hand. The room spun. It felt like he was trying to breathe in dust and gravel, but he did his best, worked his diaphragm until it ached, big, heaving breaths that made his shoulders rise and fall.

His eyelids opened a crack, and he saw Sue nodding encouragingly, breathing in time with him. Slowly, his breathing, though still labored and shaky, receded into a safer rhythm, and the invisible force pressing down on his chest eased. His body went lax, and the vice-like grip he'd had on Johnny's hand uncurled.

"What was that? Why did he--what's going on, Sue?"

--

Johnny's face was stricken with worry, but Sue didn't spare him an answer, eyeing Peter carefully as the man rode out the episode.

"Sue! Did I do that? Was that my fault?"

"No, you didn't--Johnny, calm down--you didn't do anything. He's fine." She sounded unconvincing, her critical gaze not pausing for a moment as she examined Peter. "Can you speak? You still with us?"

Peter closed his eyes again and relished in his returning ability to draw breath. He gave a stiff nod.
"We need to talk about this. I need to examine you," she told him, and then glanced at her brother, deliberating on her next course of action. Johnny waited, his face etched with confusion and concern.

"Johnny," she started, and then carefully chose her words before saying them. "I'm Peter's physician. He came here because I told him to. And he's having a hard time right now so I have to take him to the sick bay."

Her brother's eyes widened at that. "What's going on?"

Sue stood up and tugged at Peter's arm, and the man looked too exhausted to protest. He complied, knees wobbling slightly as he stood.

"I can't tell you that," she muttered, avoiding his gaze. "He's my patient, and his ... predicament is confidential. Do you understand?"

Johnny's eyes flickered sharply to Peter.

"He's going to be fine," she added to alleviate his distress. "He just needs some time with me. And some ... experts waiting in the infirmary. Maybe in the future you two can talk."

Sue took Peter by the shoulder and guided him towards direction of the sick bay, and Johnny wanted to ask more questions, probe deeper into the mystery unfolding before him, but Sue wore the face she wore whenever she needed Johnny to comply without a word. Johnny couldn't say anything, just trailed after the two as they disappeared into the next corridor.

The ghost of Peter's deathly grip lingered on the palm of his hand, leaving him with another pile of questions about his inexplicable friend.

--

Questions that he hoped that the man sitting in a secluded booth at the back of a high-end club could answer. He found Tony sitting alone nursing a large glass in his hand, his other curled lazily around a black label bottle. The container was nearly empty, yet Tony looked clearheaded, almost sober really, his stooped posture and the contemplative expression on his face notwithstanding.

Johnny casually slipped into the seat facing Tony. He wasn't sure if the spot was VIP only, but if anybody saw him, they didn't choose to kick him out.

"Just the guy I was looking for," he said as a way of greeting.

"Oh, hey--"Tony perked up at the presence of someone willing interrupt his depressing whirlpool of thoughts,"--oh, well hello there. You look strapping."

Johnny gave the man a slightly bewildered look. Strapping? "It's me, Johnny. Johnny Storm?"


"We met several times before. Saved the whole city a bunch of times."

"Yes, yes--I'm well-aware of who I'm speaking to."

Johnny kept an eyebrow raised. A few seconds ago Tony Stark almost looked dead to the world, but with someone to talk to his face had morphed, and he looked almost normal. More than normal, in fact--he looked so friendly and good-humored that Johnny found it suspicious.
"You sound awfully normal for someone who just nearly downed a bottle of ol' Johnnie."

Tony chortled. "Nanites," was all he said, before taking a sip.

Johnny didn't know what that was supposed to entail, but he had other business to pursue with the man, and getting tips on how he managed to sustain deadly amounts of alcohol in his system without, well, dying, was not one of them. He was here to ask about Peter.

"Please, have a drink. I haven't had a buddy in a while to drink with."

Tony used a pair of tongs to put ice on an empty glass and then followed it up with some Scotch, staring intently at the pouring alcohol as it made a babbling noise.

"I actually didn't come here to drink--"

"--nonsense! You come into a bar, you come out of it drunk. It's a socio-cultural rule. Stick to the rules, Johnny."

The way they both eyed the pristine glass of whisky were at two ends of the 'good idea' spectrum.

Johnny rubbed the back of his neck and looked around the place. The interior was posh, expensive, strategically lit and furnished, and the atmosphere was lively--EDM played played, people engaged in loud conversations with each other, and the dance floor did not have an inch of space available. How is this bar so full on a Monday? But for all the noise and the fanfare, Tony's booth seemed to be a bubble, as if something (or someone) was repelling everyone from the spot. Maybe Tony himself?

"Hey. You had a rough day?"

Johnny's eyes snapped back to Tony. To his surprise, the man was smiling at him disarmingly, a light smirk that fit well with his devilishly handsome features playing on his lips. Johnny didn't expect the question, but Tony's open, inviting expression had him answering before he could stop himself.

"Terrible," he confessed, wrinkling his nose and shifting in his seat. "It was good--went out for a run, saw some folks playing basketball at the local court--but then something happened after that and--"

"You found yourself in a crowded bar later in the night with a friend offering you a drink because he knows how to read you to the letter," Tony supplied, eyes mirthful. "See, in my book, I'm doing you a favor. Drink's on me."

Uncertainty spread across Johnny's face, but Tony leaned in, legs spread wide and posture loose, and his voice dropped down to a whisper.

"You want to ask questions? I won't talk unless you loosen up a bit."

His head craned around. Surely Johnny could find someone to replace him? Someone to act as a dam or buffer to the river of booze Tony was pushing towards him?

Johnny looked at Tony again, scanned him up and down surreptitiously, and saw the swelling confidence and the mischievous twinkle of the eye. Tony's power was palpable. Johnny sensed for the first time that he was sitting in a bar with an actual billionaire.

His hand slipped along the table and slowly glided towards the glass, fingers curling around its ridged surface, and Tony followed its every movement, right down to when Johnny brought it up to his lips and took a swig. This is not good idea. He held his breath, let the drink tumble down his
throat, and when he let the same breath out did he feel the effects of it on his system: it tasted sharp and piercing, like drinking liquid fire, and it coiled inside his belly like a burning snake.

"There's a good boy. Ask away." Tony leaned back, apparently satisfied. His smile was small, but his eyes glowed with a hidden agenda. Now, Johnny wasn't interested in dancing around Tony and being all political, so he decided to get straight to the point.

"I wanted to ask you about Peter," he started, but then stopped as he noticed a flicker interrupt Tony's expression. But just like that, it was gone, like a moment of static, and the mask was back in place, leaving Johnny bemused and edged out of his thought process.

"Parker." Tony winced a bit after a sip of whisky. "Great guy. Upstanding citizen." He then chuckled into his drink like he was reliving a memory. "I forgot you two know each other."

Johnny eyed the man carefully, finding his way back to the train of thought and continuing with the question.

"Yeah, I was wondering ... I mean, you know him better than I do. Well--technically, I knew him since we were fifteen, but we kind of veered away from each other after meeting a few times--so, yeah. I'm kind of ... new to Peter. And I wanted to ask, since you seem to know him better: has he got any, like, secrets?"

"Secrets?" Tony raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, like ... like I feel like he's hiding something from me. I mean, we're not like, super close or anything, but you know, he's a cool guy, kind of keeps to himself. It makes me wonder ..."

Tony regarded the man with a cool facade. He knew what Johnny was talking about, had heard about him over the weekend as a passing comment during a meeting with the Ultimates: the younger Storm sibling had been mad about being left out of the loop. And now here he was, sniffing around for the truth, and he'd found his way into Tony's bar--one of the many lucrative establishments that he invested in--one step closer towards figuring out Peter's identity as Spider-Man. Tony didn't even think he had the capacity to piece things together, didn't know that the man was observant enough to gather enough clues. The implication left him quietly impressed. So Johnny Storm had some wits about him.

Because of this tiny realization, Tony was unable to stop himself from looking at the man for the first time. He doesn't look too shabby, either. Blond hair, blue eyes--why, it's like the Gods are making it up to me, offering me such a fine specimen.

He could hear another part of himself in his head, the tiny rational part of him warning him about why exactly he had holed himself in a club in the first place. The rejected call, the absence of a follow-up, the cold silence ... He came here to drink himself silly and drown himself in booze and sorrow, not to find someone pretty to distract him.

Of course, when someone like Johnny slipped into his sacred space out of nowhere, looking exquisite in a knitted gray shirt and tight leather pants, it was hard to stay properly focused.

His absence of a reply had made the atmosphere tense and thick with edginess. Johnny had taken another swig, the purity of the alcohol making his lips moist and his cheeks red.

Tony had a lot to consider, but all of it coalesced into one person. Peter. He knew what Johnny was asking about. Did he have the right to answer him truthfully? Did he earn it after the shattering event
from hours back? Would it be considered a form of betrayal? Could he honestly say right now that he wouldn't feel an ounce of guilt, if he told Johnny the secret and threw Peter under the bus?

Was he that kind of vindictive asshole?

"Why does it feel like you're sticking your nose some place where it doesn't belong?" Tony asked, the picture of sweetness and innocence.

Johnny suppressed the growing feeling of vulnerability. He knew, from the smile and the laid-back attitude, that Tony planned to toy with him. Tony's goal was to dangle the truth in front of him, snatching it back before he could latch onto it, only to do it again.

"You know something, don't you? You know what Peter's hiding." Johnny pulled himself upright in his chair and fixed the man with an imperious stare. Tony didn't really seem to register the look--he just carried on smiling that infuriating little smile, and Johnny wanted to reach across the space between them and shake the secret out of him.

"Only one way to find out." Johnny frowned as Tony cast his glance on the empty glass before him and issued the challenge. "Bottom's up, Johnny."

"God help me," he murmured to himself, scrubbing at his face before saying: "Screw it. Let's just do it."

Tony smirked as he poured him another glass, and Johnny questioned his judgment and the direction they were headed towards. Tony didn't seem like he was going to budge, and Johnny was seemingly at an impasse. He didn't know how to deal with someone like Tony Stark--all his life he'd been dealing with intellectuals, but here was a man who used his head for different, admittedly creative but arguably nefarious purposes. And Johnny, well, he really wanted to know what Peter was hiding in his closet.

He snatched the glass from underneath the mouth of the bottle as soon as Tony tipped it back, and he peered down at it as he swirled around its contents. It felt like Tony was trying to poison him, like he was holding a shining apple in his hands and Tony was the evil queen, with his honeyed words and well-concealed schemes. The reference wasn't lost on Johnny--he always reverted to childish, idle things when he was starting to get smashed. Oh, this is SO not a good idea.

The rim touched a set of lips, and, praying for the drink to go down smoothly, Johnny swallowed. His throat worked a few times, moving back and forth as the whisky spilled in and slithered down his esophagus. He didn't hold his breath this time. Each molecule passing through his nose felt hot and charged and heady, and the strength of the drink made him screw his eyes shut. He wasn't a lightweight, but he feared the worst as the glass emptied. He hadn't had dinner, and an empty stomach always made him that much more susceptible to alcohol.

He tipped forwards and reeled back a few times. "Poison," he hissed, cringing.

It took several minutes for Johnny to recover, all the while Tony was doing his level best not to chuckle at him.

"I did what you asked," Johnny forced out with a grimace. "Now could you please answer me?"

"Impressive, Storm. You still have your wits about you. Alright, I'll answer your question." Tony poured himself yet another drink. All this time they had been drinking from a new bottle of the same brand--Johnny didn't even know where that came from--and Johnny feared that he was digging
himself deeper, falling backwards into a trap that Tony had set up.

His suspicions were confirmed when Tony finished another half-glass, and turned to him with a wicked smile. What is this guy made out of exactly?

"I'm dreadfully sorry to say this but I honestly have no idea what Peter is hiding."

"Oh, come on!"

Tony's voice was full of amusement and there was a cheeky smile on his face when Johnny glared at him. The man was so infuriating!

"You've got to be kidding me, man. It's written all over your face! You know. You know, and you're just keeping me here until I'm shitfaced."

He sounded petulant and pissed off and he knew it, but Tony's amused expression didn't change or diminish. The nerve of this guy!

"Yes, I do know," Tony casually admitted, and Johnny gaped at him, floored by the confession.

"And why won't you tell me?" Johnny's anger was flaring, but the booze swirling inside him mellowed him down, made him sound more like he was pleading and beckoning than demanding. He cursed himself for it.

Tony considered him with a long, silent stare, the kind of stare that should only really be taken in at face value but Johnny took as something deeper. He was about fit to squirm in discomfort when Tony moved, bending forward and resting his elbows on the table.

"I'm considering it. I've got nobody to talk to about it, and you seem to be at the edge of your seat just waiting for me to spit it out. But you know what?" Tony looked at him then, his expression having completely changed in a blink of an eye. Johnny's mind was starting to go fuzzy around the edges, but he saw the expression for what it was--dejected, gloomy, almost woeful even.

The look made Tony appear dangerously captivating to Johnny.

"It's Peter's secret to tell," Tony finally said, and his eyes looked down, hidden beneath long lashes and a shadow that quite suddenly hung over him like a curtain.

Johnny didn't expect the sudden rush of sympathy, but it came anyway, washed away his anger and replaced it with confusion and frustration.

"And he trusted you enough to tell you." He slouched back into the deeply upholstered seat, parting his legs widely and running a hand roughly through his hair.

Tony swiped a hand over his face and, as if he'd just remembered that he was in the presence of someone else, he put his mask back on, the cool, carefully controlled face that occasionally upturned into a smile. This time, however, he shook his head at Johnny, the smile appearing rueful.

"Actually no--he didn't."

Johnny's eyes snapped to the man, and Tony took another swig of Scotch. "I chanced upon the information during a meeting. It was a private conversation, but as you may or may not be aware of, I'm not very good at resisting the urge to eavesdrop. And, well, I found out. About everything."

The fact that there was a secret out there, a big secret that everyone seemed to know about except
him, left Johnny feeling miserable. But Tony, despite being a cheeky bastard, was right: it wasn't his secret to tell, but Peter's. He had no right to demand it from Tony, and Tony had no right to give it to him.

"This sucks," Johnny moaned.

"Yeah, I know," Tony agreed wholeheartedly.

Johnny's head fell back, and he looked towards the ceiling, wishing that things didn't have to suck like this. His gaze dropped sideways to Tony.

"Is this why you're here?" he asked. "This the reason why you're trying to get piss drunk?"

Tony's lips curled, and he chuckled humorlessly. "It's part of the reason, yeah."

Johnny regarded the other man with commiseration. Never in his wildest dreams did he expect that he and Tony would someday end up drinking their worries away on a Monday, had not anticipated that he would be in a booth with Tony in some high-end bar, nursing an odd feeling of companionship that stemmed from their shared woes. It was oddly comforting. Tony was quite different from how the public painted him, and Johnny understood him a bit better than before.

He offered his glass a few minutes after, asking for more liquor. Tony obliged his request, confirming his suspicions further that the man was out to get him sloshed, and they drank.

Soon afterwards, they fell into an easy, albeit drunken conversation, decorated with insults, witty remarks, dirty jokes ...

And a bit further down the line, when the warm, pleasant feeling of inebriation had settled firmly into their veins and their brains had all but turned into mush ... casual but deliberate touches, lingering stares, unspoken words of invitation ...

And after that ... well, after that, they got too drunk to think about what came next.

--

Tuesday

The following morning was still and quiet.

That was, until two bodies in one king-sized bed stirred like the dead coming back to life.

They were tangled in sheets, buried in warm blankets, covered in the musk and stench of the previous night. Their skins rubbed against smooth wool in very sensitive places. They exchanged twin groans of pain, quiet ones that never left their mouths but vibrated in the throats. Their limbs brushed against each other.

One of them scratched absently at a butt cheek, feeling a dull, stinging sensation deep within its confines.

The other cast a dull glow down on a pillow with his arc reactor.

That one was Tony, and his eyelids cracked open one at a time.

A minute passed where the man tried to get a feel of his surroundings, tried to grasp around and
make sense his situation. Nothing came to him. His mouth felt scratchy and his throat felt like the driest of all sandpapers. It hurt to think. There was an insistent pounding in his head, as if there was hammer trying to break out of his skull, swinging in time with his heartbeat. It stopped him from concentrating on his thoughts.

Thinking that it was time for him to do something about the horrible sensation of dying, he teetered to the side and shoved his elbow underneath him, digging into the mattress and pushing himself up into a half-sitting position.

His bleary, unfocused gaze landed on a fuzz of blond hair peeking out from the sheets.

Wondering who it was--and simultaneously trying to figure out why the person was sharing his bed--was no easy task. It made his head throb further. Instead, he reached out, hooked a finger around a fold in the sheets, and tugged.

His eyes flew open, red and bloodshot.

The sight of Johnny Storm's face, screwed and contorted in sleepy misery, made the disjointed memories flood back with a vengeance.

The pain of the recollection and the gravity of the situation came together and ripped a groan out of Tony as he fell back down on his pillow.

He covered his face with his hands, forcing down the rapidly surfacing panic as he waited for Johnny to rouse.

_Dear golly, I'm in for it now._
Come Home With Me

Chapter Notes

!! WARNING: Flashback sex. Explicit AF.
Note the change in tags.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As far as one-night stands went, Tony had gotten to a point where he would separate people into sets depending on how they behaved the following morning. Sure, it painted him as a dispassionate grade-A dickweed, but it was a system, and Tony was nothing but meticulous to a fault when it came to coming up with methods that made his life easier.

Some, like actual celebrities, personalities, and high-flying bigwigs, respected the casual nature of it all. They woke up with Tony next to them, made their satisfaction known with a good word or two, and then left amicably. There was no shame or attachment or baggage. They fell into the first set.

But more often than not, his choice would end up in the second set, assuming all sorts of things and drawing all sorts of conclusions: it wasn't everyday they were picked up and entertained by the likes of Tony fucking Stark of S.I. and the Ultimates, so they would think the instance was a once-in-a-lifetime chance for them to climb up the ladder and build a foundation for a permanent arrangement that could eventually, maybe make them skyrocket to relevancy.

Tony didn't blame them for hoping. One such partner was active on the team. Another ended up being a CEO in her own right after a night and eventually a relationship with him.

Pepper Potts, she was one hell of a businesswoman. She was ambitious, politically-savvy, and intelligent. She knew exactly how to handle Tony, and he grew too dependent on her. She ended up leaving, because she didn't feel cared for, and she always ended up picking up after him. She put a lot more into the relationship than he did. Tony didn't deserve her. She fell into her own category.

During those times when his partners hoped to be Pepper 2.0, Tony ruthlessly, callously shut them down, spread his thoughts out onto a table and explained their not-so-unique position as a bedwarmer. Some ended up expressing their hurt or disgust, some sought revenge by going to the tabloids, while others submitted resumes to apply for something more long-lasting, futile as it was. Tony politely rejected them, because for the longest time since he and Pepper parted ways, he had not been looking for anything long-term.

Nat fell into the intersection of sets one and two. There were no strings attached to the whole business, and there was no awkwardness on the field or out of it, despite the unspoken desire for something more on her end.

As for Johnny ...

The man fell into a set of his own, much like Pepper.

It was the first time Tony had decided to cook a meal for someone after a night of rough sex.

Not as a thank you—as amazing and deserving of thanks the sex was—but out of concern.
It wasn't an entirely selfless move on Tony's part. He started making breakfast because he was uncertain about Johnny's thoughts on what had transpired the night before. He wanted to keep the man there until he had at least some idea, ply the man with food and sit him down and examine him.

There was the guilt that maybe he'd led the man on, seduced him with his words and loosened him up with drink. The fear that he might have done something non-consensual, which spelling horrible things, even for him. And then there was the worry that he might have changed someone forever, because he had been drunk, vulnerable, and also a little bit lonely. Johnny might have ended up being collateral for his irresponsible actions. All of those spurred him into action. He wanted to fix it, because he was a problem solver by nature.

That Johnny was exhibiting catatonic-like behavior for about thirty minutes since they got out of bed only increased his worries.

"So ..." Tony eyed the blond with barely concealed trepidation. "Johnny. You haven't said anything since you'd woken up. Haven't moved since I put you on that chair--haven't done anything, really."

He'd capitalized on the penthouse' stocked-round-the-clock fridge, putting down a hot plate of breakfast on the island in front of them, which consisted of proteins like sausages, bacon, and eggs, perfect because they needed to replenish amino acids after a night out. There was half a carton of thousand island fruit juice left, Friday had the coffee maker running on the dot, and an electric kettle kept water straddling boiling point in case Johnny was a tea person.

He'd know if Johnny was a tea person if Johnny told him what he liked. But at the moment, the blond was so still he could be mistaken for a wax figure, and he was staring at a point ahead of him, only blinking every now and then.

Tony feared the worst.

--

_He felt like he was laughing with three other people, as if Johnny contained enough warmth and presence to make the pity party less pitiful. Once the blond had loosened up, there was an effervescence to him, a certain inviting quality that could make anyone gravitate. He reminded Tony of Cap, except Johnny's anal region wasn't stuffed with a cactus and he understood pop culture references without needing them explained to him._

"--so a redhead, a blonde, and a brunette--and each one didn't know the other two were coming, but they went along with it anyway?" Johnny snorted so loudly and so suddenly that he had to wipe the end of his nose with a sleeve. "That's hot, man. And in a Jacuzzi, too. That's ..." He shook his head, smiling a crooked smile that could perhaps be the most secretly salacious smile Tony had seen on a man.

_It was in that moment that Tony decided Johnny Storm was a looker. He was hot, in a chill-but-ready, fuck-me-on-a-motorcycle kind of way. Tony was surprised with himself when he felt the first twitch of a hard-on starting to grow._

--

Johnny continued to do his best impression of a vegetable. Tony sat down on the chair next to him and hung his head.

"Look--if I--if I hurt you--"Tony's voice tightened, eyes flickering to the blond"--or did anything last night that you realize now you didn't want to do, you have to tell me, because I need to fix it. I need
to know if I went crazy and made a mistake, a huge one that could have consequences. I can't even begin to imagine what your sister would do to me with her powers if she finds out I ... that I did anything to you that you didn't want."

--

"So they went down on you." The amount of interest Johnny displayed for the x-rated Malibu story, the way he urged Tony to do a blow-by-blow, no details left out, stirred Tony on and kept him recounting. He scooted closer, eyes glinting with amusement.

"Two of them, yeah," Tony nodded, index finger circling the rim of his drink. He fixed on Johnny's face again, raising an eyebrow. "I went down on the blond. It's silly--I don't know what it is with blond guys, but when you take their dick down all the way they make this sound--"

"--waitwaitwait. Pause, bro. Guys? This story is about guys? Like, with you, naked, in a Jacuzzi?"

Tony backpedaled quickly. "Didn't--didn't I mention that?"

Johnny went deer-in-headlights. "I thought you were straight."

Tony shrugged, eyeing the man carefully. "As far as the media knows, yeah, I guess. Look--when you don't try and explore your options, check the other side to see if it's greener, you're really wasting your time and not living your life to the fullest. Living the way I did, it got to a point where I got bored, started trying new things out. It happened a few times back in college too, nothing like, deep or life-changing or anything, but it made me more open to the possibility of picking it back up again. And I did, eventually. And I figured, hey, I kind of like this. It's different. Greener. And a lot less complicated, if we're going to be honest."

Johnny squirmed. "Less complicated ...?"

Tony nodded sagely. "When you have sex with a man, you know it's done when both of you shoot. You never really know when it comes to women. They could be faking it. And you know how some of them like to be vague about it, too? So you end up guessing, and it becomes this endless mind game where you're a selfish bastard if you don't make her orgasm, and if it takes too long you lose momentum, when really, it should just be straightforward fuck-til-you-drop sex."

--

Johnny's eyelids drooped down like a curtain at the end of a theater production, and the afflicted look made Tony forget all about breakfast. He searched the other man's face for any sign of emotion, the lack of reaction slowly driving him mad.

"I ..."

Tony inched closer and trained his ears. Johnny's lips were finally moving.

"I'm ..." Johnny's eyes closed, and he seemed to be thinking hard on something, his forehead creasing and his lips quivering slightly. Tony expected any moment now for Johnny to curse at him, or cry, or something. He didn't know. He had no idea how Johnny's head worked. He was new, uncharted territory. Tony never got past the two brainiacs of the Fantastic Four--Johnny was just a person on the side, logistic support, if he had to be blunt. But right then, Johnny's well-being mattered more than anything else.

"You're what? Goddammit you're what, Johnny?"
The blond sucked in a breath.

"... Hungover ..." he groaned like a rusty door. "... So hungover ... I've never been ..."

Johnny swallowed, his chest doing a sudden spasm and his head cocking forward as he gagged. His hand flew up to cover his mouth.

"Where's the bathroom?"

--

Maybe it was the drink, or the warm atmosphere of the bar spurring him on, but Johnny kept asking for details, for puzzle pieces that together fit into this whole new image of a man he found he was suddenly interested in. The thought of Tony Stark blowing a guy wouldn't leave his mind, and he had to beat the twin urges to shuffle in his seat and groan aloud as Tony continued.

"--shoved his cock down my throat, and all the while these two were working my dick, sandwiching it with their lips like two pieces of moist, baked bread--"

He was trying to keep his breathing steady, hanging on to every word as to not miss anything important. Every now and then his eyes would dart to Tony's lips, and he would imagine them hollowed out and wide and accommodating enough flesh to get the man choking. Does he even have a gag reflex? Would he be humming in contentment? The thought of Tony's vocal chords causing vibrations around his own dick made him shiver slightly, and he hadn't realized that he was being obvious about his arousal, with the way he crossed his legs and occasionally pushed down on his bulge with the heel of his hand. He thought he was being casual, nodding along, but his actions were betraying him.

Tony had sat up, cocked his head as he asked a question, and Johnny found himself a fool for not catching it.

"Say that again?" he said distractedly.

Tony smirked, oozing confidence. "I said, you seem to have a little problem there--well, not really 'little', by the looks of it. You're not getting off to my story, are you, Johnny?"

Johnny reeled back and blinked at the insinuation a few times. "What? That's ridiculous. Why, are you getting off to your story?"

He didn't sound like he was making any sense, but that was because Tony was looking him with a heavy-lidded gaze, eyes consuming his warm body until it reached the tight area between his legs. The attention made him breathless with lust--he could just feel the vein at the side of his cock pulsating in time to the club music.

Tony recaptured his gaze again, his fingers gliding along the surface of the table until it reached the expanse of Johnny's exposed arm. They trailed along the length of it, and the tiny, almost ticklish contact made Johnny sigh.

"I could tell you more about the blond, tell you exactly how I blew his mind away ... but words won't do it justice. You won't know how it really feels, unless ... well, unless I show it to you right now."

There was a hint of suggestion in Tony's smile, just a hint that said he wasn't really propositioning Johnny ... but the way he said the words, the way he made them honeyed and tempting ... He'd left Johnny to do the decision-making. In some distant part of Johnny's mind he knew that this was Tony's way of making himself unaccountable, but frankly he didn't care anymore, because he was
leaking in his pants and the only way to stop it was to bust one out.

Johnny let his bottom lip catch on his teeth. "What ... you mean now? You mean ... like, here, in public?"

Tony's eyes inspected the table slowly, scanned the crowd. "Table's high enough to hide whatever happens below the belt."

Johnny was sorely tempted by the proposal, but it felt like his brain had turned into liquid, sloshing around in his skull and emulsifying any reservations. The wild idea was crazy hot--he would have to sink down into the seat, unzip himself--Tony would have to sit close, they would have to keep quiet ...

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to do," Tony reminded him, though his eyes, his eyes had a laser-like focus. "But honestly? The thought of sucking you off right now makes me want to fish my own damn dick out."

--

Tony was startled out of his musings when Johnny stumbled back into the kitchen with all the grace and poise of a baby deer. Just looking at him made Tony want to retch all over again, but he really wanted the contents of his stomach to stay in place this time.

"You alright? I heard weird noises," Tony inquired lightly, hands curled around a steaming mug of coffee.

"Yeah, I ..." Johnny was clearly disoriented, but his two legs kept him upright. "I got it out of my system. I kinda missed the toilet bowl though, so ..."

Tony made a face. "Oh please no--what did you do?"

"Threw up in your shower?" Johnny ducked his head apologetically. "Just spewed it out there like a cannon--I'm sorry, but who the hell keeps the toilet lid down?"

Tony quickly issued a command out to Friday, and the AI sought to clean the mess by turning the valves on automatically. The two heard the telltale sound of jets coming to life in the background.

"You couldn't have aimed for the sink? There's a sink."

"It was too far--your bathroom's the size of a fucking stadium. It was either the shower or one of those fancy-looking vases."

Tony conjured an image of the blond barfing indiscriminately into one of his antique Celadon earthenwares and silently thanked the man for his foresight.

Johnny returned to his stool and plopped down, nursing his head as if the slightest movement would crack it open. "Sorry. I can't even remember what you said a while ago--I was trying to keep your counter puke-free."

"My marble countertop appreciates it," Tony answered dryly. With Johnny acting more like himself, he decided against a repeat of the heartfelt performance a short while back.

"Disturbing imagery aside, I slaved over a stove top to cook breakfast." Tony made it sound like cooking food for someone was a privilege that he rarely bestowed unto others, but the sentiment flew over Johnny's head.

"I don't normally do this, you know, since things usually end the second we get out of bed. It's ... non-traditional? But I figured, hey--since I haven't done the whole chivalry thing in a while, and you're still here--why not? Eat. It's good, I uh, I already had some."

"Ooh boy," Johnny moaned. "Dunno if I could keep this down."

"Funny you should say that," Tony murmured behind the rim of his coffee mug.

--

Johnny held his heavy and aching flesh in his hand, stroking it languidly, slow, rhythmic tugs that went from the leather-clad base up to the pink, swollen head. He peeked at Tony between his lashes, as if he was quietly waiting for Tony's approval. His fingers caught between the hem of his sweater, trailing upwards and unveiling a hard, ridged set of abdominal muscles. Tony was mesmerized by the sight: Johnny Storm in full-clothing, slouched back on the couch while pleasuring himself tantalizingly--it drove him mad with arousal.

He gave in to the ultimate temptation, sliding against the seat, reaching for Johnny's erection and pushing aside the man's hand.

They locked eyes. Johnny's breaths were calm and measured, but Tony wanted him panting and gasping before the night was done.

He gripped around the flesh securely, resulting in a tiny hitch of breath from Johnny.

"You look good like this," came Tony's scratchy, whispered voice. "Gorgeous."

Johnny settled back and thrust his hips out, breathing out a steadying sigh through his nose as Tony pumped his mast with a torturous rhythm.

"Feels good ..." Johnny murmured, smiling lazily. "You gonna give me head or what?"

The playful, impatient tone in his voice, along with his flushed face, etched with quiet but thrumming arousal, made Tony groan softly in his chest. Johnny was well-endowed--his cock was made to be erect, pink and veiny and built like a steel pipe. Tony didn't think he could keep it down.

Tony disappeared inside his head for a moment, that after half a minute Johnny let out a tiny whine and rolled his hips, driving his cock through Tony's fist.

Brought back to reality by the very horny, very hard man beside him, he glanced at the dance floor, and when he was sure that no one was looking their way, he bent forwards and took Johnny in his mouth, almost to the hilt.

Johnny fought down a loud groan.

--

"That's right, you--"Johnny blinked fast, coughed lightly, eyed the plate. "And my ... yeah. That was ... yeah. That was nice."

Tony hummed his assent, using his fork to steal a bacon strip from under Johnny's nose. He was facing out into the living room, reliving the memory, while Johnny started to put food in his mouth. "It was. You know, it's been a long time since I got to do that with someone. I was kind of rusty, and
my jaw hurts, but ... eh. It worked out. Who knew the youngest Storm had a flagpole between his legs?"

He saw the blond swell proudly at that. He didn't usually hand out compliments, but Tony figured he sounded casual enough that it wasn't going over the line. Johnny seemed to take the words at face value, and continued to eat.

"I'm actually surprised that you're not ... well, surprised. Or freaking out." Tony glanced at him and shrugged one shoulder. "People usually freak out because it's me. It's almost surreal, really. When you showed up at the club, I didn't expect it all to happen--I thought you'd be less ... up for it, I guess? No--not that I saw you and thought, shit, this guy's begging for it, but I had no idea you had it in you to be so freaky."

--

"Christ, Tony," Johnny said heatedly, adding more fuel to Tony's already raging fire.

Tony had stretched his mouth wide to accommodate the throbbing shaft, yet still it rubbed against the circumference of his lips. Oh God, Tony thought, as a warm wetness spread within the confines of his pants. He gave his hands free rein as he ran his palm up and down Johnny's torso, the other running up and down the man's thigh. All the while his head was dipping down to consume the man and bobbing upwards just as smoothly. His lips painted the hard, satin skin with hot saliva. He could see dimly how Johnny's balls clenched and relaxed in almost painful pulses, could feel the heat of blood pumping through the man's cock against his tongue.

Of course, every pass Tony made at his flesh made Johnny moan and thrust up into his mouth. His impatient hip thrusts and muffled groans only drove Tony wilder. He could smell Johnny. He smelled so fucking good that his mouth pooled further at the thought of doing something more.

He let the man's cock go with an audible pop, lips soaring upwards to crash against Johnny's. The man's mouth pried apart with the least bit of coaxing, and Tony curled his tongue softly, lavishing in the man's hot taste. He used his hand to masturbate Johnny lightly, and in some distant part of his mind he reveled at how hot and willing Johnny was against him, tongue meeting his with equal gusto, hips rolling upwards and pumping straight into his wet fist. It was dizzying. He wanted his own release so bad. He wanted more.

"Want you," his hot breath intermingled with Johnny's. "Come home with me."

--

"It's not the first time I got head at a club," Johnny said around his food, eyes rolling at Tony. "You understand. You have this whole run-and-gun, sexual tornado lifestyle that everyone always talks about. I think with my dick, too. Every guy does. And I've had my fair share of sex. Though, when you took me back here, I didn't--well, I wanted it. But I didn't come prepared. Don't get me wrong, it was amazing, but my asshole's still on fire."

"My self-control got away from me for a bit," Tony said, actually sheepish at the complaint. "It's been a while."

--

It had been a short car ride. Johnny remembered being astounded with Tony's driver's professionalism, but the thought was the farthest thing in his mind. They'd stumbled into the car and all manner of control had left Tony--he'd taken Johnny by the hips and pulled him flush against him,
and they kissed, Tony's lips rough and demanding. His hands burned a path across Johnny's skin, searching frantically for more contact. It blazed across his sides and his back, thrust into his shirt and ran across his chest and stomach, pressed against all kinds of pleasure points. He found himself pinning the man, rutting and rolling his hips uncontrollably, his kisses just as clumsy and violent in return. Johnny never wanted it to end.

He was confused as to how they found themselves in a bedroom, though he supposed it was because he was too preoccupied with keeping his impending orgasm at bay, and was trying to give as much as he got from the sexy man he was with. It took little to keep the heat going, for Johnny was so horny and needy that each touch left him wanting more.

Tony almost slammed his bedroom door shut, though he did slam Johnny back against it as soon as it closed. He stole another searing kiss from Johnny before he could so much as breathe. Their pants were nowhere to be seen--left in the hall somewhere, discarded. Johnny's cock swung freely. And when Tony's own purple flesh ground upwards to meet his hips, he was lost. It felt spectacular, rutting without anything between them. Tony was hard and masculine and insatiable. He was mad with arousal. He took, and took, and Johnny's moans ripped out of him so loudly that he feared the next city might hear.

He squirmed as Tony cupped his ass cheeks with his big hands, tugging him close. He couldn't think straight. All he wanted was release, but Tony was in control, and he wanted to prolong the fire and the pleasure. Johnny let him. He was high on his own arousal. He let Tony surge forwards with his lips to suck the crook under his ear, and Johnny let out a high-pitched breath in response.

"Do you know what I'm going to do to you?" There was serious aggression in the voice, and Johnny's knees wobbled at such an overpowering assault. His dick throbbed in response, pinned and leaking against Tony's own. He nodded quickly, his own lips biting and nipping against Tony's neck.

When Tony spit in his hand, spread the slick, sticky substance across his fingers, and pressed them in between his buttocks, Johnny gasped, the fingers forcing into his entrance. They pumped in and out in long, unforgiving strokes, turn Johnny into a moaning mess.

"O-Oh God," Johnny groaned, turning his head and blindly seeking Tony's lips again. Their mouths found each other, and Johnny could do nothing but grind against the man as his hole was pried open and abused. He pushed his ass back like some thirsty, sex-depraved whore, begging with his body for the one thing that he knew was going to happen next.

"Fuck me," he pleaded, hot breath ghosting against Tony's mouth. "Please. Fuck me."

Tony was greatly impressed by the fact that Johnny didn't look angry and hadn't started talking about what the development spelled for them or where they were headed.

On the contrary, it was Tony who felt the first stirrings of interest, but he told himself forcefully that this was not something that he should be pursing or looking into--there were too many events playing out in his life right now for him to be curious, and on top of that, he had not forgotten why he ended up getting sloshed in a bar to begin with.

Peter was still in the picture. Peter still existed. And whatever happened the night before didn't change the fact that Tony still had feelings for him.

It hit him, what he'd done. He was suddenly, painfully disgusted with himself. Not a day ago he had told Peter that he wanted the man, lavished him with attention, invited him to a date, and as soon as
he stumbled upon an obstacle he'd reverted back to a shadow of what he once was: a man who only took from the world and didn't give anything in return. The guilt washed over him like a bucket of ice-cold water.

He had to remind himself: Peter, while already an amazing scientist in his own right, also happened to be Spider-Man. He was caring, selfless--he had a beautiful mind and a good heart. He knew exactly how to handle Tony, dealt with Tony's temperament with surprising consideration. The thought of Peter walking out of his life frankly terrified him. Yet the man deserved so much more than him. Last night's ordeal was a definite step back from progress.

Now Tony had to--he needed to formulate a plan, because his thoughts were jarred and required organizing, and he needed direction. He needed to talk to Peter and sort things out, figure out why, despite his open and honest declaration, Peter had chosen not to accept him.

Whether or not he was going to tell Peter what happened between him and Johnny was still up for debate.

He didn't know what to do with Johnny, even though it seemed that the whole situation between them had resolved itself. Johnny didn't seem rattled by the fact that they had sex the night before, and he seemed to have accepted it as something that had happened spur-of-the-moment. It was accidental and consensual and surprisingly reinvigorating, but it was just that: sex.

With the food almost gone, Johnny stretched, one arm reaching up as far as it could while his other hand ran down the plane of his stomach. Tony caught a sliver of skin as the man's shirt hiked up, and Tony felt his body betray him as remnants of last night's passion sparked to life inside him.

"The food was great. Thanks. I still feel like shit, but, well--it's nothing a good 5k couldn't fix."

Johnny flashed him a winning smile, looking all warm and fresh out of bed with his mussed hair and bleary blue eyes.

Tony was almost certain he'd screwed himself over when he felt his arc reactor heat up.

He shoved the stirrings back into a secluded compartment in his head.

When it came time for Tony to show his guest out the door, he was still living in a state of dreamlike shock over the events that he didn't catch what Johnny had said to him.

"I'm sorry--what?" He blinked a few times at the man leaning against the doorway.

Johnny quirked an eyebrow at him. "I said, I'm headed back to the building. I just remembered that Peter was there." His hand flew up to flatten his hair, and Tony's focus snapped back to the present at the mention of Peter.

Johnny's hand came back down to scratch at his elbow. "I forgot that I went looking for you yesterday because of him--I forgot a lot of things, actually. Sex can get kind of distracting." Johnny crinkled his nose at that. "And, well ... I feel guilty, now that I think about it. I wasn't supposed to be out bonking other people when I'm chasing after someone I like."

"Wait wait wait. What's that supposed to mean?" He was sure there was more to dissect about Johnny's words, but his attention was drawn to the details surrounding Peter's whereabouts. "What do you mean Peter's there? What happened?"

Johnny, unaware of Tony's growing apprehension, sighed under his breath. "He had a panic attack yesterday. I thought you knew because he told me you sent him over to deliver some files. I don't know why it happened, but it was when his phone rang around lunch."
Tony recounted Johnny's words in slow motion, processing it, letting the information sink in. His forehead started to crease, his pulse quickening ...

Johnny continued: "Sue kept him under surveillance last night. I don't know what the deal is--I thought it was a little too extreme, but she didn't explain much--said it was strictly confidential--"

Tony wasn't listening. He'd raced back into his living room, searching around frantically for his phone.

"--er, what's going on, man?" Johnny followed him back into the room, looking slightly perturbed over his actions. Tony didn't care--he looked under furniture, flipped over the cushions in the sofas, peered at the wooden platter where he kept his flash drives. When he found the phone inside the pair of pants he'd discarded the night before, he quickly pressed its home button and punched in his security code. He paled immediately afterwards.

Peter had left him three calls and a message asking him to call back.

He staggered, head blooming with a fresh new headache. Johnny stood from afar, watching with consternation.

"Peter had a panic attack," he repeated hollowly at the blond. "Did I ... did I hear that right?"

"Yes?" Confusion laced Johnny's features. "I was going to head over there and check up on him. Why? You wanna come with?"

Chapter End Notes

It's been over two months since I started this piece. Before that I had a little over two weeks worth of knowledge on the Ultimates Universe, since I literally just picked this fandom up last May. It's been very awesome so far--64k words, and over 70 comments and 200 kudos. Thank you so much for your support. I know that I haven't nailed the characterizations yet since Peter and Johnny and Tony are all new toys for me, but I'm working hard on them :D so thank you for bearing with me! Leave comments-- they're food to me.
Headshrinking and Matchmaking

Chapter Notes

Edited the following day since I have no beta and I finished this at like, 4:30am.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter woke up alone the next morning in a room that Sue had provided for him yesterday. It was a bleak confinement: the walls were a dull cream color, the air inside was cold, and it felt like a prison cell despite the windows and the comfortable single bed. He'd argued that he didn't need the accommodation, that he was okay with going home, but Sue had informed him that his Aunt May had been told of what had happened in the halls, and that she was coming over to see him. This had dented his resolve severely, and he'd felt a little betrayed because Sue had gone behind his back and called his aunt just because he'd had what he refused to call anything but a minor setback--

But the whole ordeal seemed to take on a whole new level of serious when Aunt May had come in, hugging her purse close to her body and approaching him like he was about to explode at any moment. He'd wondered what Sue had told her, because there had been no trace of anger or disappointment in her face, only heart-wrenching concern.

The only reason why Peter hadn't turned tail, why he hadn't tested any of the seven escape plans he'd hatched since he was more or less institutionalized, was Aunt May's words.

"I want you to get help." Aunt May's confession had been tearful. "I can't stand to see my boy suffering like this. I love you, and I want you to get better."

Peter had wanted to protest, but Aunt May had held up a hand and eased him back down on the bed. "I've been getting help," she'd said. "For years now I've been going to a therapist. I got help, Peter. And everyday my mind's at ease because I learned to talk to someone about my problems and my worries."

"But Aunt May--"

"I know that you have certain things that you just can't tell me for whatever reason." She let out a quelling breath, trying to keep herself composed. "And I'm angry at you for it. But I'm trying to understand you, and I'm trying to understand that this isn't an issue of trust. I know you trust me. I trust you, too. You just can't find it in you to talk to me because I'm your aunt. Your mother, really. There's a gap between us, a difference in age and generation and outlook. I get it. So I've agreed to get you help, because I'll be damned if my boy crumbles in the middle of the day without warning because he can't manage his problems properly."

She'd left him alone afterwards. He knew she was right, but he resented her tone of voice. He would have argued with her if she had stayed, and that tendency had probably been the reason why she'd stepped out before Peter could get a word in edgewise.

That was yesterday. At present, Peter felt like staying in bed again. He wasn't exactly exhausted--he'd been lying down all night and had barely left the bed ever since he arrived. He did feel numb and hollow though, which really wasn't any different. He'd been scraped from the inside with a spoon and everything that had been taken out of him was there on his lap, waiting to be examined.
A knock came from the door. He didn't know who it might be—Sue didn't knock and Nick Fury never visited. He expected it to be the same person who had come in yesterday, a few minutes after his aunt had left. He grew tense just thinking about the experience.

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The Previous Day

"I didn't know you sidelined as a shrink," Peter told Steve Rogers as the man edged towards his bed. He was huge, but somehow his size didn't quite impede his movements as Peter had initially presumed. "Not that I think that this is some kind of quack session, because I'm not crazy, I'm just--"

"--stressed?" the man filled in for him kindly. "So done with everything'? That's how Clint would say it. I don't have to go deep into your head to see how ... troubled you are."

Steve loomed over him, scanning him quickly with his clear, super-soldier eyes, but not quite with the worried intensity his aunt exhibited. Nevertheless, Peter's skin crawled, feeling like a kid next to the large hero.

"No offense meant, of course. But I just had that feeling, seeing you now," Steve attempted a smile, but it came out as a twitch of the lips and nothing more.

Peter had to admit that he was a little intimidated by Captain America, but the man was known for being patient, courteous, perfectly good-natured—any moment the man could snap Peter like a twig, he had no doubt about that, but the true reason why he had misgivings about his presence was because Captain America was huge, not just in size but in fame, too. How was he expected to talk to someone so outrageously public and famous without making a supreme idiot of himself?

Steve took hold of a nearby chair and pulled it to him before sitting down. Peter's eyes followed the clipboard in the man's hands, but soon snapped to the man's face when he spoke. "Fury told me everything about you--"

"Oh, no." Peter groaned immediately after hearing this, falling down onto the bed.

"--and I'm here to assist you in managing any thoughts and feelings that may have arisen from the traumatic events you've experienced."

"He told you everything?" Peter bemoaned, head rolling miserably to the side while his eyes fixed on Steve. "As in, everything? Including The Secret I've been bending over for just to try and keep from people?"

Steve nodded, unsmiling yet sympathetic. "I'm sorry. But don't worry to much about it—the only people who know about your 'secret' are those who need to, and Nick thought I needed to know about it so I could be here. He was right. I wouldn't even know where to begin if I just met with you as Tony's aide."

Peter huffed, turning away from the Captain and glaring petulantly at the sky through the window.

"But for what it's worth, I find it very admirable, what Spider-Man--" a quick shake of the head, "--what you do for New York. For us. Being a faceless hero is a thankless job."

Peter glanced back at the man. Captain America just complimented him. He didn't know what to feel about that. "Thanks, I, uh. I gotta admit it sounds pretty awesome coming from you, but ..." Peter's
lips were a stubborn line. "What Nick Fury wants, Nick Fury gets. Is that it? Am I going to be stuck here until I ... confess my sins? Break under torture? Pardon the language, but *fuck him*. Do I even have a choice anymore? I'm pretty sure that this is illegal."

"Like I said, we're trying to help you." Steve's eyes had widened at the profanity, but his resolve was as immovable as he was (with his size and all).

"You're *illegally* trying to help me by detaining me. So much for freedom, huh Captain Ameriquack?"

Peter knew he'd touched a nerve when Steve grew quiet for a moment. He didn't want to upset the man, but he wanted to vent, to be immature about it so he could hide the panic threatening to rise from his stomach. And Steve already looked like a leather-clad slab of punching meat anyway.

"I know how it feels," Steve intoned. "The first time they tried to talk to me was after my first few missions. I felt defensive and cagey. I told them I was fine. That I just needed to shake it off. I didn't want to talk about my feelings, didn't like how exposed it made me--"

"No offense, but I don't remember you having a doctor's degree in feelings," Peter interrupted, fingers tangling in his sheets.

"--but after a while," Steve continued, slowly and patiently. "I realized that the longer I kept bottling my thoughts and emotions, my fears and concerns, the more I lost a grip on myself, and the worse I performed when it came to fulfilling my responsibilities."

Peter eyed Steve doubtfully through a few strands of his fringe. "What happened?"

Steve shrugged one shoulder, fixing his gaze on Peter. "I got caught up in this huge mess that the government had to clean up for me."

Peter shifted under the look. "What kind of mess?"

"I failed a mission." Steve's looked down, shoulders slumping, and Peter knew then that it must have weighed hard on the man. "There were casualties, and the way it happened, it didn't look good for my image. Or rather, the image that the government wanted me to have."

Peter snorted in derision. "So you went in and talked to a couple of Frasiers about your feelings because you wanted to please the government?"

Steve's face was somber when he said: "I started talking to people because I didn't want to hurt those around me. And I didn't want to put those who were important to me through something that I could have spared them from."

Peter sobered at that. There was a story behind the words, he was sure, a personal tragedy that Steve kept in the strictest of confidences. It was easy to forget that the glorious Captain America once fought in a war half a century ago, had been a key figure in rallying forces and stopping the Nazi momentum. Steve Rogers, not a day over thirty years old, was a veteran of World War II.

Peter took stock of the man before him and saw glimpses of a dark and haunted past, hidden beneath grim determination and a dauntless, strong facade. The man was evidently still in the process of healing. Peter didn't know if it was sensible for Steve to be his confidant and therapist when the man himself had a lot of inner demons to deal with. But Steve had faced a lot more trials than he had, had suffered through so much more shit than Peter could even possibly imagine, and yet the man still stood on his feet, fighting for what he believed in, no matter how bureaucratic or downright dishonorable the system sometimes was.
Peter couldn't help but compare the man to himself, feeling ashamed. All he had to deal with were muggers and petty thieves for four to five hours a day, and yet he was barely pulling himself together. Another reason why you suck as a person.

He knew that he was being hard on himself as he thought it, but the Captain was right. He had to be unfair and he had to weigh himself next to the man. If he didn't deal with his problems now it would only lead to worse things.

There was hesitation in Peter's voice when he said: "I know that I have to face this--all of this stuff going on around me and in my head. It's messing me up. I can't ... I can't even think about wearing the costume again after ... after ..." he closed his eyes and let out a shuddering breath. "But ... I can't. I can't just talk to you like we've been through a lot."

Steve sat still like the Lincoln Memorial, but he was nonetheless rapt with Peter's sudden flurry of words. "It's not easy. But I'm here to guide you. Talk you through your thoughts. Ask questions and all that."

Peter wanted nothing more than to sink into the covers and keep his lips sealed tight. There was a lingering anxiety inside of him, chaining him down and stopping him from confiding in Steve. "I don't ... it's like. How do I put this? It's way out of my comfort zone, talking to someone like you about ... stuff. I mean--I don't mean it like, like it's 'cause I don't like you or anything. You're a pretty swell guy, but ... but I don't know you, Captain ..."

"Steve," the man supplied. "Call me Steve." Did he just think I'm clamming up because we aren't on first-name basis? Peter wanted to hit the guy, but since it might possibly be a felony to physically abuse the pride of America, he opted to explain further instead.

"Steve," Peter breathed shakily. "It all seems ... impersonal, you know? Like--like talking to you. I don't want to dump all my shit on you just because you're ... you're qualified, or something. It's like talking to a stranger. It's--I know you'd understand some of the things that I have to say to some degree. You'd know about the gunfire and the enemies and being out there, risking your life. I know what you've been through, and you've been through a lot, but still ..."

"I understand. That in itself is something worth looking into." Steve crossed his legs and looked through some files on his thigh. Peter was curious as to what was written on them, but he was resigned to the fact that he would never know.

"What is?" Worth looking into? Peter tensed.

"The hesitation. The fear of confiding in someone." Steve crossed his arms over his chest, something that Peter thought he wasn't even capable of doing, with all the muscles that were in the way. "I read that you've been doing this since you were fifteen, while you were still in school. That must've been tough. How did you deal with it?"

