Like Father, Like Son

by castlesbuiltintheair

Summary

When Tony chose not to be a part of his son's life, he never really planned on changing that decision. He was happy to keep his distance and watch Peter grow up far away from him and all the craziness that came with his life. Except that, even without Iron Man and the Avengers, his kid manages to become a vigilante superhero on his own. Tony probably should have seen that coming. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, after all.

Notes

Edit: Spoilers for Captain America: Civil War and Spider-Man: Homecoming, and the general MCU!

Edit 2: The primary focus of this fic is Peter and Tony's relationship with each other as Father and Son, and sorting out some Tony-centric post-Civil War feels, with background working through the impact of Civil War/the Accords to rebuild the Avengers again. The romantic
ships like Michelle/Peter and Steve/Tony will be pretty slow burn.

Thanks for reading and hope you enjoy <3
Chapter 1

Tony’s made many mistakes in his life. Some easily dismissed and forgotten, some just extremely embarrassing for him to learn from. And some that have fundamentally changed his life and turned it on its head.

Long before Afghanistan and finding out about his empire built on ashes, one such mistake happens.

Except Tony doesn’t like to call it a mistake, because…well. His mistakes have never, ever produced a good thing - before, or since then.

Honestly, he could go as far as to call this event a singularity, something that stands above and apart from the other parts of Tony’s life… mostly because he willed it so. Wanted to keep this precious, important thing safe, and leave it unsullied by Tony Stark and everything that came with that name.

It happened like this.

It was nearing midnight on New Year's Eve, 2000. The celebrations ushering in the birth of a new millennium were in full-swing across the country.

Tony was in one of the fanciest nightclubs in New York, mixing all sorts of drinks and drugs in highly inadvisable combinations and dancing with two up-and-coming supermodels. So basically ushering in the new year in his typical fashion. The natural progression of the night should’ve been Tony getting increasingly inebriated, followed by a threesome at his hotel suite, which would probably find its way to the internet as a sex tape a few days down the line, released by said supermodels for their ten minutes in the spotlight as Tony Stark’s latest scandal.

Only, that wasn't what happened that night.

Instead, when Tony headed to the bar to down a couple more shots of tequila, someone took the seat next to him. A lovely, female someone that Tony found himself immediately captivated by, though he couldn’t exactly tell you why, even to this day.

She was nowhere near as hot as the sultry girls he was just dancing with, wouldn’t even make the top fifty list of the most gorgeous people he had been with till then. But there was a quiet gravity to her, an intelligence in her eyes and a melancholy dignity to her spine that had Tony instantly forgetting all about the two girls he was with.

In hindsight, he now knows she never would have given him the time of day if she hadn’t emotionally been where she was, fresh on the grief of being widowed barely a fortnight ago and desperate for any distraction that could pierce through the numb loneliness.

But, on that night, she let him buy her drinks and chat her up, let him kiss her at midnight on the dance floor and take her to his suite for the night.

When he finally woke up around noon the next day, bleary-eyed and hungover, she was already gone. Tony didn’t think anything of it. It was hardly the first time one of his one night stands disappeared before he woke up.

He did not expect to see her ever again. Certainly not ten months later, sitting across from him in his living room, with a blue-wrapped bundle in her arms.

She told him she was going to name him Peter, and give him her maiden surname ‘Parker’. She told
him she wouldn’t have showed him Peter at all, except that it felt wrong to take the choice to be involved or not in Peter’s life away from him.

Tony, being who he was at the time, took the coward’s way out.

He threw money at her, and when she refused it, strong-armed her into accepting child support and a trust fund for the kid’s future. He was then more or less prepared to vanish from the kid’s life.

Except fate was a cruel bitch.

He never expected to be standing at Mary Parker’s grave little over a year later, cheek still smarting from the punch her brother Benjamin had thrown when he set eyes on Tony, his wife May standing to the side holding the sleeping toddler protectively.

Tony followed them to their little, one-story home in Forest Hills, Queens to discuss what was going to happen next. Watching the newly-wed couple, younger than him but already so much more responsible and loving and in control, he knew it was for the best to leave Peter with them and never let their circles meet again.

And that was that.

He had still kept tabs on the kid – being a genius and having an AI that can crack any database let you do that pretty easily. Not to mention a certain kind-hearted aunt, who sent Tony pictures of the kid once in a while through a private and encrypted e-mail account he’d set up just for that purpose.

When he woke up hungover after a conference in Switzerland in 2004, it was to JARVIS alerting him to pictures from Peter’s third birthday party. He knew when Peter was directly bumped into primary school instead of kindergarten because he was recognized as a budding genius. On that fateful morning in Afghanistan, before everything changed, Tony had been watching a local news video about Peter winning the National Under-13 Science Olympiad, at the tender age of 8. But no one else knew about Peter, not even Pepper or Rhodey, and Tony kept well away from the Parker family.

Even when he desperately wanted to reach out and try to forge a relationship with Peter, in those months right after he returned from Afghanistan when all he seemed to be doing was fix the mistakes of his past... Tony had still stayed away.

And after being betrayed by his managing partner, nearly dying under the attack of a vengeful lunatic, then nearly dying from palladium poisoning, then nearly dying from an alien attack, and then getting his house blown up by a terrorist – well. Tony was glad he resisted the impulse. The last thing the kid needed was a dad who showed up out of the blue then died before his eyes. The boy would be safer, happier, without him.

Tony continued to watch over him though. He knew when Peter graduated middle school and chose a science-based high school; Tony made an anonymous donation to upgrade the research labs at Midtown School of Science and Technology. He silently fumed for weeks when Peter had accepted an offer to intern at Oscorp over Stark Industries (!!!) during his freshman year at high school (and not just because Norman Osborn is a bastard, okay? Tony just dislikes bad science on principle).

He’d nearly gone to see him personally when Ben Parker died. He went so far as to find the address to the new apartment May and Peter moved into after Ben’s death, but ultimately settled for sending his condolences through a private letter to May.

Not to mention the last thing they needed to deal with right then was a guilt-ridden post-Sokovia
Tony Stark.

Fifteen years of staying away, but it is all going to change now.

Tony asks FRIDAY to replay the video as he drives towards Queens.

The shaky smartphone video of the red-and-blue blur swinging through the streets of New York like some urban Tarzan starts playing again. Tony, despite having already watched the video a few dozen times, still finds himself impressed when he sees the kid catch a 3000-pound car going forty miles an hour without even straining.

Not that he’d been so calm when he first realized the onesie-wearing new kid on the block was in fact his kid.

That had been one hell of a panic attack.

Still, he shouldn’t have been surprised. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, after all. Look at him and his own old man. At the end of the day, Peter Parker is still a Stark.

And now Tony needs his help.

He wouldn’t be doing this if things weren’t so dire. He just hopes May forgives him.
Chapter 2

He parallel-parks his Audi R8 in the rather dodgy parking area adjoining the apartment complex where May and Peter now live and heads in. When the elevator pings on the Parkers’ floor, there’s an angry-looking goth girl waiting on the other side, playing some game on her phone that sounds appropriately bloody and violent. She glances up cursorily when they pass each other, then does a double-take, mouth falling open. Tony winks and waves cheerily as the elevator doors close on her stunned face.

Taking a deep breath, he heads towards May’s apartment, and knocks on the door.

There’s a scuffle on the other side and footsteps heading his way.

“Did you lose your keys again, Pete- oh!” May Parker pulls up short when she sees him, door half-open.

Tony puts on his most winsome smile. “I know this is unprecedented and unexpected, but do you mind if I come in?”

She slams the door in his face.

Okay, he kind of expected that.

He knocks again, a few polite raps. “Just hear me out, May. Five minutes and I’ll leave before Peter comes home if you still want me gone.”

Resounding silence on the other side.

Tony waits, a minute, two minutes. He’s nearly about to speak again (probably something ill-advised that will not help his case) when the door opens.

“Come in,” May says, looking conflicted and worried and furious. Tony is used to inspiring such a combination of emotions from the caring, responsible women of the world so he strolls right in, drinking in the domesticity and lived-in-ness of the place, even though he knows they only moved in here a few months ago. The apartment, tiny and cluttered as it is, is already clearly a home.

“What do you want Mr. Stark?” May asks curtly, arms crossing as she stands in front of him.

“Do you want the press-release version or the tell-all version?”

“Get to the point,” May now sounds exasperated, and good, that’s good. That’s another emotion Tony is used to dealing with on the regular.

“I’m in deep shit and I need Peter’s help.” There. Nice and concise.
May watches him, unmoved. “How can he help? He’s just a high school kid.”

Tony blinks, surprised. He understood the kid’s need for a secret identity from the public, especially in the current political climate, but had he been successful in keeping it a secret from his own aunt that he lives with? Tony wasn’t expecting that. And he’s sort of impressed, frankly. At 15, the human Jarvis knew all his secrets, whether Tony wanted him to or not.

He doesn’t want to get the kid in trouble (or deal with the emotional breakdown of a middle-aged woman being told her nephew is a vigilante superhero, to be honest). He quickly backtracks.

“Do you know the things I got up to when I was about his age? Made a learning-capable helper robot, revolutionized the Artificial Intelligence community, started working on a doctorate degree, just to name a few. The kid’s got Stark-Parker genes, he can do a lot to help all from the comfort and safety of a lab – and did I mention safety? Totally safe, right here in New York, in fact! So…”

“Cut the crap, Stark,” May sounds…resigned. Tony closes his mouth.

She uncrosses her arms and heads towards the couch, dropping in it in a tired slouch and burying her face in her hands.

“This is about Spider-Man, isn’t it?” she mumbles.

Okay, so Tony was right in his initial assessment that nothing flies past May Parker’s head. Certainly not a spandex-clad teenaged superkid.

“Yeah, yeah it is.”

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She brings him tea and some truly deplorable walnut datelof that he chews down because spitting it out might inspire her ire. And Tony is all about avoiding the ire of the May Parkers of the world these days. He has learned his lesson and grown as a human being.

“So let me get this straight,” he says, chewing on another minuscule bite of the datelof (Christ, it is truly horrendous) and washing it down quickly with spicy ginger tea. “You know Peter is swinging around New York taking down petty criminals like a red-and-blue bat – or should I say spider – from hell…and he doesn’t know that you know? Why?”

The smile she shoots him is tremulous. “Because as long as he thinks he’s keeping it a secret from me, he’ll at least try to be more cautious. If he knows I know and that I’m still letting him do this, he’ll try to take on more and more of the bad things in the world… and he’s still just a kid, Tony. He’s just fifteen. At least, for now, when he thinks he can only do it in secret, he’s only taking on petty criminals and not like, publicly joining the Avengers…or taking on terrorists and supervillains and aliens or…” She looks at him helplessly, trailing off.

Tony puts down the teacup, pensive. “So why let him? You could just tell him he can’t do this anymore.”

“And you think telling a teenage boy he can’t do something is going to stop him?” May asks, wryly. “Especially when that teenage boy is a secret Stark?”

Tony opens his mouth, and closes it with a tired huff of laughter. Yeah, she’s got a point there.

“But I’m guessing that’s not going to last, huh?” May looks at him, sad and resigned. “Him not being dragged into the world of the Avengers? That’s why you’re here. To recruit him.”
Tony swallows, unable to meet her eyes for the first time. “I need his help,” he admits, before looking up hastily to reassure her. “But what I said was true, he will be absolutely safe. I won’t let him get hurt.

“It’s pretty hard for anyone to pack enough of a punch to hurt him right now,” May says. “Except maybe like, Captain America or the Hulk… but that’s who you’re taking him to fight against, isn’t it?”

“Not the Hulk,” Tony says with a tired grin. “Kinda misplaced him after the whole murderbot fiasco.”

May rolls her eyes. “You know what I mean!” she pauses for a second. “Is the situation as bad as it looks on the news? With the Accords and…everything?”

Tony leans his elbows on his knees, rubs a tired hand through his face. “Worse. It’s worse than it looks. And I’m seriously understaffed right now and don’t have the time to vet some other potential recruits I’ve been tracking for a while.” He looks up. “I really do need his help, May. And, the kid kind of needs me too, now more than ever. Things are seriously changing in our world. This is not a good time for a super-powered person to go it alone.” Tony quirks a smile. “Plus, have you seen the underoos he’s fighting crime in? *Tragedy*. The kid’s in serious need of an upgrade.”

“Hey, don’t knock the pajama-spandex,” she bumps her knees to his. “He could still kick your old ass.”

The moment of levity fades into a semi-comfortable silence.

“So do I have your permission to recruit Spider-Man as a reserve Avenger, Ms. Parker?” Tony asks, picking up the dateloaf again reluctantly to take a bite. “I promise he’ll spend 90% of the time bench, if I have any say in it.”

May sighs deeply. “Can’t keep them in forever,” she mutters to herself, before looking up. “Yes, Mr. Stark. You have my permission.”

Tony glances at the clock. “He’ll be here any second now. Gonna tell him you know all about his secret hobby?”

“Not now,” May shakes her head. “That’s a conversation for another day, when we’re not on a time crunch. It’ll involve a lot of yelling and crying, and chores for him to do till he’s sixty.”

Tony winced. “Yeah, I don’t envy him that. Tell him…tell him I’m here about a grant. I’ll take it from there.”

As if on cue, the doorknob jiggles.

“Hey Aunt May.”

“Hey! How was school today?”

“Okay. There’s this *crazy* car parked outside…” Peter trails off when his eyes meet Tony’s, mouth dropping open in shock. Tony looks into familiar brown eyes, feeling a warmth suffuse through him despite the circumstances.

Yeah, no matter how everything else goes, Peter is definitely not one of Tony’s mistakes.
DID EVERYONE SEE THE TRAILER FOR SPIDERMAN HOMECOMING?! All I see is Dad! Tony, oh my god. Also, as if I didn't love Peter enough already from Civil War, now with this trailer! How precious is he! I was already having fun with this fic, but now I'm having an absolute ball. Hope you're all enjoying this! :D *goes to rewatch the trailer again* The mentor!dad!Tony is strong in this one.

Tony has a hard time not looking at Peter out of the corner of his eyes the whole ride over to Avengers Tower to fetch the upgraded Spidey-suit.

He knows what the kid looks like. He has the dark hair and brown eyes of the Stark men, but otherwise he looks like the women of their lives through and through. The pale skin and aristocratic jawline of Maria Stark, the button nose and warm smile of Mary Parker. There was always very little of Tony to be seen, physically, in Peter. He knows that.