Peter drew his eyebrows together, tucking his legs close to his body. "What do you mean?"

He didn't know where Steve was going with his line of questioning exactly, but they weren't talking about the difficult things, yet. He was okay. Despite that, he felt like he'd fallen into some kind of trap where he was now forced to talk to the guy, although Steve didn't really do anything suspicious or invasive. Maybe this is why Nick Fury sent him. He's someone who coaxes people into talking.

Steve shrugged, eyeing him closely as if he knew what Peter was thinking. "You must have had some form of outlet. Otherwise you would have caved a long time ago. A big secret like ... crime-fighting and slinging webs and, well, being a superhero really, should have taken its toll on you a lot
earlier. Did you maybe have someone that you trusted enough to talk to, about the certain sensitive things that you can't bring yourself to open up to me about?"

"Oh." Peter felt that there was an unspoken kind of praise for him somewhere in the words--maybe Steve was quietly admiring his inner strength, or something like that--but then he mulled over the words, and thought back to the past despite his resolve not to reveal too much.

Being Spider-Man had become such a huge part of his life now, that he'd almost forgotten how he even did it, how he kept his life from spiraling out of control. There used to be a time when he was living a double life, back when Aunt May was still in the dark about his secret. He'd always been swimming in his own guilt lying to her about the things he'd been doing--always coming home late, playing hooky in class in the middle of the day, hiding his injuries from her, on top of all the bizarre events that were happening around them...

It used to overwhelm him, the pressure and the stress. It still did, now that he thought about it. Back then, the only way he'd carried on living the way he did was by talking to someone, someone he knew he could turn to when things got rough and he felt like he was getting buried under all the crazy.

"Mary Jane," Peter realized, face scrunching slightly. "She—I told her everything. I trusted her--"he shook his head, "—still do."

Steve tilted his head, nodding encouragingly. "And who is this Mary Jane?"

A flash of red hair and a bright smile surfaced in his thoughts. Peter smiled ruefully. "We used to date. She, uh—we were friends as kids, went to the same school and everything—we sort of hit it off. And things got really good for a while, you know? There was this... balance, I guess. I'd be going to school in the day, swinging off at night, and she'd be there holding it all together for me. Like—like a beautiful, redhead tube of industrial strength glue. I didn't lose track of what was happening in my life because of her."

"I see. And how much did she know?" Steve sounded like he genuinely wanted to know, not out of necessity but out of an urge to console, and for the life of him Peter didn't know why the man suddenly cared. There was a tugging at his chest that made him want to answer the guy. Maybe he'd wanted to talk to someone about it for a while, the yearning to reach out lying dormant inside him for so long that all his pent-up frustrations were threatening to burst out. Or maybe it was because Steve was freaking good at what he did. Whatever it was, Peter sank back into the bed, quavering from the intensity of the memories Steve's words summoned: how much did MJ know?


"Everything," Peter said with a shuddering breath. "I told her everything. All the little details about my adventures. All the baddies I've had to face, the stupid situations I got myself into..." He let out a humorless laugh. "Sometimes it felt like I was dumping too much on her, but she listened to me a lot and picked me up when I needed it. She was just that person, you know? She could handle a lot of things, and she never told a soul. Not a soul. I don't think I've thanked her enough for all the things that she's done for me."

Peter's thoughts were awash with melancholy. He couldn't even remember anymore what she looked like in high school. His memory of her face was from less than a month ago, when she'd met Tony
with Kitty Pryde. She was vibrant and fiery and confident, and like a moth to a flame people gravitated towards her. The time they spent together had a touch of bitter sweetness. His chest ached.

"And where is she now?" Steve spurred on.

"We ... we grew apart." Peter hitched out a sigh. "That's what I've been telling myself for all these years. But really, it was me. I pushed her away. It's just ... she got too involved. Too involved. Sometimes it'd be her fault--she'd notice that I've been keeping things from her, keeping her out of the loop for her own protection, and then she'd pry into my business and strong-arm me into coming clean. And sometimes ... I'd come back to her after a tough night of swinging around and I'd bring all my problems back with me without meaning to, because I was either stupid or careless.

"She got caught up in my crap that way. She ... she almost died a bunch of times, because of me." He stared at the palms of his hands, eyebrows drawn together. "And I hated myself for it, for all the mistakes I've made and for all the ridiculously dangerous situations I've put her through. Just because I was me. 'Cause ... 'cause she was involved with me."

Peter choked at the last word. Obstinate to the end, he tried to blink back the growing moistness in his eyes.

Why were the tears coming now? It didn't make sense. They were over. Have been, for the past couple of years. He missed her, but they were over. They had to split. She had come so close to dying that day at Roxxon Labs, in the hands of his clones, no less. The memory of her turning into a red goblin-like creature haunted him to the very day. It was all so fresh and vivid in his head that he had to close his eyes and will the thoughts away.

He let out another quivering breath and tilted his head up, biting down on his lips and fixing his gaze on the ceiling. It helped a little. The welling of tears stopped as he took a moment to steady himself.

He didn't want to do this anymore. Talking about the past hurt, and each word that came out of his mouth only drove back into him like bullets. The ghost of his injuries throbbed as he thought about them, and he was painfully reminded of his many other failures.

He didn't expect that one measly conversation about MJ would take so much out of him, didn't expect how easy it was for him to crack when faced with a few old memories. He hadn't wanted to come undone in the presence of Captain America, but here he was, on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He was nothing like the man across from him. He was weak. It was humiliating, and it was exhausting.

"Can we stop?" His wispy voice cracked in distress. He hid his face behind his hands, body vibrating slightly. "Please? I can't do this ... Not here. Not ... not with you, I--I can't."

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Reed hadn't batted an eyelash when Sue had told him that she was having coffee with Captain America. She liked that he wasn't the least bit suspicious of her, and she took that as his way of showing complete trust in her. It wasn't like she was planning on doing anything outrageous with the man anyway--she was happily married and had children. But it did boost her confidence a little, when people stared at her for sharing the same table with a poorly disguised super-soldier.

Bluestone Lane was quaint and out in the open, a coffee shop that catered well to Sue's needs. Steve had to show up incognito to make himself less noticeable, and Sue found some amusement in his choice of getup. Steve didn't seem too pleased with the public meeting place, pushing his shades back up his nose with a finger every so often and tugging at the baseball cap on his head, but Sue
was perfectly comfortable plying her self with caffeine and pastries next to a bustling street.

It made the meeting the farthest thing from being clandestine. After all, they were just there to do business. To discuss their new ... project? She didn't know how to refer to Peter exactly, but she hadn't mothered anyone this badly since Johnny hit puberty and became an irresponsible teenager.

"He's been through a lot," Steve said dismally as he hunched over a house granola. His unexpected display of sympathy surprised Sue. She didn't know what the two had discussed--Steve had insisted on protecting Peter's privacy--but with the way Steve's tone wavered ever so slightly, she could tell that he was upset and things hadn't gone the way he'd planned.

It was worse than she had hoped, then. Unbeknown to the people involved, it was Sue who had suggested Steve as Peter's potential counselor. It made a lot of sense at the time--Nick Fury even agreed with her. Steve had done a lot of psychological debriefing in his time, and had an actual psychology degree under his belt from Columbia U. On top of that, the man exuded a caring, almost fatherly demeanor that should have made the task of treating Peter child's play. But watching Steve then as he scowled at his plate, Sue wondered if she'd been mistaken.

"He wanted to tell me a lot of things." Steve's brows furrowed. "I know he did. Every cell in his body was just screaming for him to let it all out. But he didn't. We barely scraped the surface. He stopped before we could get to anything ... groundbreaking. It was kind of painful to watch, really."

Sue wiped away the banana-bread crumbs left on her lips and then leveled him with a confused look. "Did you push him too much? Is he okay?"

He shook his head. "It's not that. He talked to me for a little bit. I managed to glean some info. He's--he's fine I guess, but we didn't really make progress."

"Well that ... blows." Sue leaned back in her seat thoughtfully. "What went wrong?"

Steve did a characteristic shrug and then mirrored her actions, sitting back and looking out onto the street.

"It's me," he huffed, rushing to explain further when Sue raised an eyebrow. "Well, not me. I think I was able to do everything I could to help him somewhat. What I mean is me ... as a stranger. I'm a stranger to him. He doesn't want to say anything too personal because he doesn't know me."

"Then get to know him." She saw how flummoxed he was by her offhand remark.

"You'd think it would be that easy, but it isn't." Steve blew out a breath. "He's so stubborn. Sarcastic, too. I'm not too sure he and I would hit it off. Plus he makes a couple of cultural references here and there and I find myself too embarrassed to ask about them."

"Well--who then? Who can he talk to? His aunt?" They'd already established that Peter Parker kept a lot of things from his aunt like any normal child did. May had said as much. She'd told her that Peter had been crawling on walls and swinging around the city for months before she had any actual clue.

Steve rubbed at the side of his nose, trying to think of a solution. He hesitated for a moment, internally debating whether it was ethical of him to reveal anything about his patient. He decided that it couldn't hurt too much, since they were both trying to help the guy out. "He had an ex-girlfriend. Back then she was his rock. His anchor. He told her everything and it kept him from going crazy. I think ... I think a deep and meaningful relationship is exactly what he needs right now."

Sue crossed her arms, mulling over Steve's proposal. She had to admit that it was a smart idea. A significant other. She had Reed and Steve had Janet, and all of them were happy. "Interesting. A
relationship ... but with who? I don't think I know anyone who's interested in Peter. Who ... who ...?"

The Present

"What are you doing here?"

Peter gingerly sat up, relieved to see Johnny standing by the door after sneaking in instead of Steve. He was too raw from their talk yesterday, and he didn't think he could endure another one of Steve's triggering questions.

"I came to see you," Johnny ducked his head, his lips tugging at one side in a crooked smile, setting Peter at ease with the small gesture. "Do I need an excuse to see you?"

Peter's lips quirked, his eyes rolling in amusement. "No ... but I thought you needed clearance to see me."

Johnny raised an eyebrow at this, approaching the bed and presenting Peter with a paper bag and cup. "Why would I? Are you from another weird planet, too?"

"Shut up," Peter shot back without any bite, eyeing the bag with interest and ignoring the fact that he'd had a slip of tongue. "What's this?"

"Breakfast, I guess? Dunno if you ate already," Johnny said as he sat down on the bed. "It was Tony's idea--he thought you might need some since the food here's pretty gross."

Peter could smell cinnamon and caffeine when he took the offering. "Oh."

He stared down into the bag, the pads of his fingers feeling traces of heat from within the paper. Johnny must've kept it all warm. Inside were a few cinnamon raisin swirls and--to his delight--knot-shaped churros, the fried dough accompanied by a small container filled with chocolate dip. He wondered how Tony knew he liked them, figuring that he must have wheedled out the details from Darcy.

"Is he here?" he asked smoothly, eyes darting to his phone. He'd left the man a few messages, but he hadn't checked if he'd returned them. He hadn't gotten the chance to explain what happened the day before, and he didn't think it was something that could easily be explained through the phone.

"He's looking for Susie," Johnny answered, brows furrowing slightly. "You should eat that before it gets cold. You should think about eating more, actually. Any thinner and the CW execs could call you with a reality show offer."

Peter grimaced but agreed reluctantly--he was beginning to look a little less like a lithely-muscled superhero and a little more 90210. He plucked out a swirl, mouth salivating from the cream and the sugar crystals. Tony bought this for him. He couldn't have been that upset.

He took a bite, groaning quietly as his taste buds were flooded with sugary goodness.

Stunned to see Tony loitering the halls, Steve blinked a few times, cocking his head when Tony saw him and strode over.
"Steve," Tony greeted as he eyed him oddly. "Did I miss something? Postmodern art exhibit? Jazz night? Why are you here?"

Nick had advised him--ordered him, really--not to let anyone else in the team know that Peter was Spider-Man, much less that he was in the building getting treatment for post-traumatic stress.

"I could ask you the same question, Stark." Steve eyed the man up and down, sizing him up. What business did Tony have here? The Grape was at the Triskelion. And Steve didn't think the man was participating in any other side projects or experiments with the Think Tank. Business maybe? Maybe the man had matters to discuss regarding the intensive repairs being done outside.

"I had ... pressing matters to attend to. It's about the alien thing. You know, science. Research."

"Uh-huh." Steve crossed his arms, waiting for a more specific answer.

Tony shifted where he stood, expression nonchalant and eyes, eyes a little too detached. "Have you seen Sue Storm anywhere?"

The inquiry gave Steve an idea. His eyes narrowed a little bit. "Shouldn't you be looking for Richards? Isn't he the expert on this case?"

Steve saw the man's eyes falter for a moment, and his suspicions grew as he watched Tony further. There weren't a lot of possibilities as to why Tony was seeking out Sue.

"Right. See ... Susan has the floorplans and the ... perimeter security designs. I'm looking for her because she was supposed to hand those over."

Steve understood at this point that Tony was making things up as he went along. And the only reason why he would was because he was there for personal reasons.

The bits and pieces of information started to click. Peter. He'd heard about it from Clint, who heard it from Natasha. There was something about those two. It didn't take a genius to figure out why Tony Stark couldn't stop talking about someone. And the two had been working together for quite some time now. Steve had dismissed the rumor because he hadn't seen any evidence alluding to any mutual attraction. But running into the man now, he had to wonder.

"Uh, Steve?" Tony raised an eyebrow at him.

And how did Tony know where to find Peter? He would have to know that Peter was getting counseling. And if he knew that, then that meant ... that meant Tony knew about Peter's secret.

Steve shook his head abruptly. "You're helping out with the repairs?"

"I'm offering my services." Tony regarded him with apprehension. "You still haven't answered me. I have more of an excuse to be here than you do. Are you perhaps ... hiding something?"

Steve found it in him to smirk. He finally had something on the man and he wondered only briefly if he had it in him to meddle in his affairs. "Says the man who wouldn't give me a straight answer. You're here because of something. Or ... or is it someone?"

When Tony's eyes widened, all of Steve's assumptions were confirmed.

"What do you know?" Tony questioned, eyes hardening.

"I know enough," Steve said vaguely, his eyes practically dancing in amusement. Tony pulled him
aside and dropped his voice down to a whisper, because apparently they had to be secretive about
the whole thing despite the empty halls and the lack of personnel in the vicinity.

"Who sent you then? Was it Nick?" Tony grunted. "I heard that he had an incident. Is he alright? Tell me he's okay."

Steve was caught off-guard with the amount of concern and uncertainty in Tony's words. Although the man's tone was firm, he could tell that Tony really did care for Peter with the way his eyes intensified.

It was odd--Tony never really showed any emotion when it came to the women he introduced to them. They came and went by so fast that he was sure Tony wasn't capable of any emotional investment. Truth be told, he barely even talked to them about the Pepper situation, and how they drifted apart and fell out of their relationship. Tony seeking out Peter after hearing about his predicament said so many things about his intentions, that Steve was quite frankly amazed.

Another wild idea struck him. What if...

Just the day before, he and Sue had been at a loss as to how to treat Peter. He wasn't exactly sure of Sue's motivations, but they'd stayed at the coffee shop trying to bounce ideas around, stumped as to how they were going to find Peter someone significant.

Steve didn't expect that he would find the answer vibrating anxiously in front of him.

"Alright," he said slowly. "Seeing as you know just as much as I do when it comes to our young friend, I'll come clean." He leveled the man with a look of resolve. "I've been giving him some much needed counseling."

At this, the man blinked in surprise, before reverting back to an intense scowl. He didn't say anything, waiting for Steve to elaborate.

"He's ... he's a good kid, Tony," Steve sighed. "You were right back then, during that meeting after he, uh ... after he went down for the count. You remember what you said? Kid's got heart. I've never met anyone like him--well, I have, but that's not really the point." Steve was taken aback for a moment, when the memory of one Bucky Barnes flashed in his mind. He decided to stow it away for the time being. "And right now? He isn't looking so good."

"What's wrong with him?" Tony wore that look Steve always saw whenever the man was facing a problem he really wanted to solve.

"I'm really not supposed to say this, but I get the feeling that you'd go and torture me with some wild and elaborate version of my personal hell if I didn't."

Tony nudged his head in agreement, and then continued to scowl for answers.

Steve rubbed at the side of his nose, looked around to see if anyone was listening, and then leaned forward, whispering: "He's lonely, Tony. Very lonely. He hasn't got anyone to talk to. And he keeps clamming up if I try any complex persuasive psychological tactics to get him talking. The last person who's ever really managed to do anything for him was his ex-girlfriend. I asked around, and you know what I found? That relationship was years ago. Imagine how many years of pent-up frustration this guy has on his shoulders. To be honest? I think he needs a ... special someone to help him. Like a significant other."

Steve wished that he had a camera then, because the expression on Tony's face when the man realized what Steve was trying to say was priceless.
"Are you ... ?" Tony stepped back, eyeing him suspiciously. "Are you telling me that ... that me and him ... like, are you ... ?"

Steve's answering stare was very telling. Tony was flummoxed. Again, if I had a camera ...

"Wow," Tony said, blinking. "Wow. So ... so you're okay with this?"

Steve cocked an eyebrow. "Why shouldn't I be?"

Tony snorted. If Steve looked hard enough, he might even say that Tony looked relieved. "Oh, I don't know. Coming here today, I didn't expect the poster boy for American patriotism to give me his blessing to ... pursue someone who's significantly younger and, well ... male."

Steve shrugged, dismissing Tony's doubts about the matter. "Why not? This is America. And it's the 21st century."

Again, the camera. Damn it. If only I knew this would happen.

--

Sue was entirely unsurprised to find his brother in Peter's room, trying to wrestle a churro out from her patient's grip. When she walked in, they froze in place, sporting twin pairs of widened eyes and gaping mouths. At that moment she was confident that she'd chosen the right person--Johnny was absolutely taken with Peter, and if the look on his face before she'd come in wasn't enough to prove it, the fact that Peter had shared the same obliviously smitten expression, was.

Johnny found his brain again and decided to crawl off the other, looking slightly abashed as he rubbed his hands against the front of his pants. Peter looked like he had been caught stealing cookies from a cookie jar.

Sue tried to look stern, but the prospect of trying to match the two together made her slightly giddy. She came off looking a little unimpressed instead.

"Johnny," she drew out slowly. "Can I talk to you outside?"

Her brother looked like he was about to say something in protest, but Peter grabbed his hand and nudged his head towards the door, as if to say 'don't argue and do as she says'. Sue restrained her face muscles before she could form a smile. Johnny drooped forward like a melting candle, following her as she stepped out.

"What are you doing here?" she turned around and asked, keeping her tone neutral. "I told you that Peter's still under observation."

Johnny's face continued to look like a kicked dog. "I know. I know you said not to disturb him. But, you know me, I uh, I kind of ..." Johnny tossed his head, deciding that any excuse he could possibly come up with would be weak anyway. "Sis, look--have you seen him? He's miserable. Why did you put him in this--this box? He doesn't even have a TV in there. It's like he's in a psych ward or something. It's dull and boring. He's gonna turn into some kind of vegetable if you keep him there any longer."

"Why, Johnny, I didn't know you cared about him so much." Sue cocked her head.

Johnny quickly launched into a fit of nervous laughter. "What? No! I, uh ... what?"

Sue pressed the pads of her fingers against her cheek. "Oh, my sweet baby brother. Everyone in this
building knows that you have feelings for--"

She watched him jump in to interrupt like something had tugged at his sternum. "It's not that! Why does it always have to be feelings and expressing yourself and loooove with girls? I'm just ... interested in him, that's all."

"Men," She pointed her long finger at him, eyes doing a round towards the ceiling and then going back to him. "Would it kill you to be a little sensitive? You need to admit that emotional intimacy is not the end of the world. You like him. A lot. There's no use hiding it. I know you."

She had to admit that it had been a while since she saw her brother blush furiously, not since he'd walked in on Sue in one of the labs, testing out Reed's stretching capabilities in very creative ways.


Johnny shoved his hands in his pockets, frowning. "What's it to you?"

"Well, if you like him, then surely you want what's best for him? Being with him right now isn't exactly helping him with his mental recovery."

"Oh, what would you know?" Johnny bit back. "I spend one minute with him and he's laughing and red in the face and ... and ..."

"No, I can't deny that. You make him happy. But after my initial observation, I've come to the conclusion that he needs a more ... straightforward solution." Sue schooled her face into a mask of resolve, perfect for what she was about to say. "A few ... extrasensory experts are dropping by soon to erm, fix his mind a little."

"What?"

"Guys with ESP, like psychics and telepaths--"

Johnny waved a dismissive hand. "I know what it means. What the fuck?"

Sue put a hand up, eyes glaring partly because of the language. "It's nothing too invasive, I assure you--but we're not entirely sure yet how everything will play out. He might lose a few memories, but nothing too drastic ... I hope." She muttered the last bit to herself, just loud enough for Johnny to pick up. As expected, Johnny was looking at her like she'd gone completely nuts.

"Are you crazy?" he nearly shouted, his voice dying down into a hiss when he caught sight of Peter craning his head to get a good look at them from inside the room. "You're calling in a bunch of telepaths to--to do what? Basically mind-rape him into being normal?"

Sue didn't say anything, but she put on the face she usually employed when she wanted zero arguments from Johnny.

Johnny threw his hands in out. Her brother looked positively aghast with her, horrified by the arrangement she'd set for Peter. In truth, she and Steve had nothing extreme planned for the guy. She knew that Johnny wouldn't stand for such a drastic solution to Peter's problems. She counted on that tendency of his, that he would act on his emotions almost immediately.

"Sis, what the hell? Are you kidding me right now? This is wrong!"

Sue shook her head resolutely. "I want no arguments from you, Johnny. This is an order. If you don't back down now, you'll regret it later. I'm gonna leave you here for a few minutes so you can talk to him for a little bit, but the mind healers and I will be waiting for you in the next hall."
She turned around and left, leaving her flabbergasted brother behind. She knew exactly how Johnny would react to this piece of information. It almost scared her how much she knew her brother. She didn't even feel the least bit sorry for manipulating him. All she had to do was disable the security system around Peter's wing for a while until they escape.

--

"We have got to get you out of here, fast," Johnny announced as he came back, sounding so harried and agitated that Peter was startled out of his thoughts. He bolted up and followed Johnny with his eyes as the blonde paced around the room like a trapped animal.

"What? Hold up. Something wrong?" Peter asked in alarm. He had no idea what the two siblings had discussed outside his door, but he was pretty sure that he'd heard fits of hissing and hushed comments and Sue's admonishing tones.

"Can you get up?" Johnny stopped pacing and stood by the bed, deliberating on his options and internally debating whether throwing the man over his shoulder was a good idea.

"Yeah, of course--Johnny, what's going on?"

Peter threw off the covers and stretched his legs out to the side of the bed. The situation would make a lot more sense if Johnny stopped moving for a few seconds and explained what was going on.

"Sue's gone crazy, alright?" Johnny twirled a finger around his ear. "She's planning to use telepaths to wipe out your memory or some shit. To treat you--or whatever it is you have."

Peter gawked at him in bewilderment. "This is a joke, right? You're starting to sound like you're the crazy one."

Johnny squeezed him by the arms and shook him lightly. His blue eyes looked slightly crazed, but there was a clarity to them that assured Peter he was sane.

"Positive. She gave me the look, man. She's serious. She's gonna mess your brain up like how the Dai Li did it to the people of Ba Sing Se. Unless of course we get out of this twisted joint."

"This is nuts, I don't--" Peter paused, squinting as he thought. "Wait--was that from Avatar?"

Johnny looked quite startled for a moment, a grin forming on his lips because Peter caught the reference. "Yeah, I just finished Book II Earth, it's great, I--wait, stop." He shook his head vigorously. "We need to focus."

He was right. Focus. Peter was still reeling from shock. Sue was planning to brainwash him? It sounded so ridiculous, like some badly-written plot to a B-movie. He wasn't even sure if Johnny had heard Sue right or if he was just making it all up in his head.

But truth be told Peter had grown tired of the place anyway, and he wanted to be anywhere else but on that bed, far away from the prying questions and the looks of pity and concern.

"Where would we even go?" Peter said as he stood up and bent down to put his shoes on.

Johnny was examining the windows with a calculating expression, silently debating whether it was a good idea to blow up the whole section of wall and leave Sue to deal with the damage.

"I don't know. I don't--she'd find you if we go to your house. I don't think she'd be evil enough to like, hunt you down or anything, but we need to keep you away from here."
Peter hadn't even thought of that. The idea of them being on the run was so far removed from his mind that when it occurred to him, he had to blink a few times in dawning comprehension. They were running. And they couldn't go back to Queens.

And there's another thought: Aunt May ... oh Lordie. She'd wanted him to get better. She put him up to this. Did she know that Sue was planning all this? And what about Steve? He was a man of ethics for Christ's sake. Or at least, Peter thought he was. Did he approve of the unusually drastic measure, too?

"Oh God, this is turning into a nightmare," Peter bemoaned, burying his face in his hands.

Johnny huffed in frustration. "Tell me about it. Any ideas? Do you think we'll end up in one piece if I just--boom--blow this section out?"

At that moment, Tony appeared by the doorway, his gaze transferring back and forth between the two men. Their heads snapped towards him, the tension in their shoulders easing a little bit when they quickly realized it wasn't some telepath set to go all Men In Black on Peter.

A period of silence stretched for a moment where neither of the three knew exactly what to say.

"Everything alright in here? The two of you look like you're gonna piss yourselves at any moment." Tony stood still, eyeing the two carefully.

"Tony--"Johnny started, his words cut short as his jaw drop down. IDEA.

"Your place," he breathed, taken aback by his sudden stroke of genius. His head snapped back to Peter, hands open to his side, presenting Tony like he was some kind of miracle sent by God. "Oh my gosh. Pete, we could go to his place!"

Tony and Peter stared at each other, and Peter self-consciousness flooded so fast that he nearly choked on his own spit. "His place? Tony's place? Like, like--like the one top of Stark Tower, place?"

"My penthouse, yes." Tony's gaze lingered on Peter even as the other man broke eye contact. "Okay, somebody needs to explain, right now, what the hell is happening."

"There's no time to explain." Johnny pulled Peter against him and held his palm out in front of him.

The ensuing explosion drove them back against the far wall.

BOOM!

"Jesus Christ!"

"What the freaking fuck was that all about?"

Where two seconds ago a row of plexiglass windows and a few sets of horrible beige curtains existed, a gaping, burning hole now appeared. As the rubble and smoke started to subside, Johnny grabbed Tony by the sleeve, completely ignoring the older man's protest about wrinkles and soot.

"Get us out of here, man. We need a place to crash for a while."

"Was that necessary, Johnny? Cripes." Peter examined what remained of the section of wall, edging away from the slightly unhinged blonde.

The two men flanking Johnny didn't know how in-sync their thoughts were at that moment.
Oh fuck, this guy's gone batshit.

Chapter End Notes

Yet again I did not plan any of this. Take note that I just go along with my gut and write the plot down on the spot. The part about Steve and Sue separately taking it upon themselves to push Tony and Johnny towards Peter was a stroke of genius. Ha. And about Sue scaring Johnny and Peter into hiding at Tony's--hopefully I can come up with something that can smooth it all over.
Intermission: Phone Calls and TMZ

Chapter Summary

There was a lot of explaining to do after their overly dramatic escape from the FF headquarters, almost all of them done through phone calls.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Johnny Storm's phone

Incoming Call: Susan Storm

J: Stop calling--

S: Where are you?

J: *scoff* Like I'd tell you, you evil witch.

S: Johnny, you blew a hole through the building, after dad specifically told you not to practice any unnecessary pyrotechnics around the labs--

J: Well what was I supposed to do!? You left me with no choice. You were gonna turn Peter into a meat puppet!

S: Okay--you've got to tone it down with the hysterics.

J: Turn down the 'evil, psychotic traitor' dial and I'll consider it.

S: Oh, boy. Okay. This is ... okay. Johnny. You didn't have to blow anything up, alright? I disabled the security around the wing for a moment so you could escape.

J: ... Huh?

S: I thought you noticed the distinct lack of killer drones. Guess I overestimated you a little bit.

J: You're losing me here. What?

S: *sigh* I made it up. All of it. There's no brainwashing on Peter's schedule. No telepaths around here waiting to get into his head. I just said that so you'd try to break him out.

J: ... Why?

S: Well ... my hands were tied. I can't exactly go into the details ... though I figured if you're lucky, maybe Peter would fill you in for me.

J: So that was all for ... what?

S: Baby brother ... you are so naive sometimes. You said you liked Peter, right?
J: ... What does that have to do with anything?

S: Well ... I figured, like, as a prescription, Peter could use a friend right now. A special friend. Like ... like a very special friend.

J: Okay. I liked it better when you were a psychotic sister, Ms Creeper McNasty. Go back to that.

S: You should date him, little brother.

J: !!! ... Are you for real right now?

S: I'm serious! You two look cute together.

J: Oh my freaking gosh what are you doing? What are you doing? Are you meddling with my love life?

S: Love life? Do you love him? Oh! Do you? Oh my God my brother's in love~

J: SHUT UP. SHUT UP!

S: *high-pitched chuckling* Johnny, I'd be very happy if you dated him.

J: SHUT. UP.

S: Not only me, but it would do Peter a whole lot of good. He needs you, baby brother.

J: ... He needs me?

S: Yes. That's what I got from my assessment. He's lonely and sad and closed-off and ... it's a little too heartbreaking to watch, Johnny.

J: ...

S: He needs your warmth. I saw you two in that room. You were right. You bring color back to his face. You make him happy, J-bear.

J: ... Yeah ... Yeah, he makes me happy, too. Very happy.

S: *squealing crescendo*

J: SHUT UP!

S: Okay but don't tell Peter it was a setup, alright? The point of all this is so that you two could spend some time together. You can make your move then.

J: *grumbling* You shouldn't be poking your nose into our business.

S: Oh brother, if I didn't you'd still be flopping around each other like two headless chickens. Tell me how it goes, alright? All the steamy, sexy details--

J: SHUSH!

Call ended.

--

Parker Residence landline: May Parker
Incoming Call: Peter Parker

M: Hello?

P: Aunt May--

M: Oh thank God. Peter, what hap--

P: Wait--stop. Before anything, Aunt May, I'm fine. I'm--I'm--I'm doing well, uh ... I'm cooped up somewhere but I can't tell you.

M: Are you still in the city? Are you safe? Who's with you?

P: Yes ... I'm still in the city. I'm not in trouble. And ... well, I can't tell you. But you know these people and you've met them, so ... 

M: What happened?

P: *nervous laughter* Funny story, uh. I can't tell you much, but what I can tell you is that the uh ... the help that I've been getting? It wasn't working so erm ... somebody broke me out.

M: Peter--

P: Don't worry! I'm ... I'm not going out of my mind. And I'm with good people. Friends. I'm safe. Don't worry.

M: Peter, the whole thing is in the news--Baxter Building suffering from another explosion? I thought somebody had come to take you away! Why don't you ever tell me these things? What did I say about irresponsible decisions--

P: I know I know I know, but ... just don't worry. I'm safe. I might not be home for a couple of days. I'll still show up for work but I'll be a bit more ... sneaky about it.

M: I hope to God you know what you're doing or I will--

P: Drag me back home and chain me to my room, I know. I'm ... this is me trying to cope, Aunt May. Hope you understand. But their whole ... therapy thing, it wasn't working, and--and--and I didn't know what else to do.

M: Oh, Peter ...

P: I'm still getting help. Not ... not in a conventional way or anything but I promise. I promise I'm gonna do better. I'm gonna be better. I promise. Don't worry.

M: Okay. Okay. But call me. Twice a day. Miss one phone call and I'll march up to the nearest superhero lair or what have you and give someone a piece of my mind until--


M: Peter, call me.

P: I will. I will. Love you.
M: I love you too, honey.

Call Ended.

--

Sue Storm's phone

Incoming Call: Nick Fury

S: What've you got?

N: I traced the call to Stark Tower. I imagine that Tony's got Parker holed up somewhere away from the team. I'll have Natasha snoop around and check in.

S: Johnny would be with them. One of my calls went through. He's with Peter.

N: I did not plan this.

S: No, but this ... this isn't so bad.

N: *sigh* This is what I get for working with people who do freaky shit everyday.

S: Look, all you wanted was for Peter to be up and running before ... before the next Grape touches down. And ... it might take a while, but I'm sure Johnny could--

N: You have no contingency plan.

S: It'll work, I think. If it doesn't, I guess ... I guess Stark can do something about it.

N: I have to admit I feel a little less pissy about this, knowing that Parker's just above the team. In case he goes rogue or flips out, I can have him pinned down in ten seconds--

S: Can you not treat Peter like some ... some defective soldier? He doesn't work for you. And he's not going to go rogue.

N: He doesn't work for me ... yet. It'll happen eventually. Until then, I've got him on lock. It won't take too long if I get the team to persuade him.

S: Do whatever you want. But please, please keep us and our home out of the ensuing mess when it all blows up in your face.

Call Ended.

--

Steve Roger's phone

Incoming Call: Tony Stark

S: Talk to me. What's going on?

T: Well ...

S: When I told you what you should do, I didn't expect ... explosions. I thought you were more subtle than that.
T: That wasn't me. That was ... *sigh* Cap, this plan of yours ...

S: What happened?

T: I've got a little ... I wouldn't say problem, because he isn't so much a problem as he is an ... obstacle.

S: ...

T: I've got him. Peter. But he, uh ... the younger Storm is here with him.

S: Johnny Storm?

T: Yeeeah, he's the one who made the hole in the side of the building. Quite a fireball, that one. A little crazy, too. Listen--I can't romance this guy with a third wheel.

S: ...

T: Okay, that's a lie. I probably could. It's a challenge. But! I'm starting to think that there's more to this ... buddy-buddy friendship thing they have going on that meets the eye. They're awfully close.

S: ...

T: You're gonna have to say something eventually.

S: I know. It's just ... I just had a thought. I'll call you back. Take care of Parker. And ... I don't know. Try to work around Storm.

T: Hey, we're not done here, are you gonna--

Call Ended.

--

Sue Storm's phone

Incoming Voice Mail: Steve Rogers

It's Steve. By any chance, would you happen to have anything to do with your brother tagging along with Parker to ... to wherever he flew off to? Because, see ... I have this plan. And it kind of doesn't involve him.

--

Steve Rogers' phone

Incoming Voice Mail: Susan Storm

Yes, I happen to. That was all me. I ... well. I thought about what we discussed over coffee yesterday and it came to me: my brother's single and available and really, really close to Peter. And even though he doesn't know that Peter's Spider-Man, he's buddies with the guy's superhero side, too. So, I did a little pushing and convincing and, well ... I found someone to be Peter's guy! Ta da!

--

Sue Storm's phone
Incoming Call: Steve Rogers

Sue: Hello?

Steve: It's Steve. Why didn't you tell me about this plan of yours?

Sue: Isn't it great? It's perfect. They're the same age, they've known each other for years, and they're positively doe-eyed for each other it's sickeningly sweet--

Steve: It's a great plan. But you didn't tell me. Because of that, both our plans are about to fall apart.

Sue: What do you mean? You had a plan? What kind of plan? What did you do?

Steve: This is so messed up.

Sue: What? What is it?

Steve: *sigh* I'm not the type to spread around ... gossip like this. But this isn't a rumor anymore. I've pretty much confirmed it.

Steve: ...

Sue: Captain?

Steve: Tony likes Peter.

Sue: ...

Sue: Come again?

Steve: Stark. Tony Stark. He likes Peter. Crazy about him. And I told him to ... to do whatever you told Johnny to do, if I understood you right.

Sue: You ... you what?

Steve: I ... I told him that maybe Peter could use a ... well, a friend. Like a special friend.

Sue: What?

Steve: Look--if you told me that you were going through with this ... this Johnny Storm thing, I would have called off my thing. But you didn't.

Sue: You didn't ask me either! When were you gonna tell me? You mean to tell me that Stark and my little brother are cooped up in one place with Peter and they're--what? Trying to pursue him? Ask him out?

Steve: Like I said, messed up.

Sue: Well--what do we do? I didn't even think about Stark--about Tony having feelings for Peter. Does he even keep to one partner long enough for any lasting development to come out of this?

Steve: I heard that he's in pretty deep.

Sue: Oh, crap. This is ... this is ... *frustrated growl*

Steve: Crap. Yeah, I know.
Sue: You should see him, Steve. My brother. He's really good for Peter. He makes him laugh and smile and everything.

Steve: *sigh* Tony's ... I know he'll do everything he can to make sure Peter's fighting fit again. And he really has taken to the guy. It's so not like him that I think this is the real deal.

Sue: Oh gosh, this is a nightmare ... I have to do something.

Steve: I don't think that's a good idea. You can't tell your brother that Tony likes Peter and I can't tell Tony the same about Johnny.

Sue: Why?

Steve: Well, obviously these two men would be ... vying for the love of Parker and--and it might become messier if they know about it. And they're both enhanced--I heard that Johnny's a volatile kid and Tony isn't one to back down from a fight. Imagine how a brawl between those two would go. I don't think the city would appreciate more ... destruction.

Sue: What about Peter? Oh my gosh this might actually push him off the edge. Shit. We've killed him, we've killed Peter--

Steve: Hey now--don't jump into anything extreme. Parker can probably handle those two. I've talked to him. Kid's got heart. We don't know what will happen. We'll see how everything goes. Lord Almighty we shouldn't have interfered.

Sue: I am this close to going over there right now and, and ...

Steve: And what? What can you do? These three would have to figure it out for themselves. And if one of them comes out of it ... a loser, then I guess we do something, then.

Sue: Oh, boy. I need a drink.

Steve: I'll be on standby in case any full-blown fights happen. I do live here, after all.

Sue: You watch them like a hawk and give me updates. I'm taking Reed out for a much needed drink. This is what I get for being a evil, psychotic, traitor sister.

Call Ended.

--

Tony Stark's phone

Incoming Voice Mail: Steve Rogers

Tony. About Storm ... Don't worry about him. Just think about how you can help Peter. I don't think he'll ever admit it, but he's counting on you. And don't be too ... hostile towards Storm. I hear he and Peter are close. Guy could use a lot of friendly faces around him.

I'm in the team headquarters if you need me.

--

AND NOW TMZ PRESENTS:
A PICTURE'S WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS

... OR IN THIS CASE SIX--

TONY STARK AND JOHNNY STORM?? WHA-HUH? (it's one word)

Kelly: This is honestly--this is huge. HUGE. I can't even--this is--

Dax: She can't even speak!

Kelly: *laughs* Okay. So we have Tony Stark--

*room erupts with comments*

Harvey: Okay! Stark. This is gonna be good. We haven't heard from him in a while.

Kelly: That's right, not since early this year, with that scoop about hash in Malibu. But anyway, so--so we have Tony Stark sneaking out of the Gold Maroon--high-end club and bar, he co-owns it--

Shevonne: That's right we cover that bar multiple times--Dax goes there, he whores around there all the time--

*laughing*

Kelly: So he's walking out with a blonde--

Charles: Figures--everybody knows he's got a thing for blondes--

Kelly: Ahaaa, but here's the thing. He's walking out with a blond dude--

Harvey: A dude!?

Dax: A dude!

*room erupts again*

Kelly: This isn't some random dude he picked up, but--get this--JOHNNY STORM, walking out of a bar with TONY STARK wrapped around him--

*room explodes with comments*

YES IT LOOKS LIKE PLAYBOY BILLIONAIRE PHILANTHROPIST TONY STARK SEEMS TO BE STUMBLING OUT OF A BAR WITH PEOPLE'S #2 SEXIEST SUPERHERO UNDER 25, JOHNNY STORM.

*room still going insane with comments*

Harvey: This is HUGE! So, so--

Dax: Wait so Stark plays for the other team?

Charles: No, psh, dude. Come on. Rumor has it that Stark plays for both.

Shevonne: It just so happens that he picks up a blond with a dick this time--

Kelly: A whopper, if last year's coverage of that burning costume mishap was anything to go by
THE HOTTEST HERO TO TAKE TO THE SKIES OF NYC WITH BURNING BITS, SHACKING IT UP WITH IRON MAN?

Harvey: So this isn't just *laughing* so this isn't just like, you girls fantasizing about this couple, right? This is actually confirmed?

Kelly: Well of course we're fantasizing about it--

*chorus of giggling*

Kelly: But this is straight up, classic Tony Stark picking up blondes from the many bars he goes to--

Charles: We need facts! Testimonies!

Shevonne: Do you actually watch this show?

*laughter ensues*

Kelly: We did actually confirm it with some of the party-goers and yes--the two have been seen all night canoodling--

Harvey: canoodling!? CANOODLING BEING A EUPHEMISM FOR GETTING THEIR FANTASTIC FREAK ON!

Kelly: *nodding enthusiastically* in a VIP table, with some even saying that foreplay was happening under the table--

Dax: That's just ... *grimace* WOW

Shevonne: Oh shut up--you're only jealous because you're not the blond guy Tony picked up that night--

*laughter*

YES, DAX IS ONLY JEALOUS--BECAUSE HE'S NOT THE TALL GLASS OF BLOND MILKSHAKE BRINGING THE ULTIMATES TO THE YARD.

Kelly:--course we would have broken this news out earlier but SI's PR is MAMMOTH, but we did get off through a technicality--

Charles: As we always do when we catch snapshots of him with women in his arms--

Harvey: And now they're this item now--broke the internet today when it came out in the morning news?

Kelly: Totally--Hollywood has gone apeshit with this news--we've got no comment from the two superhero teams--Pepper Potts, Tony's ex, is keeping silent about it--

Dax; I would imagine. I mean, imagine all the fanfics that would spring out about this! It's insane.

Shevonne: You'd write most of those I bet--

FANFICS. YES. NO DOUBT THESE PHOTOS WOULD SERVE AS FUEL FOR THE
This is just me smoothing things over a little bit and spinning some drama before the actual friction starts.

I've still got some issues to address. I've been neglecting Kitty Pryde's involvement in research, progress about The Grape and the Shi'ar, MJ, the memories Peter lost from his drunken night etc.

ALSO I'm making gif chapter images so look forward to those.

I've got a little cast in my head, and if you don't agree with them ... well tough luck because I've already made up my mind. HA.

I've got the usual Avengers playing the Ultimates cast, including Robert Downey Jr. as Antonio Stark.

Since Chris Evans played both Steve Rogers and Johnny Storm, I've decided to keep Chris as Cap and fancasted Hunter Parrish as Johnny. Look forward to that.

Sue Storm is Jessica Alba (still the best Sue imo). Ioan Gruffudd will most likely be Reed Richards.

I know that Jamie Bell played Ben Grimm in the reboot of the Fantastic Four, but like everyone in the fandom I've decided that that version never existed.

So Peter Parker is played by Jamie Bell (just think an older version of Tom Holland, who will be playing Peter in the latest Spider-Man: Homecoming movie)

What else ... um. Thank you so so so MUCH to all my loyal readers :D I keep writing this because you take the time to comment. So comments are really appreciated. I would reply to all of them but I have this thing were I don't want to bog down the comments counter too much with my replies.
The move to Tony's place was one part awkward and two parts thrilling—not that Peter said so out loud, but there was something exciting about staying the night at the man's penthouse, the feeling only really dampened by the fact that he and Tony couldn't make it past half-mumbled questions and short, clipped answers.

Tony gave a brief tour of the place—one round through the two-tiered living space where he pointed to rooms and objects and identified them: 'bathroom/laundry room, guest room, my room, game room, workshop/lab, closet, another bathroom, office/entertainment room hybrid, abstract sculpture, ficus, sofa'—making it a point to sound as hospitable as possible, but ending up sounding high-strung and fake chipper instead. Peter wondered if imposing on the man was the right thing to do, but seeing as Tony was making an effort to accommodate them, all while managing to keep from making eye contact, Peter presumed that the man wasn't so much as inconvenienced by the turn of events as he was just skittish about his presence.

Tony then muttered an excuse under his breath, heading for the doors and leaving him and Johnny standing in the middle of the large living room.

The whole place was so electronic that Peter was surprised that the plants were organic and needed watering (by automated water spouts). He would have ooh'ed and ahh'ed during the tour and fired off a hundred different questions about universal home control and wiring and electricity costs, but he didn't want to seem too excited, seeing as Johnny was entirely unimpressed by the whole setup. Come to think of it, Johnny didn't seem surprised at all by anything that Tony showed us. Not even the outrageously large game room with the pool table and the bowling lane.

Peter chalked it up to the rooms at the FF headquarters having similar home furnishings and improvements, but it still felt like he was missing something. He was by no means an observant person, but he did see Johnny react strangely to the only guest room in the house, as if he had been there before.

He kept his hands to himself as he sat down on the couch, even though his fingers were itching to try out the buttons at the end of the armrest. Johnny followed him and eased back into the sofa, his expression pensive.

"This place is nuts," he whistled as he craned his neck to see how far the ceiling went. Who needed that much air space in a living room? Peter could easily imagine a set of pterodactyl bones or a full-scale WWII fighter plane hanging from the beams, with plenty of room to spare.

"It's a'ight," Johnny shrugged, eyeing the place with disinterest. "A bit over-the-top, but yeah, I guess it's ... swanky."
Peter twisted and pulled his legs up onto Johnny's lap, lying down with his hands behind his head. "Admit it--you want this place."

Johnny scoffed, but then relented a few seconds later.

"Alright, it's gorgeous and I'm moving in ASAP. Satisfied?"

Peter snorted in response, his smile turning hesitant shortly after. "You will stay ... right?" He kept his tone light, only glancing at the blond for a second before fixating yet again on a portion of the ceiling.

"Dunno," Johnny sighed. "It depends on Tony. If I could, I'd hang out for a while. Not sure about sleeping here, though. There's only one bed in the guest room."

Peter rolled his eyes. "It's a big enough bed--Tony probably had like a school bus in mind when he bought it. We could share."

"What--sharing? With you?" The way Johnny gawked at him made it sound like a ridiculous proposition, even though being in bed together was most definitely not a first time incident.

His answering smile curled to one side in a playful smirk. "You didn't seem to have a problem with the idea the last time you slept over."

"Hey! That--that was for you. I did that for you, else you would have ended up like huge slab of frozen nerd."

The color in Johnny's cheeks made his throat dry. Peter gave him a withering look, settling back and almost rubbing his face against the upholstery. "This couch is okay. Maybe I'll sleep here. It was a sinfully cozy couch, with its bottomless padding and fabric that felt too expensive to even touch."

"Just take the bed. You're the guest here. If I'm staying the night then I'll take the couch."

It almost sounded as if Johnny didn't like the bed at all, with the way he kept shooting down the option.

"Or you can just share the bed with me and stop making a big deal out of it."

Johnny shifted uneasily. "Why are we even talking about this? It's barely lunchtime. Just ... whine about it later when Tony's here."

"You're the one who brought up the bed."

Johnny looked smug. "You're the one who wants me to stay."

That earned the blond a punch on the arm.

"Shut up."

Their playful banter was stopped short by a call coming in through Johnny's phone. The blond's mood soured with the interruption, and Peter slipped his legs out from Johnny's lap, expression sobering as he sat up.

"It's Sue again," Johnny informed him while scowling at the phone screen. "Third time since we left the place."

"Just answer her and ... I don't know. Throw her off or something."
"Stop calling--" Johnny complained as he answered the phone, stopping when she spoke and then scoffing. "Like I'd tell you, you evil witch."

The blond stood up and took the conversation out to the balcony, and Peter sank back onto the couch, his thoughts suddenly restless.

The thought of Johnny's sister made him feel slightly sick. He threw an arm over his eyes and pushed down the urge to growl in frustration. He didn't know what to think about the situation they were in, but it was no doubt Sue's fault that they'd resorted to it. He still couldn't believe that Sue's plan was to brainwash him, as if his problems would go away just like that. Maybe it could. Maybe it was a good idea. But it didn't seem like the right idea. It's scary to think about. I thought I could trust her.

Tony returned before Johnny could finish talking to his sister, his arrival making Peter sit back up. The man didn't look as agitated as before, but he did wear a sober expression.

"Talk to you for a moment? Up in the lab," Tony told him, eyeing Johnny on the balcony for a second before passing behind Peter on the couch.

"What's going on?" Peter's eyebrows drew together, standing and following the man to the stairs.

"Lots of things. There's some development on the Grape. Triskelion's sending the readings." Tony sounded serious and completely different from before. "Oh, and they managed to strong-arm some info from the Shi'ar prisoners. Barton used one of them as target practice."

"Yikes."

"Eh. And also, the whole Church bible's been translated."

"Hallelujah," Peter replied, eyeing the man in his periphery. They made it up the stairs and entered the room directly across from it, the sliding doors parting to allow them entrance.

Tony's personal lab wasn't much different from the ones a few floors down, except it also served as an armory and a work station for engineering projects. The mashup of different fields--biotechnology, electrical engineering, robotics--realized itself into one spectacular workspace. Peter had to remind himself to close his mouth. There were half-finished projects everywhere, ranging from a zero-gravity vacuum cleaner to what seemed to be a frictionless magnetic bicycle.

Tony noticed the look of awe on his face and shrugged in a self-deprecating way, smiling slightly. "I tinker with a lot of things, and it kind of became a hobby. Pepper says it's an obsession, but I always say that so long as--"

"--as an obsession is a good obsession, it's a healthy one?" Peter provided, earning him a surprised look from Tony, followed by an answering nod.

"My uncle used to say the same thing," Peter said with a rueful smile, scratching at his elbow. "Of course, we had to set down ground rules as to what was good and what was not so good."

Tony's smile was almost imperceptible, but he didn't miss the fond little glint in the man's eye. This made him go red in the face, and he coughed slightly to hide it.

"Right." Tony rubbed the back of his head and steeled himself. "So. The Grape. Friday?"

Peter realized then why the floor had been kept open in the middle. Beams of light came from every direction and produced a hologram in front of them, and Peter had to step back to make sense of the whole thing.
"Wow," he breathed, sharing a brief look of amazement with Tony. The Grape was projected in front of them, a 3D model scaled smaller to fit the room.

"What have we got?" Tony asked the AI, looking at the Grape with a critical eye.

"Sir, S.H.I.E.L.D. linguists are advising you to look through the translations. They have picked out points of interest and highlighted them," Friday said.

"Show them to me."

Peter watched as passages from the Shi'ar bible wrote themselves out onto the air space in bright blue font. There were passages about lunar cycles and hearts of planets, and passages about planting seeds and taking root.

"So they're ... horticulturists? I thought they worshiped a phoenix god?" Peter knew code words when he saw one, and the almost poetic way the lines read could only mean that the original writer was trying to be prophetic about it.

"They do. That line about the heart of a planet is most likely referring to the core. Shi'ar lore tends to drone on and on about how the Earth's core is the cradle of the Phoenix."

"And how do you know about Shi'ar lore?" He turned his gaze to Tony.

"I always study the material before taking it on."

"Nobody ever sends me anything. And I've been busy, so ... I haven't gotten around to catching up."

"Well ... maybe you need a tutor."

It was always like this, Peter thought as they locked eyes. They would talk about physics and math and general relativity and vector space and then suddenly, they would end up talking in low, heavily punctuated tones, using their voices as if they were touches and soft caresses ...

It was the second part of the two-part thrill, that being Peter working with Tony in confined spaces and letting their imaginations run wild. And flirting. Flirting that used to be harmless until Tony implied it wasn't.

Johnny's sudden entrance acted like a circuit breaker between them. Tony broke away, eyes turning to the ceiling, while Peter let out a breath that had been stuck in his throat.

"Finally got her off my case." Johnny skidded to a halt at the other side of the hologram and went back and forth between them with his eyes. "What's up?"

"Bible study," Tony said, his tone a deadpan as he turned to a computer panel and started sending a message to Bruce. Peter cocked his head to the side, eyes squinting in bemusement.

The blond walked around the floor, inspecting the writings floating over their heads. He snickered under his breath a few seconds later. "These look like the lyrics I used to scribble down onto a notebook during this tragic grunge phase I had."

Peter propped himself up onto an empty table, snorting. "They're bible passages. From the Shi'ar--" he paused, turning to Tony. "It's okay to tell him, right? I'm not breaching any S.H.I.E.L.D. protocols or whatever?"

"He probably has some idea about what's going on anyway, so it shouldn't hurt," the man said
wryly, inclining his head and crossing his arms over the glowing arc reactor in his chest. He regarded Johnny with a cool gaze. "Any thoughts? Think you can decipher this nonsense?"

Johnny gawked at the sudden inquiry. Peter was stunned, too—he didn't expect Tony to ask the blond for his opinion. He mentally berated himself for being so presumptuous. Johnny wasn't stupid. Maybe he had some useful insight.

"Yeah, I'm bad at this stuff. I'm not the brains of our team," Johnny admitted with a shrug, pushing his fingers into his pockets. "It's weird, though. Before this weird religious group decided to rear its ugly head, you were calling this alien thing a grape—and now this line right here is talking about plants and roots. Weird coincidence?"

Tony stared at him hard for a moment, his eyes widening and snapping back to the Grape afterwards. "Maybe you're onto something."

Peter's eyes lingered on Johnny, before transferring fast to Tony. The man answered his confused expression with an indulgent one.

"Okay. Let's put it this way." Tony circled around the projection, flicking his wrist and summoning the Shi'ar tome with a command. The 3D projection appeared, opening to the first few pages where a series of creeds and doctrines were written in detail. "The first commandment of the Church of Shi'ar Enlightenment is ..."

Tony whirled around with a waiting expression.

"To preserve the knowledge of the Creation God and protect it." Peter answered hesitantly, turning to the graphics overhead. "The 'God' in question being this ... this Phoenix entity."

"That's right," Tony nodded with satisfaction. "Now, Shi'ar adherents believe that the planet Earth was created around the Phoenix to serve as a prison. That the Phoenix resides within the core."

"Sounds like a load of pigeon crap to me," Johnny chimed in.

"To you and me both," Tony said drily, cocking an eyebrow at the blond.

Peter watched the exchange curiously, and then slowly added: "So these ... Phoenix fanatics planned this attack on the Think Tank because ..."

"They ... wanted to protect the planet's core, maybe?" Johnny said uncertainly, waving a limp hand. "I mean, it doesn't make sense, but ..."

Peter gave Johnny an incredulous stare, his eyes widening as the realization then hit him. "Nonono. That ... That makes a lot of sense. But that would only be true if the Grape--"

"--is a threat to our planet's core. The Phoenix, according to the Shi'ar." Tony finished, his expression turning grave.

Peter's mouth formed an 'o' shape, redirecting his stare to Tony. Johnny plopped down on a nearby chair, gaping at the Grape in a completely different way. "Well, shit."

Tony paced around the room, thoughts going a mile a minute. When he stopped, he issued a command to Friday, who made more passages appear in front of them, the same ones that Nick Fury showed them during the meeting a few days ago.

"Nick showed this to us back then when you were ... uh, when you were out sick. I wouldn't call it
spine-chilling, but ... it talks about the Grape falling from the sky and destroying the earth on which it lands."

Johnny sprang to his feet. "It's a seed! Grape. Seed. Get it?" He looked pleased with himself. "There you go." He pointed to the passage about seeds and roots. "Motive. The Shi'ar wanted to seize the Grape because it's a threat to their God or whatever, which they believe is in the Earth's core. Right? It makes sense!"

Tony ran a hand down one side of his face. Peter could only nod—it was a harrowing revelation. The more he thought about it, the more terrible it sounded, the possibility of the world ending making his insides twist.

"Sounds like we've made a breakthrough. A big one, at that. There's a lot to do. We'll have to figure out how the Grape will go about it."

"And we thought the Shi'ar wanted to steal it because of its massive energy output," Peter let out a shuddering breath, still reeling from the turn of events.

Tony frowned. "That's where we took a wrong turn." The two of them were the ones responsible for the initial hypothesis, even though it was a reasonable conclusion at the time. The alien mass contained lots of untapped potential, energy that could be sold and used as bargaining chips for politics and warfare. It was only natural to assume that the Church wanted the Grape for their own selfish endeavors.

"Sir, about the prisoners that Sir Barton questioned ..." Friday proceeded to add that one of the pieces of intel gleaned from the Shi'ar interrogations corroborated the new theory: the Shi'ar wanted to destroy the aliens, not use them to their advantage.

Peter began to feel a mild sort of panic rising through his throat. His voice strained when he said: "So ... so what? It's going to germinate and bury into our crust? Eat the Earth from the inside? How? Why? When?"

Tony's eyebrows drew in concentration. "That, we don't know. Time is relative across the universe, and we don't even know where the hell this thing came from. It could be today, or next week, or whenever the Grape feels like it. But if the Shi'ar were desperate enough to destroy the damn thing that they'd kill for it, then this thing must be more dangerous than we initially thought."

Johnny eyed the hologram with dread. "So aside from the large amounts of energy stored inside this thing ... it's also a planet destroyer. Christ."

"And more of these things are coming. According to this ancient tome they'll be falling periodically until March," Tony added with foreboding.

"About that, sir," Friday interrupted. "Nick Fury requests your presence tomorrow morning. Pietro and Wanda Maximoff have returned from the Savage Lands with information regarding a second Grape."

"Feed their findings through my phone's and Peter's database."

"Well ... we have two Grapes now. Maybe we could get some more information from the intervals between each arrival?" They were grasping for answers and Peter knew it, but there were still too many new questions to answer before they could even come up with a proper solution. It would take time, time that they may or may not have.

"Maybe ... We can also predict a window between impact and germination. But to do that, we would
have to wait until it actually starts sprouting roots."

"What if we can't stop it?" Johnny raised. "We can't just watch it destroy the planet."

Tony sat down, shaking his head. "No, we can't." Peter could see from the worried lines across his face that Tony was agonizing for a solution. It was one of the idiosyncrasies he'd observed about the man: he didn't like being stumped. "This is a problem. Global catastrophe. It's ... it's nothing I haven't dealt with before, but it still leaves me feeling ... irritated."

He sighed eventually, picking himself up and erasing the projection in front of them. The lights blinked out of existence, plunging the area back into a wide, open space. "Everything we've gathered so far, we send to S.H.I.E.L.D. They can worry about that for a bit and try to come up with a plan. As for me, I need a drink."

--

A couple of drinks and several bad puns later, it became evident that Tony was aiming to get wasted as early as four pm, with Johnny trailing behind but gaining on him fast, with the way the billionaire all but poured drinks down his throat.

At around the fourteenth or fifteenth drink offer, Peter stood up from the sofa and decided to call his Aunt May to inform her of what had happened to him, using the task as an excuse to get away from all the cajoling. He couldn't tell her outright that his 'treatment' was an icepick and mallet away from turning into a lobotomy session, so most of the conversation involved Peter skirting around the topic and sparing his aunt from any more worries, and Aunt May getting increasingly agitated by his cryptic babbling.

Dissatisfied with his performance, Peter thought to reassure her in person. He was planning on passing by the house anyway--he couldn't very well stay in hiding if he didn't even have his own toothbrush with him, much less a change of clothes.

When he informed the two men, both of them jumped at the opportunity to drive him to his house and back.

"I have nanites in my system," Tony said with a lazy smile.

"I *hic* burn alcohol like fuel. It's fine," Johnny slurred unconvincingly.

The two stared intensely at each other the next second. "You two are very drunk right now," Peter pointed out. He could imagine the two passing out on the couch within one hour.

"I'll just take my chances with the public transport." He grimaced at the two red faces frowning at him before slinging his backpack over his shoulder.

"Take Happy," Tony pushed. "He'll make sure you get there and back safe."

Peter shrugged, accepting the offer. Tony grinned smugly at Johnny then, earning him a throw pillow to the face.

--

"You offered to drive the guy while inebriated," Tony said, eyeing Johnny a peeved expression. He nursed a glass, balancing it over his arc reactor as he slouched deep into the sofa.

"You did this," Johnny accused. His head was throbbing. He supposed driving wasn't a good idea if
he couldn't see straight, but the opportunity had been there, and the thought of spending some alone
time with Peter clouded his judgment. His thoughts were a mess, but the fact that it was Tony who
offered him his first few drinks didn't escape him. "You just love to get me drunk, don't you?"

Tony gave him a withering look. "You're easier to deal with when you have that dopey look on your
face. A lot easier to talk to."

Johnny tried to train his eyes on the man, but he ended up nursing his head against the backrest
instead. His hair fell in his eyes and his mouth parted just so, that Tony was forcefully reminded of
how enticing Johnny looked when red in the face.

"I wasn't aiming for a yes," Johnny mumbled after a while. "I'm just here to make sure that the two
of you don't spend a few minutes more than necessary."

Tony barely heard him, but he registered the words spilling from Johnny's mouth. He sat up, fixing
the blond with an intensely curious look. A sneaking suspicion began to form in his head as to why
the man was sticking to Peter like glue. "You lost me. You're here to what, exactly?"

Johnny snorted, pushing himself up to a sitting position. Tony was caught off-guard by the smirk on
the guy's lips.

"Do you honestly think that I'm just gonna sit here and watch you do to Peter what you did to me the
night before?"

Tony's mouth fell open. He couldn't grasp what Johnny was getting at, but he had a sinking feeling
that their talk yesterday hadn't quite ended. In his head, the list came up, the set of all the people he'd
spent the night with. Johnny teetered over the edge of his own little isolated set, threatening to fall
into a different category where most of his other conquests had been banished to.

"I see the way you look at him. Everybody knows." Johnny brought up a limp hand and pointed up
the stairs. "You ... you fucked me in that guest room last night. The same room you're offering to
Peter. Wouldn't take me three guesses to know what you intend to do to him."

Tony didn't know what to feel. Affronted? Outraged? Confused? It was difficult trying to sort
through Johnny's words with the alcohol in his system. Was he ... was he jealous? Jealous of Peter?
Or ... or jealous of me?

Tony swallowed, regarding the man with forced civility. No. Johnny wasn't jealous of Peter. The
blond made it clear where they stood that morning. There were no strings attached. It was a one-time
thing. And although Tony entertained for a brief moment the thought of ... of starting something with
Johnny, he had been reminded of what he felt for Peter, and what Johnny felt about them sleeping
together. It wasn't so much a mistake as it was a slight error in judgment. A distraction.

Which left only one thing ...

"You like him," Tony said. It wasn't a question. It was a realization. It was clear as crystal--Johnny
felt the same way about Peter as he did. With the way he stood by and hovered around the labs and
brightened up whenever Peter was there, it was all so painfully obvious. Why hadn't he noticed
before?

Because you yourself were distracted. All you thought about was Peter, that it didn't even occur to
you that other people might like him, too.

Johnny stared at him defiantly. The truth was written all over his face. The younger Storm harbored
feelings for Peter, maybe even loved him. Tony wouldn't be surprised--the blond wore emotions on
his face so openly and acted on them without thinking. He was like Peter in that regard. The idea left a strange taste in his mouth.

And ... and Johnny thought that he meant to treat Peter the same way he treated the man. His eyebrows drew together. Johnny thought that Peter was just a conquest to him. Just another notch waiting to be punched into his belt. A trophy. The stinging sensation that followed left him bemused. So this was what Johnny thought of him. *What everyone thinks of me.*

In the past, Tony would have been angry. He would have dealt with his frustration by nipping the source of it at the bud. Pepper had taught him to think with a clear head during those times, and her principles had changed him. He no longer acted against his emotions without checking them with his brain first. He was different now. More mature.

More than anything, he wanted to prove Johnny wrong. He wanted to wipe the self-satisfied look off the bastard's face. But not with his fist. He wasn't a brute like Clint Barton.

The best way he could go about it was to sweep Peter off his feet and make the man fall for him completely.

"If you think that I'm ... pursuing Peter just to get into his pants, you're wrong," he told the blond calmly.

Johnny's eyes widened as he rose slowly, sitting up.

"I've never cared about someone as much as I care about him." Tony said quietly as he stood up, letting all his feelings for Peter lace his words with honesty. "You may not believe me right now, but I'll make you believe. And if you want him the same way as I do, then I'm warning you right now: you're gonna lose."

He strode past the gobsmacked man, fishing out his phone as he headed over to the balcony. He was going to have to talk to Steve, tell him about his current situation. If Johnny wanted to stay, then so be it. Tony wouldn't kick him out. He mattered too much to Peter as a friend. He'd be a hindrance to his ultimate goal, but he'd already promised himself that he would have Peter in the end.

--

Peter had met Happy before. He was the same man who had driven the limousine when Tony had dragged him over to a science expo a few weeks back. He was pleasantly surprised when the man recognized him from that time, chatting with him amicably and shooting him significant looks through the rearview mirror.

It didn't take too long for him to realize that Tony must have been talking to the man about him for quite some time now. Happy even knew about his aunt. Peter didn't know what to think about that. Either Tony wasn't as tight-lipped as he had assumed, or the man really did trust his driver.

When they arrived at his house, Peter told the man to wait for a moment while he went to get his things. The front door was locked, and looking at the time on his phone, Peter assumed that Aunt May had gone out to buy things for dinner. He fished out his keys and opened the door, calling out to the house. His suspicions were confirmed when nobody answered.

The place felt emptier and colder without Aunt May, and he stood in the living room for a moment, thinking about what it must be like for her to wait for him to come home while he was out. He was sure that his aunt had plenty of things to do to entertain herself, but the feeling wasn't lost on Peter. *I should spend some more time with her.*
A few minutes of reminiscing was all it took for the creeping loneliness to seep back into him.

For a while now he'd known that he had his own reasons for wanting to stay over at Tony's. He had to admit that it felt nice being surrounded by other people, by friends who cared about him and gave him their unwavering attention. It felt good to have Johnny following him around and smiling at him, to have Tony to talk to about all manner of things.

He knew that it was helping him find some inner peace. He wanted some stability, and the two men waiting back for him were helping him achieve it.

He turned on the television to bring some noise into the house, flipping through the channels for a moment until he found one where the people on the show were talking excitedly. He made a face at his choice, but then figured he wasn't going to be staying long anyway.

TMZ reminded him of the ugly side of his previous job. The sensationalism and attack journalism. The paparazzi. The news sites that exposed celebrities and invaded their privacy. The Bugle was like that at some point. But he remembered being glad about J.J. Jameson's structural reforms when he'd left the job. Sadly Hollywood was just as vicious as ever.

He left the living room and climbed up the stairs, making a beeline for his room. He would need a bunch of clothes, but not a lot since Tony had state-of-the-art laundering technology. If he needed a suit or a fancy shirt, he'll just have to come back for some. He didn't think he would need them for now, since it seemed like the Grape problem would soon become a full-time project.

There was one more item of clothing he'd almost forgotten about. The Spider suit. Aunt May still hadn't sewn him a new one, and it had been almost close to a week since he'd donned the costume. He'd forgotten to ask her about it, the request never once crossing his mind.

If he was honest with himself, the thought of wearing the costume again and going head to head against dangerous criminals and evil villains terrified him. Ever since the day he'd woken up and realized that he'd escaped the clutches of death, he'd been having dreams about dying, about letting everyone down, about leaving Aunt May alone.

_I'm going to have to assume the mantle eventually, but it's going to take some time. I still had a lot of issues to work on._

His next destination was the bathroom, grabbing all his necessary toiletries and shoving them into his backpack. He'd have to use a gym bag for his clothes, but otherwise, he ended up not carrying a lot of things. His shooters were in a secret compartment, along with all his stored web fluid. He would have to broker some sort of agreement with Tony to make more fluid without letting the man know what he was up to. _That's going to be hard. How am I supposed to keep this secret from them? Tony probably has the whole place wired with cameras. I'm going to have to be extra careful about it._

All packed and set, Peter gave his room a once-over and went back down the stairs.

He forgot that he left the TV on, and was just about to turn it off with the remote when a flash on the screen caught his eye.

He stood frozen as he listened to the announcer.

YES IT LOOKS LIKE PLAYBOY BILLIONAIRE PHILANTHROPIST TONY STARK

SEEMS TO BE STUMBLING OUT OF A BAR WITH PEOPLE'S #2 SEXIEST SUPERHERO UNDER 25, JOHNNY STORM.
He blinked a few times, trying to process the images that flit past the screen: Johnny melting in Tony's arms. Tony with his lips in the crook of Johnny's neck. Johnny's hand disappearing behind Tony, the man chuckling as his ass was cupped.

He barely registered some of the paps' comments.

*It just so happens that he picks up a blond with a dick this time*--

*But this is straight up, classic Tony Stark picking up blondes from the many bars he goes to*--

*We did actually confirm it with some of the party-goers and yes--the two have been seen all night canoodling*--

*--in a VIP table, with some even saying that foreplay was happening under the table*--

*--broke the internet today*--

*--no comment from the two superhero teams*--

His bags dropped to the floor.

He couldn't look at the TV anymore, but he couldn't look away either, and he stepped back until the back of his knees hit the couch. He felt like the paps were laughing at him, and he had this sickening, lurching feeling in his stomach that seemed like it would soon translate to him bending over the kitchen sink and throwing up his lunch.

He didn't understand. He wanted to understand. What was it all supposed to mean? Tony ... the man said he'd wanted him, but here he was, on screen, plastered against Johnny and ... the pictures flashed again, and Peter seemed to have missed one, a photo where Tony and Johnny were locked in a deep and blissful kiss. His best friend and his ... his ... what was Tony to him? His boss? His friend? A suitor?

It didn't make a lick of sense, and he wanted to stop the emotions from coming out, wanted badly to stomp down on the brakes before every new information drove him off a cliff.

His breaths started coming out short, his chest heaving and his body shuddering. *NO. No, no.* He forced his eyes shut, curled down into the sofa. The intense wave of anxiety hit him with full force. Suddenly, the room was upside down and his fingernails were digging into the back of his arms. His heart pounded in his ears. *Catch your breath. Catch your breath. Please, please. Hold it together. Inhale, exhale.*

He hugged himself tightly until the episode passed, leaving him deeply shaken and exhausted.

It was clear that he would have to stay away from them. How was he supposed to deal with this? How was he supposed to deal with them? Was he supposed to feel betrayed? Nothing had been set in stone between him and Tony, at least not yet. They were supposed to figure out together. Peter was hoping they would come around to it eventually. And Johnny ... Johnny wasn't his to begin with. The man didn't owe him anything. They were just friends. But there was this fire inside him, this intensely burning *jealousy* that wouldn't go away. For both Tony and Johnny.

He lay there for a while, head and heart reeling from the panic attack. He waited until his muscles relaxed, until his breaths stabilized enough that he didn't see stars behind his eyelids anymore.

So ... so Tony and Johnny were together. Or at least, they liked each other enough that they didn't care if they got caught showing it. Peter let the information screw his mind over.
It was no wonder that Johnny was always around the labs. They were an item. And Johnny knew what Tony's place looked like, so he wasn't as amazed by all the features it had. He'd been there before. Why else would he suggest that they hide there? He knew that it was a safe place to hide. His confidence in the security of the place must have stemmed from the fact that they'd been able to keep their ... whatever they were a secret for so long under Tony's roof. And the man had to wait for Tony's approval before he could stay over. Maybe they had to set up some ground rules, or ... or maybe they had to figure out how they were going to hide their relationship.

Relationship. **Tony and Johnny are together.** He let out a shuddering breath. Maybe it was a new development. Maybe ... maybe Tony had been upset because he didn't go to lunch with him. **Was that it? Or am I just being paranoid?** He didn't expect that Tony would move on so fast. And with Johnny, too. It hurt to think about, even though he knew he didn't have the right to feel hurt. They weren't **together.** **Stop being such a fucking pansy about it.**

Happy was waiting for him outside. He didn't know how long he'd been lying there, thinking about a thousand things. What would they do if he didn't come back? Would they go after him? Did they even know that their relationship was public now? **That Peter knew?**

He still owed them a lot. Peter knew that. He hadn't forgotten everything they'd done for him. He knew deep down that they still cared for him on some level. They'd have to. They couldn't be that cruel. And Tony ...  

Tony had a lot of explaining to do. Peter wasn't sure if he was ready to hear the man out. He just felt so ... so betrayed.

He didn't know what motivated him to drag his feet back to the car. It felt like he was walking towards the electric chair all over again.

Happy threw him a few concerned looks as they drove back. In the meantime, Peter raided the car's whiskey stash and began to drink straight from the bottle.

--

Back at the tower, Tony shook Johnny frantically until he woke up, the man having passed out from drinking too much.

Phone calls started coming in a few minutes later.

"Sir, Miss Potts is on the line. Mrs. Storm-Richards is also on hold," Friday said.

Friday also replayed the TMZ clip on the large flat screen TV as if to taunt him. Johnny blinked at the screen, trying to comprehend what was happening.

And from the front door, loud, impatient knocks resounded.

"TONY. IT'S STEVE. OPEN THIS DOOR RIGHT NOW OR I'LL BREAK IT DOWN."

Chapter End Notes

EDIT: I added a tidbit about Pietro and Wanda's return from the Savage Lands. That should be further covered the next chapter.
TAKE NOTE THAT they were sent there originally because a second Grape had impacted around the area. This was briefly mentioned in Chapter 7 - Wonder Webs. The Shi'ar thought Thursday was the first Grape's arrival, when in fact it had arrived weeks ago. Thursday was actually the day of the second Grape's arrival, and it touched down inside the Savage Lands off the coast of Australia.

I didn't know exactly how Peter would react. So I just pretended to be him and did what I would do in his shoes.

Take note that this is Tuesday, the same day that they broke out of the Baxter Building. That would mean that Peter had his first panic attack just the day before.

To clarify,
Monday:
Peter goes back to work
Tony confesses to him
Nick tells Peter to go to Sue
Peter has a panic attack
Steve counsels Peter
Steve and Sue talk about Peter in a coffee shop
Johnny and Tony sleep together

Tuesday:
Tony and Johnny talk about the night before
They go to Peter
Tony talks to Steve
Johnny talks to Sue
They break Peter out before lunch
The calls happen throughout the day
The three discuss the Grape
Tony and Johnny drink again and realize they both like Peter
Peter goes home to get his stuff and chances upon the TMZ clip

I didn't realize that all these events were squeezed into two days until I read through them. So I apologize if it all seems so packed. Also, I find it funny how I've written a lot of chapters and it still hasn't been a week since the attack on the Baxter Building. TBH most of the chapters are sort of like mini-chapters to larger chapters. I just divide them into parts because honestly I want to be able to post something every week.

Also, Chapters 1 to 9 have chapter gifs out. I apologize for the size. I'll enlarge them once I procure higher definition movies.

I'll go through this chapter again tomorrow when it isn't 4am and when I'm not sleepy.
Please find time to re-read it then lol

Comments :D

Also, damn you, TMZ!
"You didn't tell me about this." Steve stabbed his finger towards the TMZ video that Friday still kept looping on screen. "Why does no one tell me anything? I can't make plans 'round curve balls like this."

Tony raised his hands up in an attempt to pacify the man. It was hard to keep composed when someone twice his size was raising their voice at him. "Calm down, Steve. Nobody's asking you to make any plans--"

"Why's everyone so noisy?" Johnny groaned as he peeled himself off the couch. "God, take it somewhere else."

Steve's eyes snapped towards the blond. The second after that, Johnny's phone started ringing in his pocket. A quick assessment of the half-finished bottle of Jack and Grey Goose explained to Steve why Johnny was mewling about his delicate hearing. "Kid, you better start sobering up right now because your sister's about to give you an earful."

"Wh--What?" Johnny said, his face scrunching. Tony couldn't find it in him to feel sorry. He tried not to panic. Panicking meant leaving less space for planning and rational thinking. Johnny clumsily fished out his phone and threw it across the room towards a recliner.

Steve meanwhile whirled back to Tony. "Explain."

Tony wanted to bite back that he couldn't just barge into his place and start demanding answers, but Steve's steely glare brooked no argument.

"We got drunk the other night and I took him home," Tony sighed in resignation. He spoke quickly to add: "It happened once. Just once, and these God-forsaken fuckwads got a couple of shots."

Steve snorted in derision. "A couple? They could organize a freaking art exhibition with the amount of shots they got. Call it, 'shameless shithead shmucks'."

Tony eyed him heatedly. Steve never swore unless the person really deserved it.

"It was an accident."

"What about Peter? He's gonna find out. He logs in to, in to Tweep--what is it?"

"Twitter."

"He logs onto one of those stupid social networking sites and who does he see first? You making out with one of his friends." Steve tossed his head in disapproval, practically squeezing his chest as he
crossed his arms tightly. "You know, you were a respectable man in my eyes--not a stellar guy, but good enough. You have redeeming qualities. And for some reason all that kid sees are those. Now, tell me why--"

"Okay, you stop right there." Tony jabbed his fingers against Steve's shoulder, leveling the man with an equally firm look. "I didn't run over a kid and leave him for dead, I just ... had a weak moment. I have nothing to explain to you. Nothing. You can feel self-righteous and holier-than-Jesus for all I care, but I still won't owe you anything. It's Peter I need to talk to. I'll explain everything to him when he comes back. You understand me?"

Steve's indignation brought a chill to his gaze. "I'm not really in the mood to believe any promises right now."

Tony steeled himself to argue, but like hot steel plunged into water, most traces of heat left him, to be replaced by a tempered curiosity. He regarded the man with a suspicious stare. "What is this? What's-What's with the brother bear act?"

"What?" Steve obviously hadn't comprehended his question. The man had had all of two days to get acquainted with Peter. His head wouldn't catch up until at least the end of the week. But Tony could see it, could see how someone like Steve would have a certain complex for someone like Peter.

He was going to have to watch this development with a critical eye. "If you don't believe me, stay around and wait for him."

In the course of their exchange Johnny was making choked noises in an attempt to interrupt his evidently irate sister on the phone.

"And try and save Johnny, please. I can only handle a few problems at a time," Tony implored the soldier. "FRIDAY. Tell PR to clean up this mess, or I swear to you I'll have that whole floor fired by dinner."

He stepped around the two blonds as Steve tried to negotiate against Sue's alarming promise to castrate, with Johnny hanging onto his every word as if his life depended on it. Tony let out a raspy breath, swiping his abandoned glass--or Johnny's, he couldn't recall--from the table and downing its contents, before telling Friday to patch Pepper through to his phone.

"Pepper," he said tiredly through the receiver. "I take it you've been watching E! ?"

"Do we need to talk, Tony? I thought you were after Peter Parker." Pepper's tone was light, conversational, like she was doing some work over her desk at the west coast and thought to call him on a whim. "Or at least, that's what Darcy still tells me."

"No, we don't need to talk." Tony blew out a breath. "It's not something I can't fix."

"Maybe I should go over there and ... mediate? Or something? I always knew you were crap at this sort of thing. But hey, crap worked on me, so ..."

"It's fine. You can come if you want, but I'm hoping everything's sorted out by then."

He turned to the two blonds on the couch--Johnny was getting a lecture from Steve. The soldier probably thought that the younger Storm was a lot easier to stare down.

"If you have everything taken care of, then I don't see why I should," she said. "I'll keep in touch. Don't fuck this up."
It was at that moment that Friday let one Peter Parker stumble through the doorway. All eyes went to him, widening. There was a bottle in his hand, drained halfway through, and slung over one shoulder was his backpack, while a gym bag on another kept him off-balance. He looked pretty inebriated, but he was sneering almost.

"I won't," Tony strained to say. She hanged up, and Tony let the phone fall to his side, approaching Peter like the floor had traps on it.

"Hey," he said, eyes searching carefully for any sign that Peter had caught wind of the news.

"Tinman," Peter nodded in acknowledgement and then spun on his heel to face the couch. "Hey, Captain--you here to brainwash me?" He snorted. "Course not. It's flamebrain over there and his sister who wants to fuck my brain up even more."

And then his eyes went to the flat screen.

"Friday, would you turn that damn show off?" Tony snapped, but Peter dropped his bags and chuckled loudly. It unnerved Tony instantly.

"Yeah Friday, turn that off--already seen it," Peter announced, waving a limp hand at the screen as he dragged his legs over to the stairs. This made a flash of alarm cross all three faces--well two--Johnny looked like he was about to cry. Tony figured vodka had a different effect on him.

"You ... you saw it," Johnny stood up, swaying for a second before advancing. "Peter, I--you have to listen--"

Peter stopped with his hand on the rails of the staircase and turned to the two of them, his smile still in place but his eyes shining with a myriad of emotions. His fingers went up to smooth down his unruly hair. "I'm gonna lie down for a--for a bit. Kind of had a lot to drink--I can still sleep in the guest room right? So ... so whatever stuff you have going on that you haven't told me yet, save it for when I'm not happy from the booze. Don't kill the buzz, okay? Night."

Tony deflated, watching as Peter staggered up the stairs. He thought of chasing after him, of firing off explanations while the guy was still receptive, but Tony hadn't thought this far yet, and didn't know how to read emotions--the one thing he still didn't have a grasp on even after Pepper. So he willed his legs to stay still and told himself to give the guy some space.

--

"How in the world did this happen? Did you know about this?"

Steve winced, giving Johnny a sympathetic look. Sue sounded pissed--at his brother for sleeping with Tony, at the two of them fucking behind Peter's back, at her and Steve's glaring incompetence in planning and matchmaking--her tone taking newer and newer heights with each task she realized they fouled up.

"No, I didn't," Steve looked cross. "Tony told me they got drunk and spent the night yesterday. It was ... it's a pretty stupid thing to do. No doubt the large quantities of alcohol messed with their brains. But it happened, so ... so we deal with it one step at a time. Tony has the paparazzi show covered while I'm ... cleaning up over here."

"Give Johnny the phone."

Steve offered the phone to Johnny, raising his eyebrow in question. Johnny's face turned a frightened shade of grey.
"He's kind of down for the count--it was a mix of whisky and vodka and he's pretty intoxicated. Can I take a message?"

Steve listened to her words, nodding gravely, while Johnny watched him as if his life was flashing before his eyes. Steve only listened to half of her demands--he was thinking of how he was going to deal with three men who had different, clashing problems. He thought about how they didn't quite make a good mix, and tried to plan something that could sort them all out.

He hanged up at around the same time Tony was done talking with Pepper. At that time, the sliding doors had opened and Peter walked in, carrying his things and looking pretty much like Johnny did, except he wore a calmer expression and was flushed from the alcohol he'd unquestionably transferred from the bottle in his hand into his stomach.

"What did she say?" Johnny asked in terror, before his eyes followed the two others' gaze to the door.

"Hey," Tony said carefully. Steve wondered how he was going to handle all of this, but with the way he was gaping at Peter like a zoo attraction Steve had low expectations.

"Tinman." Peter wore a strange smile, the kind that soldiers wore when they returned from the field to their brothers, after seeing their field companions get shelled and mortared. Peter turned his eyes to him and his breath caught in his throat. Peter had a sharp glint in his eye. It made Steve reel back from the images. Bucky. *How can he look so much like Bucky without actually looking like him? Why did accusatory gazes floor him so much?*

Johnny stiffened beside him. Steve felt like Peter was directing much of whatever he felt towards the other two towards him, too, as if he had been there with them when they messed things up and he was as much to blame. He furrowed his eyebrows--why was he caught up in this mix?

"Hey, Captain--you here to brainwash me?" His voice was a knife and it shook unevenly. Steve narrowed his eyes. What did he mean? "'Course not. It's flamebrain over there and his sister who wants to fuck my brain up even more." His chin tilted up to meet the flat screen, bravely putting on a face.

"Friday, would you turn that damn show off?" Tony ordered the AI. Peter dropped his bags in a corner of the room next to a ficus and laughed.

"Yeah Friday, turn that off--already seen it," he announced, waving a limp hand at the screen. This made a flash of alarm cross all their faces, faces that followed Peter all the way to the stairs. Johnny emitted a quiet broken sound.

"You ... you saw it," he stood up, swaying for a second before taking three cautious steps. "Peter, I--you have to listen--"

Peter stopped with his hand on the rails of the staircase and turned to the two wrongdoers, his smile still in place but his eyes quavering. *He's trying to understand. He wouldn't come back here if he'd known beforehand and he didn't want to understand. He would have stayed home, but he came back anyway.* Peter's fingers went up to smooth down his unruly hair.

"I'm gonna lie down for a--for a bit. Kind of had a lot to drink--I can still sleep in the guest room right? So ... so whatever stuff you have going on that you haven't told me yet, save it for when I'm not happy from the booze. Don't kill the buzz, okay? Night."
This was not what Steve had intended when he'd urged Tony to pursue the younger man. Less than eight hours was all it took for Peter's life to spin even more out of control. As Peter's first ever therapist, he was twice as disappointed. He felt responsible, somehow, even though he hardly knew the man and he didn't have much to do with the predicament.

"So much for explaining," he told Tony, before taking an empty glass and pouring a small amount of hard liquor into it. Johnny watched him, aghast, and Tony conveyed his feelings the way he usually did--by schooling his face into a hard, brooding expression. Once he'd downed the drink, he pushed himself up to his feet and made for the stairs.

"Where are you going?" Tony's hand came up to grip at his arm.

"To talk to him." At Tony's narrowed eyes Steve explained: "Do you honestly believe he's sleeping up there? He came back. Why would he come back if he knew what happened? I'll tell you why: it's because he thought he could handle it. He made up some excuse to lie down because he handled it for a while, and then it hit him full in the face."

"He's upset with you, too," Johnny said from behind him. He sounded miserable. "Sue told me you all planned it, planned to mess him up with a telepath to help with his problems. 'Course, I only just found out it was all a lie so we could break him out and ... help him ourselves." Johnny ducked his head, even though it was pretty clear to everyone what he meant. Everyone knew everything now.

Steve turned back and wore his patient expression. "He's a whole lot more upset with you guys, believe me. And I'm not just gonna sit here while he wallows in his own self-pity upstairs."

Before Tony could so much as bristle defensively, he took the steps up to the second floor, turning right and knocking at the door immediately to his left. He knew it was Tony's guest room. There was a reason why the bed in there was large. He opened the door a few seconds later--he only knocked to warn the man.

Peter had collapsed on the bed face down, limbs sprawled out. He didn't stir when Steve closed the door behind him. By the way his back rose and fell, Steve could tell that sleep was the last thing on Peter's mind. He sat down gingerly at the end of the bed and watched as the mattress dipping down made Peter's head roll to the side. The man eyed him crankily. Steve stared back, waiting for him to say anything, because he knew Peter had a lot to say.

"Why are you here?" Peter asked hoarsely after a while. "And if I may, may I have that brainwashing appointment now?"

Steve shifted in his seat. Just the friction of the sheets against his fingers was bringing back memories. "I wasn't in on that. I'm against you getting your brain washed."

Peter slumped back down and let the sheets cover his sheets. If Steve didn't know any better it seemed like the guy was trying to suffocate himself.

"When did you find out?" Steve's calmly intoned.

There was no answer for a while, but then Peter was pushing himself up and turning in place until he was lying on his side. Peter looked lost and confused, just as anyone would in his situation.

"Turned the TV on in the house. Was unfortunate enough to catch the show. Are they fucking each other?"

Steve tried not to be so affected by the casual use of foul language, instead employing it in his vocabulary in the hopes of communicating with Peter--his patient--better. "No. No. They fucked--but
aren't--fucking--that implies that they do it occasionally and knowingly."

Peter went scarlet, suddenly remembering who he was talking to. He braced himself with his hands and pushed away from the bed, until he was sitting up and leaning back against the headboard. "So... so they did it once, unknowingly? What, were they drunk?"

"You went out for a few hours and look what happened to them." Steve chanced a smile in the hopes that Peter could find some humor in the cosmic joke playing in front of them. It worked. There was a brief pull of muscle at the sides of his lips, but it was gone all too soon when he ducked his head down and ran one hand up the side of his face on the way.

The crestfallen appearance tugged at Steve's heartstrings--Bucky had looked at him the same way when he found out about his and Gail's engagement. That was shortly before the A-Bomb and the cryogenic imprisonment and the shitty barreling into the 21st century. Steve found himself reaching out involuntarily, until his hand had settled heavily onto Peter's knee. The younger man's eyes widened a fraction.

"They didn't mean to hurt you, Peter," Steve said sincerely. "They've been beating themselves up trying to find a way to apologize. They didn't mean for it to happen, and I'm guessing they didn't tell you beforehand because it hadn't meant anything to them." Steve paused to think of another reason. "Either that or they haven't had a chance to tell you. The TV said this happened only yesterday--"

"Tony said he wanted me," Peter interrupted quietly, though he didn't sound small--his voice was low and he sounded frustrated. "It feels like crap. I mean, I don't really have a right here, do I? But I thought that the moment he said it, he was willing to commit or something--why do I sound like such a pussy?" he tossed his head wildly and then sank back to the bed in a miserable heap.

Steve didn't understand what Peter actually meant by that, though he figured it must have had something to do with how emotional he was getting. He wasn't about to start with a 'men are fickle' anecdote. Who knew what Peter would do if he started excusing their actions.

Instead, Steve decided to draw from his own experiences and come clean about a secret.

"Look around this room," Steve commanded gently. Peter did so, and Steve trailed after him, eyes sweeping slowly from floor to ceiling, taking note of the colors, the patterns--the muted red carpet, sky blue walls that bordered on overbearing, crisp white ceiling. The golden fixtures and lamps and figurines. Stars, stripes. His lips quirked at the memories. It wouldn't be apparent to someone who didn't have all the information, but if Peter still had his brains with him, he'd easily figure it out.

"Why does everything look so... so patriotic?" Peter grimaced, and Steve ducked his head to hide a smile. A few seconds later, Peter's eyes rounded back on him as if magnetized by a force. Peter soon realized why Steve wanted him to take a good look at the interior.

"This room is you," Peter stated flatly. "How is that possible? What the--this looks like your costume turned into a room!"

Steve nodded in satisfaction. "That's because it is. This used to be my room. At least after they revived me from the ice."

Peter stared at him incredulously. "You lived in Brooklyn before the Tower. Everyone knows that."

"I lived here before that," Steve explained to him, spine rolling down the mattress. He eyed around the room, reminiscing. "I moved out. I'm astonished that Tony kept this room in this state. He must laugh at it every now and then."
Peter pulled his feet towards him and tucked them underneath his thighs. "But now you live below, in the Ultimates quarters."

"I did. It was more practical to live with the team. They're sort of family to me now." His tone took on a fond tone at this.

"So you lived here, in this room. Across from Tony's room." Peter made it sound so ridiculous. *It was, back then. So ridiculous and unexpected.*

"Yes," he answered.

"You chose to?"

Steve tilted his head, looking wistful. "No. Tony insisted. I didn't know why. To me he was just the more flamboyant, more arrogant, more ... *everything* son of Howard Stark, this scientist I knew years ago. Well, many years ago. Back then I had no idea he would end up owning such a successful corporation. I never thought his son would turn it into a multinational economic force, much less offer me room and board in the building, across his own room."

"Why are you telling me this? Are you trying to make me see how good a person Tony is?" Peter frowned reproachfully.

"That's ... one way to put it," Steve said, though there really was more to the story than just Tony being a good person. "I was living here for a while, cursing the way he mocked me. He made the room's interior match my new gear. He gave me figurines from the 1920s and snickered about it, and showed me this site called Youtube, where lots of old videos of me had millions of views. He was doing it all to annoy me, and I could tell, with every fiber of my being, that this guy just lived to mock my very existence. It took me a while to realize that that wasn't the case."

"It wasn't?" Peter asked doubtfully, eyes considering the room in a new light. His fingers had found themselves tangled at the end of the sheets. *A habit,* Steve thought idly.

"No," Steve exhaled. "It was something else. I was ... very depressed back then. So much of my life has changed. All my friends were six feet under, and the world as I knew it was gone, replaced by something fast and scary and overwhelming. Those little statues--they're authentic. If he'd sold them now he could make a fortune. They used to make it here, in factories down at Brooklyn. My memory didn't serve me all that well, but it brought me back to when life was simpler, when the kids at the orphanage all wanted a figurine like that.

"And the Youtube videos--Tony sat me down one time and read me the comments. People told stories about how the Captain had saved their grandmother from a fire in a little village in Poland. How the super soldier saved a bunch of American paratroopers off the coast of Sicily. They *remembered* me, even though it was only through passed down tales and recollections. Small stories of how people's lives were changed by my actions, all the way down to the present. It made me think about my purpose for living."

Steve's voice had dropped down to a low mutter. He was dredging up old wounds by recounting something that had happened in his life that had no doubt affected him profoundly. "It made me realize, to my amazement, that Tony was trying to pick me back up. He was doing it all to help me, even though his way of doing things was ... unorthodox, and frankly speaking, irritating as hell at first."

"Did it work? Were you ... were you the same again?" Steve was stunned to find that Peter was hanging onto his every word. He was listening to him. In some parallel universe he had been in this
scenario before. Steve wanted to figure out what it was that made Peter so ... easy to talk to.

"It did. I forgot how much I could affect the world just by doing my job as a soldier. I wasn't being responsible with my power, he said. And he told me that there was no reason for me not to be able to enjoy my life despite all the responsibility. He .. he took me places. Museums. Shows. Made me sit through this concert where people sang pop songs in this century the way the sang it back then. It was ... it was awesome, I had to admit. There were people living in the present who still stuck to the old ways. My ways. I didn't know life today could still be so refreshing. Tony made me see all of that. And I was more than grateful. I was ... well, I was confused afterwards."

"What do you mean?"

Steve hesitated. He loved and hated that part of his life. It was when everything he'd wanted had been there, in the other room, beyond his grasp because the timing was wrong and circumstances unfortunate. He hadn't told a soul, although one person had pieced things together and talked to him about it. Pepper had it all figured out before he could so much as pin down the emotion. In a sense, she was the one who exposed him to the truth. And now ... as he geared himself to tell someone for the first time, it felt like he was rekindling a fire that he'd shoved away in a dark corner a long time ago.

"I'll tell you if you promise that it won't leave this room."

"I--I don't understand." Peter shuffled in place, blinking at him in bemusement. "But yeah ... alright. Okay. I can keep a secret."

He steeled himself, sitting back up and facing Peter fully this time. "Okay. Well ... after that, I started, you know, feeling more. Tony was unpredictable and erratic and ... and despite all that, in spite of it all ... I found myself feeling attached to him. Too attached, if you know what I mean." His eyes glowed intently, hoping to convey what he meant without actually having to say it out loud.

To his relief, Peter seemed to comprehend, with the way his eyes blew up. "Oh. OH. So ... so you and ... him ...?"

Steve smiled brightly. Peter looked comical. *Cute, almost. I can how Tony has taken to him.* "Yes. I couldn't help it. The man just has this way of making people gravitate towards him, you know?"

Peter snorted loudly, the back of his head hitting the headboard. "Yeah ... I can see that. I think it's that big head of his." The lingering smile was replaced by a more searching expression. "So, what ... what did you do about it? What happened?"

It was here that Steve's smile turned rueful and a touch melancholic. "I started ... well, wanting more. But I couldn't ask him anything. He was with Pepper, back then. They were good together. And Pepper could handle him so much better than I could. She was his rock, and I couldn't compete with that. So I packed my bags and moved to Brooklyn."

"You left?" Peter was shocked. *Maybe he was expecting something of a grand confession. But he doesn't know that underneath all this I'm still a coward.*

"I did," Steve nodded. He looked down, eyeing the blue sheets that matched the walls and the color of his eyes. He spoke quietly, letting his emotions color his voice: disappointment, sadness--it had been a very trying time for him.

"He wanted an explanation from me, even threatened to lock me in here until I came to my senses. But I could never come to whatever 'senses' he wanted me to come to, so I looked him in the eye and
told him that I couldn't stay. I just couldn't. I willed for him to understand, and then I walked out the door. We didn't talk to each other for a long time after that. And ... they--he and Pepper that is--stayed together and I got over it eventually."

They went into a contemplative silence. Peter sat still, but Steve could tell that a million thoughts were passing through the younger man's head, with the way his brows quivered and his eyes flickered. Steve appreciated how Peter was taking it all. It wasn't everyday that he told the story to anyone. He just hoped that Peter understood that it wasn't as burdensome as it sounded, to be working with a man that he once cared for deeply. Still care for. I still do.

"That's ... that's insane," Peter breathed after a while, breaking through Steve's restless thoughts. "I can't believe that you of all people would ... I mean, I can understand how anyone would feel that way about Tony--but you? Like ... like wow."

Steve's lips quirked in amusement. He wondered what it looked like from the outside. He was a soldier, a figure of American patriotism and liberty, and here he was, pining for another man. He was glad that Peter wasn't so caught up with that tidbit, or if he was, Steve was happy that Peter didn't bring it up. He chalked it up to Peter having the same proclivities. Maybe if Steve had told someone else, someone narrow-minded, they might have kicked up a fuss. In the end, Peter turned out to be the perfect person.

"I don't, I'm like--I don't know what to feel about him yet," Peter admitted, his face coloring. His expression changed constantly, morphing from emotion to emotion. He was conflicted, Steve thought. Maybe I just made things worse. "But I definitely thought I was heading somewhere along your lines until--well, until all of this happened. Now, I'm not so sure anymore."

Steve sighed and gave him a concerned look. "I told you all of this because I'm giving you a second opinion, as someone who's been in your position. Tony isn't superhuman. He makes a lot of mistakes. But he's an amazing person, much like you."

"I know," Peter sighed tiredly, and then shook his head. "Not, 'I know I'm amazing' I know. I meant I know he's--yeah, you get it."

"Give him a chance. He's an asshole, but he's the good kind." Steve smiled encouragingly, standing up and heading towards the door. Peter had a lot of things to consider, and he would need space and some time alone to think.

As he left the man to his own devices, he slowly realized that he'd neglected the side effects of his own confession in favor of helping Peter. Now that his past with Tony had been reopened, he was beginning to feel conflicted. He stopped on the landing by the stairs looking down at the living room. Tony sat on a recliner, his expression dark and distraught.

How was he to face the man now, with every emotion he'd once felt floating back to the surface?

Chapter End Notes

I was supposed to post this Monday, but we had this power outage at home that threw everything to shit. So this became longer and diluted somewhat (I'll clean it up and make it more colorful, it's just that my muse went out along with the electricity and I was super pissed for a while), but yet again everything got away from me and well, it turned into
more drama and more plot. Ho ho.

So. What do you guys think of Steve?

Edit: I'm recovering from a serious flu (I almost never get sick but when I do it hits me hard) so the next chapter will probably not arrive until the coming Friday.
Peter's eyes had shot open sometime in the night, jolting out of a feverish dream. He'd reached out beside him, hand falling onto empty space and fingers curling around thin sheets. It had taken a while before his shallow breaths eased and his heartbeat calmed.

It was thankfully the kind of dream that did not feature any of the usual bloodcurdling screams playing on loop or the horrific imagery lurking around every corner. In the dream, he wasn’t suffering or dying, or facing a decision that would inevitably lead to either his suffering or dying, and no one else was subject to the same fate. He was tuck away in his room back at Queens, pinned to the bed by some inexplicable force (a figure of a man, he was sure) and it was dark and cold, so cold that frost had began to form along the walls and the furniture.

The gloomy room kept changing while retaining some features of his old room--it morphed into half of Tony's personal workshop at some point, and then it was Johnny's room in the Think Tank, large and inviting, and then it was the red-white-and-blue interior of what used to be Steve's room but was now Tony's only guest room. But the loneliness and the iciness never left his side, only changing in intensity with each room switch. The shuffling designs disoriented him, and he could do nothing but watch it all play out, while the mysterious man on top of him drove him crazy with hot touches and steamy kisses.

He'd woken up when he realized that the dream was waiting for him to choose a room. His face twisted in confusion, aware that the dream wasn't implying a deeply-seated craving to redecorate but rather something else entirely.

He curled his body to one side, bunching his blankets together until they formed a mass large enough to hug close to him, and stared at the window across the room until he saw slivers of the rising sun. The answer didn't come to him. He almost wanted to go back to sleep in the hopes of catching the dream again. But he was too well-rested, having slept more soundly than he had in a long time, and he had obligations to fulfill throughout the day, obligations which mostly involved dealing with other people he'd rather not face yet and doing something about the alien lifeforms threatening Earth.

He should try and sort out his problems this time and not run away like a coward. He'd had enough of being a passive player in whatever game he was being forced to play. With this mindset, he picked himself up from bed as soon as it was light enough to see, dressed for the day and then ventured out of his room.

He found the three of them around the island at the center of the kitchen.

Johnny had his phone to his ear, his eyebrows drawn together, one of his legs vibrating impatiently on top of another stool. He was calling someone, but it didn't seem like they were picking up, as evidenced by the frown on his face and the way he carded his fingers through his bed hair repeatedly. Steve had probably left to sleep in the private rooms below, only returning that morning--he looked the most traditional, wearing a wifebeater and sleep pants, drinking from a mug of black coffee while flipping through a newspaper. As to why he came back, Peter could only assume he was there to mediate. Tony was dressed in boxers and a dark shirt with long sleeves, an apron draped over his front. He was cooking up a storm, mixing eggs in a bowl, frying, filling up the waffle iron, sometimes doing all three at once.
"Peter," Johnny breathed, blinking at him rapidly and forgetting the phone completely. At the sound of his name Tony had whirled around, holding a pan of sizzling strips of bacon. He eyed Peter the same way Peter eyed the breakfast. Peter carefully avoided their gazes, all except Steve, who peered over the newspaper he was reading and smiled tentatively at him. Peter threw him a grateful glance, and then took a chair.

"Breakfast?" Tony offered tightly, and Peter nodded stiffly in return. Johnny just gawked at him as Tony piled food onto a plate.

The first meal of the day was a silent affair for all of five minutes until Johnny started firing off explanations.

"Listen--Pete. How do I ... okay, it's like this ..." and so Johnny began, his hands doing complicated movements and gestures. Peter listened intently, but he didn't give any reply whenever Johnny paused in between sentences, waiting expectantly for him to say something. Peter kept shooting Steve uneasy looks.

He'd accepted at some point during the night that Tony's momentary lapse in judgment was nothing to be seriously upset about, though why he'd chosen Johnny of all people to sleep with still irked him. The blond's explanation had been patchy at best--it was hard for Peter to believe that Johnny just strolled into Tony's club without no real motivation and happened to bump into the billionaire. How sex ensued afterwards, Johnny couldn't quite choke out. Peter knew that Johnny had edited his recount of the events, and until they decided to tell him how everything transpired, he kept his answers short and his tone curt. This left Johnny looking like a wilting sunflower.

He still hadn't quite pinned down why he was upset at the both of them. He had actual reasons for staying mad at Johnny. He and Tony were on the way towards developing something along the lines of a relationship and Johnny had squashed the possibility. But he was even more cross with Tony--the constant sparks of possessiveness flaring in his chest whenever Johnny spoke even just a few words to the older man left him seething with a bad combination of confusion and frustration.