But the way Peter’s right leg jiggles with barely controlled energy the whole way, the endless curiosity, the adorable delight of a teenage boy getting to ride in a luxury sports car for the first time, the way he constantly tries to redefine the edges of what he can get away with – it’s all startling in how familiar it is. How much it reminds him of himself.

Tony has only met the kid twice in his life, both before the boy was even two years old, and he has never spoken to him before. And yet Peter talks like him, tripping over words that don’t come fast enough to keep up with his quick brain, something Tony used to do till he trained himself out of it when he took over Stark Industries.

They think alike too, Tony realizes with something like startled disbelief at how easy their conversations so far have been, the same brand of easy humor and chaotic trajectories of thought as they discuss upgrade possibilities for Spider-Man’s future suits, as though they’ve been doing this for years.

It makes a secret part of Tony puff up in pride, which is entirely ridiculous, but for the first time in a long time, there is a gentle warmth in his chest that doesn’t ebb.

Peter calls him Mr. Stark and Tony says to call him Tony (and wishes he could ask for 'Dad' instead).

When Tony describes the situation they are heading into, Peter grasps it with a gravity and wisdom beyond his years, the same that he displayed in his bedroom an hour ago. Like he felt the weight of the responsibility of his powers resting on his young shoulders. Tony hopes it never crushes him, but he’s starting to suspect Peter may just be strong enough to bear it.

When they pull up at Avengers Tower, Peter has a – there’s no other way to put it – fanboy moment. Or, more accurately, he has an extended fanboy episode.

“This is awesome!” he exclaims when they drive through the special Avengers-only entrance to the Tower as Tony scans them in.
“So cool,” is the reaction to being greeted by FRIDAY at the secret garage door, followed by, “Your AI knows my name, wow.”

If only he knew of the entire servers dedicated to his baby pictures, Tony thinks wryly to himself.

“Sweet baby Jesus,” is the gratifyingly reverent whisper as they walk past Tony’s gleaming sports car collection. (Tony feels smug about that. Very smug. And barely restrains himself from offering Peter a pick of the lot for his 16th birthday. Barely. Death by May Parker is not a heroic way to go.)

By the time they take the elevator up to Tony’s floor (“Where are the floor buttons?” “FRIDAY runs the house.” “House-running AI, sure of course, it’s not like that’s freaking awesome!”) Peter seems to be in some sort of excitement high. Tony smiles at him fondly as the doors open on his penthouse suite.

Peter goes stock-still next to him, mouth slightly open. Tony looks up to see Vision, decked out in full armor, floating serenely before the floor-to-ceiling windows as he’s wont to do when he’s pensive.

“Is he actually another alien like Thor?” Peter asks lowly out of the corner of his mouth. “Which planet is he from?”

“Yeah that’s a media story we just didn’t bother correcting,” Tony replies, leading Peter towards the living room. “He’s actually an android made from a fancy-ass regeneration cradle, my old AI JARVIS, and a cosmic stone. He’s only a year old, so don’t corrupt him with porn.”

Peter splutters next to him, choking on air a little bit. He’s adorable. Tony wants to hug him and bake him cookies (though he doesn’t, in fact, know how to bake. He’s sure he could make a baking-bot with a minimal AI, to function under the supervision of FRIDAY… How hard could it be?)

“Natasha and Rhodes will not be happy when they see him,” Vision says, floating down to the ground. Tony can feel Peter’s brain working overtime to understand the possibilities opened up by Vision’s very existence. “I did not realize he was a child.”

“I am not a child,” Peter finally finds his voice to hotly make the assertion of children everywhere.

“Yeah, that’s why Nat and Rhodey aren’t going to see him out of costume,” Tony smoothly interrupts, leading them all towards his lab. “You weren’t supposed to either, but I didn’t realize you were here.”

“I came to offer my assistance with anything you might require to equip our new recruit,” Vision says, floating down a bunch of stairs instead of climbing down it like a normal human being. Which he isn’t. So... huh. “I am Vision,” he says to Peter, extending a large purple hand.

“Uh – Peter. Parker. Spider-Man,” Peter says, shaking it vigorously and eyes flickering down a few times to Vision’s feet floating an inch off the ground despite himself.

“Yeah, well, keep that knowledge to yourself,” Tony says, going through the lab doors. “We’re maintaining his secret identity.”

Peter gasps when walks in, eyes darting everywhere, looking like a kid in Candyland. Tony feels strangely proud and vulnerable at the same time, watching Peter in this place that is most fundamentally Tony. He whistles to wake the bots and they come wheeling out, heading straight to Peter like curious puppies.

“Peter, Dum-E, Butterfingers, and U. Bots, Peter Parker,” he introduces, watching with a strange
rush in his heart as Peter bumps fists with his bot children, looking ecstatic. Tony tells Peter he can have a look around (you’d think Christmas had come early, looking at the kid’s face) and asks FRIDAY to fire up the prototype Spider-Man suit. He’s going to have her do some final tests to ensure the suit is combat-ready, tracking the data personally to double-check her conclusions. He may be willing to put on an uncalibrated suit and take it straight for a test-drive, but he will be damned if he let his kid get so much as a scratch that could’ve been prevented.

When Tony next looks up, Peter’s on the other side of the lab in the sound-proof Iron Man enclosure, standing before the array of his suits. Something hurts in Tony’s chest at that sight – two of his greatest creations side-by-side.

“Do you plan on telling him?” Vision asks softly beside him and Tony startles out of his reverie.

“Tell him what?” he tries to play dumb, but the knowing look on Vision’s face is as familiar as the exasperated affection that used to color JARVIS’s voice. Tony deflates. “How do you know?”

“JARVIS dumped his memory, but never his protocols,” Vision says, those ethereal eyes fixed on him. “And the two protocols that were so ingrained it was weaved into the very fabric of his existence… was protecting you, and watching over him.”

Tony feels a lump rise in his throat and the corner of his eyes prickle. Sometimes he just really, really misses… he clears his throat.

“Now’s not the time,” Tony says, tapping out a line of formula to fine-tune the eyepiece. “Never telling him was the original plan, but now it’s a whole new ball game obviously. But with everything that’s happening now, the Accords… and the kid just lost his uncle…,” Tony takes a deep, shuddering breath.

He’s just so tired.

“I can’t risk him being angry enough with me to refuse my help,” he tells Vision, looking up. “I need to be there for him right now. I need to protect him, at least now, though I failed him before.”

“You never failed him, Tony,” Vision frowns. “Your decisions were always made with Peter’s best interests at heart.”

“I’m talking about last year,” Tony replies curtly, deleting some commands unnecessarily harshly. “You just said it yourself. One of JARVIS’s main jobs was watching over him. But it was never a part of FRIDAY’s, because she was never meant to take over for JARVIS. And I knew that. But after Ultron, I was so caught up in the fallout, I never bothered to alter FRIDAY’s protocols. Even though I knew Peter was in Oscorp at the time, and I knew it wasn’t a safe place for him, I never thought… and now look what’s happened to him!” Tony controls his breathing, avoiding Vision’s eyes. He doesn’t need to see the pity there.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Vision’s voice is so soft and sympathetic Tony wants to throw something. “Being bitten by a radioactive spider and becoming super-powered… even you couldn’t have foreseen that.”

“Yeah, can’t foresee a single thing, can I?” Tony says bitterly. “Some futurist I am.”

Silence descends on the duo while Tony taps out some addendum to FRIDAY’s tasks.

“Go to him,” Vision says, nudging Tony’s side slightly. “I’ll take over for you.”

Tony starts to protest but gives up at the stern look Vision shoots him. He sighs. “Yeah, probably for
the best. I’m severely sleep-deprived, even for me.”

He lets Vision take control and walks towards the bullet-proof enclosure separating the Iron Man suits from the rest of the lab floor.

Peter doesn’t turn as Tony walks up to stand beside him. They’re both quiet for a minute.

“You saved me, you know? Peter says, breaking the silence, eyes trained on the battered suit from the fight in Sokovia. Tony remembers the other battered suit, from the Battle of New York. He shakes the heavy touch of the portal’s memory off him.

“Yeah well, it was my job. Aliens pouring through a sky portal and a nuke about to go off in Manhattan? I couldn’t let that happen.”

“No, I wasn’t talking about New York, Mr. Stark, though thank you for that too,” Peter says, finally turning around to look at him. His face is so earnest and respectful. Awed. Tony doesn’t feel worthy of it. “I meant you saved me. I would’ve died or at least been severely hurt, but you were there to save me.”

Tony feels the wind punch out of his lungs. He doesn’t remember Peter ever being in that kind of danger, or him being there to protect him.

“When was this?” Tony asks shakily.

“Way back, during the Stark Expo,” Peter explains, some of the fan-worship Tony saw hints of earlier bleeding into his tone. He doesn’t quite know what to do with that from Peter. “I wanted to go see the Expo really bad, but Aunt May couldn’t get tickets before they were sold out. But Uncle Ben had a friend whose family had to cancel, so we bought their tickets off them at the last minute. And I was so excited to be there, everything was just so cool and I even bought one of those toy Iron Man helmets and repulsor gloves, and War Machine was supposed to unveil that night –”

Tony, with a sick feeling in his gut, thinks he knows where this is going.

“– But then the fight broke out and I got separated from Uncle Ben and Aunt May and one of those drone things was standing right in front of me and but then you were swooping down out of nowhere to take him out –”

And Tony remembers it all in a flash. The adrenaline of the moment, the map with the blinking triangles indicating the positions of drones, JARVIS sounding urgent as he alerted him to a kid in danger, Tony flippantly complementing the kid before blasting off, never realizing who it was beneath that toy helmet, never knowing how close he’d come to losing him forever…

Peter’s still talking, grinning now. “And it was the coolest thing I’d ever seen in my life. I still have the helmet and -oof!”

Tony doesn’t care if he doesn’t know Peter well enough to be hugging him right now. He needs to feel the kid warm and strong and safe in his arms right now.

Peter is unsure and awkward as he hugs him back. “Hey… um, Mr. Stark?”

“Shut up, kid,” Tony says gruffly, trying to repress the waterworks. Things have already sunk to an embarrassing low without Tony bawling on top of it. “I’m happy you’re safe, let me just get it out for a minute.”

Tony feels rather than sees Peter grin into his shoulder. His arms come up to hold Tony back, and it
just feels so comfortable and *right*.

Tony doesn't ever wish to let go.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Edit: Preface to this chapter - I have had many comments expressing concern over the future direction of this fic re: Steve, and let me just say, my plan is to write a Civil War fix-it with all sides somehow working their differences out, and I plan to also build an eventual SteveTony relationship, which would also involve some extensive fence-mending, as we say. I love Steve *and* Tony, thought both of them were strongly sympathizable in the movie, so while this chapter is from Tony's POV and his anger and betrayal, I do hope to work through mending the Avengers too eventually, and I have zero interest in vilifying any one side to justify the other!

Hope you enjoy the fic!

It is Vision who comes for him.

FRIDAY, bless her gorgeous coding, apparently sent his location coordinates to Vision in the last seconds before Steve drove his shield into the arc reactor. Tony is struggling to walk in the cold Siberian terrain, weighed down by a half-offline suit and the vibranium shield, putting one foot in front of the other for no other reason than because that’s what he does, when Vision lands before him like a guardian angel. He carries Tony – armor, shield and all – to the closest airport where they can charter a Starkjet, which happens to be Tolmachevo International in Novosibirsk. Tony just lets Vision arrange it all for him, worn down to his very bones to even bother with anything that isn’t merely breathing and existing.

The only thing that even slightly pierces through the numbness is news that Peter landed safely in New York and that Rhodey has finally woken up.

When they land, he is wheeled in to be patched up and pieced back together again. He has lost count of how often that’s been done over the past several years. He doesn’t know how many more times he can take it before he just stays irredeemably broken forever.

At this moment, his heart a giant bruise inside his chest, he feels like he already might be beyond repair.

He listens with a stony face to the doctors’ prognosis that Rhodey might never walk again.

He ignores sleep, hunger and the giant red-white-and-blue shield in the corner of his lab to build Rhodey a prosthetic exoskeleton as good as any fully-functioning legs. And then he goes without sleep for another three days because ‘as good as’ is not good enough for his Rhodey.

He doesn’t go to see Peter, because in his nightmares the slender body is flung across the airport and doesn’t move after crashing against the bone-breaking pavement.

Regret and self-loathing are familiar friends.

It goes on like this for a few weeks more. He isn’t there for Peter like he promised himself he would be, and ignores May’s worried, then angry, e-mails. He dedicates himself solely to Rhodey’s
recovery. He is numb.

And then he gets that letter from Steve Rogers.

The machine beeps in the background from Ross’s calls and Tony feels something close to bewildered rage building in the pit of his stomach as he stares at the phone (a flip phone, Jesus Christ, it’s like Steve went out of his way to insult Tony in every way, right down to technology so outdated it makes his eyes itch just looking at it).

*The Avengers are yours, maybe more so than mine.*

The sheer *gall* the man must have had to write that, when he is presently freeing three-fourth of the Avengers Team from a prison he got them into in the first place, presumably to go on the run with him… The kicker is, Tony knows Steve is earnest about this. He *genuinely believes* what he wrote, the utter asshole.

Tony, for the first time since Siberia, laughs out loud.

The Avengers are *his*, are they? Well, good. Tony is an expert at taking apart outdated, non-functional things and rebuilding them to be the better than anyone could’ve imagined.

His Avengers? They will be *better*. He *will* protect this planet and *his Avengers* will step up when the Earth needs saving. And he will do it with no help from Captain fucking America or his merry band of followers. He is *Tony Stark*. He built one of the most advanced technological marvels of this century in a cave with metal scraps. He fought an actual *god* and held his own. He is *done* kowtowing to SHIELD and Cap and the government and Ross and a public that is never satisfied.

It is now time to do things *his way*.

Tony scoffs at the eyesore of a phone and briefly contemplates throwing it against a wall just to see it smashed to pieces. In the end, he just stashes it into one of the storage drawers in his office, along with the letter. At some point, it might be nice to have a way to gloat to the egotistical bastard.

Tony has a lot of work to do.

He will start with his son.
Chapter 5

Peter is **bored**.

He’s in AP Chemistry, and normally, Peter would be paying attention because he’s a good kid, even if he knows everything the teacher is saying already (which is usually the case). But today, he just can’t be bothered. He is filled with ennui.

It’s been nearly a month since the fight at the Leipzig airport, with the excitement of a fight that truly challenged him, and the feeling of being a part of something bigger than he is. And he hasn’t heard a single thing from Mr. Stark since.