Tony respected his desire for space, though he still threw meaningful stares his way, long, drawn-out glances that were too much for Peter to handle. He would probably be able to string together enough sentences that didn't sound stilted or awkward if they talked about the Grape or the missions that were looming over the coming month, but that was for later, when the meeting started.

Peter chose Steve's company after breakfast, much to Tony's and Johnny's astonishment. He followed him down to his sleeping quarters at the Ultimates floor, asking the soldier questions about the Shi'ar interrogations and any progress regarding raids. Steve humored him with answers, providing him with all the details without a second thought. It spoke of Steve's acknowledgement of him as an enhanced operative of their initiative, and he was sheepish and a little awestruck because of it.

Peter was sitting on Steve's bed while the man changed into some day attire, and even as Steve continued to tell him more about the raids, Peter's eyes wondered appreciatively over Steve's trim physique.

"We've rounded up most of the known Shi'ar lodges--Clint's having a lot of fun, I've had to stop him on several occasions when he became a little too trigger happy with his new weapons arsenal--though we're still stumped as to how we're going to weed out the secret moles living inside some of the more ... sensitive organizations. Like the FBI, the Fed, the Armed Forces ..." Steve peeled his shirt off of him and Peter's eyes blew wide, though he adamantly refused to look anywhere but Steve's face when the man turned to level him with a curious look.
"You can use non-supers for that, maybe, I think," Peter pointed out, throat slightly growing dry. Steve cocked an eyebrow at his odd behavior.

"That's what we're doing now. Though after the attack on the Baxter Building, we've learned that some of these people have been willing subjects of experimentation. Illegal genetic modifications, chemical and robotic enhancements, the works. Non-enhanced agents aren't enough to handle them." Steve turned away from Peter and bent down to look for a shirt inside his closet, earning Peter a full view of the man's ass, so perfectly sculpted that it put the same ass on his memorial statue down in Washington to shame.

"If you need help with any secret sting operations, or ... or any grunt work, don't forget I'm enhanced, too," Peter said tightly.

"We might take you up on that offer," Steve said with some effort as he bent further down into his closet. Peter's pants began to strain at the front, and he quickly had to adjust himself in his seat to cover up his reaction.

"Yeah? You got a mission for me?" Peter asked distractedly, biting his lip and trying to control his sudden craving.

"We'll have to wait and see first--Wanda and Pietro are back, so we aren't as short-handed as before. Although ..." Steve found a clean shirt and struggled to fit himself into it. "Do you really want to work with us as Spider-Man, too? I thought ... well, I thought you didn't want to be any part of the Ultimates." Steve ducked his head and smiled furtively at him. "We have this secret mission to convince you to join. As I've said a bunch of times on the field, we could use someone of your caliber."

"Not really a secret if you tell me," Peter came up to rub the back of his head shyly. He still couldn't believe it at times, when Steve laid down the compliments on him openly.

"I'm flattered, believe me. I've been tempted to play one of Earth's mightiest heroes," Peter crinkled his nose. "I mean, I want to work with you personally, if only because you stand for a lot of things I stand for." Peter warmed when he saw Steve swell proudly at that. "But ... I still have my misgivings about Nick breathing down my back. Even here, with my involvement in the Grape as a scientist, I can feel Nick's sticky chainsmoker breath ghosting across my neck like a broken humidifier."

"Nick doesn't smoke." Steve's eyes creased with mirth. "Though I can see how difficult it would be for you, being a vigilante and all."

"Devil-may-care image to keep, yeah," Peter shrugged, smirking mischievously. "I can't have someone pulling at my strings when I'm supposed to be my own law. I gotta keep it real for the kids."

"I'll call you when I need you, then."

As they walked back to the elevators, Peter was hit with one glaring problem in their arrangement. He was going to have to beat up nutjobs and fight criminals again. Except now I can't do it. Because I'm too chicken to pick up the costume and the shooters. How was he supposed to answer Steve's call in the future if he couldn't even swing from place to place without a debilitating sense of dread overtaking his senses?

You have to work on it. Peter urged himself. Today. You've been putting it off for too long.
Johnny subsided into a darkly brooding state after breakfast. Tony's lukewarm offer of peace came in the form of a neutral 'nice try' thrown over the center island, along with a plate of breakfast. The food didn't help matters. He'd lost his appetite, and he picked at his plate silently, only nibbling absently on a piece of bacon and ignoring the rest.

He tried to grasp the complicated dynamic of his friendship (relationship?) with Peter, but he couldn't get anywhere by explaining it himself. Was Peter mad at him for sleeping with someone? Was he mad at Tony for sleeping with him? Where was his displeasure directed towards? Those were the questions that he should have asked, but Peter had trailed after Steve as soon as the man left for his room, and Johnny had no choice but to wonder what this spelled for them as friends without the aid of any definitive hints.

There was a tiny spark of hope in the back of his mind that Peter was jealous, that he'd been upset because Johnny had looked at someone else, but he knew the possibility to be slim, knew that it was likelier for Peter to be alarmed by Tony seeing someone else, because he knew how Tony felt. Tony had confessed to him in no uncertain terms that he felt something special for Peter. In that regard, Johnny was far behind in the race. You're gonna lose, Tony had said. Johnny had a sinking feeling that he was right.

He didn't have a lot of people to turn to for advice. Although Sue was still bent on being meddlesome, He didn't want to seek relationship advice from his sister. There wasn't a lot of people he trusted implicitly to be on his side, especially after what had happened with Tony. Everyone would be concerned about Peter's well-being, would take Peter's feelings into consideration more than his own. That's what MJ would do, what Kitty would do, what Peter's Aunt May would do.

There was only one person left, but Johnny couldn't even reach him. He'd asked Reed for any information on Spidey, but the man had flat out refused to offer him any consolation. The vigilante was just as elusive as ever. He didn't even know if the man was doing okay after last week. He'd yet to appear in any of the new channels, had not dropped by for a visit. Johnny had grown increasingly agitated for the man over the few days that have passed, worried that Spidey might have been badly shaken up after nearly dying. More than anything, Johnny missed the way they could sit down and talk about anything. He wanted the company of his acrobatic friend, but he was nowhere to be seen.

In many ways, Johnny was frightfully alone, and he couldn't help but harbor an attitude of pure despair.

He walked quickly and purposefully through the streets, in a hurry to get home and get away from the cold. His goal was to drop by unnoticed and pick something up from his garage at the back of the Think Tank where nobody bothered him and he was free to do as he pleased.

It was there where he kept all his cars and his bikes, where he used to spend most of his time building things from scratch. He didn't anticipate a break in the storm he was currently weathering, and the only way he could think of to endure through was to distract himself by working on some of his old projects.

The garage felt vaguely familiar, having been locked up for a good month since Peter started working on the Grape. It was just as he'd left it, with one wall dedicated to all sorts of tools and gadgetry, the floor containing car lifts, tire changers, wheel balancers, with a large space near the entrance where all of his cars were parked.

It reminded Johnny just how much his life had started revolving around Peter, standing there in the middle of his personal haven. Any expert would have argued that it was an unhealthy lifestyle, the way he’d stuck to Peter, and Johnny would have agreed now, when he would have dismissed the thought weeks ago.
It occurred to him with a start how much he had missed working on automobiles. His eyes swept over the floor, towards the few vintage cars that he'd tried to pull apart and salvage. Three cars from one era, no longer operational, but still contained mismatched parts that oddly enough could work together if built back into one frame.

And then there were the motorcycles--a brilliant red Honda dirt bike made for motocross, two sports bikes, one a streetfighter with modified handles, fairings, and lights, another a standard for track races, high-performance and lightweight.

And then there was the one bike he'd been building from scratch two months ago, a beautifully bulky Harley FL from the 40s, half-finished, with the other half strewn across a large work bench, its parts labeled. Johnny smiled. He'd acquired the schematics and the diagrams online, choosing to hunt for the parts instead of buying them in an attempt at authenticity. He'd scoured pawn shops and restoration workshops all across the east coast, and had given up halfway through since he always seemed to end up picking up the wrong bits and pieces.

He remembered suddenly how he'd come across a quaint but well-furnished junkshop in Maryland which seemed to collect bike parts exclusively, and how he'd found just the right amount of accessories, gears, and components to actually complete the bike.

He walked over to the parts and loomed over the methodical mess of metal littering his large work desk, deliberating on his options. He didn't have to think too long--he wanted to haul everything he needed into the pickup by the entrance and drive back to the Tower, have the half-conceived Harley brought up through the service elevators into the engineering floor. He was sure Tony wouldn't deny him some work space--the man would be glad to have him off his back for long periods of time.

Moving the parts from the floor to the pickup had him working up a sweat in no time, but he relished the backbreaking work, loved the feel of touching and handling cool metal objects that left a hint of grease on his palms and the smell of motor oil in his nostrils. With the diagrams and the manuals stuffed into a junk box, he'd covered the back of the pickup with tarp, admiring his organizational work for a few seconds.

He then took a small detour to his room in the upper floors, where he picked up a fresh set of clothes and grooming essentials. He could use a shower, but he was nowhere near finished with what he intended to do that day, which was to seclude himself from everyone and everything and just work until he grew exhausted of the fumes and the tools and the wires. He didn't run into any of his extended family--he was quietly grateful for that--and soon he was climbing into the Ford pickup and backing out of the garage, driving back to the Tower and anticipating the work ahead of him.

--

It was just an ordinary ramshackle jewelry store slash pawn shop at the edge of Hell's Kitchen crossed with two plain old thugs with sharp, deadly weapons. Peter adjusted his mask and peered down into the street over the low rooftop wall of the opposite building. One of them had a butterfly knife and the other a machete. What are they? Corn farmers? At least they were a little creative. Peter gave them credit for not being bottom-of-the-barrel petty thieves. They had style, even if they preferred weapons that belonged in the countryside.

I can do this.

He had the shooters, the fluid. He even wore the experimental costume. The red and blue knitted abomination and the racing gloves. It was day one all over again--he was fifteen and trying valiantly to succeed in executing his first crime bust. He should've been great at this already, the memory of flips and punches and kicks ingrained in his muscles after years of experience. All he had to do was
drop down into the street via web shooters and kick one baddie in the face while clocking the other with a fist.

The sharp bite of the cold air made his muscles freeze in place.

*Move, hands and feet! Sling that web! Jesus! Please don't wig out.*

He let his head drop to smack against the concrete ledge when the pair made their clumsy escape. He growled aloud in frustration. What was wrong with him? It shouldn't have to be difficult to do what he ought to do. Why was he so terrified of failing at being Spider-Man that he couldn't even try anymore?

He gripped the corners of the low concrete wall and went down on his knees, berating himself and his sorry ass over and over. *This can't be it. I can't be stuck like this forever. I have to move forward. Or else I won't be able to do my job. Protecting people who need protection. Saving lives. I can't be like this forever. I wouldn't be able to live with myself.*

He was reminded of the bullets that punched into his body, the scene playing over and over in his head, coming unbidden and unrelenting and making him tremble. He froze like a statue. The ghost of his near-death experience bloomed anew, like a flower of pain in his shoulder, a sledgehammer through his ribs, a grenade to his gut. The excruciating pain had welded itself into his consciousness like a parasite that reared its ugly head whenever he so much as thought about donning the costume and standing in the middle of conflict. No matter how much he told himself that it wouldn't be the same, that it happened because he was sick and his senses weren't with him, that it *can't* happen again, his body just wouldn't listen.

He punched the floor so hard he left a small crater in the cement.

He then felt sick to his stomach in remorse. *Why can't I fix myself?*

*Why?*

Peter sat down, leaning back against the wall, dropping his head and letting the back of it hit the hard surface repeatedly. He was digging himself deep into mourning the loss of his ability to be mentally-stable, when overhead a flash of red and yellow soared past him and caught his attention.

It disappeared behind a few taller buildings, and Peter thought he'd seen the last of it, until it returned, coming from another direction as it swooped down. It circled around, losing height, until it touched down onto the building he was on, at the opposite corner of the rooftop. His rooftop. Peter stood up, staring intensely.

Tony in the Iron Man armor was formidable and awe-inspiring, looking every bit like a superhero should. He looked nothing like Peter, who wore jeans and worn sneakers aside from the ridiculously coordinated costume.

"Spider-Man." Tony's voice sounded tinny and distorted. He didn't approach. Peter didn't move.

"Incredibly Ballin Man. What brings you to--er. Where is this?"

"Hell's Kitchen." Tony must have left the meeting at the Triskelion early. Peter had a feeling the man didn't like how it turned out--he sounded harsh and serious, the suit voice adding more roughness to his tone. There was a little voice in Peter's head that said that Tony was frustrated at him for not attending and choosing instead to test his failing mental constitution, but it couldn't be. The man was talking to Spider-Man, not Peter Parker. The logic would make sense of Tony knew, which Peter was pretty sure he didn't.
"Can I help you?" he tilted his head in question, stepping back until his spine met the wall behind.

"Cold? What are you wearing?" Tony pointed to his attire. He sounded more curious than derisive, and for that Peter was at least a little bit grateful.

"Oh, this? What does it look like? It's a sweater." Peter said snidely.

Tony took a few steps, the joints of the suit making tiny mechanical whizzling noises. "In red-and-blue. Nice. D'you figure some of the villains out here have mittens and earmuffs?"

Peter frowned behind the mask, and he crossed his arms. The playful mocking didn't amuse him. "Shut up. It's a temporary thing. I've got my a--I've got someone making me a new one."

Tony nodded, foregoing the teasing after hearing Peter's less than friendly retort. Instead, his head tilted up and down, regarding him. If the face on Tony's mask was detailed with tiny little nuances, Peter would say he was being scrutinized. "I know about what happened. Er. We got briefed on it by Nicky."

Peter looked down at the floor. He wouldn't be surprised if everyone knew about his tragic stupidity, how it almost got him killed in combat. He tried to keep his tone light, but it ended up sounding strained and forced.

"Really? That Nick Fury always talks behind my back." Peter shrugged, turning away from Tony and looking out into the street. "Maybe I should spread rumors about him for a change. See what the super community would think when he's the object of all the gossip."

"You know what I mean." Tony's voice came from behind. "You got seriously hurt. It's not a laughing matter."

Peter waved a limp hand over his shoulder. "Yeah, yeah. It's an embarrassing moment for me, alright? Don't mention it. I'm supposed to be the Amazing Spider-Man--and all it took for me to lose that 'Amazing' bit is to get slugged. I don't need your ... what is it? Concern? Charity? What are you doing here exactly?"

He peered back over his shoulder at the Iron man suit and heard the tiny sigh coming from the helmet.

"Getting shot down while saving the lives of ordinary people is hardly anything to be embarrassed about. You did good. And not one week after nearly dying you're up and spinning your webs again."

_Not exactly true._ Peter had all but lost the ability to function as a high-flying crime-fighting Spider boy. It was a major setback, but Peter was trying to hold onto hope that maybe he could fix himself over time. All he needed was a little persistence, some determination, a heavier set of balls, maybe ...

"It's not like anyone else is gonna do it," Peter argued quietly. "I doubt Thor spends his time punching muggers in the face. You're all ... like, you're all there for the big stuff. Captain America can shut down a whole terrorist operation. The Hulk can level a city down in minutes. You fire weapons of mass destruction into rifts in time and space. You deal with large-scale stuff. Like apocalyptic stuff. You're all good at that. Me? I save old ladies and babies. I try to keep one city from being riddled with crazies, and most of the time I can't even do my job well. So it's the least I can do to try."

Tony said nothing for a while, forcing Peter to go back and replay his words in his head. He sounded so sure of himself, in spite of his crippled, handicapped state of mind. Peter shook his head minutely.
"You talk big for a guy who can't fight anymore."

"I brought you something."

Peter turned around and stared dumbly at Tony. He hadn't noticed it before, but for the whole time that they'd been talking, Tony had one hand behind his back. He was stunned silent. He didn't know what to expect exactly. What could Tony have possibly brought for him? Did he even want what was hidden behind the man? Would it be some inane gift he bought in an attempt to be understanding or kind?

Tony pulled the box out from behind him. It was larger than Peter had anticipated, though it wasn't huge--just a box roughly the same length as Iron Man's forearm. It was plain and unassuming, and it had no markings or words written on it. Tony approached Peter and held it out in front of him for Peter to take. Peter cocked his head to the side, confused. What was it? He was burning with curiosity. Why Would Tony give Spider-Man a gift out of nowhere?

Peter took it from the man's hands and stared down at it for a moment.

"Open it," Tony encouraged. Peter still couldn't read Tony's expression behind the helmet, but if he had to guess, his body language looked expectant.

Peter ran a finger down the length of the box lid, lifting it with a nail and pulling it off. His eyes widened behind the mask the next second.

It was a costume. A Spider-Man costume. But it looked different, had a much more intricate design. It felt heavier, too, now that Peter had time to consider what it was and how it felt against gravity.

"Take it out and look it over," Tony commanded softly, and Peter did, taking it out of the box and holding it in front of him. The texture was a lot different. It didn't feel like regular spandex. Though the material was silky to touch, there was a brittle coarseness to it, too. Peter had to examine the material carefully before he understood what exactly made it so different from his previous suits.

"Circuitry. There's ... I can feel wires, and ... nanorobotics?" Peter tilted his head in question, though in his head his thoughts were whirring with the possibilities. He couldn't keep his eyes off the suit. "Mr Stark ..."

"It took me a while to make," Tony said apprehensively. "I don't do this everyday, wiring a costume to be biomimetic and bioresponsive. Biology isn't my strong suit. I had to do extensive research before I understood how your Spider-sense works."

"What? Are you saying that--that it's like armor--?"
"Awesome, right?" Tony's voice changed into a more excited tone, having been encouraged by Peter's reaction. "Well, get this. It's also wear- and tear-proof, waterproof—it insulates heat, so you wouldn't have to worry about freezing your ass off in this weather—it doesn't malfunction under electromagnetic pulses, and it's resistant to electricity, too." Tony craned his helmet back. "I know you dealt with Electro in the past, and I thought this could protect you from damage. It should also keep your shooters safe, now that I think about it."

Peter stared intensely at the suit, going quiet for a long time.

"It's machine washable," Tony singsonged.

Peter blinked at the suit, letting the nanotechnology-infused fabric run through his fingers.

"Say something," Tony's hollow metal voice pleaded.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why would you make this for me?" Peter's voice was croaky and uneven in his low-pitched mumble.

Tony froze to look at him incredulously. "Do you want the straight answer or do you want me to sell the suit some more?"

Peter moved his intense gaze to Tony, still waiting.

Tony sighed, rubbed his helmet with a hand. "You're serious. Well ... Okay. So. One of Earth's mightiest heroes nearly died last week. It left a bad taste in my mouth. I couldn't sleep thinking about it, and when I can't sleep I go to the workshop. I tried to think about what I could do to make things easier for you. I didn't want you suffering like that again."

"And you came up with this?"

Tony shrugged as much as his metal shoulders allowed. "I'll need to do a lot of calibrating and you'll need to field test it. There's still a lot to do. But it works. It's protection. Insurance, if you will. You're a great hero, Spider-Man, and sometimes, great heroes need protecting, too."

Peter didn't know what else to say. He couldn't even wrap his head around the amount of work that had surely gone into perfecting some of the features of the suit. And Tony did it all in under a week. Why? Because he wanted to keep Spider-Man safe. *Because I almost died last week and he worried for me.*

Peter fervently blinked away the prickling at the edge of his eyes. He was thankful he had the mask on at that moment.

"I--thank you," he said seriously, almost breathlessly. "I'm surprised, I ... I didn't expect this to come from you. It's really special."

"It sucks. It's not perfect," Tony said in an attempt to be modest, but he sounded really glad that Peter appreciated it. "You'll need to come down to the labs and help me improve it."

Peter nodded in acquiescence. His heart rate built slowly over the exchange, growing quicker and faster against his chest. He was minding the suit less and less and considering the man who made the suit. Thinking about Tony spending hours in his work bench designing the costume, trying to figure
out how to jam all sorts of cool features into the fabric, working with care and attention, losing sleep ...

And for what? So Peter could fight without having to worry about getting hurt.

Tony didn't know it was him behind the mask, but if he did, Peter imagined that Tony would have worked even harder on the costume than he already had, would have forgotten sleep altogether, would have replaced the blood in his veins with caffeine, and ... and the sentiment felt so warm and comforting to Peter, he very nearly wanted to slip his mask off and kiss the man, pry off his helmet with a crowbar if he had to--

But then Tony was stepping away and muttering about needing to get back to the Tower, and Peter stomped down on the urge to reveal himself prematurely. He wanted Tony to know soon. He deserved to know about Spider-Man. Peter was filled with a deep and overwhelming ache to tell Tony that the suit in his hand, Tony made for him, Peter Parker, and that he was willing to forgive everything he had done a few nights before. He wanted Tony so much at that moment. The thought almost knocked the breath out of him.

Tony flew away, towards the direction of the Tower. Peter wanted to go back, wanted to ambush the man and maybe surprise him into a long kiss until he ran out of oxygen, but he had some field testing to do. He wanted to see if the suit did exactly what Tony pitched, if the suit was the solution to his lackluster performance.

--

Steve found himself roaming the engineering floor after confirming Johnny's location through security. A call from Sue left him in charge of her precious baby brother so long as he was in Stark Tower, and she was growing concerned since Johnny wasn't picking up her calls. She wanted to swing by and check things for herself, but her brief, high-speed travel to Seoul and back had left her extremely fatigued, so she urged Steve to check up on her brother in her place. Steve felt compelled to oblige her--the blond had disappeared, dispirited and gloomy ever since Peter's brush off that morning. It was a certain cause for worry.

The man grew curious as to what manner of activities Johnny had picked up to take his mind off the experience, and was pleasantly surprised to find the blond in his own little corner away from the regular workers, lost in a project. He wore a shirt completely and impressively ruined by grease, and he was crouched low with his nose buried deep in the confines of the framework of what seemed to be a motorcycle. Upon closer inspection, Steve recognized the model instantly.

"Would you look at that," Steve said in wonderment, eyes gleaming at the motorbike. "A good ol' Harley, FL design. Classic."

Johnny's head snapped to him, his expression turning puzzled. "Steve? What are you doing here?"

He shuffled away from the bike frame and then pushed himself to his feet, wiping his hands absently on his shirt.

"Looking for you," Steve replied, eyes turning inquisitive as they transferred to Johnny. He blinked at what he was seeing. The blond was covered in a light sheen of sweat and looked rugged and dirty. "Were you down here this whole time?"

Johnny gave the half-finished bike an appraising look. "Since this morning," he ducked his head, because both of them knew how pleasant breakfast had been. "I've been trying to assemble the wiring, but I'm stumped--some of the labels are old and I can't quite make them out, and the diagrams aren't helping. You were looking for me?" His expression turned doubtful when he looked at Steve again.
"I wouldn't have to if you actually answered your phone every now and then," Steve answered in good humor. "Your sister wanted me to convey her extreme disappointment in you for not giving her the time of day, but I don't think I can do her voice justice."

Johnny snorted, rolling his eyes. "Spare me. She can be so anal when she wants to be, so I tend to ignore her sometimes. She always feels the need to check up on me, like I'm always doing something stupid or dangerous. Like I'm some kind of kid."

Steve wanted to tell him that kids weren't capable of complicated auto repair, and they certainly didn't come like Johnny, who looked like he belonged in a motorcycle shop as a mechanic, with all the tools surrounding him and all the splotches covering him, his skin and his muscle shirt, decorating him attractively. But then he'd also have to explain that he was ogling Johnny's form appreciatively, and he wasn't sure how the man would handle the admission. So instead, he smiled back furtively, nodding in understanding.

"Need a hand?" Steve offered, circling the area in which Johnny worked and eyeing his progress. "This wasn't the exact same bike I owned back in the war, but it's based off of the same design."

"Really?" Johnny perked up as he realized that Steve actually lived in that era long ago. "Holy crap, this is awesome. I forgot you were there when they started throwing these out into the market. Don't you ride a bike these days?"

"I do." Steve beamed at him. "It's a replica of the Softails back then, yeah. Heavily modified for combat though, so it has a lot of unnecessary baggage. Takes a heavy guy to drive it around."

"Cool," Johnny grinned. "Mind taking a look? I just need a little help with the wiring. It's complicated, man. If you can recall which wires go where, you'd be a lifesaver."

Steve decided to try his hand at being electrician and dove in fingers first, tinkering with the various little attachments and explaining to Johnny what some of the more ancient circuitry did. To his delight, Johnny listened to his every word and even offered questions of his own. It was an unexpected experience. Steve wasn't aware that Johnny was good with his hands. All I knew was that he had a couple of geniuses for a family. I should have known that there was more to him than just looks and powers and bravado. He's a street smart.

Steve knew his motorcycle like the back of his hand, but the guys at the service shop over at the Triskelion never really let him do anything repair-wise because they were too focused on doing their jobs well, and Steve knowing how to fix his own bike on top of his many skills only made them feel inadequate in comparison. It would be fulfilling if he was the one doing his own repairs and customization, but he liked to make people around him feel useful, so he let them do their work.

"So where did you learn all this?" Steve started to venture, peering over the framework down at the blond. Johnny was on the floor, examining the machinery from below with a critical eye. He knew that fixing cars and motorcycles wasn't something one just picked up by sitting in a classroom setting and poring over books. One actually had to go to a shop and experience work firsthand, learn how to take things apart and put them back together again.

"I used to race," Johnny disclosed hesitantly, eyes subtly challenging Steve, because he was obviously referring to the more illegal side to the recreational sport.

Steve cocked his eyebrow in question, and Johnny pressed on. "I'd go out with a sports car and rip through uncrowded highways with folks I'd met around the more undesirable circles in town. I had to learn how to modify and juice up my ride, went around several garages watching how it was all done. Then I discovered motocross, tried that out for a while. Started tinkering with motorcycles, too.
It became this thing."

"You're a thrill seeker." It wasn't a question, but Steve gave Johnny a look that established the man as incomprehensible in his eyes.

"It gets boring having to live with people who legit get off to regulations and safety precautions." Johnny blew out a breath that told Steve exactly how tired the man was of living in a confined and controlled space for most of his life. Steve could certainly understand the man then, could imagine how such limitations would make someone want to rebel.

He didn't voice out his apprehension over the man's choice of hobby--he was obviously very good at what he was doing if he was still standing on his own two feet, and if he could still find some excitement in working with cars and bikes. A dawning comprehension of Johnny's sister's incessant worrying followed almost immediately after. If Johnny had been his sibling, he'd probably be just as frequently concerned.

"No wonder your sister's so protective," Steve laughed, earning him an astonished look. "Taking a walk--or rather, driving on the wild side. You're either very good at what you do or you're very lucky."

Johnny peered back at him with barely concealed admiration. "Luck has nothing to do with it, man."

They continued to work together until it grew dark outside. They didn't notice how much time had passed--the floor didn't have a lot of windows and they were too focused on piecing together a motorcycle with questionable parts and missing components. Johnny didn't mind at all that they were working half-blind. Working on the project was exactly what he needed to forget about his problems.

It took a very loud growl coming from Johnny's stomach to remind the blond that he hadn't eaten anything at all the whole day. He was ravenous by the time he'd decide to throw down the towel, scooping himself up from the floor panels and dusting himself off.

"I'm starving," he announced, wiping his hands with a piece of soft cloth. "And my back is tired."

"We should probably call it a day," Steve agreed, examining their handiwork with an immensely satisfied expression. "This was ... fun."

Johnny glanced at the soldier with a renewed sense of appreciation. With the way everybody else talked about him, Johnny always thought that Steve was a giant stick in the mud, but after that long afternoon, he was beginning to think that he shouldn't have jumped to conclusions. Steve wasn't a complicated person at all. He was very easy to talk to and very informative when it came to motorcycles. He'd also found that he enjoyed most of the stories about Steve's time in the armed forces, and his little anecdotes about Bucky Barnes and his buddies over at the orphanage he used to live in. It didn't hurt either that Steve was easy on the eyes and positively bright-eyed whenever he smiled. It made the project fun, and he was surprised to note that he was looking forward to the next time they got to do the whole thing again.

"Listen, man," Johnny ventured, scratching at the back of his neck awkwardly. "Let's do this again sometime. I've never actually worked on a project with someone else before, and you really know what you're doing when it comes to these vintage bikes. It was fun. Let's do it again."

Steve grew wide-eyed at his suggestion, but then he grinned in response, making Johnny smile in relief.
"We can do it again tomorrow. I don't actually do a lot of things around here when we don't have missions to do," Steve chuckled. His eyes glowed when he said: "I definitely want to see this through. I want to see how the bike turns out, since you're using antique, restored parts for the whole thing."

Johnny rewarded him with a brilliant smile. "Great! Just drop by anytime after lunch. I'll be here. Though I should probably bring some food along with me so I don't kill myself from starvation."

Steve rumbled a low laugh in response. "We should head to dinner. Maybe we could order in or something. Tony hates it when he has to cook for people all the time, and I'm not that good around the kitchen."

They left the engineering floor in high spirits, both having found companionship from an unlikely source.

Chapter End Notes

I'll work on this chapter some more once I'm less sick from the flu. I hope you guys don't mind me working Steve into the story. I'm starting to grow found of Cap myself.

If you check out the previous chapters, #'s 1-10 now have big chapter gifs :D

Please don't hesitate to leave some very encouraging comments below :D they're very helpful insight.
It took Peter roughly twenty-four hours to realize that he hadn't imagined the absence of people. Tony was nowhere to be seen, Steve had not come up for breakfast, Johnny was missing—for one uneasy moment of panic he'd thought they'd all been kidnapped, frantically searching the house and even going so far as to barge into Tony's private room, but one hastily fired question to Tony's AI gave him the answer to the mystery: the team had gone to the Savage Lands to retrieve the second Grape.

Without him.

Because he wasn't part of the team, he remembered resentfully.

As he mulled over the fact with extreme dissatisfaction, he trudged back to the guest room and slipped on the suit. To do what, his mind hadn't decided yet, but he was going out, and he was going to vent his frustrations on the first evildoer he laid his buggy eyes on.

It turned out to be the Shocker, whom after years of bearing the name had lost all capacity to shock Peter. He was robbing a bank, because he obviously never learned that it was not a lucrative business venture and the city of New York did not have programs to teach criminals any better.

Peter clocked him out of a stolen armored car onto incoming traffic while the vehicle was going at ninety an hour. It felt satisfying, and he wanted to do more, wanted to dropkick Shocker into a new villainous name, but he'd never been for police--rather, vigilante brutality, so he spun a few webs and secured Shocker onto a parking meter for the proper authorities to collect.

Greedy for his next do-gooder stint, Peter swung through the streets like a man possessed.

He wiped the sky in an arc, passing by some LED video displays bolted to the sides of some commercial buildings and seeing the screens portray pictures of Tony and Johnny's tryst in an endlessly torturous and scandalous slideshow. It played for every passerby and tourist to see. They were being dubbed as the new it couple. How was he to compete with that? How was he supposed to wedge himself in the middle of all that media fanfare? It didn't make sense for Peter to exist within that story. He hated the media. No doubt that if he got caught with Tony the next time the paps got lucky he'd be painted as some shameless scene-stealing homewrecker.

He'd heard from one of the folks down at PR that many LGBT organizations were trying to reach out to Stark's foundation. Not that Peter didn't care for any of them, but his agitation about the whole situation left him irritated at all the opportunistic homosexual slash bisexual slash whatever groups, making him reconsider his opinion of Tony yet again.

In the midst of all the Tony scorn, Peter was at a loss as to why he felt Johnny was blameless in all of this.

He supposed that it was because Johnny was Johnny. The man didn't strike him as the kind who went behind his back and slept with his boss. Johnny had more good sense and loyalty than that. Johnny was a playboy, much like Tony, but throughout the month they'd spent together outside of the Spider suit Johnny had been a constant, crackling thorn on his side, never going on dates (as far as Peter knew) and Peter had gotten used to it.
Peter had to remind himself that Johnny wasn't his to keep away from people, though it was becoming unavoidable and increasingly evident that that was the way he wanted things to be.

He knew that there was no rule out there anywhere that allowed him to want multiple people at once and have them all. He knew that life didn't work that way. You had to pick one and make amends with the others. If Tony had picked Johnny and Johnny had picked Tony, then there wouldn't be much to discuss. Everything would be straightforward and clear. But none of them were even sure what they wanted anymore, and even Peter, in the span of a few days, had entertained going to someone else.

He thought about Steve and his lingering glances. Steve who within himself harbored a small but persisting flame for Tony, yet flickered waveringly whenever he was alone in a room with Peter. Steve didn't know what he wanted either, evidently as blind as Peter was to his own carnal fragility. They were all weak that way, and Peter had thought about taking advantage of other people's weaknesses for once and taking and claiming instead of being left in the street to dry.

But Steve was out there, doing his job in some tropical stretch of land in Antarctica and not letting his carnal desires rule him there. Peter looped around the tallest building jutting out from the smallest of complexes and thought that maybe he should think about doing his job for once, too.

After half an hour of staring into all four directions waiting for any crisis to happen--an explosion, a monster turning left at the next intersection into his line of sight--he saw a streak of fire cutting across the sky. For a few seconds it remained a straight line going from east to west, piercing through the clear swatch of dull blue above like a hot needle through ice, and then it changed course, and turned into a point in the sky that grew bigger as it drew closer.

Peter remained crouched, immobile as a gargoyle statue, as Johnny Storm landed on the rooftop and extinguished. He'd thought he was alone in the city. He hadn't been specific when he'd asked Friday. Of course Johnny would be here. He wasn't part of the team, either.

The man probably came to the same conclusions as he did and went flying out to cool his head, if that was even a possibility given his powers.

"Hi," Johnny tried on his approach, looking bright-eyed and windswept. Peter had to remind himself that their dynamic was different when he was in the suit. A lot more chummy and a lot less bitter.

Peter stood, perfectly balanced at the edge of a protruding stone spire. "Torch!" he said. He didn't have to smile. Johnny wouldn't know the difference. He just had to make sure his tone of voice and his body language were both welcoming.

To his surprise, Johnny crossed the three steps it took for him to stand on the same precarious spot and gathered Peter into a big hug, spinning him an inch away from plummeting towards the pavement below.

Peter would be lying to himself if he said he didn't feel a little breathless. He returned the embrace, grinning from ear to ear this time. He punched Johnny in the shoulder the next second.

"You missed me," Peter said smugly, and Johnny smiled at him, warm and easy.

"'Course I did. You disappeared for a week!" Johnny said, and then his eyebrows came together, his eyes boring into Peter's mask. "How are you, really? I thought you'd gone and hung the costume for good after ... well, after last week. No one'll tell me where you were and I couldn't reach you. It was torture."
It was, Peter wanted to tell him, and it would have been easy to say out loud that it was him, Johnny who held him through the first night, and that although he was still reeling from the harrowing experience, the cold still embedded in his bones, he was doing better now, and he was in the streets again, trying to keep the city safe, but the notion got stuck in his throat, catching there like a cloth on a nail.

"How'd you find me?" Peter asked instead, low and unsure since his normal civilian self had taken to ignoring Johnny for half a week.

"I've been keeping an eye out," Johnny admitted shyly. "You know--listening to the radio, waiting for any news of sightings. I freaked when I heard about Spider-Man knocking some poor unsuspecting criminal out of an armored car into the freeway and I just--I had to fly out and see you. I missed talking to you. And you got a new suit! We have so much to talk about."

His fingers tugged at the suit by the thigh and he wanted to tell him that too, to let Johnny know that Tony too had come to his aid and had given him a solution to his hopeless predicament, but the thought of discussing the man with Johnny made him switch lanes of thought, to the photos being flashed all over town in huge screens. Yes, they had so much to talk about.

"Tony Stark," Peter started, and he nearly choked on his own spit trying. "What's that all about?"

"That," Johnny sighed piteously, "is a long story. Care to take it somewhere, like, with coffee and some food?"

Peter glanced down at himself and then leveled Johnny with a look, shrugging. "I'm in costume."

"It's fine," Johnny said dismissively. "I know a place where people won't give a shit."

The place turned out to be some rundown fifties-inspired deli, complete with round tables and spacious booths and a low counter with stools where people could eat, one of the many eccentric throwback diners one could find in the city if one looked hard enough. The proprietor hadn't batted an eyelash, though he did give Johnny a friendly salute, and continued on polishing the large mugs that were used for milkshakes. Peter supposed it was useless to ask why he'd never caught whiff of the establishment, because for one places like this turned up and disappeared all the time, and second, he'd never been one to go exploring everything there was that New York had to offer.

He slid into a booth, the cold hard plastic interior matching the bright red color of his costume, the same way Johnny's costume matched the tissue and condiment dispensers with their electric blue shade. Johnny settled comfortably, and Peter assumed that he could just as easily settle in and not have to worry about the patrons staring at them or intruding on their private space.

"Is that the actual Spider-Man?" a waitress asked as she rolled by and stopped at their table, eyeing Peter without making it seem invasive or rude.

"Yes, Katie, buggy bug-eyed wonder in the flesh," Johnny grinned at her, looking like a well-watered dandelion.

"Hi," Peter said, tipping his head back to allow her to get a good look at his costume. She answered back with a smile.

"If you could bring us two coffees, please, with some fries and some sandwiches. Eric should know how I like them," Johnny requested, looking at Peter for a second to make sure he didn't mind. Peter shrugged.

"Right away," she scribbled the order down on her notepad. She gave Peter a simple nod as she
inserted her pen back into her hair bun. "It's a pleasure finally meeting you, Spider-Man."

"Of course," Peter answered, blinking at her casual tone. She rolled away as if it was just another day for her, skating on tiled floors and occasionally taking superheroes' orders. Peter's head swiveled back to Johnny with the silent question.

"I don't know why you've never once heard of this place," Johnny inclined one shoulder and dropped it just as fast, eyes scanning the room, gaze passing by the fluorescent light fixtures and the frames of food posters that hung on the walls. "Everyone I know who's run into some powers or some crazy, life-altering ability eats here. Hell, even some criminals pass by on occasion." Peter's back straightened with a start, and Johnny added: "Not the really harmful ones. They know that if they do anything stupid in here there'd be hell to pay. Where else can you go and eat something fast without having to worry about people snapping photos or making a scene?"

Peter noticed the sign by the door that said, 'no flash photography', fixed on the wall above the 'no smoking' sign.

He imagined that if the place where any other deli in Midtown, Carnegie at 7th or at the cleaner, busier one in 2nd Avenue, he would have caused a disturbance. Spider-Man was elusive and mysterious and most certainly did not go into food establishments dressed to fight crime.

"I'm sorry I don't ask the baddies I beat up where they like their sandwiches," Peter said wryly after a moment. "I'll remember next time."

They sat staring at each other for a while, with Johnny blinking more than usual as if expecting his eyelids to wipe Peter clean from his vision at any moment.

"How's the, er, how are the holes in your body doing?" Johnny leaned forward and put his elbows on the table.

Peter's eyes darted to his shoulder, cocking his head noncommittally. "Scarred over. They look like someone pushed nickels down on my skin. I can hardly feel them." His voice took on a characteristically darker tone. "Your sis did great, stitching me up." I'd thank her but she currently wants to fix me in the head. "Course there's also Janet to thank."

Johnny missed the glowering tone and nodded in satisfaction. "Good on you to bounce right back. Bullets, they just--fizz into glob when they hit me."

"Not all of us are so lucky," Peter crossed his arms. "Although with this upgrade I can come close." He let his gaze fall to his costume. "It's everything-proof in a nutshell. At least that's how Tony Stark worded his sales pitch. I'm not so sure if it can handle ketchup or mustard but bullets, he said, will glance right off."

"Tony made this suit for you?" Johnny sat back, wide-eyed. "Why? What's in it for him?"

The hell if I know, was the retort waiting to jump out from his tongue, but he really did appreciate the suit. It was helping him feel secure in the streets. "I don't know. He said he didn't want Spider-Man dying. I mean, maybe the guy does have a selfless bone in his body somewhere, like his ear or something."

"So--so Tony knows who you are behind--underneath the, uh ...?" Johnny seemed to strain when it came to forming the words.

Peter shook his head. His fingers had found themselves preoccupied with bending a milkshake straw into odd geometrical shapes. "No. Maybe. I don't know. It's hard to tell. Lately everyone's been
surprising me by coming to me when I'm ... when I'm regular, and telling me that they know. It's a nightmare. Badly kept secret. I blame Nick Fury."

Their food arrived, and as the waitress laid down the plates in front of them along with two coffee mugs, he found that he wasn't quite upset about the whole thing anymore. No one who was in the know had brought him any trouble so far. On the contrary, everyone he knew who had a clue had actually gone out of their way to make life a little easier for him, whether it was with a healing serum or counseling or whatever else he'd needed at the time.

"And why hasn't this badly kept secret reached my ears yet?" Johnny questioned with the air and behavior of a petulant five-year old. He bit off a large piece of one of the sandwiches and spoke through the clump of food in his mouth. "You know, the ears of someone who actually gives a crap and wants to check up on you?"

"I don't need--" he started in outrage, but he'd be kidding himself if he said he didn't require direction, or an extra set of eyes and firepower on the field covering his ass. "Haven't you heard? It's a strictly need-to--"

"--need-to-know thing, yeah, I know." Johnny's fingers formed a pyramid with the sandwich, his eyes blazing over them. "I need to know, Spidey. I need to know where you are and if you're doing something stupid or reckless, so I can do something about it. Maybe hit you on the head. What would it take for me to be in the know so I can hit you on the head whenever I feel like you deserve it?"

"I don't know." His voice was beginning to take a surly, unsure tone. "But the Ultimates seem to know. More than half of them know who I am already." The idea of Johnny being in the team didn't make him feel eager or excited.

"So that's it, then." Johnny leaned back and smirked. "All I need is to be inducted."

Peter rolled up his mask and gave Johnny his most dead, below-the-nose expression. "Johnny, you're already in a team. Just in case you forgot the name's sewn on your chest."

"So what? I can't play for two teams at once?"

Peter bit down on a sandwich, followed by a few fries. "Well ... it's not a rule, but wouldn't that be really confusing?"

Johnny made a wild gesture by throwing his hands in the air in front of him and looking around, incredulous. "What's not to get? I'm in the Four for family reasons and in the Ultimates for ... different reasons."

"You better get your reasons in order before you talk to Nick Fury, then. Also, Sue would hit you," Peter made the point clear by throwing a fry at Johnny's direction.

"Hey! Don't play with your food. And she can't do anything to me if I'm out of her reach." Johnny gingerly plucked the fry from his shoulder and ate it. "Besides, I can make my own decisions. I'm an adult. If I'm on a government payroll and Captain Murica's on the same thing, what difference does it make?"

"You're gonna be taking on a lot more responsibilities, is the difference. And it's not a passive job. They send you places even though you don't want to, and it can be terrible, the timing, the conditions." Peter chewed to let the thought sink in, getting scalded as he tried to drink from the mug of caffeine. "I don't think you're ready for it."
It wasn't exactly what Peter had meant. It wasn't about Johnny. It was about the idea, and how it made Peter's insides churn to think about Johnny going off on dangerous missions. It was Johnny's turn to hurl a fry at him. Peter tried to catch it between the teeth, but it ended up rolling down his costume towards the floor.

"You don't think I can be responsible?" It was clear that Johnny had drawn conclusions and had taken offense. "You asshole!"

Peter forced out air through his nose. "That's not what I--"

His phone rang mid-sentence, a loud trilling near his waist that startled him out of his response. Johnny narrowed his eyes at him, but Peter was too perturbed by the sudden interruption to focus on it. He slipped his fingers into a hidden pocket in his suit and took out the phone. The screen read that the call was coming from an unknown source.

He picked up the call nervously.

"Who is this?" he said warily, eyes flipping forward to stare at Johnny, who was giving him a look of contempt that promised a continuation of their argument. Peter rolled his eyes, but then he froze, and his face went deathly pale as Nick Fury's voice spoke through the other line, fuming and authoritative.


His throat tightened around the words stuck in his throat, and Johnny noticed everything, started firing questions.

"You want me to--to--to--" he swallowed down a large lump, and he vibrated from the sheer amount of information being dumped through the phone into his suddenly racing mind.

"What? Who is it? Tell me!" Johnny demanded, sounding more and more panicked the longer he stared at Peter's shocked form.

"Fury," Peter choked out shortly, feeling dizzy. "Rescue mission. They're--the team, in Antarctica--they were all captured--"

Johnny snatched the phone away from his hands, slapping it against his face.

"Fury. It's the Human Torch. Whatever it is, count me in."

--

Peter spent the next hour in a jet flying at God knows what speed thinking about how it was possible for Captain America to have failed.

No, he didn't fail, he's compromised.

He distracted himself by thinking about the few flaws Steve possessed that could be exploited under the right conditions and steadfastly tried not to think about the ditch Johnny was making as he paced back and forth along the length of the plane.

Nick Fury was in over his head. Aside from the S.H.I.E.L.D. pilot, he and Johnny were alone in the rescue expedition.
As if the two of them was all it would take to bring down a force that so easily managed to subdue Earth's mightiest heroes.

The flight was steady—they could have been sitting in the deli imagining all of this. Peter could have ingested a bad fry that left him hallucinating, and the enormous pressure he felt weighing on his shoulders was Johnny attempting to shake him out of his stupor. Still, he felt sick to his stomach, wondering restlessly how they were going to pull this off.

He didn't want to think of them failing, too.

When Johnny sat down, Peter said the first thing he could think of that would surely stop Johnny from fidgeting and stop his own mind from cataloguing every worst case scenario it could come up with.

"We didn't get to Tony Stark," Peter tried to keep his voice even, his limbs secured to the plane seat by his stiff muscles. "Like, how did that happen? And hasn't Tony ever heard of discretion? It was like he hired the paps specifically to catch you two."

His tone couldn't have been any more contrived. He knew Johnny could tell that he was trying to lighten the mood, could see the man pondering over the question. Johnny had never been frank about the night, choosing to omit the details presumably to spare him. But his eyes were alight now, and Peter immediately knew that he'd told no one else before and was eager to, now that he'd found someone whom he thought could be impartial and detached.

It wasn't very cunning. It was a betrayal of trust if Peter seriously gave it a thought.

He tried not to.

Johnny began a detailed account of what had gone down that Monday. From the late morning he'd had, to the basketball, to the quick hotdog he'd eaten right before he went into the Baxter Building, where he found Peter in the elevators. Peter's face shifted under the mask at the mention of his episode and how genuinely Johnny had worried about him all afternoon (the same afternoon Steve put on his therapy act and tried to squeeze something out of him), and Johnny pressed on, right down to his decision to look for Tony and ask questions. Questions that, to Peter's stupefaction, revolved around his secret.

When Johnny laid it all down in detail, Peter couldn't help but wonder how he still hadn't made sense of everything. It was all glaringly obvious, and for one stricken moment he thought that Johnny'd actually connected all the dots, but then the look of frustrated confusion on Johnny's face said otherwise.

Peter figured he should at least spur Johnny on--for the last few minutes the mask had been staring blankly back at Johnny. "So what then?"

Johnny drew a breath and leaned back in his seat, his voice going softer. "So ... so I get into the club—which by the way I didn't know was his–his assistant at SI? Darcy? The one with the breasts so large that other breasts wanted to orbit around them? She told me that Tony's driver Happy had called in to cancel Tony's afternoon and I could find the man there--and so I do, I find him in a booth, right? So I slip in, intent on interrogating his ass, and he decides to fuck me over by turning our talk a questions game where ... where Scotch is involved."

He slanted forward again, elbows digging into the ends of his thighs, his voice going low. His eyes were a sharp blue against the afternoon light filtering in from the plane windows, and they fixed on Peter intensely.
"I don't know if you know the guy that well, but Tony—he laid down all the moves on me that night. Turned it up a hundred and ten percent, put on his stupid smile and started making eyes at my—at me. At my everything. Fucking me with his eyes. And ..." Johnny pursed his lips, but his eyes washed into a duller, more hazy pearl grey as he cast them down. "Fuck, he did me in. He started talking about all the lusty gay sex he'd had behind closed doors and he was ... let me tell you, he sounded like one of those horny sex line operators, going through every little detail down to how—how he sucked this blond's cock like a pro, and, well ... I caved."

Peter had craned his neck so far back that his head was threatening to dislodge the backrest.

"Caved." he said, hollow yet probing.

Johnny covered his mouth, shook his head a fraction and swiped a hand over his lips. He glanced bashfully at Peter and then cast his eyes away, to the sky outside. "He sucked me off. In the club underneath the table. To show me what he did to the blond. And afterwards, he wanted to take me home so we could—"

"Finish?" Peter supplied tightly, and Johnny's eyes sharpened as he nodded jerkily.

"I see," Peter said tersely, his jaw tightening beneath the mask. He had to force out his next question with considerable attempt at forced civility.

"And ... and how was it? You ... did you ... did you enjoy it?" Peter knew that he was only torturing himself at this point by continuing to pry, but he couldn't stop, because he had to know. Had to know where Johnny stood.

Johnny's nostrils flared for a moment, and then he sighed resignedly.

"I've never been fucked so good in my life. And it's—it's sick. But I ... I stored it in my head, stored him in my head as ... as jerk material."

Peter went silent as the blood in his veins churned like the water miles below—dark, turbulent, and a few degrees short of freezing.

"This is Papa-Romeo-Five-Five, we are four miles north-northwest of drop-off position, please prepare for insertion via paratroop doors. Green light in one thousand seconds. Beginning descent, stand by."

Peter shot up from his seat as soon as the announcement cut off, heading towards the large steel doors by letting the tilt of the plane and gravity move his feet. Sensing Johnny behind him, he looked over his shoulder. He couldn't even muster up any anger or resentment, or any appropriate expression, really. Not that it would matter, since for all Johnny knew he was splitting his face in two with a gleeful grin behind the mask.

"And what about—what about that guy you were so worried about?" He cursed himself for sounding so small. "Where does he come in the picture?"

Johnny stuttered in his step, and then said: "This is the mess I'm in right now, Spidey. I ..." he paused in step, choosing his words. "I told you before. Don't you remember? I said I liked him. Still do. Actually ... ever since then, it's been ... worse. Way worse. I'm going nuts thinking about him."

Peter froze, and then whirled around to face Johnny. When? When did you tell me?

But before he could ask, Johnny's voice grew uncertain with his next words. "I want to ask him out. I want to tell him that ... that I want him. I have to."
He wants to ask me out, he repeated in his head. He wants me.

Peter would have been over the moon a few leagues back.

Instead he wanted to double over and bark out a laugh. It would have come out humorless and tinged with crazed lunacy if he'd done so. So he didn't.

"Don't," Peter said instead, with a shake of his head and a dip of his chin. He wouldn't be able to deal with it. He wouldn't be able to accept Johnny, knowing what he now knew. "Don't do it. You'll only make things messier." There was a tinge in his voice that was almost a quiet plea.

"Then what am I supposed to do!?" Johnny exclaimed as he threw his hands out in a wild gesture of frustration.

Peter fixed his gaze on the doors and waited for the light above to change from red to green.

"You sort out your feelings for Tony, 'cause I don't think you can make them go away that easily."

Johnny threw him a look that was equal parts astounded and betrayed. Peter didn't dare incline his head towards his left to look, staring resolutely at the locking mechanism of the door.

Johnny stepped forward until he was inches from Peter, his shoulders set and his chin jutting out defiantly.

"Well I'm going to tell him anyway," he said with fierce conviction. "I'm telling Peter."