Listless, he pulls up YouTube to look at the CNN video of the Avengers clash again. There’s the giant Ant-Man (Giant-Man?) flailing about, causing massive destruction, and Vision using brain-beam or whatever the hell it is to make an entire hangar collapse, and then there’s Peter, holding his own against Captain America (!!!), working together with Iron Man and War Machine to take down Giant-Man. Spider-Man was a useful member of the team in the fight. Spider-Man didn’t look like a kid playing dress-up to take down petty criminals. Spider-Man looked like he **belonged** with the Earth’s Mightiest Heroes.

“Mr. Parker, are you paying attention?”

“Yes!” Peter blurts in a slightly high-pitched squeak (ugh, puberty), slamming the laptop closed.

“Yup, I’m listening, Ms. Smith. Full attention on the Boltzmann equation. Kinetic theory, got it, you are doing an excellent job –”

“Laying it on a bit thick now, Peter,” Ms. Smith interrupts drily, and Peter shuts up. “Please at least pretend to pay attention for the next fifteen minutes.” She goes back to writing the derivation on the board while Peter sighs, hand on his chin, brain sliding out of focus again.

At least there is that. It’s a Friday, and this is the last class of the day. Peter can then go home soon and wallow in his misery till he can be sure Aunt May won’t call for him anymore, and then sneak out to crack down on a string of dumb crimes in his neighborhood.

Everything sucks.

It just doesn’t seem like enough anymore…

Peter does what he usually does when the bell signaling end of class rings. He heads to his locker to sort out the books he will need for homework this weekend, pines quietly as he spots Liz hanging out with her group of friends across the hallway, and makes plans to study with Ned on Sunday morning.

He’s walking home, contemplating next week’s Physics test, when his evening is spectacularly derailed by a black Jaguar bearing one Happy Hogan pulling up alongside him.

Peter may have been unnecessarily exuberant in his delighted greeting of Happy. Throwing yourself bodily into the arms of a person you’ve known for all of a day with a loud yell may be a bit over-the-top. A bit. But you can’t blame him. Happy was chaperoning him for a good chunk of the trip to Germany. They’ve bonded, as far as Peter’s concerned.

“It’s nice to see you too, kid,” Happy wheezes from holding up the weight of a fifteen year old squeezing the breath out of him (and seeing as said fifteen year old has superpowers, that’s a
considerable squeeze). And then he says the magic words that make Peter giddy with excitement. “Mr. Stark wants to see you.”

Everything is awesome.

Happy points him to Mr. Stark’s garage when they get to the Avengers (or is it just Stark now?) Tower. Peter feels the same thrill as the first time he walked through there. The place is every teenage boy’s wet dream.

“Ah, hey Peter, good to see you,” Mr. Stark says, popping up from under a 1930s Ford Roadster. Peter doesn’t know what to stare at, his personal hero clad in greasy sweatpants and tank-top with machine oil in his hair, or the car. Peter finally settles on the car. There might be drool on his chin. Peter would marry that car if he could.

When his starry eyes settle back on Mr. Stark after their covetous detour, the man looks distinctly amused.

“You wanna help me finish tuning her up before we get started?” Mr. Stark asks, eyes crinkling with his suppressed mirth.

Peter goes into (very manly, mind you) paroxysms of delight.

An interminable hour later, which Peter spends with what is clearly the love of his life, Mr. Stark declares the Roadster all fixed up and they (reluctantly, in Peter’s case) retire to the penthouse to shower, and then talk. FRIDAY guides Peter to a room so he can wash the grease off him, but it isn’t until he gets there that Peter realizes what he’s seeing.

Unless he’s very, very mistaken, Mr. Stark has given him his very own suite. In the Avengers (Stark?) Tower.

Peter is blessed.

“This room has been modeled for your use since Tony discovered your superhero identity four months ago,” FRIDAY says, rocking Peter’s world a bit, he’s not gonna lie. Mr. Stark’s been planning to recruit him for that long? “The suit is new, of course. Mr. Stark would like you to wear it when you meet him in his lab after washing up. He wishes to run it through some tests while you wear it.”

“Cool,” Peter says, shucking off his clothing and walking towards the bathroom.

The bathroom is bigger than his whole room. The bath rugs are so soft Peter thinks they’d be pretty sweet to take a nap on. The towels are exceptionally fluffy. The water pressure is so divine it’s like being gently massaged by a warm tropical rain.

Peter spends a good ten minutes trying to come up with scenarios where he could persuade Mr. Stark to adopt him and Aunt May.
His brain betrays him by conjuring a universe where Aunt May and Mr. Stark get married, thereby ensuring Peter could continue to bathe in the warm tropical rain shower... and ew. *Ew.* Not even the super fluffy towels are worth that.

He finally leaves the shower and pulls on the reinforced under armor he finds in the bathroom closet (alongside underwear in his size and preferred style, seriously, who stocked this place? That level of knowledge into Peter’s life is just unnerving).

FRIDAY guides him through putting on his new suit. It has an auto-sealing maneuver that activates by rotating the Spider on his chest, which is *neat.* Now he won’t have to spend precious minutes wiggling in and out of the suit. Honestly, Mr. Stark’s thought of everything, he’s the best.

When he’s finally all suited up, Peter takes a minute to just breathe and look at himself in the full length mirror. The suit... it’s *everything.* He can feel the power hum under his skin just looking at himself in it. He feels like he can take on a robot army in this suit. Like he can be a part of the Avengers. And then, because he is him, he takes a good two minutes to admire his ass in the mirror. All the crouching, squatting, and climbing involved in being Spider-Man have done *wonders* for his glutes.

FRIDAY snorts delicately at him, and if she were real, Peter knows she’d have been chewing gum and eye-rolling at him like a judgmental older sister. “If you’re quite done admiring yourself, Boss is waiting for you in the penthouse kitchen.”

He sticks his tongue out at the ceiling (he knows she doesn’t live there, it’s just instinct to do that okay), and with one last look at his butt, jumps out of the window.

The suit is absolutely, completely, the most awesome thing to ever happen to him!

He thought the prototype was perfect, but this final version is something else. It’s like the suit is a second skin, programmed to accommodate his every command, perfectly balanced on his frame to allow for maximum flexibility. The eye shutters are *amazing,* offering him excellent visual clarity and fitted with a watered down and revamped version of Iron Man’s Heads-Up Display, giving him abilities beyond his powers.

He does a few additional swings around the outside of the tower, exhilarated by the suit, before finally swinging into Mr. Stark’s penthouse.

“When I asked you to come up here, I meant taking the elevator,” Mr. Stark deadpans, sipping from a large mug that has a poster of the Hulk saying ‘Hulk like Tin Man’. Peter tries, and fails, to not find it incredibly adorable.

“Can you get me one of those saying ‘Hulk like Spider-Man’?” he is asking before he can control his mouth, and dammit. That’s what his grave will one day read, he’s sure. Here lies Peter Parker, who died of mortification because he couldn’t keep his damn mouth shut.

Mr. Stark blinks at him, looking from Peter to the mug and back to Peter, before laughing out loud.

“Love the Hulk, huh? Bruce will be flattered if he knew,” Mr. Stark chuckles, taking another sip.

“Do you know where he is?” Peter asks, before realizing it might be a sensitive issue. He isn’t wrong. Some of the mirth bleeds out of Mr. Stark’s expression, and he looks slightly sad.

“Not a clue,” Mr. Stark replies curtly, draining the rest of the cup and placing it in the sink. “You want coffee?”
Peter nods, pulling off his mask and taking the proffered mug. This one reads ‘Stand Back! I’m going to try Science’. This one Peter is familiar with.

“Hey, I have one of these too,” Peter says with a grin, and Mr. Stark’s expression, confusingly, falls even more. “Uh… Did I say something wrong?” he asks tentatively.

“Cap got me that one,” Mr. Stark seems to be grinding his teeth. Peter carefully places the full mug back on the kitchen island like it’s a grenade that’s about to go off. “Picked it up on one of his morning runs after a small explosion in the lab caused some minor property damage. He got Bruce one that said ‘Dammit I’m a Scientist not a Doctor’ after the hundredth time one of us went to Bruce for patching up after a battle instead of the SHIELD medical wing. It was his thing.”

Strangely, that little tidbit of domesticity drives home to Peter the magnitude of the Avengers Clash and the emotional price of it better than all the documentaries and interviews of the Avengers he has seen put together. They were all clearly, if not a family, at least close enough friends that they shared a living space, and had inside jokes, and knew each other’s routines and weird quirks.

To have that kind of relationship culminate in a fight like the one in the airport must have been devastating.

“Hey Mr. Stark,” Peter asks quietly, picking up the mug carefully to take another sip. “You are okay now right?”

Mr. Stark seems startled by the question. Peter hopes he’s not the first person to ask him that since the Avengers fight.

“I mean, I know it’s not even remotely the same… and I’m not saying I’m good enough to be a replacement for like, Captain America or the Hulk or anybody. But like, for what it’s worth I’ll be here to help you out, if you need me to,” Peter mumbles, not looking up. “In case there’s like another alien attack or something… which is just insane in the first place, another alien attack, like the fact that that’s even a thing…? What.” Peter mimes his brain being blown. “But what I mean is… if you ever need, like, me… I’ll be there.”

Mr. Stark’s smile is a strange thing. “Sure, kid, I’ll keep that in mind.”

For the next few hours, Mr. Stark – “Tony, call me Tony, I’ve told you this before.” – runs Peter through the features of the new Spidey-suit, mostly the ones involving protection or self-defense. Peter thinks it’s fucking cool that he has FRIDAY in the suit, she is going to be so much help! Also, now he can do his reading for tests through the HUD while taking out the bad dudes. He keeps that last thought to himself because he knows Mr. Stark (Tony, man that’ll take some getting used to) will object because no matter how cool the adult, they all still have the fundamental need to be boringly responsible.

Mr. Stark personally drops him home at the end of the evening. The car ride is quiet, Peter contentedly reviewing all the cool new features of his suit in his head, while Mr. Stark fiddles with his phone.

When they pull up outside his apartment complex, Peter finally asks the question that’s been burning at the back of his head all day. “So does this mean I’m an Avenger now?”

Mr. Stark’s head shoots up. “What?”

“I mean, are there like any trials or tests or something so I can officially qualify or something – or no?” Peter asks. He didn’t realize how badly he wants this till he actually started voicing it. Peter
Parker really, really wants to be a part of the new Avengers.

“No of course you’re not,” Mr. Stark says like he’s stunned Peter even asked that, like it should be obvious. “Leave the Avenging for the adults, you’re a kid.”

Peter can feel his jaw start to jut out pugnaciously. “But I can keep the suit?” he asks, just to make sure.

“Oh of course you can. It doesn’t fit me,” Mr. Stark tries to lighten the mood, but Peter’s not having it. Mr. Stark looks at him for a minute, then sighs.

“Look, kid, the kind of threats the Avengers take on is… too much a lot of times, even for me,” Mr. Stark says, rubbing his eyebrow with a tired hand. “Consider yourself on standby mode for now. Can’t you just be a… friendly, neighborhood Spider-Man? For a little while? At least till you finish high school, and then we can talk about this again?”

*Finish high school?* That’s ages away, Peter’s just a sophomore! Peter can feel the excitement of the day come crashing round his ears.

“So what *do* I get to do then?” he asks, irritable now. *Adults.* Mr. Stark clearly needs the help, now more than ever with the Avengers all disbanded. Why can’t he just accept Peter’s help?!

“Don’t do anything I *would* do. And definitely don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” Mr. Stark says. He places a hand of Peter’s shoulder and mimes a small space in the air. “There’s this tiny grey area in between, and that’s where you operate.”

Sure, that clears it *all* up.

“Just, stay safe kid, alright?” Mr. Stark says, looking earnest and worried now. It only irritates Peter a bit more. “Enjoy being a teenager. I’ll take care of the rest, okay?”

Sure. *NOT.*

Mr. Stark comes forward as though for a hug, and sure Peter’s a bit irritated with him right now, but he’ll be damned if he passes up on any opportunity to hug one of his idols. He places his chin on Mr. Stark’s shoulder, arms wrapping around his back.

“This is not a hug, I was just getting the door for you,” Mr. Stark sounds amused again, and Peter draws back, flushing. Why does he always find himself in these situations?!

“It’s alright,” Mr. Stark claps him on the back again. “You take care now. I’ll be in touch.”

And Peter’s left in the parking lot outside his building, clutching a backpack crammed with books and a suitcase full of superhero equipment, watching Mr. Stark’s car zoom away.

Yeah, right. Like hell he’s going to just be a ‘friendly, neighborhood Spider-Man’. He’ll show Mr. Stark he’s not just some kid.

Somehow - he’s not quite sure *how* yet - but somehow, he’ll show Mr. Stark that he is good enough to be an Avenger.
This fic has a legit ‘proposed-plot’ sheet now, so updates should be semi-regular instead of me staring at an empty document wondering what to put in. So I'm definitely going to be exerting my 'canon divergence' tag here for the rest of the fic, because I have conveniently rearranged what we know and have seen about the Spiderman movie from trailers, etc. to fit my plot. So, mild spoilers for the movie (and I may borrow dialogue that will work with my fic), but mostly this thing is going to be, well, canon-complementary, but not canon-adherent. Hope you enjoy! xx

P.S. Early reviews for Homecoming look so fucking good!!! I'm so excited *-*

It’s 2 a.m. on a Saturday a couple weeks later and Peter is just wrapping up for the night when FRIDAY beeps in his ear, alerting him to a brewing situation that could use Spider-Man’s assistance. With a sigh, Peter takes off, following FRIDAY’s directions.

Peter loves the new and improved Spidey-suit. Quite apart from the obvious perks that come with a superhero suit designed by Tony Stark himself – vibranium-reinforced fabric specifically synthesized for highest flexibility while retaining physical protection, thermal maintenance so he doesn’t burn up or freeze with the changing weather, eye-pieces that are more perfect than the most HD camera lenses invented yet, and which also have recording capability so Peter can continue making fun v-logs for his own personal amusement (and occasionally Mr. Stark’s, because he seems to genuinely enjoy the ones Peter sends him of Spider-Man’s shenanigans around New York).

But Peter’s favorites by far, that truly make this suit special like no other, are two things – his updated web-shooters and FRIDAY.

The concept for the improved web-shooters is something he came up with a while back, when he lost track of how much web he used up one night and nearly ran out of webs while fighting the bad guys. He’d discussed it with Mr. Stark on the ride to the Avengers Tower before their trip to Germany (Mr. Stark told him he’s still calling it the ‘Avengers Tower’ coz that’s where he, Rhodey and Vision now live and they’re gonna “continue kicking ass”). Anyway, he had the idea and the basic blueprints for a miniaturized, self-synthesizing web-shooter that would essentially never run out of juice (Mr. Stark had seemed super impressed with him!), but he did not have the money or the fabrication units to do it himself. But Mr. Stark does have the money and voila! His new and improved, self-renewing slingers that work like a dream.