Peter looked at him then, and saw the determination flashing in the corner of Johnny's eye.

"One hundred seconds," the pilot announced overhead. "Brace yourselves for deceleration."

This was exactly what he was referring to when he'd thought about going on dangerous missions. The timing worse than he could have ever imagined. They shouldn't have breached the topic in the middle of an important operation. Any other day he would have had a more compassionate answer for Johnny, but he was steeling himself for the drop, and was trying to retain whatever focus he had left for the monumental task at hand. They had no time to discuss it further, and Peter had been forced to make a snap decision.

His thoughts still in disarray, Peter wondered, petrified, if what he'd said made a mistake.

He closed his eyes for a moment and quietly sent a prayer out to whoever was listening.

Chapter End Notes

I originally intended for this chapter to be much longer, but I decided to cut it off here. Next chapter will be the rescue attempt and the aftermath.
The horizon stretching out in front of them was a cool purple dusk mixed with an ever darkening black sky. It was a spectacular sight to behold, lulling him into a false sense of calm. What it told Peter was that they didn't have much time, which in his opinion sucked horribly.

Johnny had been too impatient and had opened the deployment doors early, which was why Peter didn't quite catch what the man was crying out, the air whistling loudly in his ears.

The light above turned green and Peter jumped, forgetting for one moment that, with the large stretch of sky in every direction, he had nowhere to sling a web and secure himself to.

Fuck.

"SPIDEY--YOU DIDN'T GRAB A FUCKING PARACHUTE," Johnny exclaimed while in freefall with him. Peter's heart was in his throat as the air pushed against him and tried to thrash him around.

But he'd been falling for eight years. He knew how to steady himself mid-flight, knew how air and wind rushing against him could be used to his advantage. He straightened his body like a human bullet and tried to lessen his air resistance until they were at a certain height. He could do this. He would NOT lose his cool.

"GRAB ONTO MY HANDS," Peter shouted back a little desperately despite his calm self assurances, "MY COSTUME'S FLAME RETARDANT."

"WHAT?"

"TAKE MY HANDS AND FLAME ON, YOU DOLT," he instructed loudly, throat going hoarse. There was so little air to catch with his breath. His lungs felt like they were squeezing in water through his nose.

"BUT I EMIT A LOT OF HEAT WHEN I FLAME ON." Johnny argued, blond hair whipping out of his face.

"I KNOW FLAMEBRAIN JUST DO IT."

Johnny tried to position himself above him. It was a tricky maneuver that took them too much time to execute, but before they reached a dangerously low altitude, Peter barreled forwards and spun in the air, hands connecting with Johnny's waiting palms. His grip was a vice around Johnny's own.

Johnny burst into flame, then.

Any civilian would have been roasted by the sudden heat wave, and the harsh yank would have dislocated both the shoulders of a non-enhanced person. But Peter had his costume on, which kept the plasma at bay, and years of swinging from building to building had turned his wide shoulders into steel, built up his high resistance to g-forces.

Since he was within earshot, Peter lowered his voice to a volume that strained his throat less. "You have to stay low, Johnny! Confuse their tracking if they have any!"
"Alright! Brace yourself!"

Peter had been in the same position once before, during a random skirmish in the southside. Iron Man had been the one who had taken his hands, flown him away mere seconds before an explosion incinerated him. The sensation felt different--there was a prickly sort of heat pressing against his back and they were going at a much faster speed. Johnny had done as he commanded and flown at an angle, soaring perilously fast towards the ground, but his large hands were secure around Peter's own, and the fine hairs on Peter's palms assisted a lot in keeping him from slipping out of Johnny's grasp.

As they drew closer to the ground, the scene before them changed.

Lush, dense foliage rolled over an uneven terrain broken by hills and boulders the size of buildings. To the east was a vast, dark lake with banks the color of rust, and surrounding the landscape all around were volcanoes, some actively spewing out smoke and others dormant, dead as mountains. In the distance, Peter could hear cries coming from some unknown creature within the countless trees, the sound dying out abruptly, as if something had silenced the creature for good. After which, the sounds of hooting and crooning birds, accompanied by echoes of howling and growling animals took over. The air became thick and heavy with moisture, and the temperature dialed up, adding to the warmth that emanated from Johnny.

The words, 'I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore' ran across Peter's mind, though New York was hardly Kansas, and Oz was a children's playground compared to the eerie, unfamiliar jungle below.

They made their descent, with Peter narrowly avoiding branches from knocking his legs off, his heightened senses overly-stimulated by the surroundings. They found themselves in the middle of a small clearing, with Johnny letting out one last spurt to cut their momentum.

Johnny touched the ground lightly with his feet, completely killing the flames around him. Peter's landing wasn't so elegant--he dropped clumsily on his heels, curling into himself and rolling against the rough underbrush until he was stopped by a large bush. That's gonna leave a few bruises. Ow. He groaned to himself as Johnny jogged towards him and offered his hand.

"You good? That was ... rough," Johnny grinned, so calm and self-assured despite the wilderness around them.

Peter took the hand without thinking about their talk only a few minutes ago, too jostled by the bumpy landing to feel anything but a sense of business and professionalism.

They'd done it. Reached the Savage Lands with only their powers protecting them. Peter felt like throwing up, watching the scene before him. The setting was too similar to Genosha, where mutants and individuals with powers and abilities were shot on sight. But this place was different--instead of headhunters, ancient creatures lurked in the dark and normal humans didn't get out alive.

Peter found Johnny's smile a little more reassuring after seeing what they were facing. Somewhere deep in the woods was their friends, held captive by someone they didn't have any information on. It was a reckless plan. Peter couldn't fathom how Nick could send them, just the two of them, in the middle of nowhere, expecting them to deliver and produce satisfactory results when the rest had failed.

The dread he'd been keeping at bay since they boarded the flight threatened to fill him, but he stamped down on it hard, crushed it in his head and tucked it away somewhere it wouldn't be able to affect him. He wasn't alone. Johnny was with him. It wasn't the most solid reassurance, but the rest
of the Ultimates were counting on him. He had to buck up. If not for the team, then for--his mind glanced briefly at an image of Tony, and then threw away the thought completely.

For Steve, then. He'd toughen up for Steve.

"What now, Arachnoboy?" Johnny sidled next to him, surveying the place with a mildly doubtful expression. "You're the brains of this operation."

"Funny thing, flames," Johnny remarked lightly as Peter swatted another bug away from his face. "They have so many uses. Warmth, light, deadly explosions."

It was dark, almost completely pitch black save for the tiny light coming from the small fire flickering at the tip of Johnny's thumb. Peter nearly tripped on another root when a large leaf blocked the glow the flame cast.

"They also attract attention," Peter retorted snidely, throwing the man an incensed look before knocking away a large fern blocking the random path they'd chosen. "You know, like moths to a flame? Dinosaurs to bright, flickering objects?"

Johnny's eyes narrowed. "Okay, that was not my fault! You were the one doing the flamenco on every twig you see under your foot."

"No, no. I don't think their hearing's that good. But with you screaming at every flamingo that flies away I'm not surprised how the dinos are so keen on having us for dinner."

"Flamenco, Spidey--it's a Spanish dance. Look it up," Johnny rolled his eyes. "And it was a toucan that flew away. Huh, thought you were smart."

They'd argued about the T-Rex incident until nightfall. They'd come across the gigantic creature feasting on an even larger Stegosaurus, and with their hearts lodged in their throats they'd skirted past it. They would have avoided any interaction with the creature if Johnny hadn't cried out loud at the flurry of a spooked toucan. But the man insisted that the T-Rex had glared at them way before his screams of terror.

Peter had dropped the issue at some point--after all it was Johnny who shot out a blast of flame straight at the dinosaur's open jaws. But the banter continued, since they both knew that talking was the only way they could think of to keep themselves sane.

"Do you even know where we're going? We've been going like this for a long time now," Johnny sighed in question.

Truthfully, Peter thought they were lost. "Just keep walking," he snapped. "We're bound to run into that damn lake soon."

They'd set course for the lake they'd seen mid-flight, with the logic that any secret base of operations a villain would have in the middle of a jungle would need some sort of water supply. It made sense at the time, but they hadn't sighted the lake for hours, and Peter's legs were starting to tire from the perilous hike. He never complained about it, however, because Johnny didn't.

Peter was climbing over a steep drop when Johnny grabbed his arm and paused abruptly. Peter shot him a panicked look.

"What?" Peter questioned as he went rigid.
"Do you hear that?" Johnny craned his neck to one side, trying to hear with his good ear.

"Must be my rickety old knees giving up," Peter said dryly.

"Shh. Listen."

With the two of them pausing in their tracks, the sound of brushing leaves under their feet ceased, and Peter could pick up the sound.

It was a quiet, churning noise, like a machine, except it sounded watery, like a babbling of a brook.

Peter slipped out of Johnny's grip and followed the sound out of the makeshift path, stepping through a wall of thorn bushes that parted away from his durable costume.

He found the source of the sound. It was a large pipe, width the size of a man hole, and it went in two directions, disappearing into the dense trees around them.

Johnny followed suit, but not without letting small yelps of pain from the thorns that poked and pricked him.

"Johnny--look. It's a pipe," Peter said quickly. "It has to lead somewhere. And there something liquid flowing inside it."

Johnny winced as he pulled out a thorn from his hip, and then looked at the pipe as instructed.

"Finally. A lead. Where do you think it goes?"

"If I had to guess, one end goes into the lake, while the other--well, it must lead to where we're supposed to be going."

Johnny scratched his head and drew his eyebrows together inquisitively. "How do we know which direction's which?"

Peter thought for a moment, arms crossing, and then thought of the solution a few seconds later. He crouched, blinking at the dark underbrush.

"Hey--I need some light," Peter said distractedly, and Johnny looking confused, brought held his thumb above Peter.

Peter brushed the thick forest floor with his fingers, looking for the tool he was looking for, and when he'd found a sharp enough rock, he let out a small exclamation and picked it up between his fingers. It was dense enough that Peter had some difficulty picking it up, and it fit in his hand like a baseball. *This should do the trick.*

"What're you planning to do with that?" Johnny blinked at the object, but Peter had already approached the pipe, intending to show Johnny instead of explaining.

With a harsh, resounding clang, he brought down the sharp edge of the rock and hammered it onto the pipe. A crack formed in the metal surface, and Peter, with careful precision, hit the exact same place again. The crack then burst into a proper hole, and liquid spurted out, gushing like a miniature fountain. Peter smiled at his work, and knew immediately where to go.

"That way," he said with certainty, pointing towards the denser part of the jungle. "The water's clean, so it can't be sewage. It must be coming from the lake. Because of the intense water pressure, the water's fizzing out the crack in one direction, towards the place where the water from the lake is going."
“That's ... that's actually smart,” Johnny conceded, blinking at the other. Peter gave him a smirk under the mask, a response that merely registered as a blank look to Johnny, before trudging on and following the pipe down the rough path deeper into the jungle.

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Peter grasped the danger of the situation they were in when they stumbled upon a large steel fortress in the middle of the jungle, heavily fortified with guards going about their duties around the perimeter.

"Would you stop fidgeting?" Johnny hissed. "You're moving so much your costume is squeaking."

"Shut up. I'm a bit nervous, alright?"

He and Johnny stuck to the shadows of the forest, trying to come up with a plan.

"Can't we just bust in, blow up anyone in the way, find the guys, and then, I don't know. Fly away?" Johnny suggested, blinking hopefully at Peter, who'd tried and failed to discover any weaknesses in the security. *We'd have to take out one of them. Just one, and then exploit the hole in their defenses.*

Peter shook his head briskly. "We don't want to alert them to intruders. There's only two of us, Johnny. If they catch one whiff of us, we'd get captured, just like Steve and the rest." He Peter growled low in frustration, rubbing his head. "I hope he's safe. Who knows what they've done to him."

"Just him? What about the rest of the Ultimates?" Johnny cocked an eyebrow. "And since when do you call the guy Steve?"

Peter's deadpanned look was once again hidden unseen behind the mask, and hence ignored by the blond. "Nevermind that. Here's what we have to do."

He laid out his plans carefully, drawing on the caked mud underneath their feet using a stick. Most of the plan made use of Peter's webs and fast reflexes and Johnny as a lookout, to which Johnny had loudly protested. Peter clapped a hand over the blond's mouth before anyone was alerted to their presence, promptly slapping the guy on the back of the head afterwards and telling him to speak with his indoor voice.

"You get it now? Do I have to repeat the whole thing?" Peter asked wryly.

Johnny rubbed the back of his head and made a face at the other. "I'm good. I give the signal if anyone's about to run into you, and you give me the signal if you've dealt with the guard on the wall."

"Good boy," Peter cooed, rubbing the blond's head of hair and getting an annoyed grimace in return.

It was a simple enough plan. Johnny was to cause a diversion somewhere near the fortress entrance--they decided to light a tree in the darkness--and distract the guards on the ground, while Peter was to climb up the unmanned vertical wall and knock out one of the guards standing sentinel above at intervals. Then, once that was done, Peter was to use his webs to pull Johnny up.

Johnny set a tree ablaze in the night, and then slipped back into the same pocket of bushes where Peter was waiting. The guards started making noises of unrest, and from his vantage point Peter saw the guard manning one section of the wall disappear to investigate along with some of the others.

They executed the plan, then, with Peter running swift and sure, sticking to the wall like a gecko and
creeping up the surface of the fortress.

When he'd reached the top he pulled himself up, and came face to face with a guard, whose eyes widened at his appearance.

The burly man's scream was cut off when his face was hit with a web. His gun was next, shot with another web and secured safely against the man's chest. A karate chop to the neck later and Peter was pulling the guard into a hidden alcove near the doors leading to the interior of the fortress. He half-contemplated leaving Johnny there at the edge of the jungle while he did the work alone, but Johnny had been cooperative so far, and he needed another person in case he got captured.

He went back to the edge of the wall and slung another web towards the forest, hitting a patch of large, heart-shaped leaves with a resounding thwack.

Johnny ran sprinting a second later, jumping in mid-air after gaining enough momentum. The spurt of fire that left his soles propelled him just enough, and he soared in an arc, almost running straight into Peter. He caught himself on his feet, and then sighed in relief when he skidded to a halt. He grinned the next second.

"What did you do to the guy?" Johnny peered around the pillars keeping the high roof in place over their heads. The fortress was dome-shaped, and the halls curved around, with no other guards within immediate sight.

"I hit him in the neck with a chop," Peter answered with a shrug. "Now come on--we need to find Steve and the rest and get the hell out of here. This place is giving me the creeps."

"There you go again with the Steve thing," Johnny waggled his eyebrows, drawing himself up and looking smug, as if he'd figured out something that was a secret. "What's this about? It's mighty suspicious."

Peter tossed his head, feeling incredulous. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Johnny's answering smile was devious and a little too roguish for Peter. "Nothing. You just sound like you're close to Steve, is all. Maybe you are. Not that it's any of my business. But then that means Steve would know who you are under that mask. Maybe I can pester him about it."

"You're right," Peter spoke, voice low and threatening. "It isn't any of your business."

"Spidey," Johnny said gently, eyes intensifying. He closed in on Peter, who took one step back. Johnny's hands dropped down on Peter's shoulders, rubbing soothing circles the next instant.

"You're too wound up." Johnny said quietly, thumbs moving against the spots where collarbone and shoulders connected. "If you don't loosen up, you won't be able to think calmly. I'm just trying to get you to ease up a bit."

Peter frowned, and then let out a steadying breath. Johnny was right. Peter was too wracked with nerves to think. He didn't know half of what they were doing, where the rest of the guys were, how they were going to get out--but Johnny's hands worked firmly against his tight muscles, and he relaxed just a little bit, finding comfort in Johnny's clear blue eyes.

"I hear you," Peter murmured, head drooping, and arms going limp at his sides. "I'm just--it's kind of scary. I don't know how we're going to pull this off."

Johnny's lips quirked, body coming to life with heat. "It's going to be okay. I'm with you," the way he said was so casual, so certain, and Peter couldn't help but siphon some of his self-assurance for
himself. "We can work together and beat whoever this baddie is and rescue all of them."

Peter nodded slowly, willing his own skin to absorb some of Johnny's encouraging warmth.

"And anyway, so what?" Johnny grinned. "I don't really care if you're friends with Steve. Maybe something more than that?" His eyes glinted with mischief. "At least I know before we're imprisoned for life that you're batting for the same team."

Peter threw his head back and sighed loudly, before punching Johnny on the shoulder. Johnny snickered, and they set off into the fortress.

"What do we do now?" Johnny asked lightly, and it still astonished Peter how the blond could easily put his trust on all his decisions. It was more reassuring than pressuring.

"We have to figure out a way to get out of here," Peter said quietly, sticking close to the wall. "Once we have an escape route, we go look for the others. But we have to be careful. This place seems to be crawling with guards."

Right on cue, voices came from the next corridor, and Peter froze, before jumping towards the nearest wall and scuttling up the ceiling.

"Take my hand," Peter commanded urgently. Johnny blinked at his palm, wide-eyed, and then jumped, only just reaching Peter's hand with his own outstretched arm. Peter pulled him up fast, and then yanked him back towards him, arms going around Johnny's waist.

They stayed stuck to the ceiling until two guards with guns at their belts walked past, turning at the next intersection. Peter could only hold Johnny for so long, and soon he dropped the man back to the floor, Johnny bending down on his knees to cushion his impact. Peter followed the next second, pads of his arms and feet dropping lightly onto the floor.

"Christ, you're strong," Johnny complained, arching backwards and stretching his waist. "You got a solid grip, too."

"Don't count on it," Peter retorted, lips quirking despite himself. "You weigh like a sack of rocks."

Johnny looked shell-shocked. "Hey! I diet!"

Peter didn't respond to him, instead pulling the man into the next hall, and then the next, trusting his instincts, hoping that his spider senses were keeping them away from danger. They tread slowly and cautiously, keeping their ears trained for any sentinel or any sign of activity. They skirted past a few work stations where workers in identical suits were piecing together some kind of machine, and then crossed a bridge to another section of the large base, Peter silently thanking whoever was up above watching them for keeping them out of harm's way.

Peter pulled Johnny into an alcove hidden from the light fixtures as two more guards strolled past. This isn't going to work. The place is too big, and we have no time. Who knows what happened to Steve and Tony and all the rest?

Johnny seemed to mirror his exact same thoughts. "This is getting tiring."

"I know," Peter ran a hand along the front of his mask. "Got any ideas?"

Johnny pulled his lips back into his mouth and bit down, forehead scrunching. "What about the vents?" His eyes looked up towards a tiny crevice in the alcove where a steel vent was.
Peter considered the suggestion. "It could work, but ... we don't know how big this place is and we might get lost. We'd avoid the guards, but the vent shafts might have exhaust propellers. Or worse, fumes."

Johnny craned his neck in understanding. Peter was at a loss for what to do. It was taking him a lot of mental strength not give into the fear, to stop his knees from shaking or his throat from crying out in despair. They were pushed for time, and the only feat they'd managed to accomplish in more or less an hour was narrowly avoiding being discovered. If they had any chance of escape, it was slipping away, and they had to do things fast, had to cut their time down.

"We're going to have to split up," Peter murmured darkly, earning him a sharp, stunned glance. But Johnny didn't argue, swallowed whatever complaint he had waiting to jump out of his tongue and adopted a serious expression. He nodded shortly afterwards, and even though Peter knew he was against the idea, he agreed to it.

"You sure you can keep yourself safe?" It was a different tone, grave and tinged with concern, and it took Peter aback for a moment. He tilted his chin and regarded Johnny.

"I could ask you the same question," Peter said tersely. "But I know I can trust you not to mess things up. Just ... just use your powers if you're in a pinch."

"Where do I have to go?" Johnny inquired, all business now. Peter noticed that his jaw had set, his shoulders hiked up and taut, and he was quivering slightly. Peter blinked for a moment, a thought occurring to him. Johnny's anxious? Why? He was fine a minute ago.

Peter then realized that, just as he'd been leaning on Johnny for support, Johnny had been doing the same, using him as a source of stability.

Peter closed his eyes for a second, let out yet another quaky breath, and then put his hand on Johnny's shoulder. Johnny stiffened under his grip, and then eased a fraction, relaxing his shoulders.

"I need you to find us something that can fly," Peter informed him. "Something that can take around ten people and get us out of here. This fortress is bound to have a hangar or a landing pad somewhere. We're going to need a getaway ride." Peter ducked his head a little. "I'm trusting you to do this because you're much better at piloting than I am. And I'm better at sneaking around. So you go up a few floors, while I go deeper in. Any dungeon or prison ward they have would be underground."

Johnny's face shifted in the dark alcove, but soon it stopped, his expression that of steely resolve. He nodded once, and then clasped both of Peter's upper arms, shaking him slightly.

"You promise me you're going to be okay?" Johnny urged. Peter's eyes went wide under the mask, but he nodded, because Johnny was just being protective. He didn't need to snap or come up with a witty retort. He was worried for him, and agitated since they were going to part ways.

"I promise," Peter said tightly, feeling a little self-conscious under the steady gaze.

Peter let out a tiny 'oof' in surprise when Johnny tugged him towards his chest, wrapping him in his arms. The blond was always so demonstrative with his affection, always so warm and open, that Peter's fear of losing him only grew with each second that ticked. He resisted the immensely compelling urge to bury his face in the man's neck and take a good, long whiff of his scent. He wanted the comfort, wanted it badly, but he was Spidey at the moment, and Spidey wasn't so weak, so vulnerable.
Johnny let him go, and then, just before darting out, he said. "Meet you back here? You better have those idiots in tow or I'll tell Nick Fury on you."

Peter smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. Johnny stole into the night, staying low and trying to keep as silent as possible. He looked pretty conspicuous, with his blond hair and blue costume, and his power was nothing short of flashy and destructive, but he was intent on accomplishing his mission, and for that, Peter could trust him. He watched the man, feeling the same dread he'd felt when they first arrived.

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Peter slipped from one shadow to the next, keeping his ears trained for any sound, adrenaline pumping through his veins and juicing him up, keeping him from tiring out. He'd encountered guard after guard, walking in pairs or strolling alone and muttering quietly, and Peter had lost his sense of gravity at a certain point, crawling on the ceiling, sticking to sharp inclines under large arches, dangling from overhangs by a thin web. It took most of his mental faculties to keep his concentration, and although he was feeling mercilessly overworked he pushed himself forward, not even sparing a thought for Johnny. He couldn't let himself be consumed with worry. *Johnny's safe. He's gonna get us out of here.*

The size of the place made him think about who was behind the operation, what resources the person had that he was able to build a large base in one of the most dangerous parts of the world. *Someone who's so powerful and influential, I'm willing to bet... I'm not surprised that Steve and the rest of them had been captured, if this was what they were facing.* But the team was strong, and flawlessly coordinated. It would have taken someone who was incredibly armed or powerful, or someone even more organized and coordinated than the team was, to be able to perform a feat as great as subduing the top heroes on the planet, comrades who had been working for years and had built incredible rapport with each other. Peter was feeling dissuaded the deeper he went into the lair, but he had to complete the mission, so he brushed aside the heavy doubts forming at the back of his head. *I can't let the fear of failing stop me. I won't be able to get out of here alive if I did.*

Whether it was through his incredible luck or through the casual carelessness of the staff, he'd heard from one of the guards where the prisoners were located. Peter celebrated quietly in his head until the guards had disappeared, and then crawled with even more agility and purpose, peeking around each corridor before shooting out into the hall with a burst of speed, only to repeat the process.

He knew where they were. Right at the end of the wing, where the lights changed to a deep purple, coming from strobes and plasma barriers that cast its eerie light and reflected against the shiny surface of the whole fortress interior. *I'm getting close. The halls are turning at least a little pink.*

There were two guards by the arch leading to the purple hallway. Peter thought that security was a little too light, which meant that whoever owned the place must have put a lot of trust in the prison cells themselves. Peter thought that this was a little too presumptuous of the owner. He'd clearly hadn't considered someone coming in from outside and taking out the guards. *They haven't even thought about anyone trying to break the team out. How dumb.*

He scuttled above the two sentinels, trying to figure out how he was going to go about knocking them out, and finally decided on just spraying web fluid all over the two and dropping down instantly before they could make a sound or call for help. Along the way he'd known that the mainframe security system checked up on the guards regularly through handheld transceivers. He had listened in on their jargon, their way of confirming identities and communicating security status. If he was going to keep the operatives from being suspicious, he was going to have to take the guards' walkie-talkies and try and mimic the way they speak.
Once the guards had been taken care of, Peter took away their guns, and slipped his fingers into their pockets to find their keycards and transceivers. *Oh God, I can't believe I pulled that one off.*

After that, it was all just a matter of opening the sliding doors with the keys. Once the doors parted and allowed him entrance, Peter stared at a large, impossibly long hallway that curved about the same way the halls above did, following the shape of the dome. Each prison cell was separated quite a few ways from each other. *Probably to prevent any form of communication from transpiring between the prisoners.*

Peter hurried to the first cell and used the keycard on the panel by the plasma barriers. The glowing purple pillar blocking the entrance sputtered and fizzed out, and Peter stepped in cautiously, for fear of any extra layers of protection jumping out at him and taking him unaware.

When he'd finally entered the room, Peter's eyes bulged.

Tony was bolted to the wall, his eyes shut, still in his suit but his helmet nowhere in sight, and his hair mussed and sticking to his forehead from the sweat. He had small cuts on his face, and one side of his neck was bleeding. He was breathing at least, but he looked pale, so deathly pale, and he looked like he was struggling with every inch of his resolve not to succumb to whatever affliction he was suffering from.

"Tony Stark," Peter hissed, chest tightening at the scene. "Can you hear me?"

Tony cracked his eyes open, his pupils trying to focus. Eyes hazy, they looked around for a moment, confused, until they landed on Peter's form.

Tony's lips inched upwards, in a slow, agonizing smile.

"Spider-Man? Am I dreaming?" Tony groaned hoarsely, and it sounded horrible in Peter's ears. He immediately approached, stopping in his tracks when he heard the quiet, thrumming noise. *Of course. It's the wall. A giant magnet. And it's keeping the iron suit in place.*

"How do I turn the magnet off?" Peter asked gently, feeling as though any louder and his voice might overwhelm Tony.

"Panel, Outside--you figure it out," Tony responded with a quiet throaty voice.

Peter sprinted out and examined the panel closer. It wasn't a complicated interface, but the magnet would turn off immediately if he flipped the switch, meaning Tony would fall down from quite a height.

"I won't be there to catch you!" Peter hissed loudly into the room. Tony craned his neck with effort, and then shook his head minutely.

"Doesn't matter. Just get me out."

Peter creased his brows together in worry, but decided to do it. He had to get Tony out as quickly as possible.

He sucked in a harsh breath and then worked his fingers on the screen interface, cutting off the power to the magnet.

The next second, he heard an audible thunk of Tony's suit hitting the metal floor. Peter rushed back into the room and was instantly at Tony's side.
The groaned low in his throat, face scrunching in pain. He was clearly too exhausted to vocalize anything more than a moan.

"I'm going to pull you out of the suit, alright?" Peter instructed, heart beating wildly in his chest. He couldn't ask Tony for the answers anymore. He was smart--he could figure out how to unlock the suit even though it was deprived of any power.

A few tense seconds later, and Peter had found the manual locking mechanism lacing Tony's sides. He took off the suit piece by piece, trying to be as gentle as possible as he slid out the armor from each limb and body part. Inside the suit, Tony was devoid of a shirt, his skin drenched and sticky with day old sweat. Peter was astounded to find that he didn't smell terrible (or like a dying animal, he added grimly in his head), and he cursed himself when his thoughts briefly entertained the downright heady muskiness of Tony's perspiration, or the sheen of it making the tight skin glisten.

"You still with me?" Peter urged, and Tony came to again, blinking at him. When he turned his head to the side to gaze at him properly, Peter noticed a few shards of what seemed to be iron sticking out from Tony's neck. He blanched, realizing that that was the source of the bleeding.

"I'm going to take these out, alright?" Peter's eyes glanced briefly at the wounds and the pieces of iron. "Stay with me now, okay? You're going to be fine."

Peter then began the painstaking process of pulling out shard after shard of iron, and Tony groaned again, breathing labored, but still holding onto consciousness. He was smiling, Peter noted. Even though he probably had one leg in death's door, he still found the energy to pull his lips up. It was a good sign, and Peter would have cried out in relief, if it weren't such a demeaning thing to do.

"You're here to save us?" Tony murmured, his voice not quite catching on his vocal cords, sounding airy and dry.

"Yes, I am," Peter breathed, nodding to himself as he got the last of the shards out. He placed the bloody piece of iron on Tony's open palm, fingers closing around Tony's hand.

"I'm so glad I found you alive," Peter laughed in relief. "You should put that under your pillow for the shrapnel fairy."

Tony chuckled then, a short tremor coming from his chest that turned into light bouts of coughing. Peter's face shifted into worry again, but to his surprise, Tony had pushed himself up to a sitting position, arms wobbling by the elbows and breathing even more stuttered than before.

"What's wrong with you?" Peter inquired softly, feeling that Tony was strong enough to be able to respond.

"Nanites," Tony said roughly, as if that answered the question completely. Before Peter could press further, Tony added: "Magnet fried my system and--and kept the nanites on my back. I have a weak immune--immune system without them. I--I think it's Tetanus, from the rusty shrapnel. No spasms or lockjaw y-yet. And--and dehydration. I'm thirsty as hell."

Peter was amazed at Tony's self-diagnosis. He'd been worrying about losing his calm and in turn, losing his ability to think rationally, and here Tony was, suffering and injured, yet still able to think on his feet.

"We need to go to the next cells," Peter said, and then shook his head resolutely. "I can't leave you here."

Tony nodded shortly, and Peter was at least grateful that Tony didn't have enough energy to argue.
"There's a slight possibility that--" Tony stopped abruptly, looking stricken with pain as his face pinched and a shudder coursed through his body. "--that I may be dying--"

"Don't--" Peter hissed with a sharp glance at the man's face, hauling Tony to his feet and slinging one of the man's arms over his shoulders for support. "Don't be dramatic at a time like this."

"I'm not, I'm--" Tony's breaths came out in short puffs, but he continued to force himself to speak, the stubborn bastard. "Maybe--okay, maybe I'm not dying, but--but it feels like I am--listen--can you-can you just stop dragging me for a moment and let me get this out ...?"

Peter wanted to punch the man in desperation--it would be much easier to carry an unconscious body--but one look at the gaunt yet resolute expression on the man's face and his feet froze on the spot. Against his better judgment, he pulled Tony to the side of the dilapidated hallway and propped him against the wall, throwing the other a severe look behind the mask.

"What is it?" Peter groaned in exasperation. "What do you have to say that can't wait until we're out of this stupid mess?"

Tony took a few moments to gather himself, pulling in harsh, noisy breaths of air, and then he opened his eyes, clear and glowing with intent, and said: "I know who you are."

Peter's body went rigid. "What?"

Tony closed his eyes, eyebrows drawn together in an impatient, irritated way, and then flicked his eyes open again, and at that moment he looked even more determined, with the way he puffed air out once through his nose and glared.

"Underneath the mask. I know who you are," he said gruffly.

Peter waited a few moments, before saying in a strained tone: "You're delirious--look, we have to get out of here--"

Before he could move, Tony's hand came up and swiftly fell on top of his mask. He sputtered in protest, but Tony's arm muscles went slack, tiring quickly from the exertion, his hand dragging down Peter's face and taking the mask with it.

His hair feathered out as it was freed from confinement. Peter stared at Tony in wide-eyed astonishment.

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"Peter, I know," Tony told him, eyes hooded. The sound of his name made him jerk upright. *He knows.*

Slowly, Tony drew closer, and Peter was sure that the man was about to lose consciousness, was going to collapse--

But the next second, he surged forward, tilted his chin, stepped into Peter's space and--

--and captured Peter's lips in a kiss.

A surprisingly firm kiss that made Peter's eyes flutter shut and caused him to stagger on his feet.

But seconds later, it was over, Tony's lips ghosting along the corner of his mouth. His forehead drooped forwards, dropping down on Peter's shoulder.

"Fuck," Peter hissed in panic. "Fuck. Tony. Tony--are you okay?"
Tony didn't respond, body having gone completely slack against Peter, and for a moment blood ran cold inside of him, and he felt numb, his breaths starting to come out short. *Tony, no. Please, don't do this.*

He felt the room start to spin, and he was losing his thoughts completely, panic becoming full-blown and all too real in front of him.

_Not now. NOT NOW, not when Tony's relying on me. No. NOT TODAY. Breathe, Peter. Breathe. Inhale. Exhale._

He forced down the onslaught of what was surely the start of a panic attack, and he'd just about lost his concentration when his breathing evened out and his muscles went slack, even before the attack consumed him.

Taking in deep gulps of air, his hand frantically ran along Tony's arm, thumb smoothing down the length of the man's forearm until it found the end of his wrist. He pressed down hard, and waited with bated breath for a response.

He felt the tiny, fluttering beats of a pulse, and he nearly cried then, in relief, in sheer exhaustion, but he pulled himself upright, gathered his bearings for a moment, and then set out towards the next cell with Tony practically hanging off of one side of him.

It took them ages to reach the next cell, but when they did, and Peter peered in, relief flooded him instantly.

Steve was sitting with his back against the far wall, his head hanging and his knees drawn towards him. Peter's face scrunched. Steve looked utterly defeated, and the flash of sympathy for the man nearly caused him to topple over.

"Steve," he called out, and at once the blond's head jerked up, his eyes alert and locking onto Peter's. The blue eyes blew out widely, and then he was up on his feet, heading towards the plasma barrier.

"Peter? Peter? How did you--" Steve started to ask, but Peter cut him off with, "No time. Just--just hang on for a bit."

It pained him to set Tony down against the wall next to the cell entrance, but he had to dismantle the barrier, and to do that required him to use the keycard.

A short while later and the purple pillar fizzled out, and Steve shot out of the prison cell, going to Tony's side immediately.

"What happened to him?" Steve shot. Peter looked into the room and found Captain America's shield, bolted to the wall in the same way Tony's suit had been. He quickly took care of the magnetized wall, too, and the shield dropped down to the floor with a harsh, solid clang.

"He's sick," Peter choked out, dashing into the cell and retrieving the shield for Steve. When he returned, Steve was hovering over Tony, expression lined with worry, and he continued to fire off his explanation. "He's got an infection from the wound in his neck, and--and the magnets messed with his immune system, I--I had to get him out of the suit. I--"

"Calm down," Steve commanded softly, eyes glowing with intensity. "You did great. I can't believe you're here."

"Neither can I," Peter sighed, feeling more and more assured now that Steve was here, looking unscathed and not at all drained, despite his day-long confinement. "Can you carry him? I'm--it's not
that I can't, it's just--"

"Say no more," Steve muttered, and with his muscular arms he gathered Tony up and held him close to his chest in an astonishing display of gentleness, steady arms looking immovable around the man's prone form. "Are you alone? How did you get here?"

Peter shook his head, and when his hair flopped around his face he realized that his mask was still hooked around Tony's fingers.

"Nick sent Johnny and I on a rescue mission. He's on the upper floors, looking for a jet we can use." He approached the two and plucked the mask out of Tony's grasp and shoved his head back into it.

"Just the two of you?" Steve's jaw tightened and his expression turned dark and serious, and Peter nodded quickly, feeling the waves of quiet anger emanating from the man.

"Right then. We'll scrap the mission and retreat," Steve said authoritatively. "Go to the other cells--Pietro and Wanda should be fine, they're enhanced. I'm not so sure about Janet, Clint, or Natasha. From what I heard, Bruce is being held captive with extra layers of security measures at the very end of the hall."

Peter followed his orders without question, sprinting through the hallway, re-energized by the unflinching guidance that Steve possessed and commanded.

He found Pietro pacing quietly in the next cell, and when he called out in attention, Pietro paused in his tracks, head craning back to look.

"Spider-Man? Is that ... Spider-Man? Or have I finally gone insane?"

Peter didn't know him all that well, but he was glad to find him safe and unharmed. Unlocking the cell took less than a minute, and Pietro burst out of the cell in the blink of an eye, standing too close for comfort.

"Amazing," Pietro drawled as he calmly regarded him. He was taller, looming over Peter and eyeing him with curiosity. "And you're here to rescue us, are you?"

The shock of white hair, the amused glint in his eyes, and the complete lack of tension in his posture was a clear indication that the man was either very levelheaded or verging on insanity.

"You're fast, right?" Peter asked tightly, shoving the other keycard against the man's chest. "Think you can open the rest of the prison cells quickly?"

Pietro blinked at him twice, and then smirked slowly.

"It's already done, little Spider," he teased, leaving a vacuum of air behind that nearly knocked Peter off his feet when the man sped through the hallway, lightning fast.

The rest of the operation went swimmingly after that--Pietro had done as he promised, the cell barriers shutting down one by one, and the rest of the prisoners were carried back towards where Steve waited before even a minute had passed. Clint was alright, weak but capable of standing by himself, but he threw up inside Steve's cell after suddenly being whisked away by Quicksilver. Pietro had laughed at him, and Clint had flashed him a rude gesture and a few choice curses, earning him a disapproving look from Steve. Natasha was unconscious, having been knocked out by some drug--Clint assured everyone that it was a harmless sleeping serum and nothing more, seeing as Natasha still breathed and her skin still possessed a healthy tint to it. The same had been the case for Janet--she'd been stripped of her size-altering suit, wearing nothing but a thin undershirt and underwear.
Pietro had found her lying prone in her cell, but she too was not dead, to Steve's immense relief.

When Peter had made it to Wanda's cell, he saw that Pietro had dropped the expression he'd been wearing just minutes before and was looking aggrieved.

Wanda was wearing Tony's helmet, the piece of armor attached to some kind of machine. The Scarlet Witch stayed magnetized to the wall through the helmet, and the machine seemed to be streaming images into it, playing for Wanda to watch.

"I can't get her down," Pietro cried out, but as he turned to him, Peter was already whirling back into the hallway, intent on trying to deprogram the machine and cut the power off on the wall.

Wanda soon fell from the wall, with Pietro catching her in his arms. As soon as the machine shut down, the iron helmet glowed a bright, menacing red and shot off Wanda's head, hitting the far wall and leaving a large dent.

"That man," she hissed with vengeance. "I'm going to kill him."

"All in due time, dear sister," Pietro crooned softly, propping Wanda up on her feet with extreme care. "We have orders to fall back. Until then, we require your assistance." Pietro then turned to Peter, his sneer back in place now that his sister was safe in his arms. "You go back to the Captain, little Spider. Wanda and I will help Mr Banner with his restraints."

Peter didn't have to say anything. Wanda Maximoff was the stuff of nightmares, and Peter wanted to leave, with the way he felt the cold fury coming from her. If anyone was capable of destroying complicated machinery with the flick of the wrist, it was the Scarlet Witch.

They rendezvoused outside Steve's cell, with Wanda carrying a heavily sedated Bruce Banner behind her. She wrapped her mysterious red magic around the two other girls, too, making their bodies float above their heads. She offered to carry Tony as well, but Steve shook his head with a quick jerk and she didn't ask again.

With Steve making the plans and some decent firepower backing them, Peter embraced the lightheadedness that came with the brief respite. When before his confidence shook like a leaf, now he was steadier on his feet, his breaths coming in easier.

"Our priority has changed," Steve told all of them. "We are to get the injured and incapacitated out of the field and back home safely--"

His words were cut off when an ear-splitting explosion resonated throughout the whole base, making the whole fortress shake under their feet.

"What the hell was that?" Clint cursed as he nearly lost his footing, and Peter's head swiveled so fast towards Steve, answering Clint's question without the need for words.

--

Half the fortress had been blasted to bits.

The team saw this as soon as Wanda took to the air and brought the team along with her. They descended on the destruction, multiple pairs of eyes scanning the damage, feet landing on the charred floors of what was once a large lab facility. Peter could tell that it was a laboratory, for the place was littered with all kinds of molten machinery, circuitry sputtering out sparks of electricity, damaged beyond repair, melted remains of glass, and--and bodies, corpses that had been singed beyond recognition.
At the center of the facility stood the second Grape, round and bulbous and undamaged, the pedestal where it was once propped on now a hardening piece of twisted, half-molten metal.

And, a few feet from where it stood--Peter gasped audibly, his heart shattering in an instant--

A few feet from the Grape, the center of the large explosion, where charred streaks fanned out from all directions and the floor cracked and threatened to give way, was Johnny, blond hair a stark contrast against the burned, blackened surroundings.

"N-NO," Peter's voice cracked as he shouted loudly, and he burst into a sprint, not even thinking for a second if the floor could hold his weight, if the soles of his costume could even handle the intense heat left by the blast ...

Johnny lay still, soot covering his face and his hair trembling in the wind, and he wasn't moving, not moving at all, and Peter, he went down on his knees, his face already streaked with tears and scrunched in despair under the flimsy mask. Not Johnny, please not Johnny ...

His hands trembled uncontrollably as they hovered over the prone form, an acute sense of fear gripping at him, clawing at his chest, threatening to burst out and cause him a wave of excruciating pain, and he lay a hand on Johnny's chest, willing the man to be alive, to be alive, please, be alive ...

And ...

And Johnny stirred, his chest rising, and with the small hitch of breath Peter thought that he was going to faint from the tide of relief that consumed him.

Johnny's eyes opened into slits, his forehead creasing, and Peter wanted to shout out, wanted to cry at how thankful he was, how grateful he was that Johnny was breathing.

"Johnny," Peter's voice was soothing, shaking, and soft all at once. "Oh my God, I thought you'd died. What happened?"

Johnny craned his neck slightly, brows going smooth and lax when his eyes met Peter's, and he smiled, the corner's of his lips twitching just so.

"Spidey ..." he breathed out, teeth flashing as he attempted a grin. "'Was ... was in a pinch ... used my powers like ... like you said ..."

Peter gasped out a short burst of laughter in spite of the situation. "You're stupid. So, so stupid ..." He threw himself down onto Johnny, pulling the man into a tight embrace, this time burying his face in the crook of Johnny's neck and taking in his scent, resolving never to take for granted the comfort it brought him.

He never wanted to let go again.

Chapter End Notes

This came in late. I just horribly suck at writing scenes that require a lot of action, and I find myself breezing through most of it. I do hope this is satisfactory, though. Explanations about what happened and what's next for the team will be in the next chapter. I will edit this tomorrow. Again, sorry of this was late. I got busy with life :D
Edit: The next chapter will come Friday (16th) at the latest because I've been busy >
The smell of antiseptic in the well-lit, sterile hallway unsettled Peter. It was almost as unnerving as Sue Storm, who had stood beside him at some point with a severe expression, and had come and gone a few times in the last hour, sometimes without Peter even noticing.

He was wearing his costume still, had been in it for more than a day that it stuck to his skin, feeling dry and scratchy and crusty. He contemplated whether Sue could smell him. *I should take a bath. Change into more comfortable clothes.*

He peered again into a room in the sick bay, gaze penetrating the glass panes and landing on the prone form on the bed. Johnny looked dead as a door knob, and the only indication that he was still alive was the beeping of the heart monitor he was strapped to.

"He hadn't gone nova," Sue had sought to clarify. "He'd only released an incredibly short spurt. It's a lot harder to control than just exploding without thought, so it took a lot out of him. But he should come to before the day ends."

After a few moments, Peter turned on his heel, and looked into another room where another unconscious form lay in a sick bed. Tony had an IV drip stuck in his arm, pumping antibiotics into his system. He looked older than Peter had ever seen him, but his face was smooth and relaxed, giving him an innocent appearance.

Apparently he'd been infected with a more dangerous strain of Tetanus, found only in the Savage Lands.

"He'll be just fine," Sue had assured him. "The mortality rate for this strain is sixty to eighty-five percent, but we have the luxury of state-of-the-art medical advancements and a billionaire's bank account. And luckily for us Friday restored the nanites in his system."

"Lucky," Peter had said, as he tried not to think of the many ways in which the mission could have gone south.

Sue had taken one look at him then and tutted. "Peter," she'd said, and the mention of his name had made him break away from Tony's face. "You haven't eaten anything, hadn't taken a bath--the only time you'd left was when they took you downstairs for a debrief, and we had to forcibly kick you out."

The debriefing had been a tense and exhausting affair where Peter had spent more time defending himself than speaking about the mission. It had been especially draining when the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents had started asking him if he'd felt any desire to kill himself after seeing crispy, burnt corpses littering the enemy encampment. He'd left the small debriefing room feeling more perturbed and worried about the state of his rapidly deteriorating sanity.

Peter had nodded in a daze, but Sue had persisted, placing a hand on his shoulder. He'd still felt as though Sue had 'brainwashing the vigilante' on top of her agenda, and so he'd flinched, but not enough to knock her hand away. "They'll be fine. They're expected to make a speedy recovery by tomorrow. Enough of this wasting away waiting for them to wake up. You should get some rest, clean yourself up a bit. Nick is getting a bit worried."
Nick could get eaten by a T-rex for all I care, Peter had thought resentfully, but finally, after an hour of waiting for the proverbial water to boil, he'd ducked out of the sick bay.

At present, he found himself on Tony's doorstep back upstairs, with Friday letting him in without even confirming his identity. He sighed tiredly as he slipped his mask off, and then stopped near the entrance when he noticed a pair moving in the kitchen.

Wanda Maximoff glanced at his direction and then continued to peel a banana over the marble counter without much emotion.

"Look, brother. The Spider's back," Wanda intoned, finding the banana infinitely more interesting. Pietro, who was bent over and half inside the refrigerator raiding its contents, paused to look up with a twinkle in his eye.

"Hello," Pietro drawled, a smirk that Peter was beginning to think would be a standard expression on the man, forming on his lips. "You're a lot younger than I imagined. I thought you'd be in your twenties. It does explain the height, though. What are you, eighteen?"

Peter stared blankly. "Twenty-three." He cursed at his thoughtlessness. Once again his identity had been revealed to people he never imagined telling the secret to. Too fatigued to mull over the presence of two enhanced agents in the kitchen raiding Tony's groceries, he dragged his feet towards the guest room, fishing for some fresh clothes and a towel before heading to the bathroom for a hot shower.

His muscles came undone under the hot spray. As he waited for the water to wash away all the grime and the skin he'd accumulated, he entertained some of his more persistent thoughts.

Nick had been stone-faced when they'd landed on the Stark Tower helipad with an unregistered jet. Peter had shouted frantically for emergency relief, to which some agents responded, while Steve had taken Nick aside and started an impromptu shouting match in front of all of Nick's subordinates. No one had seen Captain America that livid before, and he had every right to be. Tony had been dying of a serious affliction, and Johnny had killed dozens of people. Half the team had been comatose, while the rest were too tired to provide any further input.

That was the last he'd seen Steve--Peter had kept a vigil in the sick bay ever since, only leaving his post twice, once to call Aunt May and apologize for missing a call, and again to be debriefed.

Johnny had ended up incinerating the mastermind of the operation, a mutant registered in the database as Forge. Research into his history uncovered multiple instances in which he'd operated under the Brotherhood of Mutants. Further recon into his base of operations was still being conducted by S.H.I.E.L.D. agents, along with some of Charles Xavier's pupils. Peter had heard through conversations exchanged between Sue and Clint that the man had built a machine capable of tapping into the Grape's energy reserves, and that he was intending to use it for nefarious purposes. Whether he'd planned to break Magneto out of his imprisonment, or to cause terror as a separate entity, they would never know. The Torch's fire had put a stop to it.

Johnny's actions had been excused as self-defense, and Nick had grudgingly accepted the unexpected turn of events. The man had found some solace in the recovery of the second Grape, and in S.H.I.E.L.D. operatives reporting the capture of some dozen stragglers from the enemy base, henchmen who might hold key information about the whole operation. He would have loved to get his hands on any blueprints pertaining to the Grape machine, but recon had been unsuccessful so far.

His eyes prickled with exhaustion and he couldn't shake the feeling of anxiety making his insides churn. It's over, he kept telling himself, we all came out alive.
Peter washed himself mechanically, and then turned the shower knob, stepping out of the stall and drying himself. Steve hadn't been downstairs like he expected, nor had he visited the team in the sick bay. He could remember Steve's form when he'd found him in the prison cell, hunched over himself, face hidden, trying but failing to make himself as small as dust mote. He'd take the blame for all of this, I just know it. He's that kind of team leader.

When he returned to the living room, the twins were lounging comfortably in the sofa and watching trashy television, knees bumping against each other with how close they were. He'd questioned long ago if it was normal for twins to act so affectionate, and he was once again mulling over the twins' relationship.

"Have you guys seen Cap?" Peter interrupted, stepping into view. He'd forgone the mask altogether—they'd seen his face, and the mask was going to need washing anyway. He ignored how easily they fit in Tony's private space. Tony must be the kind of guy who lets the team do whatever they want in his apartment.

Wanda's eyes never left the screen, her finger twirling a lock of Pietro's platinum hair. "Training room, Spider. He always tries to go through at least five punching bags after each failed mission. His ritual, I reckon. Men and their hormonal need to punch their shortcomings away."

Pietro lifted his gaze distractedly and graced him with a sweet smile. "Sit with us, little Spider. We didn't get your name."

"It's the non-European version of your name," Peter eyed the man with distrust, shifting away. "And I gotta run. Gonna check up on Steve."

Pietro gave a light shrug, eyes dancing with mirth. He seemed to find some enjoyment in sharing a name with Peter.

"We must hang sometime, Peter," he said, tone as nonchalant as when Peter had first met him.

Wanda glanced at him once, a silent, considering gaze that promised fire and brimstone, and he stepped out of the room before the woman became any more territorial with her brother.

Well that was freaky, he thought, trying to shake off the goosebumps forming on his skin.

As he went down using the elevators, a thought occurred to him. Wanda had called the Savage Lands trip a failed mission. Peter couldn't see how that was the case exactly, seeing as the main culprit had been put down and the second Grape was safe under lock and key, though he supposed he was looking at it from a different perspective. It would look like they failed, and Johnny and I had to save their hides.

Peter had no clue how the team handled missions that had gone badly, but as he turned the last corner towards the training wing, he wondered if he should even know.

The first thing that tipped Peter off that something was amiss was the empty practice room. Agents always littered the place during all hours of the day, and the lack of idle chatter and the sounds of bodies hitting the mats were disconcerting.

The second thing was Steve. His fists were the only sound Peter could hear, echoing across the room as they hit a punching bag with sharp, blunt thuds. Steve's perspiration had made his shirt stick to his back. He'd never seen the Captain break in sweat before, and it was entirely unusual, but oddly captivating at the same time. His tight shoulders moved with each breath he took, but he was light on his feet, and his movements were quick and agile. His face, however, was different. Despite all the
exertion, he was pallid, and there were dark shadows under his eyes. If Peter had to guess, Steve hadn't slept at all since being captured.

It was inconceivable that his Spider senses would kick up while alone in a room with Steve. He wasn't quite sure how to approach, and the two punching bags that had been thrown across the room, ripped apart and gutted of its dirty rag innards, made him hesitate instinctively.

A chill ran up Peter's spine when Steve stopped, fists retracting, and glanced at him once, blue eyes hollow and dull. Peter was caught between smiling and frowning in worry, his face contorting into something that was altogether not the best way to greet someone who seemed to be having a personal moment.

"Three more bags, I think," Peter said after a pregnant pause, and Steve didn't respond, assumed his stance yet again, and began to swipe at the bag with the same amount of force as before. Peter pulled away into some corner of the room where a bench was tucked, and he sat there, watching as Steve tried to deal with his inner frustrations. *I should say something. Anything.*

In the end, it was Steve who muttered something under his breath, low and almost unintelligible, but Peter's ears had been perked for a while, and his heightened senses picked up on the words.

"He almost died," Steve said, hands coming up to cushion the bag on recoil. His head dropped down and analyzed the bottom of the cylindrical bag where the seams had split and rags were dangling out, his brows drawn together miserably. "He was in the cell next to mine and he was dying, and I didn't know, couldn't do anything."

Steve hadn't gone for a debrief, Peter realized, feeling anguished and then oddly glad at the thought. *It's a good thing. It could have gone terribly wrong.* He imagined one of the bags on the floor being a mangled mess of a body that used to be an agent. It was a distressing thought. Steve was not himself. He wondered if the public ever got to see this side of the great Captain America, without the pomp and propaganda, just a man trying and failing and feeling wretched in the process.

Peter didn't know exactly what happened. Clint had said something about magnets and Tony being held hostage and dangerous native spores during the jet ride home. Whatever it was, it hit Steve hard, because Tony had been the one to suffer under his flawed leadership. Or so, he thought. *It's not his fault. Why does he always have to shoulder everything? Doesn't anyone even try to take the reins from him just for a little while?*

Steve punched a fourth bag relentlessly, and Peter thought about the many times the man had had to fend off Tony and his attempts at leading the team out in the field. It made tons of sense, then. Tony was the one who made his flaws something of a strength, but Tony had been jeopardized, and suddenly the gears didn't fit and the mechanism fell apart.

The fourth bag rattled noisily against its chains and burst into a confetti of rags. Steve's fist, unbound and exposed, were purple and starting to bleed. Peter held himself back, sitting at the edge of his seat, and tried to even his breathing. *Just one more. I'll give him one more.*

There was a pain in his chest that wouldn't go away, similar to the feeling of setting his eyes on Johnny, lifeless in the middle of a blast zone or Tony in a sick bed strapped to a million machines. Steve was hurting himself as punishment, as if he could have helped what had happened. *Was he always like this?* The comic books and the special features on National Geographic never mentioned the downside to being a super soldier. It was somewhat haunting to mull about. The ugly side of being enhanced. He had firsthand experience, New York being a microcosm to Captain's America, but it wasn't the same, not really, and seeing someone else go through it, someone whom he'd realized he cared for more than he ever thought, made him understand why Aunt May and MJ ever
gave him those pitying looks.

Peter was watching something intimate and secret, something that the many people who were in love with the idea of Captain America would have died to see and would have been devastated to behold. It didn't make him feel any better, but seeing Steve be human in front of him, allowing him to see this side of him, reassured him a little. He could help Steve this way, and this way he'd have seen this, and no one else would have. Everybody knew, but they stayed away. Nobody had to see but him.

Steve burst through the final bag, breaths heavy and laden with exhaustion. Peter shot to his feet at once and approached him, forgoing hesitation and self-reservation and anything else telling him to stop. Steve watched him, eyes unfocused, as Peter took his hands. They were shot with dark blue blots and were oozing blood in places. The serum inside would heal him, but it still looked awfully painful.

"That's enough," Peter said, more as a command than a plea. Wordlessly, he tugged at Steve's wrist, and the man didn't protest as he was led out of the training facilities. Steve's energy was gone. He moved sluggishly and Peter walked slowly, never letting go of the man behind him. Their destination was Steve's room, where Peter planned to dress his wounds, shove him into a shower stall, and try to convince him to rest.

Steve watched him the whole time, zombie-like and unresponsive to any stimulus but Peter's.

Peter wasn't the motherly type. There were many countless instances where he was the one who forgot to take care of himself, and many people had been around him, picking up after him and making sure he was alright. Steve had been one of them, and at that moment he wanted to repay the favor.

Once in the man's room, Peter stripped Steve of his shirt--the material peeling off of the man's body like a skin-tight body suit--and then chucked it at a nearby hamper, before pulling the man into the adjoining bathroom and urging him softly to wash himself. Steve nodded once, turning his back away, and Peter stepped out of the room just as Steve began pushing down at his training pants.

It was a long, silent wait as he heard the shower in the bathroom start to spray. Peter busied himself by trying to determine if Steve had purposefully made his room as nondescript and bland as possible, or if he just hadn't had the time to personalize. Either way, Peter still believed that Steve looked much better in Tony's guest room, because that room was ridiculous and funny and it matched Steve's personality.

He recalled for a moment the conversation they had at the time. Steve had confided in him that he had a thing for Tony once. Recent events had led Peter to believe that 'once' hadn't quite dissipated. It was clear as day that Steve still adored Tony very much. Peter actually found himself feeling a little jealous. He supposed that it would take someone like Tony's level to catch the eye of one such as Steve. Both great men, both deeper than they seemed to be. Both capable of looking at each other past all the layers and somehow finding a way to fit together.

And yet, why weren't they together? Why did everything have to be so convoluted? Why did Tony have to kiss him, and why did he have to sleep with Johnny?

Peter found himself nodding off, mental faculties all but spent. He had so many questions, but those were for another day.

When Steve came out of the shower, steam billowing, towel around his waist and little else, Peter shook himself upright and blinked at Steve. He looked a little better, blond hair damp and falling in his eyes, shoulders a bit less tight. Peter asked for a first aid kit, but Steve said he didn't have one.
"I don't need it," Steve said. "I heal fast." His knuckles were still an angry puce color, but Steve's fingers were moving okay, and there was no indication of pain on the man's face.

Peter nodded tightly, and then pulled the man to the bed. Steve obliged him, eyes halfway shuttered, taking the towel off and throwing it on a nearby chair. He wore boxers underneath, presumably his choice of sleepwear, and Peter tried not to think of how Steve looked absolutely stunning in nothing but the flimsy cloth, seeing as they were both completely drained and Steve's appearance was neither here nor there.

"Please sleep," Peter urged, shifting aside and allowing the man to crawl into position. Steve's head hit the pillow with a fluffy sound, and he stared up at Peter, eyes already losing the fight against slumber.

Peter carded his fingers once through Steve's hair--a reassuring gesture Aunt May did that really worked--and then let his hand drop. He put his feet out of the bed and made to stand--he was planning on sleeping in the guest room upstairs--when Steve caught his wrist in a grip and tugged back.

Peter glanced at the man, expression tired yet curious.

"Stay," Steve murmured against the pillow, his pupils trembling just so beneath his lashes as they locked on Peter's face. At that moment, Peter needed little convincing. He breathed out, throwing his plans away, and kicked off his shoes. Despite the colorless sheets, the bed felt cool and soft as Peter lay down, though a dumpster would have offered the same comfort with the way his whole body ached to shut off. Steve was a warm and heavy presence beside him, and he turned to look, head falling to the side because his worries hadn't really gone away, simmering in the surface and anxiously waiting to come to a boil again.

Steve looked slightly less miserable, the planes of his face smoothing out in an effort to relax. His eyes remained on Peter's, still lethargic but searching.

Unable to help himself, Peter brought his hand up again to comb through Steve's hair. It felt thick and moist in his fingers, and the small breath of contentment out of the slightly parted lips made him thank Aunt May in the back of his head.

Moments later, Steve's hand found itself winding up the sheets, taking Peter's busy wrist. Peter blinked blearily, eyes widening only slightly when Steve put the knuckles to his lips. The press of skin was soft, grazing lightly against his fingers. Peter's heart sped at the small gesture.

"Thank you," Steve said against his fingers, eyes fluttering shut. Peter let his hand go limp, one finger brushing lightly against Steve's chin.

The man didn't let go of him as he succumbed to exhaustion. Peter soon fell asleep too, with the image of Steve's peaceful expression floating in his mind, carrying into his dreams.

Chapter End Notes

Short chapter. This would have been longer, but it would take until Friday to be posted. I'll probably post another chapter over the weekend.
Edit: Or not lol I'm sicj with another flu. I'll write when the horrible coughing stops.
This chapter has been long overdue. I said a lot of excuses, but this had been sitting in my drafts and truthfully I was just being lazy. But I promise that I did have the flu and it put me off typing for a while, and whenever I get hit by anything that has to do with my respiratory system I just take twice to recover (it's been like this since I was a kid). So I apologize, and I give to you this chapter.

Peter woke up with a warm conviction that everything was right in the world. Pillars of late autumn sunlight cut across the room, he wasn't cold or tired anymore, and best of all, Steve was there--

Steve--

There was a short, sleep-lagged pause in his brain as it slowly restarted.

Steve was there. And wasn't Steve a sight to behold, draped over Peter like a pile of quilts, purring like some great big cat? Peter stared, craning his neck back far enough to see Steve's face framed by a mess of blond hair. His light snores tickled the skin under Peter's ear, each exhale brushing against Peter's neck and making him shiver.

If Peter wasn't gay, it would caused him acute heterosexual alarm waking up to all these half-naked men seeking warmth and touch. But as it stood, Steve's thigh rubbed against Peter's, his kneecap promising, with the slightest movement, uncomfortable pain or sweet, hot friction as it teased dangerously against the underside of Peter's precious balls.

"Steve," Peter said, voice groggy. He pushed gently at the other man's shoulder. "Time to get up. Steve. Stevey."

The blond stirred a little, stimulated by the voice, but made no move to open his eyes or peel himself away. "Five more minutes, Tony," came his bleary mumble.

Peter smiled fondly. No matter what he had between himself and Tony, he still found Steve's deep and underlying affection for Tony very endearing.

"Wrong person, Cap," Peter snickered, eyes shining with amusement, and Steve blinked awake then, eyelids fluttering open. His eyes searched for a moment, confused, and then steadily grew wider with comprehension.

"Peter." Steve blinked at him a few times, an expression of wonder in his face. "Oh. I ... I forgot about last night." He slipped away from Peter's skin, limbs catching in the fabric of Peter's clothes, and let his head roll properly onto his pillow, his eyes never leaving Peter's face.

"You good? Did you sleep well?" Peter asked gently. Steve looked different in the morning. More innocent and less troubled by everything. Natural, he thought, more beautiful.

"I'm ... a little disoriented." Steve proved as much by narrowing and widening his eyes. "But yes. I think I'm well enough."
Steve reached up and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, the light purple blots around the base of his fingers catching Peter's attention. Peter made a grab for them, eliciting a look from the other man. Peter eyed the healing injury with resignation and plain concern.

"Don't do that again," Peter urged in a whisper, knitting his eyebrows at Steve's knuckles. "It sucks watching you hurt yourself. Nevermind that you lay waste to the overpopulated punching bags threatening to upset the balance of the ecosystem. You need a better outlet."

Steve observed him calmly, examining his face. "No one really stays to watch me whenever I ... get like that."

Peter snorted. "Scary, unbridled rage aside, they're missing out. You were kind of ... really intense. Like, like attractive intense."

Steve's breath hitched a tiny bit at this, and Peter's eyes widened as they met Steve's. He didn't mean to say it like that, but the mention of the previous night made him think back to it, how Steve had looked, with his tightly coiled back muscles through the thin shirt, hair sticking to his sweaty temples, expression dark and captivating.

It wasn't everyday that Peter got a good look at those blue eyes, so much lighter and almost silver in comparison to Johnny's tiny summer oceans. When Johnny was blistering and blinding as sunlight, Steve was cooler, more muted. *Makes me wonder if all blonds go from vibrant to distinguished as they age.*

Peter noticed a few seconds later that he was lost and staring, and Steve had been answering his look for gaze. His neck felt hot, and he dropped his eyes quickly.

"You think I'm attractive?"

Peter started, eyes snapping back to Steve and then casting them away in intense embarrassment when he found a tiny hint of curiosity in the other's questioning gaze.

"I mean, well, you know," he sputtered intelligently. *Everyone's a little in love with Captain America,* he wanted to say, but then he didn't want to be like everyone. None of them got to see the different side to Steve, the side that had loved and lost, and had tried to move on and failed, the side that ached to help people outside of the costume and the enhancements through counseling and therapy, the side that carried too much weight on his shoulders.

Steve seemed to be considering his words deeply, his face etched with emotions Peter couldn't quite understand, but before he could further decipher them, Steve rolled off of bed.

"We should head up and get some breakfast,' Steve said, his tone showing no indication of what he was thinking. Peter frowned slightly, feeling, to his surprise, a tiny bit dejected that Steve hadn't so much as expressed any interest. *Of course he wouldn't, you idiot. He still likes Tony. And you ... you like Tony. And Johnny. And ... and Steve? No. Yes. Maybe.*

"Good idea." Peter answered, keeping his tone light, because it was still a good day, and he wasn't cold and tired, and Steve was still there.

--

"Yes! An arcade theme. Brilliant. Nothing too complicated since Hide The Pain Harold over there might get an aneurysm."

Tony threw a Cheshire grin at Steve when he arrived with Peter, looking happier than he'd ever
looked. Peter was shocked silent—Tony had a small gathering of people in his living room, and he was on his feet, gesturing wildly, as though he wasn't in the hospital the day before, dying of a fatal infection.

A few of them turned their heads, and it didn't take long for Peter to figure out that it was the team. Natasha raised an eyebrow at their arrival, no doubt curious as to why they'd entered together, and Janet tilted his head to the side, too, directing a pointed, questioning gaze at Steve that promised a private conversation later. The twins were at the edge of the couch, with Wanda's feet dangling off the armrest and her head on Pietro's lap. Pietro's smile grew as they locked in on Peter, and it was the only time that Wanda's face left the tiny Stark phone in her hand, her dark eyes settling on Peter for a brief, tense moment before turning back to whatever she was watching.

Johnny was there, perking up at their arrival. He seemed a little out of place, sitting in between Clint, who threw the blond mildly annoyed looks on occasion, and Bruce, who kept fiddling with his glasses, looking unsure about how to react to Tony's enthusiasm. Hank was not present, leaving Peter to question for the first time where the man had been the whole week.

"We still need a vote on whether to put newer machines in the game room or not," Tony continued after the brief pause, and Clint launched into an argument immediately with Bruce. Bruce wanted to keep to the classics: Donkey Kong, Frogger, Pacman, the like, while Clint countered that those were too boring and elected for some more 90s arcade games, like NBA Jam and Contra and Mortal Kombat. Tony entertained them patiently, an amused smirk playing on his lips, while the rest looked on with varying degrees of interest.

"I'll get some food," Steve sighed, his face shifting into worry, leaving Peter's side and heading straight to the kitchen, but not before asking Peter if he wanted some.

"Yeah, just. Get me whatever. Thanks," he said distractedly, still staring at Tony who was playing judge to the two quarreling, grown-up men. He subsided next to Janet, who looked like she wanted to bust out and ask him some rapid-fire questions but was holding herself back from doing so.

"What's all this about?" he muttered to her, slightly perturbed. It was odd, seeing all of them together (minus Thor who still hadn't come back from whatever mission Nick had sent him to, and Hank who really didn't have much presence in the team and, really, he had to ask someone at some point about that).

"Thanksgiving," Janet said, and was just about to explain further when a ghost of a breath tickled his ear.

"Little Spider," Pietro droned, smiling sweetly. "Haven't we told you before that everyone here has different ways of dealing with failure?"

Peter's shoulder blades dug back into the couch, his arm pressing against Janet's as he pulled away from Pietro, who had appeared out of nowhere and was balanced on the armrest next to him.

"What do you mean?" Peter twitched doubtfully. Pietro was being too friendly and Peter didn't even want to look towards the other end of the couch from which he was sure Wanda was planning his disappearance.

Pietro inclined his head towards the exuberant billionaire who had one foot up on the seat of the lone recliner, slouching on the armrest and grinning roguishly as Johnny tried to support the bristling marksman next to him by saying Street Fighter was much more interesting that a frog trying to cross a road.
"The Captain likes to physically injure himself, whereas Stark likes to indulge himself by throwing rancorous parties. He celebrates now, so to speak, because he's come out of a mission alive. I'm willing to bet he's got Christmas and New Year's planned in his head as well." The annoying glint was in his eyes again, and it made Peter shiver. That, or Wanda was using chaos magic on his spine as they spoke.

"Thanksgiving," Janet restarted, rolling his eyes at Pietro, "is this Thursday, also coincidentally Thor's arrival from his inter-dimensional travels. The alliterative possibilities alone kick-started Tony's slightly manic tendencies. He's sent invitations out to everyone."

Tony caught his eye, shining with mischief, pulling his phone out of his pocket briefly and gesturing to it. Peter's phone was upstairs, in the guest room, so he couldn't check right away, but he had an inkling of what he might find there. If Tony had sent invitations to everyone, then he wouldn't have spared Aunt May, and maybe even Mary Jane and Kitty.

The argument for the theme flared to life again when Natasha suggested that they should have the best of both worlds and just cram as many machines into the grossly large game room as possible. Though Clint and Bruce protested, Tony seemed to approve, asking for a list of games. It then turned into a match between the two men as to who could list out the most arcade games, and Tony threw Peter an apologetic smile, mouthing 'let's talk later' under his breath. Peter was shot with a fresh dose of skittishness at conversing alone with Tony, his thoughts flitting briefly to Antarctica, and the kiss that made his thoughts go off the rails and his toes tingle.

Johnny caught the small exchange and drew his eyebrows together, and Peter felt a rush of guilt the next second.

And then Steve came back, eyeing him carefully as he offered him a plate of breakfast, and Peter took all the attention as cue for him to check his messages.

"Thanks," he squeaked at the man, before taking the plate close to his chest and then slipping out of the couch to retreat upstairs.

--

"Take a pinch of your hair then, and tell me where the tip ends up."

Peter did as instructed with the air of a child being forced to do the dishes, rolling onto his belly on the bed and going cross-eyed as he took a few strands of his hair between his fingers and pulled them all the way down his face.

"It's trailing behind me on the floor, Aunt May--I think I've ensnared a few agents on my way back here," he sighed impatiently through the phone. "It's up to the tip of my nose, it's not that long."

Aunt May had redoubled her efforts to interrogate Peter about his current living situation and how he was taking care of himself, trying, and failing at not being such a busybody. It had started out as a call to confirm if Tony had indeed sent her an email (Peter had found his own personal email to be too risque that he had to make sure Tony wasn't as callous when it came to her invitation), and veered off topic entirely when his aunt started burning through questions with a critical tone.

Aunt May clucked at him through the phone. "Too long. You do something about that. And if you're going to a social function, at least try not to look like a forty-year old clerk. That means clothes, Peter. You've got to buy yourself more clothes."

"My wardrobe is great! What're you talking about? And in case you forgot, you're a forty-something
year old clerk."

He heard her snort loudly. "Yes, but I try to look like a thirty-year old stock broker. Just--you're on a payroll now, Peter. A grossly large payroll, with benefits."

Peter's tone took on a suspicious and petulant hiss. "How would you know how much I earn?"

"You give me most of it and spend almost nothing for yourself? Also, it's the Captain who let it slip," she said with a self-satisfied voice.

"Steve?" Peter's head snapped up. "You're talking to Steve?"

"Well, who else am I going to hear from? He's your therapist. I've got a list, see, of the eight things you often say when you call me. They're mostly along the lines of, 'I'm fine, I love you', 'I hate doing laundry', and 'please don't touch my room it's still mine'. It's not a lot to work with, Peter, and talking--"

"--gossiping--"

"--with Mr Rogers eases this poor old bird's heart. I worry for you, dear, and he's just so polite. And your boss--despicable as he is--sent me an invitation. I'd be stupid if I passed on this opportunity to get to know your friends."

"How did this talking to Steve thing even happen? And what about Johnny? Human Torch? You met him, too. He's here, too. Why don't you talk to him?"

"Oh, the boy who was naked in your bed one day and dating your boss the next? He reminds me of that jock who used to push you around in school. What was his name? Dash?"

Suffice to say Aunt May hadn't taken the 'dating' news well, false though it was.

"Flash, Aunt May. And that's not fair, Johnny's not like that." Flash sneered at everyone and was so insecure about everything that it clogged his anus and made the shit spill out of his mouth. While Johnny, he buoyed a room with his smile, and carried himself with a slightly modest, self-deprecating air when the public wasn't looking. Johnny's boisterous attitude was all pretense to fool the media into thinking he wasn't a sensitive, perceptive person, which he so was. "And they're not dating. Those were just the paps being di--dill pickles."

"If that's what you believe, Peter," Aunt May sounded very judgmental, though she did try not to sound like she was. "But you know, Captain America's looking really strong on TV lately--"

Peter fervently wished to whittle into dust right then. "Just tell me if you're really going so I can, like, prep everyone."

Her laughter at least assured him that she wasn't feeling so alone without him around. "I'll call you once I've made arrangements with Jonah, alright? I love you."

"You too, Aunt May." And she ended the call, after which Peter lay on the bed for a while, contemplating his options.

He was terminally ill when it came to clothes selection, or finding a hairstyle, or doing anything related to preening and looking good, really. He'd ask Tony for help, but he didn't want to spend time with the man just yet--the both of them would be too distracted to accomplish anything (though he imagined Tony would be delighted to spoil him, since Peter had found out he was the indulgent type). He could ask Steve, but Steve went to barbershops for ten-dollar haircuts and owned a
wardrobe that was steadfastly brown and green and reminiscent of the army. He didn't know the others well enough, and he didn't want to ask a girl to come along (God knows they'd take ages to finish) which left only one other person.

--

"Wear that," Johnny said, handing him a charcoal sweater as his other hand moved deftly through the rest of the clothes rack. "It's perfect. Makes you look a touch suicidal but also classic."

"You have a very weird definition of 'perfect'," Peter muttered, though he did see how it'd match the collared shirt he'd already been asked to wear as a base. "Do I put it on now or--"

Johnny shoved two more identical sweaters his way. "That one's dark gray, I think, while the other's quicksilver. We have to see you in them to decide."

The saleslady assigned to them looked on with interest, though she stood straight and pretended to be disdainfully professional. Peter had already seen her whispering urgently to another lady, the two eyeing Johnny with thinly veiled admiration and him with narrowed suspicion.

Peter struggled into one of the sweaters, throwing the two others onto the plush, round seat in the center of the clothing section where the rest of his purchases sat. He hadn't imagined that Johnny would take his role so seriously, to the point that he would be fussy with material and colors that looked pretty much the same to Peter, though he supposed that he'd made the right choice. Every single item of clothing Johnny had picked had looked good, and not only that, the clothes hung off of him and made him look a hundred times better than before. I don't look like a poor man anymore. It's a momentous occasion for sure, but Johnny's too tense and we can't even talk without him clamping up or restraining himself. I have to ask what's going on.

"What do you think?" Peter asked helplessly, gesturing to the clothes and smiling bashfully, but Johnny glanced at him for max two seconds and then went back to tearing through the racks.

"Looks great," Johnny said tonelessly, "but don't pick that one. I was right the first time. The charcoal one."

Three days. He hadn't seen Johnny smile since the trip three days ago, when he'd tugged his lips up right before he lost consciousness, drained from exploding and taking their foes down. Johnny had spent the following days in contemplative silence, bestowing only faint ghosts of a smile on anyone who approached and tried to talk to him. He hadn't even tried with Peter, and it was slowly driving him mad.

Peter could get used to it. There was no use feeling moody about it. None whatsoever.

Peter scowled at his reflection and glanced back to find Johnny offering the saleslady a tentative smile as he asked where they could find stylish vests. The woman simpered, guiding Johnny enthusiastically towards the other side of the store.

Peter endured another half hour of picking out clothes that looked pretty and wearing them in exchange for a few half-hearted responses. With his arms so bursting with paper bags that Johnny took it upon himself to carry some of them, they left the last store, their next destination being the hair salon. Johnny kept his distance, and after eight minutes of cold silence Peter stopped walking and closed his eyes.

"Hey," he blurted out suddenly. "Let's go to the arcade."

Johnny froze mid-step and turned slowly, his eyes looking back and fixing warily on Peter's face.
"What?"

Peter fumbled for the right words to say, juggling the bags and almost dropping some of them. "I mean--yeah. The arcade. The party's tomorrow. Maybe we could uh, get some practice? Show everyone up? I heard there's gonna be a prize for the most game tickets earned."

It was a pathetic effort, and he could hear himself sounding a tad bit desperate, but he just wanted Johnny to be the same again, laughing and joking and being infectiously warm.

"Your haircut," Johnny said, shuffling uncomfortably. "The hair place is just a few blocks from here."

Peter could see the man faltering a little bit, and he felt encouraged because of it, so he breathed in this time, settling into a more natural grin. "Forget it! I'll get it early tomorrow. And I'm tired from shoving myself into clothes all afternoon. I want to have some fun!"

Johnny raised an eyebrow, gaze trailing after Peter as he walked past and changed courses.

"I thought you didn't like the idea that much."

"You did? Huh," Peter hummed in consideration, slightly buoyed now that Johnny was showing some interest. "Were you listening in when Tony and I were talking about the cost of the operation?"

Johnny fell into step with him and ducked his head. "Maybe? But if it helps, I get it now, why you were so anal about it. I guess ... it was more of you not liking the idea of someone spending so much money? I mean, I had to talk you into buying those five pairs of jeans."

Peter still cringed at the idea of owning more than two pairs of jeans that looked the same. "They're jeans. Why would anyone need more than two pairs? You wear one that looks good in the day and one that looks cool at night and you're set. There's no argument here for you, Johnny. My logic is sound."

To his surprise, Johnny let out a tiny snort. His eyes flicked back to Johnny's face, and they didn't look as shuttered as before, his blue eyes shining slightly. "It's called being sanitary. No one in their right mind would own just two pairs. How are they supposed to last through the week?"

"I've lasted through a month with just one," Peter announced proudly, grinning at Johnny as he grimaced.

"It's a miracle you have any friends. I should start calling you Peter McCrustyPants."

Peter shrugged, not bothered by the weak insult. *Flash could do better. And he's not Flash. Not at all.*

"Go ahead," he smiled cheekily. "I can go to the court right now and have my name changed without regrets."

Johnny's lips turned at the edges, and Peter knew he was halfway there. "You know they have Brawl in arcades nowadays. I checked. I don't suppose you'd like your ass handed to you by Princess Peach?"

--

"No, no--no! Don't--dude--"
"Ha!"

"Peach literally just sat on Snake's face."

"That's how they roll in the Mushroom Kingdom, bitch."

"That's ratchet, Peach is ratch--"

"You're losing--"

"Nah, I'll come back--"

"Stop! Hey, heyheyhey--"

"Ha!"

"Oh fuck you I hung on--"

"Take this, motherfucker--"

"Snake has anger issues."

"Yeah, boyyyy--"

"He's straight up beating on a princess--"

"Sucks to be you right now--no--oh fuck."

"Ha ha, heh heh heh--"

"Not fair--"

"HA HA--"

"Not FAIR--"

"Budge over, Snake--fall off, fall off, fallofffalofffaloff--"

"Peach is so ratch--"

"Eat this--eat this radish. Take it in your face--dude your grenades--haha--"

"Gonna spam you to death--"

"Lame. laaame, Johnnyboy--"

"HA HA HA."

"For fuck's--"

"YES--"

"Rematch!"

"YESSS, I owned your ass, boy. Peach is mine--"

"That's gross. You are gross."
"Your pants are gross."

"Rematch, now. Goddammit I almost had it."

"K k, whatever. Sit on my face again."

"I'm changing characters. Peach sucks balls."

"Peach is a prissy little darling--"

"Don't--"

"Just like you--"

"Alright. Playtime's over. You're dead. I'm sticking with the Princess. She'll choke you with her ass cheeks, bitch."

If the kids thought that two grown men with shopping bags cursing like sailors in an arcade were weird, they didn't complain. Peter didn't care about the looks they sent their way anyway. He was having fun for once. He'd fallen back so smoothly into a comfortable place with Johnny, and the man had been so eager to indulge him that Peter's cheeks hurt from grinning so much. Johnny was smiling, too, his friendly expression occurring so naturally on his face that Peter took pleasure in just basking in it. His eyes took on a fond glow that made Peter's skin heat and go red, the feeling so tender and pleasant and nice that he'd forgotten the feeling of Johnny being less vibrant just hours prior.

They decided to get drinks at the park when the sun started to set. Out of the corner of his eye, Johnny sipped at his fruit tea, tapping his foot on the pavement, while Peter munched on a crepe as he leaned back on the bench they were on.

"So," Peter began, deciding to attempt to touch the subject of Johnny's earlier behavior. "Back then when we were shopping ..."

Johnny gave him a considering look, eyebrows lifting, but he didn't say anything. Peter pressed on.

"Any idea what that was about?"

Johnny turned his cup around and around, the straw of his drink caught in his teeth. He seemed to be debating whether to answer or not. Peter eyed him patiently, though he didn't really expect much. He didn't think he deserved an explanation. Johnny didn't have to smile at him all the time. But he did want to find out, still.

After a moment, Johnny sat up fast, as if he was uncoiling to burst into a sprint, and then sat back down again, drawing his eyebrows together. Peter edged away, startled. In the end, Johnny shook his head, crinkling his nose.

"It's nothing," he said. "It's ... you know, one of those stupid, embarrassing things."

Peter knocked his elbow against the blond. "Come on. You can tell me anything."

Johnny turned his head and looked at him intensely. Peter felt himself go red at the scrutiny, dropping his gaze and shoving the last of the crepe in his mouth.

"It's one of those things," Johnny sighed, leaning back and letting his hair fall behind him as he
craned his neck to look at the sky. "One of those things you expect someone to do, but they don't do it. And you're kind of sad about it, but you really shouldn't be expecting anything in the first place, because it's all in your head."

Peter chanced a glance, and saw Johnny looking far-off into the distance. It was the kind of vague hinting that could only refer to him and only him.

"It's something I didn't do," Peter said, not asking, but stating, because he had a feeling that Johnny was somewhat disappointed, and sounding unsure about it might make him angry. Johnny tensed for a bit, and then let go of his stiff shoulders and tried to pass it off as a shrug.

"I'm not ... like, asking anything from you," Johnny's voice dropped to a mutter, and his eyebrows drew together again. "I mean, I don't really have a right, do I? But I'd expected--because, you know, you're you, and you like helping people, that you'd ... you know, come and visit. I mean, I know you heard about it. The Antarctica thing. And I know you went to the sick bay when I was there. But I also know you went there because Tony had that Tetanus thing, and that's fine. I'm not about to stop you from seeing him. But I kind of ..."

Johnny blew out a breath that weighed like iron. "I kind of wished you went for me."

"I did--" Peter began, but Johnny shook his head.

"I kind of wish that you did what you did for Steve for me. I ..." he dropped his chin and stared hard at his drink. "I heard that you helped him out and stuff, dealing with the aftermath. We didn't come out in one piece after that mission. And I needed ... wanted, and Tony got you, and Steve got you, and I felt ..." he tossed his head hard in an effort to restrain his words. "But like I said, I couldn't just outright ask for it. I'm not demanding or anything ..."

"Johnny ..." Peter sighed heavily. "If you wanted to talk, you could have asked."

"I know," Johnny sounded almost hurt. "But they didn't have to ask, did they?"

If only he knew how much I'd worried. I was there. We went there together. And I know that he took it hard, what he'd done, and he's just being stubborn about being strong, but he could have gone to me if he wanted to talk. If only he knew that I had been there the whole time, behind the mask, he'd know that I know what he went through ...

Peter pulled his legs up on the bench and turned to face Johnny. "I have to tell you something. Something important. But I'm going to need time before I can. Until then, you can talk to me now. Tell me everything."

Soon. I have to tell him about the mask soon. He can't be in the dark forever, not when ... not when he's become important to me ...

Johnny's eyes widened at him, looking lost and hopeful and scared to take up the offer, but Peter laid a hand on his thigh, coaxing, comforting.

Johnny's fists tightened, and his shoulder sagged, his head falling to stare at his lap. He then began to speak, about the explosion he'd caused, about the terror he'd felt when they'd cornered him and took him to Forge. Peter scooted closer, training his ears to listen, his eyes growing fearful. Johnny spoke about making the choices he'd made, and thinking about the lives of the people around him at the time, how he'd considered putting his hands up in surrender and going the pacifist route. But he hadn't known what had happened to Spidey, hadn't had a clue if the whole operation was relying on him to succeed or not, and Forge was planning to kill him, had uttered it, made an entire monologue
about him being a test subject for the death ray he'd made with the Grape, and Johnny had had no choice but to explode.

"It was us or them," Johnny murmured, closing his eyes, and Peter felt a tug at his sternum. "And I didn't want to make the choice. I would have spared them if I could. I'm not ... I'm not a killer, but they had guns on me, and I didn't know if they--the team, Spidey--if they were all safe, or if surrendering meant dooming us all, so I ..."

Peter reached out and snaked his arm around Johnny's neck, and Johnny leaned in, falling without any reluctance and filling the gap between them, fitting against Peter and shoving his nose against Peter's shoulder. Peter chest tightened as he wrapped his other arm around the man's arm around the man's waist, the fingers he had on Johnny's hair smoothing down the back of Johnny's neck again and again.

"I thought you talked to the agents for a debrief," he said gently, reproachfully against Johnny's ear. "I should've known you had a lot to deal with."

"You wouldn't have known. I told them I was fine," he whispered, voice vibrating against Peter's shoulder, and then added, with a mirthless laugh: "and they kind of suck at their job."

"They do," Peter answered, and then added, awkwardly because he might've slipped: "or so I've heard."

Maybe it was the dropping temperature, or maybe the proximity between them. Peter couldn't tell, but he was warmer than he'd ever felt compared to all the times he'd been with Johnny, and Johnny didn't let go for a long while, feeling gentle and solid and right against him, that when Johnny had finally tried pulling back, turning his head a little to the side to catch a glimpse of him, Peter met it head on, his eyes fluttering shut, not really thinking but just going on instinct.

When their lips touched, it filled Peter with the sensation of floating. Johnny's lips were warm and pliant and unexpectedly patient against his, moving slowly, as if he was taking care not to scare Peter off or take too much, and it felt ... marvelous. Just marvelous. Peter almost forgot to breathe, his lips moving cautiously in response and his arms tightening around Johnny's neck and waist. Johnny was responding, his hand coming up to cup one side of Peter's chin to keep him there, locked against his lips as they moved, the other hand slowly closing in on the fabric of Peter's shirt.

I wanted this. For so long, he thought idly, distantly, and Johnny deepened the kiss, and he realized, when the breath was abruptly taken away from him, that Johnny had wanted it, too. Maybe even more.

Their chests rose together, and pressed even closer that the fabric of their shirts scratched, and Johnny started taking more, angling his head and dipping forwards to meet his kiss with more push, more movement, and Peter felt electrified, because Johnny was kissing him. Moving his lips so languidly. Tasting him, and he was doing a damn good job of it. He tasted like tea and sunlight and warm drops of honey. Amazing, God, he's amazing ...

When Johnny pulled back, breaking the kiss, his top lip grazing the bottom of Peter's, the heat of it lingering, their foreheads stayed together, and they opened their eyes slowly, at once. Johnny's were so shockingly blue against the twilight and shining with so much adoration, that Peter's heart threatened to leap out of his chest.

"Damn," Johnny said, a smile blossoming on his swollen lips. Peter breathed out a quiet laugh, and he smiled, too.
"Wow," he whispered, at a loss for more descriptive words and feeling lightheaded, and then--

And then, for a moment, his mind went to Tony, and how he didn't even have a proper chance to kiss him because of the circumstances surrounding them, and how ... how he'd been so close to kissing Steve in the man's bed two days ago, and it was suddenly, suddenly bittersweet.

Sweet, but bitter.

Because he wanted Johnny so badly that his skin ached for more.

But he didn't want to let the other two go.

He closed his eyes, and Johnny took it as a sign of blissful contentment. But in Peter's head, he was cursing himself, because he was insane, and he was so, so selfish in the end.
But That Was Years Ago

Chapter Notes

A user here named DangerPlace (SNM Creative Design) felt inspired enough to draw some fan-art (I'm not crying I promise) of Johnny when Peter had woken up to find him naked on his bed.
deviantART: http://fav.me/daj2x29
http://fav.me/daj2xtg

It is NSFW, so check it out when no one's looking. Thank you, Sherry!

Also, I was never good at confession scenes. Please take note of the tags.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If there was one thing Steve had learned over the years, it was to not compare people from back then and now. He had seen that, all things considered, people hadn't changed. Sure, they'd adapted to the times and behaved differently to suit their faster world, but they moved around much the same. Deep down was a template that people didn't stray away from.

He'd taken a course once, in university, a theology subject that he'd hoped would ground him and give him some sense of inner peace amidst the tumultuous twenty-first century. It worked for a time, but he'd quickly learned that Christian doctrine had lagged behind when society had progressed past simplistic views and obsolete forms of socio-cultural understanding. He couldn't apply the Word of the bible to present life. He did, however, learn an awful lot about human nature.

One such life lesson was that humans, fickle and susceptible though they were to solitude, were also deeply relational by nature. And without the concept of communion it is not possible to speak of humanness, said an author named Ware about the subject.

This fact couldn't be more exemplified if one lived some place other than New York. In the new century, everybody lived in their own little world, oblivious to everyone else. The city had been such a cold and lonely place. Steve had thought for the longest time that he was alone, and was going to be, forever. But it was only when he'd tried to extend a hand that he found that everyone's little world could mesh and turn into a slightly bigger world. He could be included, if he took the initiative to care.

Stan the barber two blocks from where he used to live in Brooklyn put his two sons through MIT with a minimum wage. Steve wouldn't have known that if he hadn't asked about the school graduation flier on the countertop where Stan's grooming tools sat. Freddie and Donald's lives had been so busy with work that they couldn't spare their dad a day or two to fix his old jeep, and Steve had earned free haircuts getting the old contraption into working shape again, earning him a lifelong friend as well.

If he'd learned about the fact that reaching out meant results way back in the forties, he would have seized the opportunity he had before him back then. He would have taken Bucky to a bar and squeezed his heart out until it was empty and ready to be filled again. But it was 2015. Bucky was
nearing his hundredth birthday, having been happily married to Gail for over seventy years.

_If I only reach out_, he thought distantly, nursing his plate and staring bleakly across the living room, where Tony was tossing his head back, a laugh on his lips as Johnny told a joke in bad taste.

_He won't realize unless you tell him_, another voice echoed in his head. Pepper's voice, from years ago. _The smartest men in the world are also incidentally the most oblivious ones._

He started when a hand fell on his shoulder. When he turned to look, Janet was looking at him with a reproachful face.

"You're staring again," she said. "It's getting pretty ridiculous how obvious you are lately."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Steve sighed.

"You," Janet spared him one long worried glance, and then transferred her gaze across the room. "And Tony. I see it when I look at you. But he was only just with Johnny in the news. You're not--"

"No."

Her eyebrows furrowed. "But you'd like to be?"

Steve sat silent, staring at his plate.

Janet shifted in her seat, turning so that she could face him fully. "Since when?"

"A while," Steve said shortly.

"Who else knows?"

"Me. You," Steve said tightly. "Peter. Pep. He doesn't know. Don't tell him. Don't tell Nat!" They both threw a sharp glance at Natasha who had thankfully bogged herself down in the middle of the two arguing men. She was trying to mediate between Clint and Bruce, but her voice kept rising and becoming less patient with them.

"No, no, of course not," Janet's face was stricken, but then changed into a more subdued, thoughtful expression. "And he's been eyeing Peter for weeks. Dear God, Steve, I'm so sorry. What a mess."

Steve leaned his head back against the couch, plucked a wilted bacon from his plate and put it in his mouth. "Yeah."

Afterwards, when the issue of the game machines was finally settled and the group had split, Steve pulled Tony aside and took him to the balcony. He didn't know what came over him exactly, but he figured it had something to do with Tony being at death's door the previous day.

"I need to, uh," he started, and then straightened his spine. "We need to have a word," he demanded.

Tony was wrapped in a post-near-death glow. His smile was both haughty and breathtaking. "Now? I'm taking Peter somewhere today. Or at least I'm planning to."

Between the two, it was always Tony who demanded and got his way, whether Steve complied with him or not. Steve figured that he could cash in on years of being at the receiving end of such treatment. "Now. It's ... it's kind of urgent."

Tony's face grew serious in an instant, and Steve held his hands up, shaking his head quickly.
"Not that urgent. But I'd rather get it over with now before--" before I lose the courage, or whatever it is that's come over me. "Before the party."

In some distant part of his mind he knew that he was testing Tony. If the man chose to dismiss him and decided to go to Peter, then Steve would reconsider everything, and perhaps drop the matter altogether, permanently (not that he could do it so easily, but he had to try, if it came to that).

Tony eyed him in consideration for a long moment, and Steve met the gaze bravely. After a while, the man rolled his eyes. He smiled indulgently the next second.

"Oh, fine. Coffee, then?" Tony suggested.

Steve's answering smile came helplessly to him. "Yes, please."

--

When Steve met Tony at first, they hadn't exactly struck a friendship. Tony swept people around in a maelstrom, a fast-paced, unforgiving lifestyle of business and pleasure, and if they couldn't keep up, Tony chucked them out. That had been the definition of Tony, and Steve had steeled himself for the storm that should have been their first meeting.

He'd realized afterwards that he shouldn't have passed judgment so quickly.

Tony had treated him differently. He'd been as fast and unforgiving as they had said, but Steve hadn't found himself abandoned. On the contrary, Tony had seemed to go out of his way to accommodate him, patiently waiting for him to catch up to everything, the string of curses and the countless amounts of purely toxic drinks notwithstanding. Tony had been exactly what Steve needed to introduce him to the future. He was someone who was firm in his beliefs and didn't sugarcoat or whitewash anything. He also knew an awful lot about pop culture, which hadn't mattered as much in the forties but had become central in understanding day-to-day life decades since.

The agents, Nick, the members of the Ultimates, Pepper, they all said at one point that Tony surprised them with his uncharacteristic treatment of Steve, and Steve couldn't help but feel special because of it.

They hadn't struck a friendship, but something more deeply profound and unimaginably intimidating. Steve had never felt like it before.

After sitting themselves down in a coffee shop, Tony had a string of orders firing from his lips the moment their waitress arrived. He got Steve his favorite coffee combination, a concoction borne out of countless afternoons of trial and error. In the next minute, Tony was making rounds with his phone, sending emails, telling off subordinates. He'd ended up canceling his whole afternoon to fit Steve, which suited the man just fine. He didn't care that he was being so obstructive. His mind was set on one goal only, and that was to say everything that he had to say so that they could move on. So that he could move on.

He was so apparently lost in thought that Tony had to resort to chucking sugar packets at his chest.

"What was that?" He blinked fast and refocused his gaze. Tony was wearing a patient, albeit curious smile.

"I said, what urgent matter did you need to talk to me about that you had to pull me away from my schedule?" His smile turned into a smirk. "It's so unlike you, Steve, to demand instead of hint. I feel like I've ruined you by spoiling you so much."
Maybe you have, Steve answered in his head. "It's ... I haven't thought about it, actually. Well--"he shook his head distractedly,"--I have, for a long time. A long, long time--"he said under his breath, before resuming in full-volume,"--but I didn't imagine that it would be here, at this time."

The coffee shop was packed, but offered just enough privacy for the kind of conversation that Steve was hoping to set up. The mass of people would quell any outrageous reactions Tony might exhibit. Tony's waiting expression urged him to continue. Steve leaned forward, and then dropped his gaze at once. He didn't think he could say the words if he was looking straight into Tony's eyes.

"Do you remember that night when I--" Steve swallowed, "--when I left the Tower?"

It wasn't a very specific description, but Tony blinked once, and his expression switched into intense comprehension. His eyebrows drew together and his eyes narrowed.

"That was years ago," Tony said, his voice clipped. "Why are you bringing it up now?"

Steve fought the urge to turn tail and run. He closed his eyes and forced the words out. "I thought I should tell you why I did that. Went up and left and all."

If Tony had been slouching in a relaxed position before, he wasn't now. He poised himself up and tilted his head to the side, eyes burning with curiosity. But despite the telltale signs of someone longing to be answered, Tony closed off, like a steel wall sliding down and shutting with a harsh, metallic thud.

"I don't think you should," he said. Steve's eyes snapped forward. Tony's voice sounded low and threatening. "I think it's best if we leave it alone."

Steve started to stammer in outrage, and Tony took this as a sign to explain further, coughing as he let his shoulders fall.

"I don't think it's something we should open up again." His eyes were hard, but he was going slack from a sudden bout of exhaustion. "Dredging up old memories, smoothing out misunderstandings in the past, closure," Tony snorted derisively at the last word, hand gesturing dismissively in the air, "it's not for everyone. We came out all right, the two of us, and I don't think the past should matter now. I don't look back, Steve. It distracts from the now."

"What?" Steve vaguely remembered the words as something he had heard before in one of the many animated movies that Tony had forced him to watch, but he was too flummoxed by Tony's suggestion to even recall it. He gave his head a quick shake to clear it.

"No, it's n--you don't understand, Tony. You think I came out well after--after that? I didn't. And I know that you despised me for a while after that as well and--that, that affected me a lot. I have to tell you."

He knew he sounded fraught and a tiny bit desperate, his expression warped in pain, but it worked, somewhat. Tony inched back and took a good, appraising look at him, his eyes wide and a little bewildered by the sudden change in the man.

Steve huffed, his nostrils flaring, and then squared his shoulders to calm himself. The cacophony of sounds from the patrons drowned out his tiny outburst, but they didn't serve to help him focus. Tony's jaw was tight and defiant, almost intimidating, but Steve knew that it was a defensive reaction, and wasn't supposed to be taken at face value.

"Is it because I almost died yesterday? That it?" Tony said suddenly, bitterly, and Steve had that
"Is it because you're feeling guilty? Let me guess: you're thinking, you could sleep a little better if you told me now before I killed myself for good?" Tony jutted forward and glared. *He was always like this,* Steve thought, *vicious and volatile when it comes to talking about dying on the job.*

"Because I don't appreciate being treated with honesty only when I'm at a risk of dying. So is it, Steve? Is it like that?"

Steve gaped at him, as if Tony had grabbed a cup of coffee from the next table and thrown it at his face.

"No!" he almost shouted. "God, no. Just listen--"

"Then what?" Tony boomed back, a yell that dialed down in a carefully-controlled volume, yet this time some people turned their heads to look at them. There was a nerve in Tony's temple that pulsed whenever he got angry, and it was throbbing now, a shadow of a line that matched the rest of Tony's expression. It was the first time that Steve realized that Tony must have taken his departure all those years ago even more severely than he thought. He was floored by the idea.

He also belatedly realized that he had just lied--it *was* about feeling guilty, but not for the reasons Tony thought--but he already said the word and so he stuck with it.

"It's not about hiding the truth from you because you don't deserve it in any other case but your death bed," Steve said carefully, meeting Tony's eyes. "It's about me being s-scared--"his voice broke a little, "--to face whatever comes after."

"Well! Then, fine!" Tony tossed his head in frustration. "Would you stop beating around the fucking bush and just tell me if it's so impo--"

"I'M GAY."

The waitress coming back with their drinks stumbled and spilled every drop of coffee onto a couple shamelessly watching them. Steve's hands curled into fists on the table, so tightly that they went white, and he hadn't known that he'd blurted it out for everyone to hear until he noticed the dozens of eyes trained towards him.

The place was suddenly, deathly quiet. Tony threw them all a panicked glance, and then shot his gaze back to Steve, his eyes blinking rapidly.

"What? What did you say?"

*It's a start,* Steve thought, but he was suddenly very self-conscious, tucking into himself. *Maybe I should have done this somewhere else. Not where people could overhear us.*

"You heard me," Steve wavering only a little as he blinked up at Tony. "I'm gay."

Tony eyed the people watching them again and then decided to circle around the table and tug at Steve's wrist.

He bent down and said in an urgent whisper: "I know it's a good way to crush everyone's rose-colored glasses so epically and all that, but I don't think either of us really want to do that to the public just yet, what with the elections and well, me being a poster boy for homo-conversion. Let's talk about it somewhere else."
"I"m not done yet," Steve argued, but Tony was already pulling him up to his feet, tucking a bill into
the apologizing waitress' hand before bursting out into the street.

Tony tugged at him until they reached the nearby park, whirled around when they reached a spot
without spectators, and then flicked a finger at Steve's forehead. Steve winced in pain, surprise
splashing across his face and making him turn red from ears to neck.

"You can't just do that!" Tony admonished, his hands flying all over the place. He seemed to have
been restraining himself from freaking out before. "A freaking café. What were you thinking?"

Steve steadied his breathing and leveled Tony with a quelling look. "You weren't listening. I thought
I should just--come out with it."

Tony wiped the bridge of his nose with the pads of his fingers and then, _then_ let out a short, helpless
chortle, a slightly unhinged, high-pitched laugh that sounded like it would have distressed any
passerby. Steve stared blankly, uncomprehending.

"Are you--are you sure then?" Tony asked, his voice still bubbling with snickers. "You don't have to
label everything, you know. Sexuality is--it's like the weather. Even weathermen get confused about
it."

"I'm not _confused_ I--" he stopped, nails digging into his palms as he willed himself to be calm. He
relaxed his jaw, his shoulders, everything, letting it all out with a tired sigh. He then fixed Tony with
an unwavering gaze. "I can trace my ... preferences to when I was a teen. I didn't talk about
it before because ... well, times were different. I think I can say it now without being afraid of getting
beat up."

"Beat up?" Tony cracked. "You? Captain America, who walks around with obtrusive muscles and
eats punching bags for breakfast?"

"That wasn't the case when I was fourteen," Steve pointed out. "I wasn't born ready to fend off the
Nazis."

Tony conceded with a nod, and then eyed him critically, slipping his arms around each other in front
of his arc reactor.

"So ... so this was what that was? You were ... _afraid_ that I was going to do something? Judge you?
Kick you out? Expose you to the church?" Tony's grinned lopsidedly. "Me, the paragon of
gay pansexual debauchery and bad press?"

Steve's sigh was long and suffering. "You don't get it, do you? You really don't know."

He looked up at the afternoon sky, waiting for some miracle of a distraction--a burning plane, a
meteorite, anything--to forestall his next words. Nothing came, and he was left with no other choice.

"You were dating Pepper," Steve said evenly, putting some ringing clarity into the words. "And
seeing you with her, everyday, being in love ... I couldn't stand it. I had to leave."

Tony stared, missing the point for a moment, and then, his smile fell from his lips, not with a crash,
but with a slow trickle that left his face drained of any mirth. He looked stunned and utterly lost, as if
he'd been believing something all this time and the world suddenly upended. It filled Steve with an
impending sort of doom.

"That's not right, you--" Tony froze, and then he shook his head, his forehead creasing as if he was
facing the very difficult task of making two mathematical statements equal.
"But that was years ago," Tony's eyes met his, waiting for Steve to deny everything. "Are you telling me that you've been--"

"Yes," Steve sighed helplessly. "That's exactly right. I have been, since--Christ--since even before that. After the Chitauri. Before--before Russia messed us up. It died during Nat but it sprang up again."

"Oh," said Tony.

He then spent a long and torturous moment examining a faraway Callery pear as if its branches held all the answers to his personal dilemma.

Steve was forced to wait and die a little with each second.

"Pepper and I broke up less than a year after you left." Tony's voice was now forlorn and slightly dazed.

Steve's nostrils flared as he took a breath, and then he gave a strained nod.

"You didn't think to ... ? You know," Tony was hesitating, even as he took a cautious step forward, training his good ear, eyes flickering. "I was single, and you came back. You must have thought about it."