And then there’s FRIDAY, who was most definitely not Peter’s idea. Sometimes he wishes she wasn’t there – it’s like carrying around a bitchy, older sister who is irritated about having to be babysit you on a weekend and is judging all your life choices. But also, Peter kinda loves her and her company, especially on slow nights. (The sass. He can appreciate a good sassmaster.) Plus, she helps him catch up on his homework while he’s out superheroing, by assisting him with paper research, and jotting down his answers to take-home quizzes, so he can just print them out and submit the next day.

And that’s without talking about the tech support FRIDAY offers, which is incredible. Like, look at the situation right now! Without FRIDAY, Peter would’ve already been halfway home before his
hand-crafted radio receiver that can pick up both police radio and alarms alerting 911 – which, sure, isn’t the most efficient piece of technology in the world, but Peter did good with it considering he found the original while dumpster-diving, okay, even Mr. Stark thought it was a great piece of engineering – but anyway, Peter wouldn’t have received the alarm till he was already on his way home. Then he’d have had to double-back, increase speed to get to the situation before it worsened too much, which would’ve left him somewhat tired during the fight, and extremely tired when he woke up in the morning.

Plus, it helps that FRIDAY also acts as a GPS so he doesn’t end up in the completely wrong part of town. (The Brooklyn incident of 2017 shall never be mentioned.)

“Swing right at the next intersection, and head straight,” FRIDAY instructs in his ear and Peter effortlessly navigates the street, adding propulsion into one of his jumps so he goes shooting up into the air like a rocket.

Sure it may be over 2 a.m., and he’s sort of tired and sleepy, and he has a ton of studying to do over the weekend.

He still just fucking loves being Spider-Man.

“Turn left and head towards the crossroads. Your destination is the Queens Community Bank. The bank set off burglar alarms approximately 3.5 minutes ago, and street cameras and bank videos picked up four men. The police are ETA 7 minutes.”

Peter will have these buffoons webbed up and be on his way home before the police get here. You’re welcome, NYPD.

He lands silent as a spider (hehe) and peeks in through the glass doors to assess the situation. Four dudes, just like FRIDAY said, and (oh my god are you fucking serious hahaha) wearing Avengers facemasks to do the looting. Peter quickly takes a snapshot of them with his Spidey eye-cam. Tony will get a real kick out of this.

“What’s up, guys?” he says, casually strolling in and standing legs crossed and hips cocked against the door, like he doesn’t have a care in the world. The four goons startle and turn around, the one in the Iron Man mask immediately pointing a ginormous gun at Peter.

Peter rolls his eyes inside the mask and rues that they can’t see it.

“I was gonna say, huge fan, but I see you guys aren’t the real Avengers,” Peter banters while they all stare at him. “You really should work on your disguise, Hulk gives it away.” And before they can so much as blink, he shoots a web at ‘Iron Man’, webbing up his gun.

It gets really violent really quickly after that.

Peter is in his element though, these Fake Avengers are not even remotely a challenge. He flips and soars and jumps and hangs from the ceiling to punch, kick, web, or otherwise incapacitate them.

He is having a blast. He also thinks their guns are just guns till ‘Thor’ points one at him and then playtime is over, because whoa what the fuck is that.

Peter stands, immobilized, as the blue-white light envelops him, utterly paralyzing him. He yells, uses his full strength to fight it, but barely gains an inch. FRIDAY is giving urgent instructions in his ear, but Peter can barely hear her through the ringing in his ears, while his whole body refuses to co-operate.
‘Thor’ keeps the gun trained on Peter while his band of crooks pick themselves up from the various minor injuries Peter gave them. Peter feels the first burst of panic in his stomach when, as one, the four of them turn to look at him with murder in their eyes, while he stands there utterly unable to defend himself.

This stun gun is waaaay beyond the pay grade of any petty, ATM-robbing crooks. Where did they get it?

“Fuck,” the ‘Hulk’ swears, rubbing at his elbow and straightening his mask. “Boss’s not gonna be happy about this. He wanted to keep these weapons off Stark’s radar.”

“I say we just kill the little shit,” ‘Cap’ growls viciously, nursing what looks like a cracked rib. “Fast-talking parasite, do the city good to get the Spider off the streets.”

“Hey, New York loves it’s friendly, neighborhood Spider-Man,” Peter quips, because he can’t help it okay, paralyzed and in mortal danger or no, he will get in sass when he can. It’s one of his many charms.

‘Thor’ increases the stun intensity for a brief bit and Peter yells out, because that stung, ugh, ow.

“We should take him to the Vulture,” ‘Iron Man’, the clear ring-leader in this mini-band of thugs, says. “He’ll know how to deal with it. Get a ransom on his head or whatever. Stark will cough up, I’m sure, he sure has the money.”

The situation seems to be going from bad to worse, as these kinds of situations usually tend to do.

Peter’s had enough of this shit.

“Mute”, he says quietly and FRIDAY’s now-bitchy voice in his ears goes silent.

In the spirit of the argument, ‘Thor’ had been going further and further off-center in his aim with the stun-ray. The next time he almost removes the focus of the stun gun from Peter, he is ready and waiting for it.

Before any of the thugs can react, Peter has broken the paralysis and lunged forward for the weapon, getting his hands on it just as ‘Iron Man’ lets loose multiple bullets from a regular machine gun.

Time slows down.

Peter has just enough time to twist the stun-gun out of the hands of ‘Thor’ and lift it up in front of him like a shield against the spray of bullets.

To put it simply - things go boom.

The stun-gun spectacularly explodes with a stunning concussive force, taking out half the building and a good chunk of the sidewalk outside. Everyone goes flying, including Peter, whose stop brake comes in the form of a lamp-post on the other side of the street. His body colliding with it bends it backwards about 75°, but thankfully doesn’t break the metal pole (or his spine).

By the time Peter manages to regain his shaky footing (it takes a few minutes of groaning and huffing, he’s not ashamed to admit), he hears the distant wail of the police sirens rushing towards the scene.

Well. Time for Peter to scarper. He’s pretty sure the police can wrap the rest of this mess up by themselves. He points his web shooters to the nearest building and takes off.
On his way home, in the blessed quiet (he still hasn’t unmuted FRIDAY, he knows he’s gonna pay for this later ugh) he has time to think.

Some new budding villain named ‘Vulture’ is organizing petty criminals in New York and arming them with Avengers-grade, alien-tech weapons. Peter knows that’s what he saw just now. He remembers the video about the physics of Chitauri weapons that FRIDAY allowed him to access in the Stark server, to educate him about the kinds of threats the Avengers face on a daily basis. He remembers seeing weapons exactly like these in the blueprints developed by SHIELD, which never actually got made because, well, they got exposed as HYDRA by Captain America. HYDRA which has managed to survive for nearly 80 years now, despite the best efforts of Captain America, SHIELD, and the Avengers. And now a local crime boss or organization called the Vulture has popped up, giving these extremely dangerous weapons to criminals…

Peter may not have all the pieces but he can see the pattern pretty well. He’s going to need to take the Vulture down if he wants to keep this city safe. No bastard with stolen weapons is gonna ruin his city.

Plus, this is an Avengers-level mission. If he can show Mr. Stark that he can do this, maybe he’ll let Peter be an official member of the Avengers.

This is his chance to prove himself.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Warnings for Spiderman Homecoming spoilers will apply for most of this fic!

With that out of the way, HOLY SHIT DID YOU GUYS WATCH THE MOVIE YET. I am officially writing from beyond the grave. The movie killed me. It was beyond anything I hoped. It was perfection.

P.S. I am kind of glad I waited for the movie to come out before starting up the rest of the fic. I have fun~ ideas on how to integrate movie canon with my fic. As I said before, this fic is NOT going to be canon compliant. What I'm shooting for is to draw a canon-complementary narration, which will give me more room for fun ^_^

Thanks for all the comments and kudos, you guys are amazing <3

P.P.S. More notes at the end of the fic.

Peter totally pays for ignoring FRIDAY all night when Mr. Stark personally kidnaps him the next morning.

He’s on his way to meet up with Ned when a ridiculous(-ly awesome!!) yellow 2017 Audi R8 pulls up beside him.

(They seriously gotta stop picking him up like this from random streets in his neighborhood, by the way. Mrs. Minlow downstairs who owns half the building has eyes everywhere, and she will get it into her head that he’s a budding drug dealer. Spider-Man’s got nothing on little old ladies when it comes to taking down local hooligans who might bring down their property value.)

“Get in the car,” Mr. Stark says from the driver’s seat, sporting his trademark look of moto jacket and jeans, paired with a tousled head, and nonchalantly thrown-on sunglasses that look like they cost more than most of the cars parked on this street. He looks relaxed, like he’s just here for a friendly chat, but Peter isn’t fooled.

“Um, I’m kinda meeting Ned for a… um, a project?” Peter hedges, trying to come up with a convincing excuse. “Yeah, homework, major paper due soon, we really should be working on that, education is important, right Mr. Stark? So maybe, we could, um, meet up again at some other time or… something?” Peter trails off. Homework is a good excuse, right? Adults always fall for that sort of thing.

Not this adult, apparently.

“Well, cancel and reschedule, or don’t turn it in. I don’t really care. Get in the car,” Mr. Stark says in clipped tones, fingers drumming on the steering wheel impatiently. There’s the slightest crack in his façade of carefully-crafted casualness. There’s a tick under his cheek that’s growing, and he seems to be grinding his teeth a bit.

Yeah, Peter’s definitely in deep shit. He slumps, resigned, and pulls open the passenger seat door.
They’re halfway to the Avengers Tower, and Peter’s just finished texting apologies to Ned and promising to make it up to him tonight by working some more on their nearly complete Lego Death Star, when Tony speaks up.

“Remind me again the three fundamental rules I laid down when I gave you your new suit?” Tony asks, casual and mild.

Peter does a deer-in-the-headlights impersonation. “Um… ‘You’re not an Avenger, so don’t take on international terrorists, supervillains, or aliens’?”

“Oh, and…?”

“‘Always immediately call for help if I accidentally stumble upon international terrorists, supervillains, or aliens.’ But, Mr. Stark, I didn’t know these guys had alien wea-,” Peter starts to say.

Tony interrupts him, “And?”

“‘And always listen to FRIDAY when she starts giving me instructions,’” Peter finishes, a bit sullenly. “I was doing the best I could with the situation!” he gets in, before Mr. Stark could start at him again.

“Nearly dying in a force-field explosion and taking out half the block is definitely the best you could’ve done, oh yeah,” Mr. Stark says, his sarcasm biting.

“I didn’t know those guys had such crazy-ass weapons! And I knew the police were on the way,” Peter protests. He doesn’t deserve this. It’s not his fault regular criminal assholes randomly pulled alien tech on him. Life is so unfair.

“Sure, the police could’ve dealt with criminals who Spider-Man, in a Tony Stark custom super-suit, couldn’t defeat,” Tony says. A little part of Peter almost admires the amount of eye-rolling packed with that sentence.

There’s a minute of tense silence, filled only by the silent purr of the Audi’s engine below them.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Stark,” Peter finally mumbles, looking at his hands. He doesn’t regret cutting off FRIDAY, nor does he think he is exactly to blame for how spectacularly shit hit the fan last night. He definitely knows he did the best he could have (even if the best ended with Queens minus half a street). Still. He hates feeling like he’s disappointed Tony.

(And when did that happen, huh? This desperate desire to have Mr. Stark be proud of him? Not just as Spider-Man, a potential Avengers recruit, but also as Peter?)

“No,” Tony’s voice is slightly raspy. Peter turns to see Mr. Stark determinedly staring straight ahead, the sunglasses not quite masking the strange vulnerability in his stance. “It’s… you’re my responsibility, you know? You screw up, it’s on you, but by extension, it’s also on me. And next time, it could be worse than just a couple of buildings getting blown up and the bad guys getting a serious concussion. This isn’t a joke, Peter, it’s not a game, you could end up hurt or killed and it’d be on me because I should’ve been able to prevent it, I should’ve been looking out for you because you’re my…” Mr. Stark clears his throat, briefly turns towards Peter before looking away. “I just don’t think I can deal with any of that right now, alright?”

Peter’s… kinda stunned. He can’t believe he managed to leave such a bad impression on Mr. Stark. He never thought it was a joke or a game. All he wanted was to impress Mr. Stark, no, Tony. He just wanted to make sure Tony knew there was someone in his corner now, with all the other Avengers gone rogue. Someone competent that Tony could trust and rely upon to have his back.
Somehow, he’s managed to colossally mess this all up. He needs to fix this. He needs to prove to Tony he’s not just some kid messing around with his superpowers. That he can be trusted.

Peter opens his mouth to say as much when Tony completely derails him, by saying, “Which is why I’m gonna need that suit back.”

What? No.

“Nonononono,” Peter blurts, panicking. “Mr. Stark, I need that suit. I need to be Spider-Man, you can’t take it away. I’ll be better from now on, please –“

“I’m not taking it away, kid, calm down,” Mr. Stark says, sounding exhausted. “I’m just going to do some major overhaul. Make alterations based on the recent events, modify its base protocol. It’s my whole thing, c’mon, it’s what I do.”

“But what are you going to do to it?” Peter asks, suspicious and protective. He loves his suit. He doesn’t want Mr. Stark taking it apart and ruining it. (Never mind the fact that it’s technically Mr. Stark’s suit, plus there’s no way Tony Stark would ever ruin a piece of equipment, that he built in the first place, but… Yeah.)

“Well, I’m gonna take FRIDAY out, for one thing. I thought you were ready for an experienced AI who could act as your partner in the field, but clearly I was severely mistaken.”

“But I love FRIDAY. And she makes it so much easier to be Spider-Man.”

Peter is devastated.

“Please don’t do this, Mr. Stark,” he pleads at a half-whine, but he’s not even ashamed. He loves having FRIDAY in his suit. He doesn’t want to give her up.

“Puppy eyes, no, don’t,” Mr. Stark says, sounding rather consternated. “No, stop it. I’m not leaving you without any AI backup, jeez, what do you think I want to do here? The goal is to stop you from getting your ass kicked. Just, you’re not ready for a team-effort like with FRIDAY yet. You clearly need more training first. And I won’t be around to keep an eye on you all the time, what with all the Accords negotiations coming up soon. I’ve just upgraded one of the training AIs from the upstate Avengers facility to input into your suit. She’ll be a good mentor/teacher to help you find your feet, that’s kind of her whole point for being created.”

So, basically, Mr. Stark’s gonna take away FRIDAY and put in an AI nanny instead? Well that sounds goddamn fucking great. Shoot him now. Or maybe don’t, because then maybe Mr. Stark actually will take away his suit. And also probably ground him and take away internet privileges or some other dumb shit like that.

“Wow, great,” Peter mutters mulishly, offended by the entire concept of him not being good enough to work as a teammate with FRIDAY, and not being trusted to be a superhero on his own without Mr. Stark keeping an eye on him.

Peter’s a very responsible kid, just ask Aunt May! Besides, Peter’s a great teammate. Look at his extensive participation in all sorts of team-driven activities like Marching Band and Academic Decathlon (all of which he quit since he met Mr. Stark, but that’s not the point here!). Peter’s not some disobedient child to be treated like this (never mind that he’s ignored FRIDAY’s advice on multiple occasions, and once blew a raspberry within his suit-mask to annoy her). Plus, he doesn’t need some training nanny minding his every step, he knows what he’s doing! (Even if, the whole reason he’s trying so hard is to become better at this superhero gig and impress Mr. Stark, and
ultimately prove that he knows what he is doing).

Ugh, Peter hates that little logical voice at the back of his head so much sometimes. It’s such a killjoy that sounds so much like Uncle Ben whenever he was being snotty…

Peter misses him.

They’re nearly at Avengers Tower now. Peter sort of passively notes an increased amount of activity around the base of the Tower, while he contemplates the upcoming changes to his suit.

It all sounds terrible. Peter’s trying to do good here. Couldn’t the world cut him some slack, for once?

Eight hours – spent in Mr. Stark’s lab doing homework, pestering Mr. Stark while he worked on Peter’s suit, and playing with the bots – later, Peter finally gets his suit back.

It looks and feel the exact same, though Mr. Stark’s done extensive changes to its interface, and then put it through a sub-atomic particle manipulator chamber to add more fancy features to the fabric – so it’ll now offer him decent protection against things like stun rays and laser guns, and also give him some buffer even if he’s caught in the middle of explosions. It’s pretty cool.

What’s not cool is when Peter offers up a tentative “Hi” inside his heads-up display, the voice that replies is distinctly not Irish.

Peter mourns the loss. He and FRIDAY bonded. He doesn’t want this new American AI nanny.

“Good evening, Peter,” the AI lady in his suit says, her voice pleasant and amiable and completely devoid of sass. It’s awful. “You have five hundred and ninety-two different web-shooter combinations that we could run through on your way home.”

Okay, he may hate the idea of having an AI nanny, but he has to admit, this is awesome. FRIDAY just liked to quietly judge him when he fell on his ass, usually.

“Uh, what’s up Suit Lady,” Peter says. In the background, he sees Tony Stark mouth ‘Suit Lady’ with an appalled expression, and instantly decides he is definitely gonna keep calling her that, for at least the near future. (He’s allowed to be a petty human being, he’s a teenager.) “I’ll be happy to practice the, um, the 592 web-shooter combinations that we could run through on your way home.”

“Certainly, Peter,” Suit Lady says. “Accessing Stark Servers to retrieve the last saved draft of your homework.”

“Multi-million dollar suit fitted with a revolutionary NLUI/AI assistant, and one of the most extensive server systems in the world, and he uses it for history homework,” Tony grumbles in the background, while Peter gathers up his stuff to leave. “Kids. Never appreciate what their elders give them, no respect… Suit Lady…”

Peter barely stops himself from laughing out loud. “Bye, Mr. Stark,” he calls out, heading for the closest window. “Thanks for the suit.” Because even if Peter’s pissed about being treated like a kid, he’s not going to be an asshole about it.

“Hey, kid,” Mr. Stark calls just as Peter is about to take off. He pauses, poised in a crouch on the window sill, turning back sideways to look.

Mr. Stark looks surprisingly accessible and… human, the way he’s sort of hunched in, wearing a
now-greasy T-shirt and beat-up jeans, staring at Peter with a weirdly vulnerable expression. Peter feels an unidentifiable rush of emotions in his chest, a confusion mixture of affection and admiration and a desperate need to prove himself as worthy of being beside him.

“Take care of yourself out there, alright?” Tony says, rocking on his heels a bit, eyes so very earnest. “Just, follow your training, learn to make full use of your powers and the suit. Stay safe. Stuff like the alien-tech weapons are on me, okay? We have people who handle this sort of thing. Don't get yourself into trouble trying to follow up on it or something. Just... do what you told me you wanted to do. Looking out for the little guy. Leave crime mobs to the rest of us. Can you do that for me?”

Peter does not want to promise that.

“I’ll see you around, Mr. Stark,” he quietly says instead before dropping off the window, putting to use the first dozen of the web-shooter combinations that show up on his heads-up display as he swings home.

Chapter End Notes

About some writing choices: My switching between writing Tony as 'Mr. Stark' and 'Tony' in Peter's POV, is to write Tony the way Spidey feels about him at that moment. Whether he looks at 'Mr. Stark', the hero he wants to impress and admires, or at 'Tony', the hero he looks at as a father-figure and also trusts. Not sure if it works (and isn't just extremely irritating), but I did want to point out that it's a conscious choice. Thanks for reading, and hope you enjoyed it! <3
Thanks for all the lovely comments and kudos! <3 <3 I can’t believe how much love this fic has gotten.

Reminder: In this fic Aunt May knows he is Spider-Man, but since the chapter is from Peter's POV, he doesn't know that she knows.

Peter’s plans for a perfectly low-key evening are derailed by his best friend accidentally discovering his secret superhero identity.

After the meeting with Tony, Peter swings around New York, keeping an eye out for crime while going through some of the basic web exercises Suit Lady has come up with.

“I feel rude to keep calling you Suit Lady, Suit Lady, what’s your name?” Peter asks about 30 minutes after leaving Avengers Tower, executing a double flip off a sky-scraper to land perfectly on the next building’s roof, as shown in the schematics on his heads-up display.

“I don’t have a name,” Suit Lady replies. “I am not a full-fledged A.I. and as such, Tony did not name me.”

“Well, I’m definitely going to name you,” Peter says, starting on the next projected web shooting combination. This one involves a free-fall for about 80 feet and using his webs to change course from it. Neat. He lets out a whoop.

“How’s Liz?” he asks, after he’s successfully completed that maneuver. “I like Liz. I mean I like Liz, the name, too, not just the girl.”

“Who’s Liz?” Suit Lady asks, conversationally. “I would recommend against combination 232 on this railing. It is not structurally sound enough.”

“Cool,” Peter says, jumping one roof over to start 232. “Liz is this senior girl in my school. She’s really smart, she’s the head of our decathlon team, y’know? And she’s really pretty, and I like her, like, like her, y’know?… Aaand I just realized it’d be super creepy to call you Liz. Yup. Definitely creepy.”

“If you say so, Peter.”

“How’s Karen?” he asks, spotting a brewing mugging in one of the alleys below and starting to swing down towards the situation. “It’s a nice name. I like Karen.”

“Karen is fine,” the newly christened Karen says, and then aids him while he beats up the petty criminal in the dank alley. So overall, by the time he gets home an hour later, Peter’s feeling pretty upbeat about life in general. He enters his bedroom through the window, exercising every precaution to make sure Aunt May doesn’t see him sneaking in.

Only to turn around to find Ned on his bed, looking absolutely gobsmacked and dropping the Lego Death Star they’d spent hours building to this level.
Peter’s brain freezes, at the twin shocks of ‘Ned on his bed staring at him still clad in the Spidey suit’ and ‘crashed Lego Death Star’. Then he has a mini-aneurysm when Aunt May’s voice adds to it, yelling “What was that?” from the front room.

“Ahhh, nothing! NOTHING!” Peter squeaks loudly, and fuck. Please don’t come in here, please don’t come in here. Oh my god.

Ned brings him back by saying in a tone of panicked incredulity, “You’re the Spider-Man?! From YouTube?!”

“No I’m not,” Peter denies instantly, which is ridiculous, because Ned watched him crawl across the ceiling and he’s still wearing the suit. Peter instantly hits the button to loosen the suit, hurrying out of it as though that would magically undo the last two minutes.

“You were on the ceiling!” Ned’s voice is shrill and he jabs a finger at the ceiling as if to emphasize his point. It’s a pretty good point.

“No I wasn’t…,” Peter starts to say then stops, because what can he even say at this point? “Ned, what’re you doing in my room?” he whisper-yells, changing track, starting to pull on an old T-shirt from the floor.

“Aunt May let me in,” Ned whisper-yells back at him. “You texted that we were going to finish the Lego Death Star tonight!”

Peter did actually do that. Fuck.

“She doesn’t know?!” Ned seems to finally catch on to the life-threatening problem here, looking even more panicked.

“Nobody knows,” Peter says, jittery, and he cracks under the stress, starting to ramble a bit. “Well, Mr. Stark knows coz he made me the suit but…”

“Tony Stark made you that suit?!” Ned’s voice goes even higher, awe bleeding in. “Does this mean you’re an Avenger?”

Despite the situation, Peter feels a small bit of smug pride seep into his gut. He’s a superhero. Tony Stark personally mentors him and makes him supersuits. He can stop a 3000-pound truck with his bare hands and swing from skyscrapers. He’s pretty cool.

“Yeah, basically,” he says, trying to manage a bit of nonchalant shrugging.

Ned looks rather faint on his feet, as if the awesomeness of that thought is too much for his young bodily constitution to handle. Peter gets it.

He feels the same.

These last few months have felt like a weird, fantastical dream and Peter doesn’t know what he did to deserve it, he only knows that he will do his best to keep it and keep doing the most good with it.

Which is why –

“You can’t tell anyone about this,” he hurriedly whispers, grabbing Ned’s shoulder to emphasize how serious he is about this.

“Why not?” Ned looks stunned at the very concept of not yelling it from the rooftops.
“Because if Aunt May finds out I’m out there trying to fight guys who’re trying to kill me every night, she won’t let me do this anymore!”

“But,” Ned is not getting it. “Peter I gotta level with you, I can’t keep it a secret! This is the greatest thing to ever happen to me!”

“No, Ned,” Peter grabs him again, squeezing him to make him listen. His super-strength unintentionally exerts itself, and Ned gives a full body twitch, with a muffled “Ow.”

Peter eases off.

“Aunt May can’t find out about this,” he says in a low voice, trying to put every bit of his panic, worry, earnestness into his tone. “With everything that’s happened, with –.”

Uncle Ben, he doesn’t say, voice choking on the name even now, nearly a whole year after it happened.

“I can’t do this to her right now,” Peter says, looking Ned straight in the eye. Ned’s face sober and he nods, looking somber.

There’s a beat of silence, and then –

“Can I try on the suit?” Ned asks.

“No,” Peter says, starting to usher Ned out of his room.

“How does the suit undo itself like that? What’s it made of? Magnets?”

“I’ll talk to you about this at school on Monday, okay? Just leave.”

Ned grinds himself to a halt at the door to Peter’s room.

“But how do you do the Stark internship and find time to be Spider-Man?” he asks earnestly.

Peter blows out an exasperated breath. “Ned, Spider-Man is the Stark internship.”

Ned stares him in the face for three whole seconds before it sinks in. “Ohhhhhhh,” he is saying with a tone of enlightened understanding when Peter finally pushes him out and slams the door shut behind him.

Jesus fucking Christ.

The rest of the weekend is incredibly stressful.

Aunt May must think he and Ned had a fight, because she keeps shooting him these searching, worried looks all day on Sunday, making aborted motions to talk to him that are driving him up a wall. He’s already fed-up with her heavy scrutiny by mid-morning and deeply regrets canceling on his study plans with Ned and Michelle for that day.

He then recalls the panicked-stunned-awed look on Ned’s face from last night and remembers exactly why he canceled the study date.

Fuck. Someone else knows he is Spider-Man.

Someone who is not an Avenger, or a high-level employee working for an Avenger, knows who he is.
His best friend knows.

He briefly wonders if this is going to turn out to be incredibly awesome or incredibly terrible… and in his mind’s eye, sees the look on Ned’s face last night again.

Terrible. Yup. No doubt about it. This is going to be a colossal shitshow.

By night, he must look like he’s two seconds away from imploding with repressed angst, because Aunt May takes him out to his favorite Thai place two blocks over.

The local news on TV is still playing footage and discussing the botched ATM robbery turned minor suburban explosion.

Aunt May keeps looking at the TV with an even-more stressed and anxious expression on her face every time they mention the words ‘explosion in Queens’, ‘confrontation with criminals possessing high-tech weapons’ and ‘neighborhood superhero Spider-Man’. Each time, she turns back to him to say things like, “Be careful, Peter, if anything like this happens again you must be careful. Be smart and protect yourself and run the other way if you have to, do you understand me? Just… stay safe. Please.”

Peter keeps nodding to appease her as he eats, thinking about how quickly their life was turned upside down last year, when all it had taken was a single bullet that Peter could've prevented…

This is why he can never tell her, Peter muses, as he soaks up some rice in the green curry. He can’t have her worrying about him more than she already does.

He can at least try to protect her from the truth of what he is now, from the burden of this. She's only just started to act a little more like herself again, after months and months of sharp melancholy following Uncle Ben's death. The last thing he wants to do is make her worry about possibly losing him too.

He'd do a lot worse than just lying about his superpowers, to keep seeing her happy again.
On Monday morning, Peter is acquainted with Ned Leeds’s new favorite hobby – 20 questions about Peter’s secret superhero powers.

Peter absolutely detests Ned Leeds’s new favorite hobby.

They’re on their way to school on Monday morning when Peter finally – amidst a million interruptions from Ned – finishes narrating how exactly he came to have superpowers.

“Whoa cool, can I get bitten by the spider too? Did it hurt? You know what, I don’t even care. The pain would be worth it. Right? Exactly how much pain are we talking about here?”

“The spider’s dead, Ned,” Peter says tersely, not even bothering to contain the eye-roll anymore. *Seriously.*

There’s blissful silence for just a few seconds when Ned suddenly goes stock-still beside him with a small gasp. Peter pauses, turning to look at him, then follows his line of sight.

They are on the street where Peter fought the fake ‘Avengers’ so eventfully early Saturday morning.

“Shit, this was you?” Ned asks in a hush, taking in the absolutely destroyed street, the bent lamp posts, the decimated building that once used to be three shops and a community bank. “Shit, Pete. You could’ve *died.*”

And Peter feels the levity of the morning fade as the meaning, the responsibility of being Spider-Man settles around him once more. This is his fault. If he had just been quicker, faster, better…

“And you lay eggs too?” Ned asks.