"I thought you weren't ready," Steve admitted. In that moment his chest was starting to tighten at the interest Tony was showing, or at the very least, at the fact that the idea of having something tangible with Steve had crossed his mind in the past.

"I thought that--well, since it got bad--you got bad for a while, I thought that dropping myself into the mix would make you worse. Or--or I don't know," he threw a hand away in the same dismissive gesture that Tony often employed. "I kind of ... I was kind of scared for you. Of somehow not ... not being good enough to pick you up again. I was worried. Is that a good enough reason?"

Tony had spiraled like a wrecked vessel into a whirlpool. Everyone knew that. They saw it unfold as a team, trapped together in a Tower without any global threats to occupy their time. For a while, Tony drank without regard for self-preservation, and slept only when he was at a point of near-fatal exhaustion. Anything could have pushed him over the edge at any moment. Steve was reluctant to even try and start anything, not when Tony was so broken, but he looked on in the sidelines, waiting to catch him if he ever did decide to fall permanently.

"And yesterday, seeing you in the sick bay," Steve burst out after remembering something else he'd wanted to say--ignoring the sharp bunch of Tony's shoulders as he was faced with an unexpected reminder of his moment of vulnerability--"I had this urge to tell you. You nearly died and I could have lost you. I was more scared of you being buried in the ground, not knowing, than I was scared of what you would say."

"Ridiculous," Tony laughed a quiet little humorless laugh. "My dead ashes are going to be funneled into every aging concoction in every respectable brewery in the world. Don't even try to fight me on that."

Steve didn't know whether to smile or to continue on being miserable, but he stepped forward, too, farther and closer into Tony's space than the small approach that Tony had made, and although Tony's breath hitched a little, he made no move to step away, or give any indication that he wasn't allowed to do this.

Tony dropped his gaze and examined their feet. "Steve ... we could have had something. We could
"We still can," Steve almost cried out, his one hand reaching to touch Tony, any part of him, his fingers ending up at the base of Tony's neck. They pressed firmly at the muscle there, the one that sloped down onto Tony's shoulder. Tony met his eyes again, hooded and glistening with carefully-contrived desire. He was holding back, and they both knew the reason why.

"You know what I feel about Peter," Tony whispered, because he was close enough, and continued on about why Peter was so important and alone and special, and Steve closed his eyes, nodding shakily. It was as close to a rejection as he was going to get, but he didn't want to accept it. He didn't want to. He didn't want to let everything go just like that, not when there was history, and a lot of wasted opportunities, and a spark that had been and will always be there between them--

Steve didn't know what he was doing, but his mouth was suddenly closed on Tony's, moving urgently even as Tony's muttered declarations of affection for Peter spilled from his lips. Tony didn't break away, didn't tense up, but rather kissed back powerlessly. There was no fight to him, only a gentle quiver of doubt and confusion, and Steve persisted, kissing him selfishly, wrapping him in his arms, taking fistfuls of his hair. It filled him with a stinging warmth, to finally have Tony in his arms, to have Tony's lips on his, his body pressed so close, but--

But it wasn't meant to be like this. Tony dubiously succumbed to what he had to give, and Steve was too delirious with want and desire to even think, years of yearning winning over his logical thought. He gave Tony a desperate suck, capturing Tony's bottom lip between his teeth, and then, pushing further, he felt Tony's hot breath hit the roof of his mouth just as his tongue started curling out. Tony was wonderful. He'd always been wonderful. Everyone knew that. Steve wanted to know more. To explore and consume and learn every bit of Tony, even if it took forever.

But--

But a brief taste was all he got, before Tony was pressing the palms of his hands onto his chest, pulling away, and Steve craned his neck forward in need, to make the kiss last for as long as possible. Tony stepped away, turning his head, and there was nothing but the sound of their lips smacking apart, the rustling leaves in the autumn air, the ringing pleasure in his head, and the rapid beating of his heart to soothe him. Tony's taste lingered on his lips, and his eyes prickled with something he never expected to be there.

"I have to think," Tony pleaded, eyes so brown and glassy and confused. "I can't do this when you've given me no time to think."

And just like that, Tony had turned away, walking towards the next street.

Steve thought hard about all the things he'd done that day and wondered if it was all worth it, deciding, maybe it wasn't. Maybe it wasn't.

Chapter End Notes

This was shorter than I had anticipated, and I can't, for the life of me, figure out why I can't just fucking get to the damn Thanksgiving party already. I planned for that to happen many chapters ago, even before the Savage Lands, but I wanted to set up so many things, and you know I don't plan any of these things thoroughly, they just come out of the dark and start clawing at me until I decide to put them on paper or keyboard.
But anyway. This happened. Tell me what you think. I'm so stressed lol. I'm going overseas soon and there's also this semester. FML. Fuck these characters' lives, too.

The next chapter is most definitely the Thanksgiving party this time.
The elevator walls loomed, like he was trapped in a sleekly designed pit and it was closing in on him fast, though there was only him and Aunt May inside, and the heating was being put to its paces trying to keep the temperature perfectly comfortable. He fussed with the cuffs of his shirt, wrinkling them in the process, and tried to straighten his already slicked hair, ruining that, too, his fingers leaving sweat on everything he touched like he was genetically-enhanced to fill buckets with them.

"I don't think I can do this."

Peter muttered the words under his breath, his thoughts becoming nerves and spilling out, and though he wasn't really expecting an answer, it came anyway. Aunt May shot him another look, the kind that showed both her patience wearing thin and her motherly instincts kicking into action.

"You look fine, Peter. Quit your fidgeting. For God's sake it's like I'm the one introducing my aunt to my friends."

Not exactly the problem, Aunt May. He made to say it, but he could see his agitation transferring to her when she drew her eyebrows and started worrying her lip. He decided to reply to her with an apologetic smile instead.

She wore an olive-on-cream dress, nothing too fancy, and her hair was done up, looking totally appropriate for a Thanksgiving party. She wanted to go out, wanted to finally meet the people that Peter frequently rubbed shoulders with, and Peter wanted to put that in his head first. He was doing this for Aunt May. He wouldn't be doing it for himself. If he had a choice (he did, technically, but it would be considered rude to choose not to show up) he'd have been perched on a skyscraper somewhere an hour ago, willing for mayhem to occur so that he could put a stop to it.

It was funny, how he would rather face the hazards of his secret occupation than go to a party.

The elevator chimed, its doors lurching away, and Aunt May had to herd him into the hall, his feet stumbling forward woodenly. The corridor to Tony's immensely spacious loft already contained a smattering of people, and Peter was on his toes almost immediately, his ass clenching as a defensive mechanism.

Aunt May threw him a withering look as she saw him freeze. "Why don't you let me take care of myself, and you can do ... whatever you want to do." She smiled, and the upturn of her lips was too devious for comfort that Peter paled even more. "You'd be surprised at how much I know these
people already."

Peter let out a whine as Aunt May trudged forward to lead them in, radiating confidence, as if attending high-profile parties was something constantly penciled on her schedule. One less thing I have to worry about, I guess.

--

Maybe it was petty and childish, or maybe it was warranted that he wanted to distance himself for a while, but Steve ignored the shirt and slacks that Janet hung on his door for him, choosing to wear sleep pants and a wifebeater instead. The Ben & Jerry's tub was probably too much, but it brought him great comfort that strawberry cheesecake came ready to be devoured in such a large quantity.

Steve had successfully avoided the rest of the team for the whole day, dodging and weaving like a ninja around corners to avoid coming into contact with them. They would have asked about tonight, would have talked endlessly about how exciting it would be. Steve only wanted to avoid the surge of bitterness that came whenever he thought about Tony continuing on with the party, swallowing it back down whenever it reared up and struggled out of his defenses, and chasing it with a heaping spoon of frozen confection.

He was just settling in, snuggling into the team's common room couch and burying himself in blankets, scrolling through the choices Netflix presented. Half of the movies were thrillers or horror films, which sucked because Halloween was nearly a month ago, while the other half catered to girls and their need for romantic, sappy endings, which sucked even more.

He wanted to purge. He wanted a movie that was hopeful and optimistic at the beginning and then took a turn for the worse, towards a slippery slope that led to heartbreak or the ridiculously melodramatic, untimely demise of a love interest. Preferably with explosions and an apocalyptic ending somewhere in the mix. Because that was what it felt like. What he felt like.

Thank God he was alone. He looked pretty pathetic.

"What in the world ...?"

Steve went rigid, spoon caught in his mouth as Natasha appeared, wearing a light, airy apricot dress and a visibly astonished expression. He slowly slipped the spoon out of his mouth, eyes never breaking contact with hers. Daring her to say that this wasn't normal.

"What."

"What? What are you doing? The party's in ten minutes." Natasha curled her arms in front of her and peered at him curiously. "Don't tell me you're not planning on going."

"I'm not planning on going." His tone was short and defiant. He looked away then, and busied himself with scrolling through more chick flicks.

"Everyone's going to be there," Natasha pointed out, raising one delicate eyebrow. "You're going to be sitting here alone for the rest of the evening."

"That is the plan, yes," Steve said in clipped tones.

He didn't like the way Natasha stilled, her eyes narrowing slightly. She didn't say anything or try to cajole him into coming, but she did hover for a few moments more before sauntering off.

A plan had formed in her mind, he could tell, but he didn't think she would make such a big deal out
of it at the party. She liked to do things under the table and work alone if she could. But she wouldn't tackle this by herself. Not this time. Clearly she knew nothing of what was going on, so Steve was predicting that her first move would be to find out what the details were exactly.

Steve felt an uneasiness settle in his stomach. She would tell someone about him. Maybe not someone like Clint, who would spread the information out like wildfire, gossiping housewife he was, or Bruce, who wouldn't know what to do with the news and would suggest stimulants and a doctor's visit. But he could already feel the situation being blown out of proportion.

Steve scooped more ice cream into his mouth, clicking on Blue Valentine and bracing himself for the onslaught of misery.

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Peter went through the arduous task of trying to keep his breathing in check as he stepped into the room.

It was transformed for the occasion. What used to be the wide open space that Peter had gotten used to was now a place that Peter could only describe as a room of torture. There weren't any blatantly flashy decorations save for the addition of chandeliers, plants, and the smartly strewn silvery ribbon here and there, but with a little rearranging of furniture and the addition of round tables, the space that Peter had grown comfortable with over the last two weeks was now a different place altogether.

The sheer amount of people in attendance was completely terrifying, but Peter kept his eyes within ten feet of his immediate line of sight, more often than not resorting to just simply dropping his gaze down to the floor. It worked, for the most part. Half the people in attendance would be too engrossed in their own self-importance anyway.

The first person to recognize them was Sue, who was looking stunning in red and was entertaining one of the tables with a story about her husband. Reed hovered over her chair, smiling sweetly, looking just a bit embarrassed as Sue recalled an incident with a shrinking machine and a good pair of slacks.

"--the ray bounced against a chrome tile and hit him straight in the butt," she said brightly, earning her a couple of delighted laughs. "His face went so red from his squeezing pants that he couldn't talk to me over the comm without squeaking--"

"--I find your straightforward manner very charming, dear," Reed said, though the redness in his face said that he preferred not to be the butt of jokes, literally, in front of virtual strangers. Sue laughed, and then pecked her on the cheek in apology. That was when her gaze landed briefly on him and his aunt.

"Oh! There's Peter with May. I was hoping to see her tonight." Sue excused herself from the table and pulled Reed along, and Peter scuffed the sole of his shoe on the floor while Aunt May beamed brightly in response. Once within distance she gave Aunt May a heartfelt greeting, taking her hands and complimenting her on her dress, introducing her to Reed after a pause for breath.

"You two are seated with us. We have a lot to talk about." Sue's eyes sparkled, and then they turned to Peter, making a quick assessment of his health with a sweeping once over. He in turn accepted her touch against his arm with a smile.

Evidently, the incident with the brainwashing scare and the blown-up living quarters in the Think Tank had not reached Aunt May's ears, for they were burning through topics instantly. Reed whisked away somewhere to talk to a few aides about string theory, and Peter was left standing
there, like a kid in a grocery aisle whose mom had fallen into conversation with a fellow shopper.

Aunt May rolled her eyes at him and quietly urged him to mingle around, and Sue pulled her away to the next table to introduce her to Janet Pym.

"So how's Jonah doing?" were the last words he heard from them, and he couldn't for the life of him figure out how the two had gotten so acquainted that his aunt felt comfortable enough to talk to Sue about her budding romance with the Bugle editor.

Ignoring her wishes, Peter chose to look for their table and sit himself down instead. He weaved around the place, his senses keeping him light on his feet.

Thor had indeed returned, wearing a traditional Asgardian uniform. He was laughing boisterously amidst a crowd of women and men alike, and Peter could recognize some of them. Clint had ditched the compression tops he so often wore and donned a shirt that went inexplicably tight around the arms, making Peter wonder if he had this thing about peacocking his muscles. Bruce had apparently decided it was not his crowd to be in, slipping away and wandering off to where Reed was.

There were a couple of exchanged greetings between Peter and some of the scientists down at the labs, men and women who'd hung their lab coats and donned semi-formal wear. He resented them all for fitting in more successfully than he did. There was still a feeling of uneasiness in his stomach, and it only took him a moment to figure out why. His eyes had been searching for Tony, the host of the party, and so far he hadn't showed up or made himself seen. Not only that, but Steve seemed to be missing as well, but Peter chalked that up to not looking hard enough.

A tray of drinks floated by, and he decided he could use the buzz if he was going to sit through a party for hours. He had a glass of champagne, the sparkling drink clearing his surprisingly parched throat, and he took another glass with him until he finally found their table. I'll only have a few glasses, just to loosen myself up a little.

When he arrived at the other side of the crowd to where Sue had indicated their tables were, he cursed inwardly for not realizing what her words had meant before. Ben Grimm, a forty-stone figure sticking out like a sore thumb, bickered with Johnny, who looked—fuck—looked amazing in a blue shirt and dark tie. Peter dived into a crowd of people, just barely getting away from their line of sight.

It's not that I'm avoiding him. I just haven't sorted my thoughts out yet.

His mind plunged back to the day before—as if a sleepless night just replaying the scene over and over wasn't enough—and it threw him off for a moment that he bumped into the next woman trying to get around the heavy concentration of party guests.

He spun her around, catching her before she fell. An apology was barely out of his mouth before he was being engulfed in a crushing hug, and he let out a squawk of surprise.

The red hair tickling half his face and the sight of Kitty waiting back with an impatient expression helped him identify his assailant in an instant.

"MJ," he breathed, his face smoothing out. "Never thought I'd see you here."

Mary Jane drew him away at arm's length and took a good long look at him. "Looks like somebody ran into Tim Gunn on the way here. I didn't think you had it in you to buy good clothes."

"Rude. Johnny took me shopping," he grimaced, slightly insulted by her tone. "And I can so totally dress myself, thank you. He might've picked the clothes out but I decided what to throw on at the end."
"You look good," Kitty interrupted, and for some reason Peter was getting an irritated vibe from her. "I mean, we would have taken you out to the store ourselves if you just thought to call us every now and then."

_Not this again._ "I was busy," he said, trying to go for the placating tone, and even to himself the excuse sounded so lame. He went for his best apologetic smile, a default expression that he was sure was going to wear out before the night ended. "I've kind of been all over the place. You know. Hero work and all that typical crap."

MJ was a lot more forgiving than Kitty, who demanded that he at least greet the rest of the table. Peter hadn't noticed the whole time, but their table had stopped talking at some point to watch the exchange. Peter clammed up at the attention.

Who hadn't Tony invited? Professor Xavier was there, nodding to him, while Jean and Scott acknowledged his presence with warm smiles. Ororo gave him a tiny wave as she drew away from Hank McCoy, who peered back at him through his glasses. Bobby was looking strapping in his ensemble, though slightly bored with everything going on around him. He looked up just as Peter's gaze settled on him, and Peter flashed him a smile. It was obvious that he'd tagged along because he thought it was going to be a rager of some sort, and Peter found it amusing how the attire for the occasion hadn't tipped him off.

After a brief exchange of mentally exhausting pleasantries, MJ took notice of his dwindling attention and pulled him away quickly, asking him to make a turn about the room with her. It was right around the time when Kitty turned to greet someone in white, but Peter didn't get a glimpse of the person, for MJ was looping an arm around his, pulling him up and tugging at him to follow, not really having a destination in mind but hoping to get re-acquainted.

"I think Bobby thought this was going to be a bash," Peter supplied, and MJ threw him a confused look.

"It is," she said, her eyebrows closing in as she frowned. "Or did I get the invitation wrong?"

Peter stared at her. "What?"

MJ blinked at him for a moment, and it was so easy to recall a time when all that had mattered was seeing her face and touching her and being together. _It was so long ago_, he thought, but although the memories resurfaced, the old feelings had not.

MJ's smiled cheekily at him as the situation dawned on her. "Of course. You totally didn't read the invite. That's so you."

It was Peter's turn to scrunch his face in bemusement. "Yeah I--I mean, no. I did. I don't--what?"

MJ laughed again. "You didn't. Otherwise you'd know how the whole night's supposed to play out." When Peter just stared, still uncomprehending, MJ continued, looking patient as she explained. "Peter, how do you mash together a Thanksgiving soiree and an arcade-themed party in one? I'll tell you: you get creative with the invites."

They stopped by the bar and Peter watched as MJ slipped her phone out from one of the hidden pockets of her black dress. She looked for the email, and then showed it to him. Peter squinted at her phone screen for a second, and then widened his eyes.

"This wasn't the invite Aunt May got," Peter told her. "There's _two_ parties?"

MJ smirked. "See? You didn't read your invite, just your aunt's. I bet you that you got this email with
the additional stuff about the after-party party."

Peter felt a headache coming along as he stared further at the screen. "Ten p.m. Huh. So some of the
guests go home and everyone else moves to the game room upstairs."

Yet again he felt like he was an idiot for not realizing it. He simply thought that Tony had given up
on the idea of an arcade party because it was ridiculously wild and complicated.

"Why wasn't I ... I'm so out of it right now. I didn't even ... and ten. That's so late and--and why am I
even bothered by this?"

MJ got them two new glasses of champagne from a barista. "It's the nerd in you with the curfew.
Don't worry--at least you haven't changed, not one bit. You feel guilty about staying up late but you
do it anyway. Classic Spider-Man. You're so dense. I forgot how much of a nightmare you are. God,
I missed you."

"You probably hit your head on the way here because I think, I think
you forgot that I like dick."

MJ hit him in the arm, tipping down her glass with a toss of the head, and Peter followed her
example, buoyed by the warmth that the champagne and the present company were sending through
him.

It wasn't as hard as he thought it was going to be. Peter stuck around with MJ for a few minutes
more, chatting idly. He found out that Kitty was working for a S.H.I.E.L.D. division that
continuously prodded at the Grapes sitting in the Triskelion basement. It was to settle the initial
bargain she'd had with Stark Industries a month ago. If he'd thought to ask a week ago he would
have known--it had been a niggling question at the back of his head ever since he and Bruce and the
rest succeeded in creating a telemetry device--but he'd been so caught up and strung around by a
million other things that he'd forgotten to ask Kitty about it.

"I think dinner's about to be served," MJ remarked, her eyes scanning the movements of the guests.
"I'll see you in a bit? It was nice, catching up." Her gaze settled back on him, warm and soft, and
Peter ducked his head, smiling.

"Yeah, it was," he said back earnestly.

MJ gave him a peck on the cheek, and then whisked away, back to her table. Peter could feel the
movements of the others, could see them settling down, and a heavy weight started to tug at his
insides. He had to return to his table now, where Johnny was waiting.

His head was adrift in a deceptively pleasant fog, but his thoughts kept heading back to the day
before.

Peter sat next to Johnny with his eyes closed, relishing the heat that came from the intense kiss and
soaking in the warmth of Johnny's closeness. He like it a lot, enjoyed the way Johnny's fingers
stroked the nape of his neck, the way his breaths puffed against his cheek.

God, I need him. I need him. I need to have him.

Johnny's open and inviting gaze left him with many tantalizing options. It would be so easy to take
things further, to pull the man away somewhere and fall recklessly into the temptation. He'd seen a
glimpse of Johnny's chest under his shirt, and he thought about what it would be like to slip his
hands underneath the fabric, to explore and knead the hot expanse of skin as they kissed again.
Johnny's hands would no doubt wander, too, and Peter was already coming undone thinking about them slipping behind him and going on its own expedition. It would be so easy. Peter's mouth watered at the thought.

It could go so many ways, spell so many good things, but in the end ...

In the end, he hesitated. Doubted.

His thoughts kept flitting back to the Tower, to the man with the teasing smirk and affectionate eyes. Tony. The man with the brilliant mind and the callused hands that more often than not crossed over his glowing chest. What about Tony? Peter couldn't fathom the pain he would put Tony through if he chose differently right there and then. Would Tony hate him? Would he suffer? Was he even in the right to assume that he meant that much to the man?

He couldn't just take irresponsibly. Not like this. He had to think about his next step, and he couldn't exactly think straight with Johnny breathing like a roaring hearth, prodding that small patch of skin underneath his jaw with his nose and waiting, silently pleading for permission to taste.

His palms slipped down to Johnny's chest and pushed gently.

"I--Johnny," he breathed. "I'm not ready yet."

When his eyes flicked open, he saw that Johnny's eyes had widened slightly, disappointment flashing briefly in them as they dulled.

Guilt shot through his core like an arrow. No, Johnny, no ...

Immediately, he took Johnny's face in his hands and kissed him again, slowly this time, trying to convey with the soft brushing of their lips that everything was fine, that he just needed time to sort everything out. Johnny hummed quietly, sighing into the kiss in a resigned, deflated way, matching his rhythm and trying very hard not to escalate things, for which Peter was grateful.

When they drew apart again, Johnny's hands pulled away from his neck and slipped around his ribs. Peter wound his arms around Johnny's neck, drawing him back in, and Johnny buried his face in Peter's shoulders. It was immensely comforting, being entwined in each others' arms that way. They fit together so perfectly.

"How long before you're ... you know. Ready?" Johnny's voice was soft and unsure. "I ... I really like you, Pete. I don't think I've told you that. I thought you should know. I sound like a sap saying it, but I can't help it."

Peter let out a choked sob of frustration. "It won't take long. I ... I feel the same way, Johnny. Really. It's just ... I just need to deal with everything else first. I'm sorry."

He didn't need to go into the details of what 'everything else' entailed. Johnny's arms tightened around him, as if he was afraid of letting Peter go.

"It's okay," Johnny murmured, nodding against him. "I think I know what this is about. I'd be stupid not to. Ever since that damn science convention I could see the way he looks at you. Remember? You got angry when I asked, but as it turned out I was right on the money."

Johnny paused and trembled a bit, and although it was a quiet shudder it felt like a quaking that shattered Peter.

"I know that ... that Tony told you how he feels. Maybe you feel the same way about him. I wouldn't
know. But ... I still want to try to win you over. To make you happy and everything. Even if ... even if all I can do right now is say that I'll always be here, waiting in case the bastard decides that you're not perfect enough."

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"You know, this is exactly the level of artistry I expected Anne Hathaway to be working on for the rest of her life, Academy Award be damned."

Steve gaped at Pepper for a moment before closing his eyes and groaning inwardly. He didn't want her of all people to see him looking invested in Bride Wars of all movies. He didn't even know she was flying in today, but there she was, standing in the common room with her gravity-defying updo and her knowing expression. She always seemed to know everything. Steve sometimes wondered if she and Friday were one and the same.

He'd chucked Blue Valentine midway into a fight sequence, because it hurt too much to watch, and the next movie had gotten abysmal reviews, so it was obviously a movie he could freely heckle without worrying about injuring any of the actors’ credibility. It seemed pointless now, hearing what Pepper thought of the orange actress on screen.

"I didn't quite get women back then, but now I understand they seem to like doing everything underhanded. It's impressive and pretty scary." Steve shook a finger at the hair-dyeing sabotage happening on screen, crooking his head. If he could pass his movie marathoning off as an attempt at cultural studies he might save some face. "Also, you and Natasha? When did you get friendly all of a sudden? Did she tell anyone else?"

Pepper shook her head, smiled mysteriously, and then plopped down on the couch in a very unladylike fashion. She looked bone tired in her heels, but she still looked ravishing. "Just me. But I don't think it matters when half the people I talked to were asking where you were or why you couldn't come. I mean I know where you are now, but I've only got a theory about the second mystery. What happened with Tony?"

Blunt and to the point. That was always Pepper's style. The name cut through him like a knife.

"Nothing," he said, for that was what happened. Nothing. Nothing came out of him following Janet's advice and pouring his heart out. Granted, he did a banged up job trying to explain himself and all the complications that came bundled with him living in the same roof as her and Tony, but in the end it wouldn't have made a difference if he came through the park with a large carriage drawn by a white horse, preaching about his undying affections. Tony still chose Peter, and that was that.

Inexplicably, Pepper picked up on the connotations of his one-word response and asked him to elaborate. Steve was never cowed by her, and she never resorted to powerplays like Nick did, but there was always something about her that made him talk.

He sank into the sheets, looked down on his hands, and talked.

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It was easy to find the way back to his table. Ben still occupied his steel-reinforced seat, looking as brooding as Peter was feeling. Peter figured that he must have been trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, with the way he was hunched over, motionless.

Johnny was nowhere to be seen, though Peter supposed that he would soon return, seeing as the waiters had started filing in with the hors d'oeuvres.
He took his place next to Johnny's empty seat, which also happened to be the one next to Aunt May. She was laughing in tandem with Sue, who was once again retelling one of Reed's stories in the lab like it was her go-to crack at humor. He felt sympathy for Reed for all of two seconds before his gaze caught Ben's.

Peter offered the man a tentative smile, to which he responded by rearranging the stones around his mouth into a grin.

"You're matchstick's buggy friend, yeah?" Ben shifted slightly to face him, his form rippling.

Peter blinked, alarmed by the nickname, but Ben held a crusty palm up. "I didn't tell him. Don't worry. And no one else has had a chance to. He's been shitting himself waiting for you to turn up that he hasn't really talked to anyone. A bit rude, I'd say, but at least he wasn't embarrassing himself by flirting around. You got a little something going on between you two, don't cha? I can tell."

Peter's shoulders eased a fraction. "Where'd he go?"

Ben pretended to have flexible shoulders and attempted a noncommittal shrug. "Went looking for you, most like. He kinda went nuts when I told him you're probably getting hit on. Didn't mean to do that. He was getting on my nerves with all the pining. Never seen him shoot out of his seat so quick, though." Ben gave him the stink eye. "It's pretty clear what the whole deal is. You're not stringing him along, are you?"

Peter craned his neck back and stared incredulously. "No. Um, no."

Ben nodded in approval. "Just trying to make sure. He's dated one too many dames who didn't care for any his whims. It gets real tiring real fast having to pick up after him when shit goes south. I take it you've heard about the house he almost burned down trying to impress his girlfriend's pop?"

"Uh, yes. He's told me about that one."

Ben took on an almost exasperated tone, but there was fondness in it, gruff though it was. "He's matured some, yeah, and he's found himself a few gals here and there that were nice, but I was surprised when he started chasing after boys, too."

Peter stared yet again, not really sure what to make of the comment. "Is that ... is that okay with you?"

Ben deadpanned at him. "I'm a walking landslide dating a blind girl. I don't exactly go out there judging people. Heck, I don't get out much. And you seem decent enough. I could be wrong, though. For all I know you're some kind of alley slut with a scorch kink."

"For fuck's sake, Ben!"

Peter's laugh was interrupted by the sound of Johnny's voice, and he stiffened as the blond slid into his seat and turned to him with an overwrought expression. Ben let out a gravelly snicker behind him.

"You alright? He hasn't been harassing you, has he? It's been a while since they let him out," Johnny threw a glare over his shoulder. "Ben can get a little dicky."

"I finally get to meet the guy after weeks of you yammering about him. Sue me for being a little mouthy after that alien decontamination crap," Ben said gruffly, as if that was enough excuse for his behavior. "And anyway I don't think he gives a shit what I say."
Peter shook his head and offered Ben a smile. "It's okay, really. He's alright. He looks out for you."

Johnny eyed the man as if he'd grown another limb. Ben did his best impression of a crumbling pile of pebbles.

"I'm gonna pretend that you did not just say that," Johnny shuddered, leaning in and smiling. "Can't imagine Ben being cuddly and supportive like that. I know he is, but it's weird to think about."

He'd forgotten what he was going to say next when Johnny reached out to touch his hair, fingers pinching at the strands tickling the top of his ear.

"Your hair's still a bit long. I like it. Bet your aunt gave you an earful for not cropping it shorter." Johnny tipped his head to the side and glanced briefly at Aunt May, and then settled his gaze on Peter again. Of course, he didn't think he could compare to Johnny, whose hair was gold and eyes bright from the chandelier lights. The sight of him made Peter flush red instantly.

"I think the champagne's gone to my head," he breathed weakly.

"Yeah, you're looking a bit red in the face there," Johnny teased, and then the light and warmth left his face entirely when Tony finally appeared.

Peter could see Johnny's narrowed eyes as they followed Tony, who came around the table and stopped by between them. Tony looked ... different. He was smiling graciously, looking as self-confident and unpretentious as ever, but there was a slight strain in his shoulders, and a tightness to his voice that Peter couldn't quite place.

"I'm glad you're here," he said to Peter, his eyes then darting to Johnny next. "Johnny. Keep Peter company for me for a while."

He then straightened himself again and flashed a brilliant smile at Aunt May, who had turned from her conversation with Sue to give Tony a carefully neutral look. Tony went around again, standing in between her and Sue, and they started to converse.

Although Peter wanted to bend back and train his ears to hear them, the waiters came and started putting food on their table. Peter could see in the corner of his eye Aunt May's shoulders slowly melting, a slight smile starting to form on her face. He caught snippets of their conversation, an inquiry about work, reassurances about Peter's health, a few naturally placed comments about Aunt May's dress and hair—it amazed Peter, how unassumingly charming Tony was being, with his straightforward manner and his pleasant, commanding tone. *Ever the perfect party host.*

Beside him, Johnny was trying not to look uncomfortable, though he was white on the lips and was staring at his plate.

Peter reached forward and gave his hand a light squeeze, and Johnny stared, stunned. Tony whisked away, going towards another table and mingling with the guests, and although he was being perfectly affable and sometimes downright outlandish with his comments (he seemed to change his way of speaking depending on who he was striking a conversation with) Peter could still feel that there was something wrong with the whole picture.

*What is going on?*

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"Well. I didn't expect for it to happen the way it did, but then again I didn't expect you to have the balls to come clean to him, either."
"Ouch."

"And in public, too. What were you thinking?"

The sounds coming from the movie were but random chatter to Steve now, ignored in favor of trying to seem as chill as possible in the face of Pepper and her questioning. She was going about it in a casual way, her conversational tone and her relaxed posture forcing him to believe that she wasn't the obstacle of this whole mess, that she wasn't involved all those years ago and was just a friend now, lending an ear and offering a piece of advice. Steve found it easy to believe.

Steve was curled in a cocoon of sheets, trying and failing at making himself seem less distraught, though his current situation already looked like some trope out of a movie where he was the girl feeling miserable that her affections had been brushed aside, and Pepper was the financially stable friend trying to comfort her. In some part of his mind he thought he didn't want it to be like this, that he shouldn't be like this, because he was Captain America, damn it, and the paragon of justice and American patriotism shouldn't be holing himself away from the rest of the world because he'd been emotionally compromised.

He could already imagine the sentiments of everyone else if word got out that he was a brooding, moping mess because of Tony. This should only be a minor setback for someone like Steve Rogers, because it shouldn't be that hard for someone like him to find someone else. Tony wasn't someone perfect that one pined over. Tony was a neurotic alcoholic prone to acts of shady business dealing and borderline immoral leisurely pursuits. Tony would only sully his so-called spotless public recognition. How did the two of them even have anything in common that the great Steve Rogers was so plagued by his rejection?

He didn't voice any of his concerns out, sticking to the story and letting Pepper draw her own conclusions. At some point she'd opened a beer and taken a spoon from the kitchenette, and at that moment she was watching him critically, ice cream poised near her mouth.

"You should have seen him. Strapped to all those machines, barely clinging on to life. If I hadn't done such a crap job of leading the team he wouldn't have--it wouldn't have gone--" Steve sucked in a sharp breath. "If Pete and Johnny hadn't been there to save us, he would've bitten the dust and I'd be what? Sitting in the next cell none the wiser. It scared me. I had to tell him, knowing that he could easily die."

He was in the process of clenching and unclenching his fists, thinking about the way Tony had looked lifeless on Peter's back. How Janet and Bruce looked all drugged up and knocked out. His team was fine now, but the image left a mark in his conscience.

He froze when Pepper put a hand on his knuckles, looking up to see her worried expression. She sighed, and then said: "You said that he said that he was going to think about it. Why are you acting like it's an outright rejection?"

Steve shrugged. "I understand that it's something people do when they want to let you down easy. And I get that. Even after everything he was being nice."

There was a short pause as Pepper stared at him like this was one of those moments where she was dealing with an incredibly dense person and it was wearing at her. Steve scowled.

"You're jumping to conclusions. Don't do that," Pepper instructed. "You've been out of the ice for years, Steve, and you're doing great with the acclimation thing and the moving on from the past and the blending in. But let me tell you, you still need work in the 'reading people' department."
Steve rolled his eyes and sat back with a huff. "Tell me something I don't know."

"Alright. Well, you know how we broke up years ago? Did you ever think about the reason why we did?"

Steve's brows furrowed, his mouth pursing. "Well, I assumed that ... that he broke things off? I don't know. You seem like a great girl, but if I had to choose which one of you would be unsatisfied, it'd be the one with the world at his feet."

"And you're right ..." Pepper shrugged. Steve looked up, his eyes widening, but then Pepper continued. "I am a great girl. The best, actually. I'm totally kick-ass. So I broke up with him."

Steve looked scandalized. "Why?" he asked. The Why are you an idiot/Why walk away from someone so brilliant like Tony? remained unsaid.

Pepper winced. "Do I really have to say it?"

When Steve made no indication that he understood, Pepper looked skyward and took a long swig of booze. When she came back, she was smiling in a strained way that looked like she'd been stung and she's passing it off as nothing, her face flushed under the dimmed lighting.

"I couldn't compete. This guy came into the picture, all blond and tall and heroic-looking. He also happened to be adorably lost and in need of a hand to guide him. Tony was positively vibrating with the need to lavish him with attention, just holding himself back because he had a girlfriend." It had been years ago, but there was a slight hollowness to her gaze that Steve understood as something of a lingering regret.

"I made the choice to break things off because I wanted to get in there before things got ugly at my end. I'm not saying that it's this guy's fault that we didn't last long. We all deserve a little happiness in our lives, and I simply couldn't see myself being happy with someone who was so obviously in love with someone else."

Steve drew in a harsh breath as he minced her words into pieces and tried to consume them slowly.

If he'd moved sooner, maybe tried to be there when Tony went through a rough patch ... if he'd acted on his feelings and decided to be a freaking man, if he'd done this, done that, tried, maybe things would have turned out for the better. Things would be a lot easier than it seemed to be now. No, it's not that simple.

"He loves Peter," Steve muttered quickly, heart clenching at the mention of 'love', like it was some silly thing that could be thrown around easily, but in Tony's case, with the way he looked at the younger man ... there was no sweeping it under the rug and pretending it wasn't there. "I can't get in the middle of that. I shouldn't have said anything."

Pepper went silent, though from what he gathered after the quick, furtive glance he gave her she seemed to be in the middle of solving a complicated riddle.

When she suddenly said: "What do you think of Peter?" Steve snapped his head up again, and then cast his eyes down.

"I ... he's great," Steve conceded, hand pushing through his hair. "You got all these heroes with these adjectives saying how great they are, how heroic, but Peter ... Peter, he really lives up to being amazing." The small laugh he let out was tinged with ruefulness. "He reminds me a lot of this friend I had, back in the day. Bucky. It's insane how much I see him in the guy. It's for that reason that I can't even bring myself to hate him. I feel like I have to, but I can't. I can see what Tony sees in him."
Not to mention that time in the training room when Peter stood by and waited for him as he sorted himself out, pulled him back to the surface when all he wanted was to sink. No, he wasn't going to mention that. That was ... private. Something between only the two of them.

For a long moment, Steve thought that Pepper had tuned him out, had gone someplace else, but there was a deep crease on her forehead. She was thinking. She didn't have to, on his behalf, but she seemed to be genuinely trying to think up a solution for all of this. Steve felt more grateful than anything. But what could she do?

After a while, there was a hint of a smile on her face, and she looked at him encouragingly. "Here's what you have to do. You've got to leave yourself open to the possibility that things won't work out, and that nothing will ever happen between you and Tony."

Steve let out a sharp breath, the thought sending a small spark of pain in his chest, but he nodded stiffly nonetheless, because she was, as usual, unflinchingly correct. If things go south, he was going to have to deal with it. It was the responsible thing to do. He wasn't about to let the loss stop him from doing his duties and living his life normally. It hurt to think about, but there were no two ways about it.

"But also," she continued on, causing Steve to look at her a little helplessly, hoping to cling to her next words like it was a lifeline. "You have to think real hard about the options you're given. It's not always black or white with these things. You'll never know when a third option might present itself. I have a feeling you'll be happy with the outcome in the long run if it actually turns out that way."

"You sure you're gonna get home safe?"

"I'll be fine, Peter," Aunt May fussed with his clothing once more, glancing at the elevator yet again as more people stuffed themselves in. "Tony arranged for his driver to take me straight home. Of course, I might force him to take a few detours ... I had to decline Jonah to go to this little gathering. Maybe I can still make it."

"Aunt May," Peter sighed, batting her hands away. "Don't stay up too late and get some rest."

"Who's the parent here?" Aunt May sniggered. "You take care of yourself. I heard it's going to be cuh-ray-zy as the night goes on. I'd stay with you, but I don't want to be that kind of mom."

Peter fervently wished that she wouldn't, but he tried to let her down gently. "Happy Thanksgiving, Aunt May."

She gave her an indulgent look, and then she frowned slightly. "It's a pity that Mr Rogers wasn't here. I wanted to have a chat."

Peter narrowed his eyes, and then a sudden thought rushed, making him blink with his eyes wide open. How could he forget? Of course. He was so caught up trying to maneuver around the party and keeping both eyes on Johnny and Tony that he hadn't realized that he never once saw the Captain. So that's what's bothering me. Steve. Where is he?

"Peter," Aunt May bent forward to kiss Peter on the cheek. "I want you to know that whatever you choose to do tonight, I'm okay with it."

Peter blinked at her in confusion, but Aunt May only smiled in a weird, puzzling way. "Whatever makes you happy, Peter. Go with your gut."
They parted ways after, with Peter drifting back into the loft, trying to decipher what the hell his aunt's cryptic words meant, and being dragged up the stairs by MJ and Kitty in the process. He wanted to look for Steve, but they were insistent on taking him with them, their arms looping around his like deadbolts. Johnny had been dragged away by Bobby at some point to try out one of the games, throwing Peter panicked glance just before they disappeared into the row of machines.

Though the guests had thinned out, the crowd was considerably louder and less inhibited once they moved to the game room. Peter would never be not impressed by Tony’s talent in transforming a space. He’d been in the game room once, a large, empty hall with just a few lanes for bowling and some holographic interfaces complementing the screen fixtures on the walls—for gaming purposes, he assumed. Now, with a change in lighting from fixed fluorescent to crisp flashing lights, and multiple arcade machines covering the floor, the room had a distinct retro feel, the ebbing music and the mix of strobe and neon setting the atmosphere.

It was nothing like Peter had seen before.

‘God, this is exactly what I needed,” Kitty gushed as she came back to their table from the bar, carrying with her enough assorted drinks to knock out a bear and make Peter's face twist with alarm. MJ laughed, kissing her, and then plucked a glass out from the selection.

“Oh—Pete, you fox, those two cocktails are for you,” Kitty said. “A guy from the bar was hoping you’d like it green and destructive.”

Peter stared back disbelievingly, and then cast his gaze across the room to the bar. He found the shock of white hair instantly. Pietro raised a glass to him, a smirk settling on his face, and his eyes—his eyes looking anything but innocent. Peter froze like a rabbit in front of a hawk.

"And the beers are for us--that guy named Gerold from medical bought them, said he knows you and hopes you're alright after that bullet incident," Kitty sniffed. "I think he was hoping to get into your pants because he kept glancing at you like he wants to eat you."

"What?"

"The punch is from that guy from the front desk. I forgot his name but he looked pretty. Seven o'clock, if you're interested. The gin and tonic--I think it's from one of Stark's associates over at Nelson and Murdock. I don't know about you but if you like them greying and DILF-y then who am I to judge? The tequila sunrise is from Dennis Colbert from the Triskelion labs--he's a hornball, so don't give him any ideas--"

"What?"

"Listen—Peter, you should try and—“ MJ stopped abruptly and tried to suppress the shock that went through her as the drink she tipped back wreaked havoc in her stomach. “—you should go and get some. The guy in the bar is hot."

“I didn’t come here to—not for that. Jesus, you’re wasted.” Peter sank into his seat and kept his eyes on the two girls. He didn't know who else was looking at their direction, and he didn't want to send the wrong idea by casting his eyes about.

"Peter,” MJ smiled sweetly. "I don't think you get it. You got a decent haircut for once. Your ass is looking so tight and firm in those pants that you'd probably fall through a donut if you tried to sit on one. If you ask me, you look like you wanted to get some tonight--not that I'm objectifying you or anything, but you literally haven't looked hotter."
"Oh my God, stop." Peter buried his face in his hands. "I didn't mean to--God, this is so embarrassing. I'm not really--like, I'm not looking--"

"Maybe the problem is that the wrong guy is hitting on you," Kitty suggested. "I didn't think you were the choosy type."

A light sparked in MJ’s eyes as she remembered something. “Oh, that’s right! You have that--that thing. With … hey, how’s that coming along?” She looked around apprehensively. “You know, Johnny? I thought … well, it’s been a while since we talked but I figured he would have made a move by now.”

Peter floundered, and was just about to ask how she'd come to know about Johnny when Kitty sputtered after stopping herself from downing the whole contents of her drink. “Wait—what are you—Johnny?” she interrupted. "What’s he got to do with—“Kitty turned to Peter with a slow, curious gaze. “Wait a sec. I’m confused. He was in the news just a week or two ago with Stark, wasn’t he? So why is--what's going on?”

Not one for the third degree, Peter blurted out a hasty excuse about his bladder being filled to bursting. The girls protested, and it was only with his acute Spider senses that he managed to dodge the hands that reached for him as he ducked away from the table and disappeared into the lined up machines.

The party-goers were in thrall to the beat and the booze. It didn't surprise him that Tony was able to provide only the best of the best when it came to free-flowing drinks and a sick DJ--dope, not disease-ridden--so he tried his best to weave around the groups of writhing bodies, the projectile drinks, the masses lining up for the games, and the Petersexuals, eyes darting around and looking for the Captain. The neon lights were mesmerizing, adding to the tiny haze around his vision already provided by the alcohol he'd consumed, so he wasn't very successful in finding Steve--finding anyone he knew, really--deciding to park somewhere less crowded to cool off instead.

There was a Skee ball machine in the corner, abandoned and ignored for the more life-sized bowling alleys the enormous game room contained, so Peter decided to let loose some of his nerves by hurling a few balls in. The thing about Skee ball was one had to have control of one's own strength. Peter, with his compromised senses and his twitchy muscles, punched a dent into the wall with his first throw. He grimaced, and then beside him someone let out a laugh.

"You have terrible aim, Parker."

It was Darcy, beaming brightly, the strategic cut of her dress turning her dense breasts into powerful gaze magnets. Not Peter though, Peter had grown accustomed to the way they sucked in eyesight like a black hole. He grinned at her face instead, like a proper gentleman, happy to see a familiar face that wasn't so all up on his business.

The next second a large, bronzed man swooped in on her and stole a long, drawn-out kiss from her lips. Peter goggled, and then promptly looked away.

"Why if it isn't the man so oft spoken on men's lips," Thor boomed. "Comrade, your hand is empty. Why do you not partake in the festivities?"

Thor's hair cascaded away from his face, like the half-naked men often found in the cover of those romantic paperbacks sold at thrift stores, and his face was flushed with a nice tinge of red, completing the picture of joviality. Peter swallowed when he noticed the thin sheen of sweat on the man's neck. Darcy smirked knowingly, smacking him out of his stupor.
"I--designated driver?" Peter said helplessly. Darcy threw her head back in a laugh, and Thor challenged him to a round of Skee ball.

It wasn't so bad. Thor seemed to miss the point and thought that the game was supposed to be a battle of strength. Peter just hoped to Thor that Tony had everything insured. Five balls ended up getting lodged in the ceiling, and it didn't even upset the god when the other two told him he had lost spectacularly.

"The games mortals play are so entertaining." Thor took a swig from his mug--nobody else had a mug in their hands and Peter assumed that Darcy had provided it for the occasion--and then asked Darcy for a dance.

"You go ahead, big guy, I'm sure someone would jump at the chance to grind against a Norseman," Darcy winked, slapping the god in the ass, and Thor strode away laughing. Peter eyed the exchange with thinly veiled awe.

"I thought you two weren't dating," Peter did a jig with his eyebrows, and Darcy shoved a drink in his hand, god only knows where it came from. Peter let the contents of the glass slither down to his belly, clearing his throat when that was done.

"I don't even know how to begin explaining to you how the heart of a Valhallan works," Darcy giggled, and then lit up like a light bulb when her eyes landed on someone nearby. "Follow me! I have to introduce you to someone."

Peter allowed himself to be pulled away from the corner of the room, and they plunged into the throes of another group chanting and hollering with the music. When they came out alive at the other side, Darcy grabbed someone's hand and pulled her aside, and Peter nearly spat out the drink in his mouth when they proceeded to kiss in earnest.

What the fuck? Jeez, Darcy's going all out.

Her hair tumbled down in loose curls, and there was a mole on her cheek that complimented her features perfectly. Her smile was radiant, especially when directed at Darcy.

"You've heard about Jane Foster, right? I'm sure you have, you're a nerd," Darcy sidled close to Jane, arm wrapping around her, and Jane reached out with one delicate hand to touch his arm. Peter blinked owlishly at her.

"Doctor Foster," Peter sounded like he was about to fall down on his knees. "It's--I've heard about you. I've been reading up on ... medical stuff. I admire your work."

Jane let out a trill of a laugh, never once leaning away from Darcy's touch and igniting alarms somewhere in the back of Peter's mind.

"I've heard lots of stories too, of course, though I'm strictly not allowed to talk about them," she said seriously, taking a bottle and pressing it against her lips before taking a sip. "I'm all for preserving vigilante secrets." Her lips curled into a smile then, and Peter gaped openly at her smug face.

He groaned the next second, cursing whoever it was that had the loose lips and the lack of prudence. The twinkle in Darcy's eyes were highly suspicious and telling. "This is not okay, you know that? I do not condone this."

Darcy waved him off. "It's fine. It's Jane. I like, tell her everything."

Jane leaned forward and pulled her fingers along her lips. "My lips are sealed, Spidey." She then
giggled musically, a clear indication that she was thoroughly intoxicated, and then gave Darcy a wet smack on the cheek before pulling away.

"Be right back, sweetie, I spot a pack of hyenas preying on our poor unsuspecting god," she bounced off, heading towards the direction of Thor, caught in the middle of three scantily clad bookkeepers and liking every second of it.

When Darcy turned back to him, smile like glittering pearls, Peter blinked a few times and then dropped all pretenses. "Do they know?" A dumb question to ask, but considering the context they were in he was sure Darcy would know exactly what he meant by it.

She did, and she drank before answering. "Of course they know. I'm not a cheater. We're together."

"We?" Peter squeaked. He shook his head and tried again, his voice quieter this time. "We. You, like, we three you?"

Darcy rolled her eyes and then pulled him aside. "No. Me, Albert Einstein, and Queen Latifah. Yes, us. We, us, all three. It's not like it's not a thing. It's a thing, especially for gods who can't keep their pants on. It keeps Thor in check, having two ladies keeping him preoccupied. Jane goes off all Doctors without Borders somewhere across the Atlantic, so he's satisfied there, and when he's here, defending the homeland, he's got me."

Peter couldn't quite shake the shell-shocked expression off of his face. "And you two are okay with ... with sharing?"

"Sharing?" Darcy scoffed, and then grinned in a darkly wicked way. "Jane and I go way back, Petey. Way, way back, when she was still a nurse and I an intern. If anything, Thor's the side dish in this combo. And it works because Jane's flexible and I'm into hot Norseman ass."

There was no arguing with her logic, but as soon as the idea of being in a relationship--a working, healthy relationship-- with more than one person clicked in his head, like gears aligning and finally setting thing in motion, a tide of information burst inside of him, and he felt lightheaded in an instant. He stepped back, overwhelmed by the sheer simplicity of the solution he'd been looking for for what seemed like ages.

A healthy relationship with more than one person. It's a thing. It's a thing that happens. And it works. Darcy's in a threeway. With Jane Foster and Thor Odinson. JANE AND THOR. Threeway. Threeway. Huh. And they're all happy!

They're all happy.

Christ.

Wow. Zers.

--

"Hey, head in the game, man!"

With both hands busy trying to break his joystick and slamming the buttons down on his side of the machine, Bobby had to lift his leg and kick Johnny's ass with the side of his shoe. Johnny cursed loudly, joystick slipping out of his sweaty palm, and Bobby took his chance and annihilated Johnny's character with a fatality. Bobby swelled with triumph as blood and guts covered the floor of the virtual arena.
"Again," Johnny grumbled, not one to sit idly by while his ass was being handed to him. His thoughts, however still flit back to Peter, and the many curious, high-fructose gazes that landed upon him the second they stepped into the party. *I shouldn't have made him wear those clothes. He looks fucking irresistible.*

"Dude, weren't you fucking Tony Stark just last week?"

The joystick *burst into flames* in Johnny's hand, melting into a pathetic stub of plastic, but Bobby ignored it and landed another fatality anyway, laughing at his successful attempt at knocking the blond off-balance and hollering with his victory.

"Five in a row. Damn, you're losing your touch," Bobby smirked, snatching a bottle from the edge of the machine and rewarding himself by dumping poison into his mouth.

"Not cool," Johnny growled, before stalking off. Bobby's face fell into a confused frown, and he stumbled belatedly, hurrying to catch up. He matched stride with the pissed off blond.

"Hey, relax. It was just a joke. You should try one of those cocktails. When it hits you right it feels like you're floating in space."

"You're hilarious," Johnny quipped back, his tone dripping with sarcasm. He didn't like being reminded of his moment of weakness. Tony was one conquest he'd rather not talk about with Bobby. It was a fucked-up night that both disgusted him and sent inexplicable shivers down his spine, straight to his ass. The feel of Tony's shaft still lingered there, plagued him endlessly at nights that it bothered him a lot. Demons danced around his hole when no one was around, and he had to physically restrain himself from pressing them down one by one. That was his problem.

Bobby stared at him. "Dude. This is a freaking rager. You leave the problems by the door and then forget to pick them back up on the way out."

Johnny's nostrils flared, sending the brunet an acidic glare the next second before changing course. "I'm going back to the girls."

Bobby grabbed his arm, and the burst of flame that followed was immediately canceled out by the frost that formed on Bobby's hand. Anyone else would have had their skin seared or blackened from frostbite. As it was, Bobby knew exactly how to react to Johnny's more volatile side. Johnny spun back and scowled at him, but Bobby met his eyes back.

"Don't leave me," his face screwed in pain. "If I hear one more word about Scream Queens and Chanel fucking Oberlin I will cut my dick off with an icicle, I shit you not."

Johnny would like that. Johnny would pay to see that, but Bobby looked desperate, and Johnny did sympathize, distantly. Sue was also into Scream Queens and she seemed to be under the impression that Johnny liked hearing about all the nasty little details.

Johnny shook Bobby's hand away and straightened himself, leveling the other man with another piercing stare. "Just don't--just stop reminding me of him."

Bobby seemed to take this reaction differently than Johnny had anticipated—not that he was expecting anything from the X-man, but growing solemn and understanding in a completely weird, uncharacteristic way totally boggled him out.

"It's cool. I got your back, bro. I'll get you a drink and you can tell me all about this douche." Before he knew it, Bobby was guiding him towards the bar, arm around his shoulder. Johnny cocked an eyebrow at him, a little confused over the change in the man's disposition.
"Dude, what's going on?" Johnny asked, eyebrows going all quizzical.

"I'm being a stand-up guy and offering you a drink so you'd spill. C'mon, we haven't talked in a long time," Bobby hailed the barman and asked for something strong, something Johnny couldn't even comprehend the contents of. "Bros do this shit, too. I actually have a load of shit to dump on you too, but that can wait. You look like this has been eating at you for a while now."

Johnny swallowed down a response referencing the same night when Tony actually did do some eating, but he stomped down on the thought with such ferocity that it made him tune out Bobby's inquiry.

"Look, I know it isn't easy to talk about. We normally don't do stuff like this, and hey, that's fine," Bobby nodded to the barman as he came back with two positively distressing concoctions, and then looked at him again with the same careworn look that just looked plain wrong on Bobby Drake's smug bastard face. "We can, you know, ease into it."

"I still don't know what the hell you're talking about, man," Johnny said, pinching his face at the tonic before tipping it back against his lips, drinking as Bobby pressed on.

"I'm saying that guys like him, the uppity billionaire types, they tend to fuck around, and even I can connect the dots and see that that's exactly what happened. He hurt you, didn't he? Did he cheat on you?"

Johnny's brain sloshed inside his cranium, the words registering clearly in his mind but turning into goo.

"What?" he slurred. "Jesus fucking Criminy what is in this drink?"

Bobby shrugged, but remained unflappable as he sipped at his drink. Sipped at it. That was what he was supposed to do, not imbibe the whole thing all at once. Johnny felt buoyant, like someone had injected his head with helium. He feared that he was going to froth in the mouth in a minute. When he'd finally gathered his bearings, he realigned the words Bobby had said and looked at him disbelievingly.

"This is not what this is about!" Johnny all but shouted. "You think I'm--I'm hung up on Tony? No!"

Bobby blinked once, and then smacked his lips. "No? So he isn't the cheating coyote everyone says he is?"

"No! I mean, yes, I mean--dude, I don't know! This is not about him, okay?"

Bobby leaned away and looked stunned and a little disturbed. "Oookay. The swill hit you harder than I thought it would."

Johnny snorted humorlessly.

"All right, well," Bobby's moved his glass back and forth for a while, and then redoubled his efforts to get Johnny to share. "What is this about then?"

Johnny figured that, since nobody had even thought to ask him about his damn feelings about the whole situation, since no one had bothered, he should tell Bobby exactly what he wanted to hear.

"It's Peter, all right?" Johnny said, his voice tight and broken all at once. "Dude, I'm crazy for the guy. And we're good together, you know? I like him. He likes me. But Tony," he said the name with as much acid as he could muster. "He's in the way. Peter thinks that fucking Skittles shoot out of his
ass and he's, what, practically in love with him, and I can't do a thing about it because he's Tony fucking Stark and I'm ... not enough."

"I thought you liked Tony. I mean, TMZ, the paps--"

"I do! I mean--fuck, I don't know!"

The ringing shock that resounded in his ears as he said the words left him reeling, made him want to hide and seek shelter some place where he'd never have to hear the words come out of his mouth again.

"Okay, so ..." Bobby trailed off in a calm, soothing tone, and Johnny could have kissed him right then for trying to sound so rational. God knew one of them had to be sane and less inebriated for him to come out of this thing whole and right in the head.

"What do you want to happen?"

"I don't know," Johnny's voice dialed down to a whisper. "I just want to be happy. I just want it to end."

Bobby threw away the last of his attempts at trying to get Johnny to open up more than he already did, because it was becoming increasingly apparent that he was shit in counseling friends.

He downed the whole contents of his own glass and let out a hiss.

"That's fucked up. God, just--this wouldn't be such a huge problem if all of you just left the drama by the door like you're supposed to. My suggestion? Just screw around with everyone. Just do it. Freaking dick everyone in the ass, the face, what have you. It's what all of you want, and obviously what all of you need. You can deal with the consequences later. But really, don't take my word for it. I'm a horrible person who gives horrible advice."

Bobby observed Johnny as he nursed his head against the bar and spiraled into a drunken stupor. He knew he was going to regret the decision of ordering the strongest, most potent mix of them all for the two of them, but right now, he'd done his job, and all he wanted was to get to his own buzz.

You'll thank me for this later, Johnnyboy.

--

Peter didn't have to lie this time when he said that his bladder was full to bursting. He swayed like a drunken kung-fu master, expertly avoiding any human-shaped obstacle that got in the way as he moved towards the general direction of the exit, towards the hall where he was sure the bathroom could be found.

A few minutes passed where he struggled to open his fly and relieve himself in front of urinal, cursing at his inability to maintain functioning motor skills. Once that was done and he'd washed his hands over the sink, the quiet walk down the hall back to the edge of the game room was a bit sobering, if not short.

But just before turning the last corner towards the double doors, he felt the urge to look out onto the living room downstairs where the dinner party was held. All the tables had disappeared, as if some manner of sorcery had been called upon at some point and everything was put back to the way it was before. It still amazed Peter how Tony had pulled the whole thing off without a hitch, how everything had succeeded and gone according to plan, with everyone being sated and happy and actually thankful on Thanksgiving for a change--
And then he saw a figure in the moonlight, past the glass panes separating the room inside from the balcony outside. There was a lone person there, leaning back against the bars that separated him from safety and a long fall to the streets below. The only indication the man gave that he was in fact, a person, was the light glowing dimly at the center of his chest, and right then Peter knew exactly who it was, standing still in the darkness.

His feet guided him down the steps to the living room landing, all the way to the opening that led to the balcony. From his vantage point, Peter could see Tony better.

Tony's hair fluttered slightly in the wind, his tie loosened and his neck bared. His posture was relaxed, his wide shoulders hitched upwards to support his weight as he leaned back. There was a thoughtful expression on his face, a pin-scratch of a crease appearing right between his eyebrows, and his head was tipped back, looking at the dark skies above, most likely searching for stars that couldn't possibly exist when there was so much light pollution covering New York. The city that never sleeps would never allow anyone the pleasure of stargazing, but nevertheless, Tony's eyes searched heavenward, and Peter was mesmerized by the sight.

There was something inherently bright and boyish about Tony, something that always attracted Peter whenever he was fortunate to get a glimpse it. Right at that moment, he could see it all, and Tony looked like an absolute dream.

Of course, he had to ruin everything by knocking over a potted plant with his foot.

Tony broke out of his self-imposed isolation as he snapped his gaze to him. Peter debated whether to haul the ficus back up on its feet or just leave it there, but sound of Tony's low chuckle made him forget about it entirely.

"Peter," he said brightly. "Nice night, isn't it?"

Peter smiled in return. "Yeah, it is." Tony turned back to the sky, and Peter made his approach, stopping until he was just a few inches shy of rubbing elbows with the other man. Curiosity winning over, Peter leaned against the balcony rails and craned his neck back.

"Oh, wow," he said, his breath stolen away by the sight. "That's ..." He couldn't help the grin that took over his face.

"... the wonders of technology for you," Tony finished in a soft voice.

The stars twinkled above them by the millions.

"It's beautiful," Peter said, his spirits lifted by the sight. He'd never been out of New York, not once in his twenty-three years of existence, so he'd never gotten the chance to see the stars, see the shapes they made out, the clusters they formed.

"When I was in Afghanistan, there weren't any city lights for miles to stop us from seeing all of this." Tony said this as if he was reliving a memory he was really fond of. "The cave dwelling we were imprisoned in, it had this hole in the ceiling, just this small chasm that went straight through the rock and opened up to the sky. It was dark there, and really, really cold, but when you look up you could see a patch of sky and it was all so brilliant."
Peter didn't say anything. He just stood there basking in the starlight, and the warmth of Tony's words. He didn't know how long they were there, shivering in the cold but feeling inexplicably buoyed by some other warmth, but eventually, Tony turned to him, a smile on his lips.

"How did you know I was out here?" he asked.

Peter dropped his gaze after a few seconds and stared right back. "I didn't. I went to the bathroom and just saw you on the way back."

Tony beamed in amusement, turning to him fully. He could tell Tony was happy just because of his presence, but there was still that underlying current of ruefulness to his smile.

"The party was great," Peter said, letting his gaze fall. "I didn't get to see you as much."

"That was my fault," Tony admitted quietly. "I had a lot of guests to entertain, circles to dance around in." He sighed hopelessly. "To be honest? I thought it was going to be fun. But I don't think I enjoyed myself very much in the end."

Peter's smile fell slightly. "Why's that?"

Tony lifted his shoulders, and then looked back out into space. "I ... well." Tony pursed his lips in thought. "For starters, one person couldn't make it."

Peter didn't have to ask. He'd been looking for the same man all night. Just by that statement alone, Peter could tell, beyond a doubt, that Tony felt something deep and profound for Steve, just as Steve did for him.

"I was looking for him all night, too," Peter shared quietly. Tony's eyes dropped to his face again, and his smile took on a different note, a mixture of something that was delight and sadness. It made his heart stutter in his chest. He slowly realized that he really didn't like it when Tony was unhappy, especially when it concerned Steve. It made his chest tighten and his breaths come out short.

Tony stepped closer, breaching the space in between them, and the warmth slowly came to life again, kickstarted by Tony's form. Peter looked up through his eyelashes, his eyes darting to Tony's lips for a moment as they parted to say:

"And then there was you. I didn't get to spend time with you alone."

Tony's head descended, and Peter, unable to contain himself, met the man halfway. Their lips brushed against each other, and it was slow and so, so wonderful. The way they moved, the way Tony's hands slipped around his neck and cupped around his ears to keep him there. The way his hands found Tony's chest and spread around, until he could feel more of the warmth, the want, the need. From the hitch of Tony's breath all the way to the perfect fit of his bigger body against his own. The way Tony pressed close, the way Tony's eyelashes brushed the bridge of his nose. The way he coaxed warmth from Peter's breath with his mouth like it was the easiest task in the world. All the ways that they fit and fell into each other. Peter loved it.

Tony pulled back to look at him, his eyes shining, but he held him close still, and Peter could have stayed like that for a long, long time.

Tony let out a quiet laugh. "I have no words to describe how amazing that was."

They held each other for a while, using each other as protection from the November cold. If Peter trained his ears, he could still hear the music coming from the party. They rocked slightly to it, Peter settling his head on Tony's shoulder and Tony pressing his nose against Peter's hair.
But at some point, they started to slow. Tony clung to him, hiding his face against the top of Peter's head. Peter could tell that the warmth was slowly ebbing away. He knew why it was happening, why they were coming down from the temporary high of being in each others' arms. It was like traveling back in time and watching himself, the way he'd acted yesterday at the park, with Johnny in his arms. It had the same bittersweet aftertaste.

"Listen," Peter murmured against Tony's jaw. "I know exactly how it feels, what you're going through."

"Do you?" Tony said. When he pulled back, he wasn't smiling anymore. He looked unhappy, and Peter wanted to smooth down the lines of his face, the stamp down the worries troubling the man before him.

Peter nodded seriously, his thumbs rubbing soothing circles against the man's shoulders.

Tony blinked at him a few times, and then drew his eyes shut, tucking his chin close to his chest. "Steve kissed me. That afternoon when I came back from the dead. He told me everything. That he-- what he--what he felt about me."

Peter didn't move away, didn't stop rubbing Tony's shoulders or rocking them back and forth. He had a feeling that something like that happened. It explained a lot of things. Why Tony had been aloof all night, why Steve wasn't in attendance. Peter nearly smiled, knowing how similar the events must have played out with the pair of them, and him and Johnny at the park.

"You know what's funny?" Peter said, and Tony glanced up, staring back with mirthless eyes. Peter smiled encouragingly. "Johnny did the same thing yesterday. We sucked face at the park."

Tony's eyes widened a fraction. "Did you now?"

"Mhmm." Peter maintained their positions, kept their movements constant. "I did the same thing you did. I told him that I needed time to figure out everything."

Tony considered his words for a moment. "That's ... odd. And to be honest, really fucking complicated for all parties involved."

Peter snorted, and somehow, the way he found everything so amusing startled a smile out of Tony. "What's so funny?" Tony asked.

Peter shook his head slowly, trying to keep things a bit more serious. "I don't know. But ... you know, I told Johnny all these things, made him a promise and everything, but in the end, I really, really couldn't decide. It's ... stupid. I'm so stupid. Was it the same with you? I mean ... I'm assuming that that's the case. You're here, right now, kissing the living daylights out of me, but at the same time--"

"--at the same time, I really want Steve to be here." Tony crinkled his nose. "Literally, Steve not showing up ruined this day for me."

Peter chuckled. "Yeah. That really sucks. But it's nothing compared to sitting with Johnny through dinner. It was like he was waiting for me to blurt out my choice, right there and then."

"But you couldn't decide."

"Nope. I couldn't. I mean, it's you. You're ... brilliant. and Johnny, Johnny's fantastic."
"I ... I know what you mean."

Peter pouted, and Tony at least looked shamefaced about his subtle reference. "You would know. You'd know a lot more than I would." He then smiled almost roguishly, and then kissed Tony's neck, his mouth moving across the small patch of skin underneath his jaw, making Tony's breath hitch.

"And yet you're still smiling about it." Tony complained. "Have you had too much to drink? You've been drinking a bit too much since the night began. I don't think you actually realize the kind of crappy situation we're in."

"It's the opposite, actually," Peter mused. "Hey--did you know? Darcy's in a relationship."

"This random tangent is not doing anything for my peace of mind." Tony pulled back a little and leveled Peter with a stare. "Who with?"

Peter wrapped his arms around Tony's side this time, pulling him close. "Thor."

"And Doctor Jane Foster," Peter supplied with cheek in his tone, making Tony freeze on the spot. "They're together. All three of them. And they're really perfect for each other."

Tony didn't say anything for a long moment, and Peter could practically hear the gears shifting in Tony's head.

"You're not thinking ..." Tony pulled back, his mouth slightly moving as if he was fumbling for the next words to say. Peter inclined his head, a slow smile tugging at his lips.

"Peter." Tony narrowed his eyes.

"It's the only option left."

"Yes, but ... Peter ..." His voice went soft.

"Yeees?"

Tony sighed a long-suffering sigh. "That's going to be hard to pull off. As in really hard to pull off."

"But you're not against the idea."

"It's ... a wild idea, for sure. Something probably only you can think of."

"But you're not against the idea."

Tony conceded with a frown. "No. Just ... the possibilities ... it's really interesting to think about. Now I can't get it out of my head."

"You know why? That's because it's the only option left, and incidentally it's a freaking satisfying option. With a lot of perks."

"Peter."

"Sexy, steamy hot perks."
Tony groaned, half because it was an outrageous idea, and half because the thought of it, Peter assumed, was making Tony's groin area tighten.

The more Peter thought about it, the more excited he started to become.

And from the way Tony grumbled an approving "I'm gonna need a lot of Scotch for this plan of yours" after a minute of deliberation, he knew that Tony also found the third option too good to resist.

Chapter End Notes

NOTE!!! I haven't abandoned this fic.

Okay, so. I don't know if it's right for me to give excuses as to why this took a while. I'm going to lay them out anyway, hoping that people are still reading and following this clusterfuckfic.

For one, it's a monumental chapter. The length alone should be an indication. I wanted to take my time with it, even though I still find it inadequate (I'm sorry in advance but I'll be going through this throughout the week to edit and add stuff in. Nothing major, just things that should hopefully flesh things out a bit more). This is where the third option is presented to the four protagonists. It's important okay? I'll definitely go over this tomorrow and make the ending a bit more descriptive. Just come back to it in a couple of days and reread it. It won't change much, if at all. I'll just strive to make it cleaner and better.

Second, life caught up to me. A lot of things happened. I'm going back to school next semester for some training, so I had to go through the process of sorting that out. Also, I'm planning a trip this December, so I had to go through things like passport renewals and embassies and what not. On top of work, I haven't been able to find time to focus. For the past few months, I've had it easy, so I was able to put 80-90% of my focus on this fanfic. It's the only way for me to go about writing this fanfic, so I don't sit down and write at all if I don't have the focus.

Also, I don't know if I should say this, but I will, anyway. My best friend found a cyst in her breast after some testing. I had to be with her because her boyfriend works in Singapore. She had the operation last Monday, and her biopsy results came back negative last Thursday so we're so fucking relieved. That was an added stressor in my life, so again, I couldn't focus.

In conclusion 1)This was an important chapter that needed some careful constructing and brainstorming 2)I got so busy all of a sudden, and got scared for my friend 3) I don't write if I'm not m!pregnant with muse, and I'm not pregnant with muse if I'm not focused.

So please accept this long-ass chapter as apology, and feel free to berate me in the comments.
You've Got A Friend In Me

Chapter Notes

I have no excuse as to how late this is lol. All that I can say is that Pokemon Moon came out, Yuri On Ice and Haikyuu came out, and I've been distracted by those on top of daily life. But here have another chapter!

Ha ha I'm so sorry please feel free to kill me in the comments section.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Not to toot my own horn here but isn't the suit just absolutely divine?"

"Yes, but--"

"I'm in love with it. It's beyond a doubt one of the most singular, creative creations I've ever created."

"While I agree that it's pretty badass--"

"And the way it fits. I didn't think Friday would get the thigh area right. He must have been probing you twenty-four seven. Maybe even while you were showering--"

"Tony ..."

Tony turned around, eyes inquiring, and Peter took a fistful of his shirt before tugging him in for a kiss. Shut up, the kiss said. Tony purred, perfectly content with being interrupted, stepping closer and letting his hands roam free around Peter's tight Spider suit. The contact sent a burning path along his sides, making Peter thrum with pleasure instantly.

It was so liberating and dizzying, being able to kiss the man without having to worry about repercussions or inhibitions, that they were lost to the activity for a while, just moving their lips together, nipping and sucking eagerly, noses bumping and blood flooding through their bodies. Tony tasted so good and so decadent, and he was so broad and warm that it ignited Peter with need.

Peter drew away, and Tony tilted forward helplessly in an attempt to prolong contact. Peter blinked in disbelief at how smitten Tony looked. His lips were red and swollen, his eyes bright, and he was smiling so wide it made Peter's chest tighten.

"Thought that would shut you up."

"Don't expect it to work all the time," Tony beamed with equal warmth. "But you're welcome to try. And try, and try ..."

Peter kissed him again, indulging himself, just living for the feel of Tony Stark's lips on his own. He drew back again, a little breathless and flushed.

"Okay, so. About the suit," Peter said, making a face, his hands smoothing back and forth over Tony's chest to soften his next words. Tony let his hands settle on the crook of Peter's narrow hips in return and looked satisfied.
"Perfect, right?" Tony eyed him hopefully, his brown eyes like rum.

"Not so much. I--it's kinda noisier than my older suit? I don't know how to explain it without having a jacked up spider give you a genetic love bite--and it stinks when I wear it for too long, wet hamper stinks, though I doubt that's really a problem, since the first time I used it was in Jurassic World."
Peter scrunched his nose repentantly. "Sorry?"

"All I heard from that was you giving me a jacked up, wet love bite," Tony said lowly, eyes becoming hooded as he closed the space between them. He nuzzled Peter's face again, mouth pressing against chin, gliding lightly over a long stretch of neck and making Peter's breath catch.

Tony's hands pinned his lower half in place, and just ever so slightly, he rocked his hips forward, the front of his bulge rubbing against the exact same tight spot on Peter's costume. He was letting Peter know how excited he was at that moment, and Peter's face nearly burst with redness. The moan that tried to escape him came out sounding a little too high-pitched.

It was a mad scramble after that. Their lips magnetized, crashing into each other, mouths moving and teeth bumping--Peter couldn't breathe steady, couldn't even get a good foothold, his senses suddenly assaulted by everything Tony. There was tongue, Tony's brilliant tongue, slipping in and tasting, small calculated swipes along the inside of Peter's mouth that pulled at his deeply seated lust, making him buck forwards like a needy little animal. Tony was so good at this, so good. Making Peter squirm and pant came so naturally to him, his movements deft and practiced and precise, that it was all Peter could do to hold on, to give as good as he got without slavering over Tony.

He was pushed back, ass bumping against the end of one of Tony's metal work tables. Tony propped him onto it, strong hands lifting him up by the thighs, his grip gentle but aggressive and searing. Their hips never left contact, Peter's legs splaying forward and accommodating Tony, letting him breach the tiny space. His hands, they were already working Tony's shirt, fumbling for his buttons, eager for more of that golden skin, and Tony's hands in turn were slipping into his costume, finding the invisible hem of the suit he made without so much as a fuss, and Peter's stomach was suddenly exposed to the cold air, Tony's rough fingers mapping, memorizing--

"Sir, need I remind you that I'm programmed to intervene should I detect any activity leading to coitus with Mr. Parker?"

Tony's lips detached from his with a squelching noise, and Peter blinked his eyes open, bleary and confused.

"W-what? What's goin' on?" Peter licked his lips, his hips giving a lazy thrust against Tony, and Tony growled quietly in turn, his expression both amused, intensely aroused, and frustrated at the same time.

"Oh, Peter ..." Tony sighed, eyes raking over him shamelessly. Peter's chest was heaving, his torso half-exposed, his cock aching to burst out of his tights, but he was getting lucid, slowly spiraling down from the high that the intense makeout session propelled him towards.

"Did you," Peter licked his lips, still reeling from the aftertaste of Tony. "Did you program Friday to cockblock?"

Tony looked around, suddenly feeling ashamed of himself. His shirt was torn open, exposing his arc reactor, his dark hair disheveled so enticingly. "Yeah, I ... I figured we might get carried away. It was a reasonable assumption, and I was right--all it took was a little flirting and we're--we're already interfacing with our dicks like high schoolers. I thought--well, I thought you might regret it later if we ... I mean, think about Johnny, what he would feel--"
"No no no, you're right. You're right. Brilliant, as usual," Peter hastily interrupted, rolling down on his spine to lie on the table and bury his head in his hands. "God, that was so embarrassing, we almost--"

"I mean, I wanted to," Tony burst out, and Peter peeked around his fingers. Tony was staring hard at him. "I want to, now, to ... be inside you."

Peter drew in a harsh breath. "Fuck. Me too," he whined, not at all sounding like a manslut but getting close. "You make me want to christen this place--this is like a number three in a list of sex fantasies for me, but ..."

"Just number three?" Tony stood back and raised an eyebrow.

"There are other labs, other places. But forget that--we have to hold out. We have to not have sex. Oh my God this is going to be torture."

Tony huffed out another sigh. "We need to plan things. We need to come up with a nice, solid plan. That's what we need to do. The sooner we get Steve and Johnny on board, the sooner I can pound into you without regret."

"Fuck," Peter groaned, and then lightly kicked Tony in the thigh. "Stop that. Stop being lusty and alluring."

Tony's chuckling in that dark and inconceivable 'sexy bastard' way. "It's hard to stop when you look like that. All spread out and ready for me."

Peter's dick gave a twitch in his tights.

"Holy hornyballs I need to leave. We need to not be in the same room together or I'll go insane."

--

When Peter said he needed to leave, he didn't exactly mean leave as in buy a plane ticket, go to the airport, and fall in line in front of a gate to board a flight to Italy. He'd never even flown internationally before--disregarding, of course, the trips he was forced to take in the quinjet or the blackbird, to places dangerous and unknown and more often than not involving bogs, mosquitoes, and lunatics out to get him. Those were trips he'd rather not relive.

Peter reached the front of the queue, handing over his boarding card. It was so odd having to do it the regular way. He was used to being grabbed by the waist and whisked off to God knows where, never having to worry about security or baggage or check-in times.

Except this still isn't the regular way of flying, not when Tony had to pull a huge ball of strings just to get me a VISA and a plane ticket within the hour.

But Florence was what Steve had chosen. Peter was about to board a plane to Florence.

"He didn't choose it. He just picked a random travel destination," Tony had wrinkled his nose in a pained expression, after one of his associates over at JFK had tipped him off to Steve's location just two hours after the news broke.

"Why me?" Peter had asked.

"Because of a number of reasons," Tony had replied. "For one, Steve would turn tail and run the second he catches sight of me, and he'd go into hiding. He's much better at hiding than running
away, so for now let's be glad he just decided to go on a small vacation."

"And the other reasons?"

"Your secret identity. You look the most unassuming out of all of us. We don't want two immensely popular public heroes on a plane. It'll cause mayhem."

"Immensely popular?" Peter had quirked an eyebrow. Tony had shrugged.

"Subtlety is not my strong suit. Plus," Tony had stared straight into his eyes, placing his hands on Peter's shoulders, where they smoothed down his upper arms with a squeeze. "This is your chance to sweep the guy off his feet. I know you can do it. You can be pretty sexy if you wanted to."

"Really?" Peter had sounded genuinely surprised, and he'd looked so innocent then that Tony had gone in for another kiss, a steamy one that was all heavy breathing and groaning into each other's mouths.

Friday had had to stop them again after.

I hate the media. The media can suck it. The public can suck it, Peter repeated in his head, even as he glanced at his phone time and time again to see more news articles being written about Captain America in real time.

Out of all of them, Steve was the most sensitive to public opinion. The man wasn't used to getting bashed. Back in the forties, no one but the enemy had the balls to cry foul over Captain America, and it was one of the few things Steve had gotten used to, one of the things that totally changed the second he woke up in a different time. Back then, Steve virtually had no haters in his own country, but now, with how vicious the media was when it came to spinning a story and damaging a public figure's reputation, Steve had a lot.

Especially now that Captain America had come out of the closet.

A member of the cabin crew welcomed him aboard, and Peter asked her where his seat was. Peter hadn't asked how Tony had acquired the ticket to the seat closest to Steve's, but Tony had indulged him anyway, saying that the transaction with the lady who was supposed to be Steve's seatmate involved a lot of things, including an upgrade to first class, round trip tickets to four continents plus accommodations, and an early Christmas present in the form of a Stark smartphone fresh from the new December line.

One he got to 4C—Steve, who sat in 4A, had bought out 4B without realizing that the plane sat people by threes—he found the man in a crisp navy blue cap, Oakley's, an off-white shirt, and a grey bomber jacket, looking more like a sky marshal than the actual sky marshal, wherever he was. To his dismay, Steve was scrolling through his own Starkphone, reading every article with a hurt face.

Peter slipped into his seat and leaned into Steve's space. "You don't have to read any of that."

Steve started, his face closing off for a second before he recognized Peter. His eyes softened into relief the next second, then widened in surprise, and then finally narrowed in suspicion.

"How did you find me?" Steve asked, and then, after a pause in which he looked down at his phone and realized who manufactured it, added: "Nevermind. Tony sent you, didn't he?"

"No, uh," he shuffled in seat, preparing to lie. "S.H.I.E.L.D. did. They didn't want you alone, even though that's probably what you want to be right now."
"I'm not going back," Steve replied resolutely, shoulders bunched up and mouth set in a defiant line, yet he sounded a lot more vulnerable than Peter expected. "I mean, I am. But not now. The plane's about to take off."

"I know you aren't," Peter eyed the baggage compartment, and then stood, stuffing his carry-on into the space. He plopped back down into the middle seat this time and offered Steve a tentative smile. "I'm tagging along. I want to see Italy. You know, art and the Renaissance ... art. I hear Florence is lovely this time of year."

Steve stared. "It's nearly December. It's gonna be cold and bleak."

Peter wondered if Steve was referring to Italy or his own temperament.

"Because it's like the Russian tundra up there," he rolled his eyes. "If I wanted to go somewhere warm I'd be flying to the Canary Islands with a bathing suit."

A stewardess started listing safety protocol over the speakers, and Peter craned his neck to watch as a steward showed them how to fasten their seatbelts.

"It's gonna be dull and boring," Steve tried again in a quieter voice, leaning forward and digging for the straps lodged underneath his thighs. Peter shot him a mildly annoyed look and started putting on his own seatbelt.

"I'm already strapping in," Peter shot back, and then sighed. "Even if you told me the Plague resurfaced in Southern Europe I'd still want to go with you."

Peter chose his words carefully to make sure Steve understood that he wasn't doing this just because he was ordered to keep an eye on him.

Steve's eyes darted around aimlessly, looking desperate to find some other excuse to drive Peter off, but Peter put a hand on his arm and glowered at him.

"I'm coming with you," he stated with a hard stare. "I'm here as a ... buddy. A vacation buddy. It's not fun going to a foreign place alone."

Steve went wide-eyed. "You tagging along would make the trip more fun? Do you even know anything about Italy?"

"Do you?" he retaliated.

"I'm part Italian," Steve leaned back, affronted.

"And the heritage comes along with a built-in Italian database I'm sure," he said wryly.

"I know enough," Steve sulked, and Peter smiled despite himself.

"Look, I don't ... I don't know anything about Europe. It's my first time flying internationally," Peter confessed. "You can be my tour guide or something. I mean, provided you'd know what to talk about. Consider it a distraction. You want that, right? A distraction?"

"I ..." Steve had that lost expression again, and Peter started to understand that the other man didn't really know what he was doing and was being impulsive. He couldn't even fathom what would happen if Steve went to Italy by himself, knowing what he was leaving behind.

Steve didn't say anything else, and Peter sat back, knowing that he'd won for now. Steve however
still clutched at the phone like a lifeline, and Peter was prepared to swat at his wrist the second he thought about reading through all the shit people were saying about him again.

It was a ten hour flight and it was nearing dusk, with the sun close to the horizon and casting orange light through the plane windows. The plane lurched, and the woman on the overhead speakers was replaced by the pilot, speaking in a calm and friendly voice. This was happening, Peter thought. He was going to another continent with Steve. Tony sent him on a mission to seduce, but it all sounded so ridiculous now that he saw firsthand what Steve's state was like.

"It's gonna be fine," Peter turned to Steve and spoke lightly. "I'm sure the plane food's nice and there's tons of old movies to watch. I know the team's been making you watch 80s movies, but what do you say we catch up on movies from when I was a kid? Have you seen Toy Story?"

--

Steve hadn't seen it.

"It's a kid's movie," Steve remarked under his breath as he flashed a brief smile at a stewardess who handed them blankets.

"It speaks to all ages," Peter said solemnly. "You'll see what I mean once it gets real gritty."

"How gritty can a kid's movie get?"

At Steve's raised eyebrow, Peter pouted. "Okay, maybe I used the wrong word. But it gets good, just watch."

"So the toys ... they come alive when the owner's not looking."

"Pretty much, yeah."

"Isn't that kind of creepy?" Steve frowned.

Peter stared at him for a long time as the army men start marching towards the birthday party.

"Okay, it kind of is. But this is PG stuff. They're not gonna do anything bad ... sort of. Just ..." Peter threw his hand out. "Chuck the criticisms out the window for a while. Suspension of disbelief, Steve," he said seriously.

Steve blinked at him once, and then nodded with a sort of indulgent smile. He turned back to the backseat screen and widened his eyes in surprise when the army general said, 'A good soldier never leaves a man behind'.

"Those army men are pretty serious about this birthday party," Steve said. "They sound like actual soldiers."

"See? It's somewhat relatable, right?" Peter beamed. "Now, hush. It's gonna get better. And don't hog the blanket, Cap, this flight's being real economical."

--

"This Buzz Lightyear guy's pretty uptight."

Peter snickered under his breath.

"What?" Steve's eyebrows knit together.
"He's you." Peter grinned. "He's so you. Tell me you didn't think the exact same thing when they pulled you out of the ice."

Buzz kept nattering about his broken ship and trying to contact Star Command.

Steve's face pinched, affronted. "I handled it way better than he's doing now. I was briefed for such an outcome."

"They told you beforehand that your body will plummet to the sea after destroying a Nazi missile mid-air and you'd wake up years from then after they'd thawed you out?"

Steve pursed his lips. "Maybe." Steve's face changed into a more sober expression. "Okay, so ... they didn't. But I was expecting worse than that."

_He'd expected to die,_ was Peter's next thought, and the mood shifted a little after that.

"At least you didn't come out of the ice delusional," Peter pointed out, and the muscles in Steve's face eased a little.

As the scene went on, Steve muttered: "He's more like Tony anyway." Peter glanced at him.

"Arrogant man in a metal suit, eager to show off all his gadgets."

Peter's loud laugh made the other passengers complain.

--

Peter had one eye on Steve, watching as the man became fully absorbed in the movie. His face scrunched in worry when Sid managed to pluck Buzz and Woody from the crane game.

Was the movie drawing some kind of memory from him? Maybe. Peter didn't know what kind--Steve had been a soldier of S.H.I.E.L.D. ever since he came out of the ice and signed a contract. Maybe Sid's the movie version of some villain in the past that had taken interest in him and his genetic enhancements? Whatever was on his mind, it was clear from Steve's face that it was not a pleasant memory.

"I was wrong. Tony's a lot more like Woody," Steve decided some time during the scene. Peter kept watch, even managing to take the phone away from the man's iron grip when it had loosened.

"How?" Peter inquired softly, not really in the mood to pull Steve out of the immersive experience. He tucked the man's phone away in his pocket.

"I don't know," Steve shrugged, his eyes managing to stay glued to the screen, but he followed the words up with: "He's rational. And really, he only wants to find a home, or return to a place he can call home. A safe space, I guess. And whatever Buzz does he always goes against his better judgment and tries to take the guy with him."

"And you're ... Buzz in this scenario?"

Steve shrugged again. "I guess so. He's pretty set in his ways. And he wants to go home, too." He turned to Peter and had an inexplicable shine in his eyes. "I have two hunches as to how this movie's going to end up."

Peter gave Steve a pat on the shoulder. "Whatever sad, horrifying ending you're thinking about, it won't happen."
"It's a kid's movie. Of course it's going to have a good ending."

Peter's grip tightened a little around the fabric of Steve's jacket. "It happens in real life, too, Cap."

--

After a disturbing scene in Sid's room where Peter had to hold Steve's hand to prevent him from yelling profanities at the screen, Peter found sheer delight in Steve's ecstatic face as the toys began to reveal themselves to Sid in his backyard, an expression that instantly shifted into distress as Andy's car began to rev.

"He came back for Buzz again," Steve said distantly, and then his face fell when Andy's car drove out. "Oh no. How will they get to Andy now?"

"Just keep watching," Peter said brightly, thinking, if there was one thing he could do all day, it was to watch Steve's open and earnest face change from excitement to worry to satisfaction while watching a Pixar movie. *No wonder the team makes him watch all kinds of movies. He's a very responsive audience member.*

Once the movie was over, Steve launched into a long discussion with Peter, and Peter in turn indulged the excited man-kid.

"I can't believe you think Hamm the piggy bank is Natasha," Peter cackled. "She'd have your balls strung from Stark Tower if you said that to her."

"What? It's a compliment! He was the most rational toy in the group!"

Peter rolled his eyes. "And I'm guessing you think Rex is Clint and Slinky's Bruce?"

"Rex is kind of an idiot and Slinky's Woody's best friend. It makes sense," Steve grinned lopsidedly.

"But Mr. Potato Head can't be Thor. I don't see it."

"I don't know. Thor's ... Nordic? Scandinavian? Don't they like potatoes over there?"

Peter tried to suppress another chuckle, and Steve swelled, looking satisfied at being able to make Peter laugh. *And I don't have to fake anything. Steve's pretty witty.*

"Janet, then. Mr. Potato Head is Janet."

When dinner arrived, neither one of them protested to watching Toy Story 2 while eating.

--

Steve was surprised to find himself happily distracted for close to three hours (he knew that that was what this was; a distraction). He didn't even protest when Peter took away his phone, allowing the younger man to do whatever it took to detach him from the world for a little while.

And Toy Story had been really good, he had to admit. The team hadn't shown him too many animated films yet, and he was astonished to find that kid's films could delve into a lot of deeply-seated issues and tug at them until every emotion was spilling out of a person.

As for Peter ... he didn't really expect the man to be so good at being distracting. Not once had Steve reverted back to thinking about the mess he was leaving behind, and Peter's enthusiasm made all the weight melt off of his shoulders. He thought that Peter was going to be there only to serve as a chaperone, but Peter seemed to be enjoying the flight, even more so than he was.
He was grateful that Peter didn't spoil anything about the movie like Clint would, or launch into a complicated, convoluted explanation about the movie like Bruce. It was easy, watching a movie with Peter. Comfortable.

*Just like when I'm watching movies with Tony.*

They were well into the second installment of Toy Story, when right in the middle of the scene where Woody found out that he was a rare collectable, a kid from the next seat started yelling at a stewardess.

"I told you, I'm fine! Would you stop *babying* me?"

The two of them had caught on for the while that the boy was flying alone. He was around eight or nine years old, and no matter what the flight crew did, they couldn't appease him or his petulant rage. The stewardess gave them an apologetic smile when they looked over, and Steve nodded in understanding, but he was stunned when Peter stood up and told him to pause the video, going over to the next line of seats and talking to the boy.

Steve didn't catch much of what was said or how Peter had managed to stop the boy from bursting into tears, but he came back a few minutes later with the boy in tow, holding a toy that looked suspiciously like The Hulk.

He remembered that Bruce never agreed to being part of Tony's wild idea of making the Ultimates a toy franchise, so the toy must have been a knock-off.

"Oh my God it really is you," the kid said in awe, standing frozen in place and staring at him with wide eyes. Steve blinked in turn, not exactly sure as to what to say.

"See? I told you I'm flying with Captain America," Peter said smugly, darting a placating glance at Steve. "Don't worry, he won't tell. Right, JJ?"

"I won't I promise!" the boy chirped, and then eagerly took the middle seat, blinking curiously at Steve.

"Hi," Steve said awkwardly, and the boy squinted at him.

"You're a lot smaller than I thought you'd be," the boy decided after a while, and Steve chanced a smile.

"The toys don't really do me justice," Steve paused, and then said: "Also, the camera adds ten pounds."

Peter took the aisle seat and then leaned forward to press the screen. "What do you say we watch Toy Story 2 together?"

Peter glanced at Steve again, silently asking for permission, and Steve nodded imperceptibly. Peter beamed at him warmly, and Steve felt heat crawl up his neck.

"I've already seen that movie," JJ said quietly, some traces of his previous petulance coloring his voice.

"Ah, but Cap here hasn't yet," Peter told him, and Jj widened his eyes at Steve again.

"I was frozen in the Arctic when the movie came out," Steve supplied helpfully.
JJ considered this for a short moment. After that, he opened his mouth to say, proudly: "Okay. Ask me if you don't understand anything. Grandpa says I'm really perceptive."

And so they watched the movie until it was well and truly dark outside the plane windows. Steve indulged the boy with questions about Jesse and Bullseye and Stinky Pete, which JJ answered with gusto. He and Peter shared twin looks of amusement whenever JJ explained things seriously, with enough hand gestures to hit Peter in the face on multiple occasions.

Peter was also good at persuading the boy to eat dinner, speaking to him frankly and always mentioning his Grandpa. It was ... oddly endearing to watch. Peter treated JJ like an equal and never spoke down to him, and this put JJ at ease, smiling and laughing along whenever something hilarious happened in the movie.

Steve found himself paying more attention to Peter than the movie, raising an eyebrow at how he shared conspiratorial glances with JJ, or laughing under his breath when Peter made adult jokes that flew over JJ's head.

Having a kid between them was even more distracting, and Steve forgot about the whole 'gay Cap going viral' mess altogether.

Peter didn't seem to mind the kid at all, as if he'd tagged along with them on the trip.

When Peter had finally cajoled the kid back to his seat to sleep, Steve inquired about JJ.

"He's an orphan," Peter told him quietly.

"How'd you find out?" Steve asked.

"The stewardess from before. I asked her when I went to the bathroom." Pete scrunched his nose. "They were supposed to look after Jean-Jacques until he arrived in Florence. His parents died in a terrorist attack, and the rest of his family lives in Italy. His Grandpa lives in the States, and he really loves him, but the man is too old to take care of him. JJ's on his way back home so he was short about everything."

Steve nodded slowly, watching as Peter darted glances every now and then at the sleeping boy. "That's really sad."

And very enlightening. Peter would know how it was like, not having living parents himself. It was the same thing for Steve. He knew what it had been like, back at the orphanage in Brooklyn. Everyone tended to baby you or treat you as an object of pity. It made sense now how Peter knew exactly what to do with the boy.

"You did good," Peter said, casting his eyes down on his lap and shifting awkwardly in his seat. "We were lucky he absolutely worships the Ultimates. He likes Bruce, though," Peter hinted a smile. "I didn't have the heart to tell him that Bruce, for all the shape-changing and Hulking he does, is a giant stick in the mud."

Steve chuckled lightly. "Yes. But I think you made the whole brilliant scientist thing more exciting than it actually is."

Peter shrugged his shoulders. "JJ's really smart. Maybe someday he can be a scientist, too." He spoke so fondly of JJ that it was almost like they were related. Steve found himself hanging on to every word.

Peter continued: "You know kids. They're impressionable at that age. Things like this, meeting guys
like you, it sticks with them forever."

Steve sat back and turned his head, leaning a bit closer as he examined the play of emotions on Peter's face. "Sounds like you're drawing from personal experience."

"I am, I, uh." Peter ducked his head again, rubbing the back of his neck.

"I met Tony years back," he blurted, and then pulled back, catching himself. It was the first time since they boarded the plane that he'd mentioned anything Tony. Steve had noticed how he'd been dancing circles around the topic of the man, for his sake, most like. He was grateful for it, but now it seemed almost inevitable that they talked about Tony. Peter had met him when he was a kid? Steve didn't know that. It was a surprising revelation.

"I mean, he's always been an inspiration, you know?" The corners of Peter's lips tugged, his eyes far off as if he was reliving a memory. "He's one of the reasons why I'm into all this science-y stuff. He and my dad, or the stories Uncle Ben told me about my dad."

_And now you're together_, Steve added in his head despite himself, sounding a bit too bitter and resentful, though he still wasn't sure about where the two were about the whole thing. Peter hadn't mentioned once whether they were together or not, for his sake, most like. Either that or they weren't together, and Steve was just being an ass.

He had no right to be resentful towards Peter, not when he was such a good person. Not when he could see, plain as day, how Tony would fall for someone like him. He'd never once told JJ that he was also a hero, a person to be looked up to. Peter hadn't think that JJ meeting him would leave any impact in his life. Granted, he never even revealed that he was Spider-Man. That in itself said so much about his character.

Conversation between them died quickly. Everyone in the plane was settling in for bed, and Steve did the same, not really up for talking about Tony just yet. Maybe it would come up during the trip, and maybe it won't. Peter had been great company so far, so he expected that Peter wouldn't pry or push him into anything he didn't want to do.

All in all, he was glad that Peter had been the one S.H.I.E.L.D. had sent.

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Later on, when Steve was already fast asleep and the cabin was dead to the world, Peter fished his phone out to check his messages.

He found around ten or so messages from Johnny, and three from Tony.

Johnny's messages were around the same. _Where r u? and Where is Tony hiding u?? and I stg Ill go over there and rescue u rn!!! and R U w/ STEVE?_

Tony's messages mostly inquired about how the flight was going and how he'd been trying and failing to assure Johnny that everything was fine.

Peter fired out a text to Tony and ignored Johnny after strict warnings from the other man.

_Hey you. Everyone is sleeping. We're still in flight. Steve and I watched Toy Story 1 and 2 with this kid named JJ. It was cool._

He smiled when not a minute later a reply came up.
Awesome. And I imagine the whole arrangement has been smoothed over? He doesn't hate me, does he?

Peter replied to him just as quick, and that started a conversation of rapidfire texting.

I told him that SHIELD sent me. Idk yet if he's ready to talk. I mentioned you once tonight and he shut down for bed. But he's friendly enough. He really liked Toy Story?

You know we haven't started him on Pixar films yet. Those movies are supposed to be for the team. You're ruining our schedule.

Peter had to stifle a laugh.

Sorry. But he really did like them. He thought that you were Buzz at first. After a while he decided he's Buzz and you're Woody. It was kind of ... really sweet.

Oh ... did he say why?

Just that you're always looking out for him and that he doesn't always know what's best for him. Tony, he really thinks the world of you. He doesn't say it out loud, but it's there and I ... I'm kind of jealous.

Peter had to wait for a while for the next text to come, blushing the whole time. It was a lot easier to be frank about what he felt when it was only through text, but it didn't make things any less embarrassing.

Don't be. He's important to me, but you're just as important.

Peter's chest swelled at that. He couldn't find anything disingenuous in the words. Not when he knew exactly what it felt like to fall for more than one person. Another text followed that, and he found his face heating up in the darkness.

I miss you, Peter. I couldn't stop thinking about you all day. The things we did in the lab ...

... Really?

Peter shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He chanced a glance at Steve, who was fast asleep, half his face buried in blankets.

Yeah. You gave me the nastiest case of blueballs this morning. I'm getting hard just thinking about it.

Peter steadied his breathing, his heart stuttering. We're they going to do this? His heartbeat hammered in his head at the thought.

You didn't ... like, do anything after?

I won't do anything until you two are back. But believe me, it's torture ... I've had to press the heel of my hand down on my crotch during a meeting, Peter. It was really unpleasant.

The thought of Tony squirming to keep his erection in check during an important meeting made Peter's thighs burn with the memory of how Tony had fit there. He was getting aroused just thinking about it.

You're getting me all hot and bothered.

Maybe that's what I was going for.
Peter's hand disappeared underneath his blanket, his fingers trailing over the pulsating fly of his pants. He was ten thousand feet up in the air, and the thought of being that aroused while on a plane was giving him a headache. He decided to be a bit adventurous, and fired a text before he could think it through.

You know. You don't have to hold out ... I mean, if it's all the same. We're talking now. Why be hard on yourself?

That's a thought.

Peter waited in bated breath for a response. It took a while. Peter had had to glance up and down the aisle to make sure no one could see him working himself in the darkness. He'd had to keep one eye on Steve to make sure he was still sleeping before slowly undoing his fly. He was hard, aching hard, his cock filling with each beat of his heart.

Peter's had to stifle a groan when Tony replied.

He didn't expect to receive a picture.

A stiff, hard mast of a cock jutting out from dark slacks. Tony's dick, sent through text.

I lied. I've been touching myself since we started.

Peter hastily replied with a very eloquent, Fucj, misspelled and everything.

You're so horny, Christ.

Peter took his dick in his hand and started pumping slowly. To think that that could have been inside him if Friday hadn't intervened. To think that mere millimeters of fabric separated him from that cock this morning. That that had grazed his inner thigh over and over again as a bulge before that stupid AI decided to--

Peter moaned quietly, smooth hand fisting himself underneath the blanket.

Miles away in another part of the world, Tony Stark was masturbating to him.

Another text came, and this time, Tony's shirt was unbuttoned, spread open to reveal a gorgeous expanse of tan skin dusted lightly with hair. His pants were unzipped, the very end of the split fabric cupping Tony's balls, and his cock lay swollen on his hard stomach, jutting out from a thicket of dark hairs. Peter could just make out a droplet of precome adorning the very tip of his erection.

His knees trembled as arousal, sharp as a hot sword, speared through him.

I want this in you, Pete. Filling you up. Plugging you. Grazing your insides and pumping fast while you scream.

Peter's hips bucked against his fist, the string of filthy words making his mouth dry and his stroking erratic. God, this is hot. God, Tony's fucking hot.

Unable to resist, Peter shoved his phone underneath his blanket and risked taking a picture of himself, trying valiantly to make sure the flash didn't alert anyone. It took a few tries, but once he was satisfied, he tried stringing together a pathetic excuse for a sext.

He decided going for the shy and awkward route.

I ... I'm jerking off while on a plane. This is nuts.
He ended up sounding stupid and painfully obvious instead.

When it sent, Peter continued stroking himself, feeling like a teenager all over again, being extra careful not to get caught and stifling any and all of the sounds threatening to spill out of his mouth.

*Oh, Peter ... I'll have that in my mouth soon enough. I can't wait to taste you.*

Peter stroked himself furiously, trying to think of Tony's hands all over him, running up and down his thighs, cupping the swell of his ass, thumbs drawing lazy circles against his waist, all while Tony worked him with his mouth, gagging, slurping, taking it all in--

Peter's thoughts were jumping all over the place, unable to form a cohesive image. But it was all there, easily constructed before him once he concentrated. Tony would be taking all of his length, hot mouth hollowing around the cheeks, and he'd look up, an intense glint of arousal in his hooded eyes ... 

*What will you do to me?* His fingers managed to send.

There was a wet spot forming where the tip of his dick met the blanket, and he didn't care for it at all, didn't care that by the time they've left the plane, someone will know that he'd been pleasuring himself mid-flight.

*I'm going to fuck your ass when you get home.*

*Fuck you til you're wide enough to drive a fucking truck through.*

*Would you like that?*

When he'd pressed send on *Fuck yes,* he came. Hard.

The orgasm made his whole body sing in pleasure as he spent himself all over the insides of his blanket.

Peter made sure to take a picture of the mess he'd made, too.

Seconds after he'd sent the image, Tony sent him another picture in return.

Thick wads of spunk lay splattered all over Tony's stomach and chest, with some even landing on the surface of Tony's arc reactor. Peter blushed hotly. It was the single most arousing picture he'd seen in his life.

*We're doing that again,* Peter sent, panting in ecstasy.

When he glanced sideways, Steve stirred in his sleep, but showed no indication that he was awake. Peter let out a shaky sigh of relief.

*You know, I could fly out, right now. I could be in Florence within the hour. We could get Steve in on the idea, too. It'd be really, really dirty and hot.*

Peter snorted. *You'd be going back on the deal we made. You promised you'd get Johnny on board!*

*It's proving to be quite difficult. Johnny's too upset right now. It's not helping that you two are going to Italy and we're not telling him. And you're so dangerously hot, Peter. So freaking attractive and sublime and beautiful. You've got a beautiful dick and everything. I'll be dreaming about this for a long time.*
Hopefully it doesn't take that long. But really, I like Steve a lot and I don't want to rush him into doing anything he doesn't want.

That's totally fair. I don't want you to do that, either.

Peter was just proud of them both for having enough restraint about their situation. Of course, exchanging dick pics and jerking off to each other could hardly be called restraint, but at least they were continuing on with their plan. It wasn't like this would be a setback for them. It was a definite plus. He had pictures of Tony's dick in his inbox now for Chrissake.

The spunk would be a bitch to clean.

Sucks for you, sweet. But tell me all about it.

After going to the bathroom to clean and relieve himself, Peter went on to text Tony about how the whole flight went until finally, he passed out from the exhaustion.

Chapter End Notes

I was going to include images, but I figured, it's not that hard to look up images of naked sexts these days. So try to imagine how it would all look instead ;)

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