What the *fuck.*

* And so it goes on and on, for the rest of the day.

In Chemistry class, Ned wheels towards him to surreptitiously whisper, “Do you spit venom?”

Already, Peter regrets everything. A mind wipe would be a great superpower to have right now.

“No, Ned.”

In Biology –

“How far can you shoot your webs?”

“I dunno,” Peter mutters, hunching in to deflect further questions.
But Ned doesn’t quit. “If I were you, I’d just stand on the edge of a super tall building and shoot off like crazy, just to see how far it goes, and —” Ned’s voice grows increasingly louder in his enthusiasm.

The girl in front of them turns around to give them an utterly revolted look.

Peter reviews that sentence in his head, realizes what it could sound like out of context, and cringes. “Ned, shut up.”

In Civic Studies, leaning over a desk to disrupt Peter’s half-assed attention on the lecture about the Sokovia Accords. “Can you summon an army of spiders?”

Oh my god. “No, Ned, no.”

Michelle, sitting a few seats over, shoots them a withering glare before going back to whichever college-level book she’s reading for fun while ignoring the class lecture today.

During gym, where they’re watching yet another Captain America educational video —

“Have you met him, too?” Ned’s voice is awed.

Okay, for this one moment, Peter will admit. It’s pretty cool to have someone else know about his powers.

“Yup, I stole his shield,” Peter quips flippantly, making it sound entirely cooler than it actually was. Then his conscience niggles at him till he sighs and adds, “and then he beat me up.”

“Whoaaaaaa,” Ned still sounds extremely impressed, which yeah, Peter gets it. One year ago, being beaten up by Captain America after stealing his shield would have been the coolest thing to ever happen. It’s still up there on that list, with other greats like ‘meeting Tony Stark’, and ‘getting superpowers’, and ‘having a personal suit-lady AI/NLUI’.

So, it’s with a slightly sunnier outlook that Peter goes to do the mandatory fitness routines, with Ned as his spotter. (What used to be a mild struggle, he now basically breezes through. It’s gratifying to get a ‘Good job, Parker’ from their coach, even if he can’t show off his powers to everyone.) And maybe once Ned has had long enough to get used to the idea of Peter as Spider-Man (read: once Ned works all the dumb questions out of his system, the most recent of which has been – “How does the Hulk smell? Nice, I bet!” and “Is Captain America actually cool, or is he like a grumpy old grandpa?”), maybe it will go back to being some form of normal (read: normal for them, which historically has been a state of exceptional nerdiness).

Ned gives him cause to regret this thought barely ten minutes later, when he announces to the entire class that Peter personally knows Spider-Man.

Sure, Peter gets that Ned was trying to do him a solid, and help him out with his crush on Liz (who apparently has a crush on Peter. Him! Okay, she actually has a crush on his secret alter-ego superhero, who she doesn’t actually know is Peter, BUT STILL. It counts!). But that’s how, after tripping and stumbling through that conversation with his whole class watching (and Flash being a typical smarmy asshole), he ends up with a ridiculous promise to bring Spider-Man to a high school party.

It rankles at Peter to have agreed to it in the first place. This is beneath the dignity of what Peter is trying to do as Spider-Man! He wants Mr. Stark to take him seriously and consider him as a responsible and mature addition to the Avengers! Going to a high school party as Spider-Man to boost his popularity as Peter Parker and impress the girl he has a crush on, definitely does not fall
into the category of ‘responsible and mature’ or ‘Avengers-material’.

Which doesn’t stop him from getting ready for Liz’s party that Friday night, practicing ‘cool’ entrance-lines in the bathroom mirror for thirty minutes while donning his Spidey suit under regular clothes.

He’s just glad Mr. Stark can’t actually see him right now. He can almost feel the judgmental eyebrow raise that’d be directed his way just thinking about it.

Aunt May makes fun of the fact that he’s wearing cologne the entire drive to Ned’s house to pick him up. (He pocketed the small bottle of complementary Eau de Cologne at his five-star hotel suite in Berlin. It’s mint-scented. Peter thinks he smells pretty nice and ignores Aunt May’s heckling.)

He feels his nerves and doubts mount the whole ride over to Liz’s place after picking Ned up.

He just… he’s really not sure about this. What if someone links something about his mannerisms as Spider-Man to Peter Parker? What if he makes a fool of himself as Spider-Man and ends up being uncool as both Peter Parker and Spider-Man?

What if Liz meets Spider-Man and decides she doesn’t actually like who he is on the inside?

Peter’s in a state of steady anxiety by the time they pull up to Liz’s house.

“House party in the suburbs, god I miss those days,” Aunt May says in a cheerful voice. “Well, have fun boys, call me when you want me to come pick you up, alright?”

Peter can’t do this. “Aunt May, can we just go? I don’t think I want to do this anymore.”

“What, no,” Aunt May shakes her head, looking worried about something again. “Peter, honey. Parties are part of the high school experience. You should go. It’ll be fun. Just be a regular kid for one night. Enjoy yourself.”

Regular kid, she says, while he’s wearing his super-suit under his clothes. Although, she doesn’t know about that.

He gets out of the car reluctantly.

The sequence of events that follows is predictable. Ned and Peter head in, looking around at the partying teenagers and completely out of their element. Liz shows up to be nice to them, and Peter gapes at her like the pining moron that he is. Michelle materializes out of absolutely fucking nowhere doing something weird and being a smartass. Flash behaves like a dick.

And then Peter’s sitting on the next house’s roof, slowly taking off his street clothes to reveal the super-suit beneath it. He looks down at the bustling group of teenagers, at Ned standing in the middle of it all alone, waiting on Peter, depending on him to help lift their status a little bit in this school…

He pulls on his mask, gets ready to swing down, then pauses, more unsure than ever.

“What am I doing?” he mutters to himself.

“From my analysis, you are attempting to use your status as a superhero to positively influence your societal position in an arbitrary high school popularity structure that is absolutely inconsequential in the scheme of the real world,” Karen says, answering his rhetorical question. “Have I covered everything?” she finishes politely.
“Yeah, thanks Karen,” Peter grumbles, feeling even stupider than before but resigned to do this anyway - and then it happens.

A plume of silver violet light shooting up towards the sky, a few miles to the north of Liz’s house.

“What was that?” Peter asks, on high alert immediately, all thoughts of being a party trick instantly forgotten. Unless he’s extremely mistaken, that energy emission looked very similar to…

“The energy signature resembles the laser guns used by Ultron’s robots in Sokovia,” Karen confirms his suspicions. “I estimate the location to be an old, rarely used connection bridge, 3.2 miles from our present location.”

And Peter’s off, heading in the direction of the light, ignoring the roundabout map Karen plots for him.

“Peter, I must warn you, this route is less than optimal,” Karen says as Peter swings from rooftop to rooftop. “There is a…”

“I know this way will be quicker,” Peter interrupts, a little annoyed. She’s been doing this all week and now is not the time. “I saw the energy beam too, Karen, I can see this direction is faster. You don’t need to always baby-proof my routes, I can handle a little roughing it.”

“But last I checked, you can’t actually fly across miles of flat land,” Karen says dryly, just as Peter swings down from a dense crop of trees and shoots another web, only for it to go… nowhere. Because he is standing at the edge of a golf course.

Goddammit.

He’s been running full-tilt across the golf course for three minutes, dodging the occasional sprinkler attack when Karen says, a touch smugly, “ETA: seven minutes. It would have been two minutes under my plotted route.”

“Shut up, Karen.” Stupid smug AIs.

When he finally gets there, Peter can hear tense voices from under the arch of the bridge. It sounds like at least two men, maybe three. He crawls along the side to tentatively peer in.

“This is way beyond what I am looking for, fellas,” a scruffy, dark-skinned man is saying, shaking his head and backing away a little bit. “I was hoping to buy a couple stun guns, maybe a cool laser, but not like, weapons to turn back time or some shit.”

“You want us to tell the boss you brought us all the way out here, and made us do a dance and pony show just to wimp out of the deal?” a white man with a bushy brown beard and a beanie says, extending a indecorously high-tech energy gun in a mock-threatening way at the other man. There’s another man with a clean-shaven head standing behind him, smirking. “C’mon, Davis, you saw what these babies can do. Couple of these in your men’s hands, and you could give the Kingpin a run for his money.”

“Man, I’m just looking for some self-defense while I do my business,” the man, Davis apparently, says, backing off even further, clearly looking to exit the scene. “I have no interest in even sharing the same sentence of men like Fisk. I’m sorry for wasting your time, but –”

And Peter’s phone goes off loudly, belting out the ‘Yodeler’s Dance’, his ringtone for Ned.

Fuck.
“Did you set us up?!” the bearded man is yelling by the time Peter shuts it off, looking deranged, brandishing the laser gun before him. “I’m going to turn you into toast.”

“No!” Peter yells, dropping down from the bridge and landing before them in a crouch. “If you gotta shoot someone, point at me!”

“I don’t mind.” the man’s grin is evil as he depresses the trigger of the gun.

Peter dodges and the entire situation quickly goes sideways.

And he’s now chasing the bad guys through what feels like every suburban street in Queens, trying desperately to hold on to their van with his webs while they dodge and swing and shoot at him and basically do everything they can to dislodge him.

“There’s a tracker in your suit that you can attach to their van!” Karen says loudly, as Peter gets dragged around over the hard tar for another half-mile, even his reinforced, friction-resistant suit starting to fray a bit from the intensity of the hits he’s taking. “That way, you can pinpoint their location and later report to Mr. Stark for his aid!”

“Show me how to activate the tracker,” Peter says, panting, and then yells when the shaved-head dude finally lands a perfect shot, ripping through Peter’s web and catapulting him over a picket fence, crashing straight into somebody’s treehouse.

Peter sits up, his HUD feed misfiring a bit before it rights itself.

“Karen, which way?” he asks, activating the tracker set in his palm like she shows him, and shooting webs at the house’s roof.

“I hear their vehicular frequency in roughly the south-west direction,” she says, and he’s off, on a mission to place a tracker on their van so he can figure out where they go, and what they’re up to.

Scavenging Chitauri weapons from right here in New York is one thing. But this is something else. How on earth are local black market arms dealers getting their hands on tech from the Battle of Sokovia? Peter needs to get to the bottom of this.

“Gotcha,” he yells, when he sees the van a quarter-mile away. He hops over a few more rooftops, swings around a protruding tree branch, and extends his arm to shoot the tracker bug, nearly there, just a couple more yards…

And something large, sharp, and very strong grabs him from above like a huge bird of prey and swoops upwards, Peter held in its unrelenting grip like he’s nothing more than a helpless field-mouse.

What the hell is going on, what, what.

Peter kicks, squirms, hits, trying to break the iron-clad grip on him, trying to get out of range of this…this monster guy, who is flying…

Who is flying Peter straight up into the sky.

Peter feels his heart turn, and the bottom fall out of his stomach, when he sees how far away the ground already is. The rooftops of the houses look like something out of child’s toy city. The still-trundling van he was chasing just a few minutes ago is no bigger than his thumb in size.

“Ahhhhh, gerroff, get off me, let me go,” Peter yells himself hoarse, fighting with renewed urgency
and desperation, though a part of him is terrified of the monster letting him go, because could he even survive a straight drop from this height?

How is he going to get out of this?

Through the rush of panic roaring in his ears, he hears Karen say, “Activating Parental Control Protocol!”

An electric pulse shoots over the entire outer surface of his suit and the monster lets go of him just as something inflates from the side of his suit.

Peter falls face-first into what he’ll later realize was the newly-inflated parachute. But as it stands in that moment, he’s falling like a dead log, accelerating with every feet, the parachute hopelessly tangled around him and blinding him on top of it all.

He yells, kicking and squirming, trying to get untangle himself, his heart beating a panicked staccato in his throat, blood pounding in his ears.

He crashes into a lake with an impact that feels like it's wet concrete instead, still ensnared in the parachute, still blinded, water closing around him, unable to tell up from down, the momentum of the crash resonating through every bone in his body and…

He blacks out.
Tony puts on the last touches of concealer to cover the bags under his eyes, before throwing the colorful tasseled scarf that goes with his sherwani around his neck, and pulling on his trademark sunglasses (a pale red Initium to match his suit, one that he extensively modified to have far greater capabilities than just UV filtering and anti-glare.) He dons the Iron-glove wrist watch on his right hand and checks to make sure the refurbished Mark XLVI, (patched-up post-Siberia for traveling purposes, while the Mark XLVII is on standby at New York) is in an optimal position to fly out to him if he calls for it.

He activates the computer on his glasses to skim through any critical new updates as he exits the front hall of the bungalow that the Superpowered Threats Assessment Division of the Indian government had graciously provided him with, for the duration of his stay in New Delhi to renegotiate some of the terms of the Accords.

He climbs into the yellow Audi R8 he started maintaining in India after making heavy investments in the peninsular subcontinent towards clean energy and other technological ventures, and zooms off towards the Sri Venkateswara Temple, where he accepted the invitation to attend an auspicious celebration hosted by one of the Ministers, as a courtesy of good faith.

It’s been rough going, the whole business of overhauling the Accords to make key changes in favor of the Avengers, and Tony hasn’t been idle this past month.

While Rhodey has been relearning how to operate the War Machine armor with his new robotic legs and the extra features Tony designed into it, Tony has been making his vow to rebuild an Avengers team from scratch come true.

On one front, he’s been shopping around for potential new Avengers.

And no, Spider-Man is most definitely not on that recruitment list, no matter what Peter’s (very vocal) feelings are on that matter. Kid doesn’t even get his damn driver’s license till the first week of October. Talk about a pipsqueak upstart wanting to put his fingers into all sorts of pies where they decisively don’t belong.

But a little hidden part of Tony, one that is far removed from his constant state of anxiety over the
kid’s hijinks, is also really smug about how good Peter is at all of this, being a superhero, being a caring and responsible teenager, even if most of the time it feels like all he does is make Tony want to tear his own hair out. Tony remembers what he was like at 15, with the sex, and the proclivity for drugs and alcohol, and the lack of social contact apart from Rhodey, the professor he’s currently arguing with, or the next one-night stand. Peter, with his rigorous moral code and his goodness and his empathetic nature and his complete lack of any sordid activities and his intelligence and his overall healthy teenage life, is already so much better. Tony knows he has had no hand in crafting the boy to be who he is (in fact, maybe his lack of involvement is precisely why the kid turned out alright), but it doesn’t stop him from feeling proud every time FRIDAY, and then Karen (as Peter’s apparently named her) send him video or audio updates of Peter doing something else wholesome and loveable.

(There’s an actual video on YouTube with over 35 million views of Spider-Man climbing a tree to save someone’s cat. The kid had played with the irritable cat for five whole minutes before handing it back to the little girl with an adorable little salute that makes Tony want to smoosh his cheeks and hug him.)

But anyway, absolutely adorable or not, Peter is not getting on the official Avengers Team till he’s at least 19, if Tony has any say in it. Maybe not even till he’s 21, barring any potential world-ending events, of course.

There are others who have been on his radar for a while, that he’s currently following up with. There’s the vigilante lawyer in Harlem going by ‘Daredevil’, who seems like a good man to have on the ground to do some direct combat or covert ops. There are others, Jessica Jones, Luke Cage, someone calling himself Iron Fist. There’s a retired neurosurgeon playing mystic on Bleecker Street who promises to be the focal point of the ‘magical’ (that words still curdles in Tony’s mouth, ugh) defense of the Earth. A couple of whispers he’s been reading in the intel he receives that suggests there’s maybe some underground operation of SHIELD’s remnants working to do the job it was established to do. He has been putting out active feelers into all of their interest for becoming a part of the Avengers Team, or its support system, but is yet to actively pursue the rebuilding of a team.

Because there’s something important he needs to get through first to do all of that.

Which brings him to his second important work – gathering global support for Amendments to the Sokovia Accords. He’s been working on this tirelessly since the minute he finally got a satisfactory set of robotic legs manufactured for Rhodey.

His first plan of attack was to dethrone Ross.

Two days after Ross called him about the breaking out of the outlaw Avengers from The Raft (two days after Steve sent him that damn letter), Tony called a UN Hearing against Secretary Ross on grounds of gross Human Rights Violations (and all the reasons why these particular superpowered people, enhancements or not, still most definitely fell into the ‘Human’ category), misuse of power, and unlawful detention without rightful trial, just to begin with. Tony, and his extremely talented group of lawyers, decimated all the weak sections and under-worked rules outlined in the Accords one-by-one, to point out how wrongful parties going after selfish gain (in this case, Ross) could utilize these loopholes to commit the sort of violations that went against the whole point of the Accords.

One more week of Tony arguing his case – and he had it.

Ross was to receive his own trial looking into potential misuse of powers during his short-lived stint as elected Chairman for the Accords Council. Tony also strong-armed the UN into allowing the appointment of two heads or Co-Chairs for the Accords Council, one nominated by the UN with no
political or militaristic affiliation to any country’s government, and one nominated by the Avengers, who is super-powered but not a direct serving member of the team. And his crowning glory – he passed the motion to allow for extensive Amendments to the Sokovia Accords.

The nominations, and the limitations on those who could be appointed to the Council, are not hammered out yet. They haven’t even begun forming a consensus on what is or isn’t going to fly in the updated Sokovia Accords.

But for all that… it’s a start. The conversation is on the table now. He can now steer it, shape it, influence it. And all with no thanks to any of the outlaw Avengers.

His so-called friends.

Tony bites his lips, staring blankly at the bustling streets of the North Indian city as he maneuvers through traffic. (His flashy car with the STARK nameplate seems to be attracting quite a few eyeballs, but Tony ignores it, using FRIDAY to find backroads and lesser used highways to draw out of the inner city.)

He is finally doing with the Accords what he hoped they would accomplish in the first place, and it feels good. Good to be independent and strong-willed and uncompromising, fighting tooth-and-nail with every dirty business trick or underhanded political maneuver he’s learned, to get the results he wants – without Cap’s judgmental eyes trained on his back, a special cocktail of disappointed, resigned, and disapproving that always managed to raise Tony’s hackles. It feels good to take the world and shape it to his will, without hearing whispers of him being maniacal and egotistical from Natasha, or Wanda, or Clint. It fells damn good to be moving and doing something, without hearing words of caution and fear from Bruce or Thor.

But despite all this, despite how much he convinces himself his life is better without the Avengers that were so quick to turn on him, the truth is…

He misses them.

So many of the issues he fought so hard on were those he knew would directly impact the outlaw Avengers. He spent three sleepless nights to push through a motion to pardon the outlaw Avengers, and spoke till he was hoarse till the UN agreed to hear more arguments towards their pardoning. Not to mention all the provisions he’s making sure to include in the Accords, because he understands what each of them would want, the kind of clauses each of them would need to see before they would even consider signing something like the Accords.

He wonders if this would even matter in the end, or if they would continue to be disbanded vigilantes, resisting all structure and command, leaving the Earth severely under-prepared and undefended when the inevitable happens and there’s another massive alien invasion…

At this point, Tony forcibly removes himself from this train of thought, shaking his head to focus on something else. What the outlaw Avengers choose to do is no longer his problem. All he can do is fight for the most just, most reasonable agreement that he can manage with the UN, and whether anyone signs it or not is up to them.

And meanwhile, Tony will do everything he can to put together that first line of defense himself, to make sure this planet is never left lonely and vulnerable.

He sighs, turning his thoughts towards happier matters. Like his super-powered spider-kid doing his best to send Tony’s cholesterol and blood pressure shooting to not-good levels.
‘Happier matters’ is a relative term in the Stark world).

“FRIDAY, patch Karen through to me, would you?” he asks, zooming across the highway, still not over the strangeness of driving left on the road (even if the local government sanctioned the use of his own left-steering-equipped car as a gesture of goodwill toward his status as Ambassador of the Avengers Initiative).

He spots the gopuram of the temple in the distance, and sighs as Karen connects with him. He hasn’t had time to inquire beyond Peter’s safety and comfort for the whole past week. Looks like he doesn’t have much time to do so now, either. He’ll just have to catch up later.

“Hey Kare-bear, how’s the Petester doing?” he asks, deftly overtaking a trundling truck to cover the last half mile to his destination.

“He is fine,” Karen replies calmly. “He is presently on his way to attend a high school party at the house of a girl from his Decathlon Team.”

“The one that he quit?” Tony raises an eyebrow, pulling up before the temple. “He friends with this girl? Does May know what he’s up to?” Wouldn’t want the kid to start underage drinking now, after all.

“May Parker is driving him there,” Karen informs him, and Tony relaxes. He then nearly slams his foot on the brake in surprise when she continues, “I am not sure about the friendship between Liz and Peter, but I believe he has a crush on her.”

“What,” Tony breathes, feeling a grin start to split his face. “Karen, details.”

“He is presently very nervous,” the AI sounds gently amused. “He is wearing cologne that he swiped from his suite in Berlin, and redid his hair five times before leaving the house.”

“Oh my god, that’s so cute,” Tony laughs out loud, utterly charmed and delighted. His baby duckling is all grown up and crushing on girls. Tony mentally begins a plan to somehow work in him giving ‘The Talk’ to Peter the next time he sees him, purely for maximum embarrassment to the teenager (and maximum entertainment for the shameless adult). “Who is this girl?”

“She is a senior in Midtown High,” Karen starts, and Tony snorts with another hoot of laughter, because senior? Really? Of course Peter has to go extra-ambitious with his crush. “Her name is Liz Al –”

“Mr. Stark,” a voice calls out, and Tony looks up to see the Minister who invited him walking forwards to greet him. With a sigh, he cuts Karen off with a quick “Report later,” and turns to greet the intelligent old woman who has been a vocal supporter of the Amendments he’s been trying to push, complementing her colorful sari and thanking her for the invitation.

If there’s a spring to his step since that chat with Karen, well, no one else except him will truly know why.

*

Of course, it all goes to shit less than forty minutes later.

Tony has been blessed by a priest during a puja, been fed two cashew-filled gram-flour laddus, and has washed it down with a cup of sweet coconut water. He’s feeling marginally at peace and in vague harmony with the whole world.
And then his phone blares with the special tone that he’s set for Karen calling him with a Peter-related emergency. He instantly links the computer on his glasses with the Wi-Fi at the temple, using his phone to commandeer a few passing satellites to strengthen the signal and ensure its steady connection, readying both the Mark XLVI here and the Mark XLVII in New York, for any eventuality.

He’s prepared to deal with a teenage fistfight, acts of inebriated vandalism, or a broken heart. (Actually, if it’s the last he’s gonna run away like the wimp he is, and let May deal with it.) He’s even prepared to hear about some back-alley Spidey skirmish that Peter might need to be bailed out of.

He’s most definitely, emphatically, not prepared to hear that his son is currently in the clutches of some minor supervillain in a flying mechanized suit, being dangled and yanked around 600 ft. above the ground.

His heart starts thumping painfully. No. He made sure… he took every precaution…

Tony’s remotely deploying the Mark XLVII before Karen has finished the sitrep. He uses his glasses to pilot the HUD, with FRIDAY co-piloting for maximum speed.

“Karen, activate parental control,” he yells in a strained voice, huddled next to a stone pillar, watching New York city zip beneath him in his glasses as he remotely pushes the suit to go even faster. “Electric pulse and parachute.”


“What’s happening?” Tony asks, looking at the blinking tracker in his glasses. Ten miles, eight miles, less than six miles…

“He’s free-falling,” Karen’s voice is distracted, distressed. “His parachute got tangled with his body during the release. He cannot break his fall.”

Tony’s blood runs cold.

In his glasses, he sees, three miles, less than two miles… the suburbs under him are a blur, his suit’s HUD throwing up alarms of extreme air friction due to his speed.

“Seven seconds to impact,” Karen says, and Tony knows he won’t get there on time.

He knows…

In his head, all he can see is Rhodey spinning through the air, falling, falling as Tony pushes himself forward, pushes and pushes and pushes, all for nothing, only to reach him too late. The nightmarish sounds from Rhodey’s armor as it crashed with the ground. The stuttering seconds where Tony was sure he would pry open the armor only to find his best friend dead. The torturing truth that if Tony had only been quicker, smarter, better… maybe Rhodey would have working legs today.

If Rhodey nearly didn’t make it after a crash like that while wearing a titanium alloy machine armor, what chance did Peter have in his lithe reinforced fabric suit?

His parents. Rhodey. And now… Peter? No. No.

Less than half a mile.
“Two seconds, one second.”

He’s nearly there but not close enough, he’s still too damn far away. No. Not again.

Impact,” Karen says, pausing for a millisecond that feels like an eternity before continuing. “Impact was with a lake, no major trauma or bleeding detected. Peter’s vitals are within reasonable parameters for his unique biology, though he may be slipping into unconsciousness.”

Tony distantly thinks he lets out a cry.

500 feet, 100 feet, nearly there. I’m here, Peter.

The armor shoots into the water like a falling comet, and Tony remotely pilots it towards the tracker, watching as Peter comes in view of the HUD. He looks like an improbable creature of the underwater world, floating in his red-and-blue suit, small and young and so damn breakable.

Tony has him in the armor’s arms and zipping back out of the water in less than ten seconds.

Peter comes to a few minutes after Iron Man scooped him out of the lake.

He seems discombobulated, shaking his head and looking around in drowsy panic as the armor carries him across the lake.

“Wha – whoaaa, wha’s ‘appening?” Peter groans, shaking his head like that’d spur him into consciousness. He finally seems to realize what is going on. “Mr. Stark…? What is goin’… um, hey. Did you see that guy?!”

Tony would be worried about a concussion if he didn’t know this is how Peter normally talks.

“Shut up till I get you on solid ground,” Tony snaps, his frayed nerves absolutely out of any semblance of patience. He gets up from where he’s been huddled next to the pillar and walks around, feeling tight and angry as he remotely instructs the Iron Man armor to carry Spider-Man towards an empty playground nearby. The armor deposits Peter on top of a dome climber, and Tony waits, biting the inner lining of his mouth tensely while Peter takes off his mask with weary, shaky movements. Tony consciously stops when he tastes blood.

“What. Happened?” he bites out instead, can hear the anger translated even through the mechanized voice of the armor. Peter is looking up at him, clearly regrouping.

And the whole grand story comes out.

Peter spotting the laser show, then following it to its source because of course he did. (Never mind that Tony specifically told him not to do anything like that.) Peter voluntarily jumping in front of a gun brandished by a maniac, to save some low-life criminal who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Peter getting dragged along the road for three miles like a human bumper streamer. Karen guiding him to reframe his agenda to simply placing a tracker on the van, and leaving it for later (and hopefully, for the adults) to handle.

“And then this flying monster guy swoops in out of nowhere,” Peter is narrating breathlessly now, words tripping over one another in his haste, seeming completely unaware of the fact that he’s the reason Tony’s currently having a mini-apoplectic fit in a Hindu temple while surrounded by marigold garlands. “And he carries me up like, hundreds of feet, like a thousand feet, and suddenly Karen’s yelling ‘Activating Parent Control’ or something, and she like, zaps the flying guy with some electric shock thing on my suit – did you put a shocker in my suit, Mr. Stark, coz gotta say that’s awesome –,” Tony actually feels the blood pounding in the vein over his left eye, “– but anyway, she also
activated this parachute, but the vulture guy flipped me and I fell right into the chute and couldn’t get out of it and…” he pauses to take a breath, wringing out the water from his mask. “Yeah that was not really good, I thought I was a goner. Lucky that I fell into a lake, right Mr. Stark?” (Not really good…? Lucky?!) And then you got here and got me out of the water, so, yeah. That’s it.”

Tony is actually speechless.

“Did Karen tell you where I was?” Peter asks conversationally, like he didn’t just nearly die, like him being alive and whole and unhurt here right now wasn’t just blind dumb luck of him happening to be over a water body deep enough to take the force of his fall at that time.

(What is it with the stupid superhuman idiots that he cares about and falling into water bodies?)

“I put a tracker in your suit too,” Tony answers Peter’s question, wrestling with the impulse to yell and curse at him instead. In that moment, he feels a weird kinship with Howard and that just… isn’t something he can deal with right now, on top of everything else. He will think about all of this later, with a glass (or three) of scotch. He continues, trying to keep his voice steady, “I put everything in your suit. Including an oxygen filter that’ll let you breathe underwater for hours, as long as you have your mask on. And this heater.”

He remotely commands the Iron Man armor to activate the Spidey-suit’s internal heating unit and watches as Peter shivers blissfully when his suit instantly goes from wet and clammy, to toasty warm and dry.

Tony gives himself a minute to just breathe in and out, while Peter groans appreciatively over his now-warmed state.

“What were you thinking?” Tony gets out eventually, words clipped and hard. He sees he’s finally attracted the attention of other guests in the gathering, and tries to rearrange his face to something amiable and relaxed. He nods at a few of them, throwing up some peace signs to reassure them that the world’s not actually ending (just his world that nearly collapsed). He’s not sure he succeeds.

“We know who’s responsible now!” Peter’s saying earnestly, eyes so innocently excited, like the child he is. Tony would fight death itself to prevent that innocence from being shattered by their line of business. “If I can track down the flying guy, and take him down, we can stop these crazy weapons from getting into the hands of the criminals of New York!”

Wait.

“Take him down?!” Tony asks, a little more incredulous and shrill than he’d have liked. His secret super-kid wants to go after a criminal underground super-weapons ring. So sue him, he’s allowed to freak out. “No, no, no, junior, I think you’re forgetting something here. This is not your job. There’s gonna be no taking down of anybody that’s not a bicycle thief or an alley mugger for you.”

Peter’s jaw is starting to set in a pugnacious clench that Tony can tell will soon have a Pavlovian effect on his blood pressure and general sanity. He changes tack, softening his tone a bit, trying to reason with Peter. Again.

Goddamn teenagers. Tony is sure this is karma coming back to bite him in the ass.

“Can’t you just…” Tony runs a hand through his hair, clenching it in despair, happy that Peter cannot see the gesture. “Remember what we discussed last time? About you just being the local superhero, the crime-fighting spider, the friendly neighborhood Spider-Man, looking out for the little guy? Saving kids from bus crashes. Helping little old ladies who’ll buy you churros. Stopping
muggings and bicycle thefts? Can’t you just… continue doing that, for a little while longer? Stay close to the ground. Stay out of trouble. Forget about all of this. This is not your problem. You’re not ready yet.”

"That’s not what you thought when you took me to Berlin to fight Captain America!” Peter’s tone is split between whining and sullenness, a trademark tone of voice used by teenagers everywhere since the beginning of time, probably.

"Kid, if Cap wanted to lay you out, he would have," Tony manages through gritted teeth, trying to once again wrangle his temper into check, trying not to feel the guilt-fear-panic rise up in his throat again at the memory of an unmoving Peter lying on that tarmac.

Peter, of course, looks even more mutinous.

Tony turns around to stare at an idol of Goddess Shakti, praying for a stroke of enlightenment that’ll help him deal with rebellious teenage boys. The idol continues to benignly smile at him, and blesses him with no such enlightenment.

“I can handle this, you know,” Peter says, sounding offended now, and what is Tony doing wrong? He wants to clutch his hair in despair again, but more people are glancing his way now, and he needs to save face. “You didn’t need to come all the way here to help me, I could have handled it on my own.”

Tony blows his lid, patience cracking.

“I am not, in fact, here,” he snaps, remotely instructing the armor’s headpiece to snap open. The look of surprised awe in Peter’s face is gratifying. “Thank God, and Ganesh while you’re at it, that this place has decent Wi-Fi, or you’d be toast right now. Contrary to popular belief, kid, I’m not actually just sitting around in a California mansion, drinking and playing pool with half-naked supermodels. I haven’t slept in a week, I’ve traveled to four countries in as many days, I am currently in India rubbing elbows with a minister’s family, after fighting their military bigwigs about amendments to the Accords for the past 24 hours, and I am tired, do you hear me? The last thing I want to do right now is remotely pilot my suit to save Spiderlings that are playing pretend-Avenger, and refusing to do as they are told.”

He can hear the crickets chirping on the other end of the line as Peter stares at him.

“I am not playing pretend-Avenger,” Peter says, voice low and angry now, and fuck, of course that is what the kid took from that rant. Of course. “I am ready to do this, why won’t you just trust me?”

“It’s not about trust – you know what?” Tony is tired of this, he doesn’t have the fucking time. “We are done here. We’re not arguing about this, you will stay out of this. You will let this go.”

“Oh will I?” where did the kid even learn to introduce that level of rebellious sarcasm into his tone. It would amuse Tony if it wasn’t currently aging him a decade. “And why would I do that?”

“Because I said so,” Tony yells into the phone, and a hush falls around him. Ah, fuck.

He mutes the call just as the Minister walks up to him with a tray of coconut water, looking concerned.

“I’m dealing with a teenager right now,” Tony explains, and her expression clears, understanding flitting across her face. The exasperation of dealing with teenagers is a universal language, after all. “Sorry, I’ll be just a few minutes. He’s not listening.”
She smiles, thrusting another cup of coconut water into his hand and patting his arm in a matronly fashion before walking away. Tony takes a sip of the sweet liquid, breathes in and out, then unmutes the call.

Peter’s expression is still set in that look of pig-headedness that promises a few dozen fresh grey hairs in Tony’s near future.

He literally doesn’t have the time for this right now.

“Karen,” Tony snaps, and instructs Peter’s mask to come active so he can ensure Peter hears this conversation.

(Oh, was he not supposed to be petty, because he’s the adult? Well, screw that.)

“Yes, Mr. Stark?”

“Change in prime directive, authorized by User Alpha: Tony Stark,” he instructs, watching Peter’s head snap up. “From now on, the minute Spider-Man is involved in any activity that is even remotely related to a crime that is above the NYPD paygrade, override suit autonomy and take him home.”

“What?” Peter cries, voice cracking in panic and budding rage. “Mr. Stark, that is bullshit. That’s not fair!”

“Well, life’s not fair, kid,” Tony quips back, some weird guilt infusing his rage now, and did he mention he does not have the time for this? “I tried to train you, to get you to understand your responsibility and your place in the superhero power-grid, but if you want to force me to treat you like a naughty kid, fine, that’s what you’re gonna get. Consider yourself on detention. FRIDAY, end call.”

“Mr. Stark, you can’t do –” Peter’s furious voice is cut off as FRIDAY severs his connection to the suit.

Tony leans back against the pillar, breathing in and out, that weird guilt churning low in his gut.

He… may have been a bit more harsh than he planned to be. He doesn’t know what he’s doing, or if this was the right choice to make. Peter’s furious little face flashes in his mind again, and he sighs deeply, tilting his head back to stare at the sunny, cloudless blue sky.

He’ll fix this when he gets home next week, he tells himself, putting on his game face to go back to charming the crowd again. He just has a few more diplomatic stops to make, a trip to Wakanda to meet King T’Challa (and avoid the outlaw Avengers if he has any control of the situation at all) among them, and then he’ll be in New York again.

He can pay the kid a visit personally, and mend any broken bridges.

(He convinces himself this is not how Howard must’ve felt, every time they had one of their rows and he had prioritized business over fixing his relationship with his son.)

Peter’s all he has left now. He won’t let their relationship become the same mire of resentment and hatred that Tony’s relationship with Howard had become in the end.

He just wishes he knew what he was doing wrong, so he could fix it.

“It’s going to be okay,” he says out loud, breathing deeply, in and out, in and out. Just one more week, and he can talk to Peter in person, and make sure everything is okay. Make sure that Peter
understands why he is doing this, that it’s for his own good.

Being a parent (whether your kid knows you are one or not) … it’s a special kind of uncertainty and helplessness he never really understood before.

He wishes his mom was here.
Chapter 11

Peter Parker is furious.

He’s stomping through the lakeside park in the general direction of Liz’s house, unable to use his web-shooters or his HUD navigation because Karen is running some internal diagnostics assessment so she can start rebooting his suit for the new prime directive. The new directive whose purpose is to limit his access to the full features of his suit. So that he can never do anything he wants ever again, without Mr. Stark tracking his every move.

How dare he.

“I require your authorization to initiate suit shut-down,” Karen says, interrupting Peter’s disjointed noises of outrage over the entire debacle. “Please use your personal codes to begin the reboot process.”

“What, you need me to do it?” Peter recovers enough coherence to ask scathingly. “You mean Mr. Stark still wants me to have some form of autonomous power over my own super-suit? Wow! Who would’ve imagined!”

“The whole point of this new Restriction of Access protocol is to prevent danger, minimize risk, and reduce likelihood of harm,” Karen replies, her voice rather disapproving. “It defeats the purpose if I were able to completely deactivate your suit when you might be under imminent danger from unexpected hostiles. Mr. Stark isn’t curtailing your powers, he is merely ensuring you are unable to use them on matters he deems too dangerous. With good reason.”

Figures Karen would be a total Iron Man groupie about this. He feels betrayed. He thought they had a connection.

Peter begrudgingly initiates the shutdown sequence before she can harp on him some more.

And now here he is ten minutes later, trudging through the endless maze of Queens suburbia, using his phone GPS to guide him back towards Liz’s house where he left his regular clothes.

(Seriously, he needs to start thinking about stashing street clothes somewhere on himself or in multiple secret niches around the city, or something. The number of T-shirts and backpacks and jeans he’s lost or torn or had to fish out of dumpsters over the past few months is ridiculous at this point. It would be great if he could have some compartment in his suit or a specific changing-location or something. Maybe he should ask Mr. Stark if he could…)

Ugh, Mr. Stark. Peter’s never gonna ask him for anything ever again.

“Stay close to the ground, what is he on about, he’s the one flying around in a weaponized Tin Can at, like, eighty years old or whatever,” Peter grumbles angrily under his breath, kicking a rock particularly viciously. It shatters under the force of his kick.

That is mildly satisfying in his current rage. Mildly.

He starts kicking around larger and larger rocks as he walks, swinging his leg for maximum impact, feeling a vague curl of satisfaction at watching them break apart under his foot.

And that’s when he sees it.
A weird blueish violet glow coming from one of the rocks before him, so clearly not of this planet, so clearly something other.

Peter crouches over it, seeing what that rock is attached to now that he’s closer, picking up the weird alien-human tech hybrid. Ned’s ringtone yodels from his phone for the third time that night, cracking through the silence of the night while Peter stares at the weapon in his hands and –

He has an excellent idea.

* *

“This is a terrible idea,” Ned says in Peter’s bedroom on Monday evening, when Peter outlines what he’s planning to do.

The setting sun filtering through the window illuminates the deactivated and dismantled Spidey-suit splayed across the floor, with three wires feeding its ports into Ned’s computer. Ned is sitting in the middle of that chaos, staring up at him like he thinks Peter’s gone insane.

“What, no, c’mom Ned, this is a great idea,” Peter protests, jumping onto the top bunk bed from where he was hanging upside-down from the ceiling, and pointing at his desk in emphasis. The holographic Spidey tracker is rotating in a slow circle, showing a red blinking dot currently driving through New Jersey. “The tracker I planted on those dudes when they came snooping at school today will lead us straight to their evil lair! All we have to do is reset Karen’s protocols and reprogram the suit to give me full control, and bam!” Peter punches his right fist to his left palm. “I take down flying monster guy and his whole band of baddies, destroy his evil lair, take those crazy weapons off the street, and show Mr. Stark that I can handle this sort of mission. It’s a win-win-win-win!”

“Yeah, a quadruple win where you lie to Iron Man and hack into his multi-million dollar suit!” Ned squeaks, shaking his head in disbelief. “Are you crazy?! I’m not sure this is even legal.”

“Neither is me swinging around New York every night, but you support me on that!” Peter points out, annoyed. He pauses for a second, then bursts out, bouncing on the bed in his irritation, “I’m just so sick of Mr. Stark treating me like a kid all the time!”

“You are a kid!” Ned says reasonably, while being entirely unreasonable as far as Peter is concerned.

“Yeah, a kid who can stop a bus with his bare hands, and took down the Falcon and the Winter Soldier in one-on-one combat!” Peter says, trying not to sound like an egotistical douche, but really. He’s not just a kid. He’s Spider-Man. He’s powerful, and awesome, and ready to help save the world dammit!

“Ned, please,” Peter changes tack, hurrying to Ned’s side and employing his best pleading expression. Ned stares back at him, extremely dubious and unsure. “You’re my ‘Guy in the chair’. You have to do this for me. C’mon, Ned. Help me catch this guy and show Mr. Stark he can depend on me from now.”

Peter waits, blinking up at Ned with a wheedling expression, hopeful and pleading and –

“Ugh, alright!” Ned says exasperatedly and Peter barely refrains from fist-pumping in the air. “If Iron Man finds out and gets mad at me, I’m throwing you under the bus!”

“Thank you!” Peter says, giving Ned a bear-hug, before collapsing to the floor across from him.
Three hours and some intense electromechanical tinkering (Peter) and computational hacking (Ned) later, the suit is finally ready, de-tracker-ed and reprogrammed.

Peter slips on the full suit and inputs his personal codes to start up the internal system. The HUD flashes through all the system checks, booting… booting… and then –

“I am reading extensive changes to my base protocols,” Karen says, sounding mildly alarmed instead of her usual serene tone of voice. “Some of these could cause critical endangerment to Spider-Man. Activating Parental Control Protocol.”

He sees her start a call to FRIDAY and Mr. Stark.

“I forbid you from calling FRIDAY or Mr. Stark!” Peter yelps and the connection cuts immediately.

Karen’s voice comes back, sounding pissed now. She seems to have caught on that whatever changes were made weren’t from an external source. “Peter, what did you do?”

“Authorization by User Alpha: Peter Parker,” Peter says, and for a noncorporeal voice in a super-suit, Karen somehow manages to make her silence heavy with cold disapproval. “Change to all protocols about contacting Mr. Stark or FRIDAY or Happy or anyone from Mr. Stark’s side, okay? From now on, any message you would communicate to them, or any calls you get from them, you’ll consult with me first before giving them a status update or – or anything. That cool, Karen?”

“That not cool,” Karen replies, frostily. “But by my new protocols, I am compelled to oblige. Updating communication protocols. All attempts at contact will be vetted by User Alpha: Peter Parker.”

Peter shrugs off a small twinge of guilty remorse at Karen’s obvious displeasure. “Thanks, Karen.”

“I have to tell you I think this is an absolutely terrible idea,” Karen continues coldly, echoing Ned from three hours ago. “But I will continue you to assist you in every way possible.”

“Thanks, Karen,” Peter says, with a weak little laugh, shoving the now-larger twinge of guilt to the back of his brain. He clears his throat. “We can start by tracking down these bad dudes that came looking for the glowy thing at school today.”

Peter knows he can do this. He knows it. Everything will be just fine.

*

Tony settles into his seat with a sigh as his private jet takes off from the Haneda Airport in Tokyo, contemplating taking a quick nap for the four hours he’ll be up in the air before reaching the capital city of Wakanda.

He passed bone-deep tired three days ago. At this point, he would better befit the role of an extra on ‘The Walking Dead’ than that of ‘International Ambassador for the Avengers Initiative’.

And Wakanda isn’t even his last stop. He still has to navigate the diplomatic nightmare that is the middle east, make a quick stop to a meeting with a council of representatives from the EU (and then the UK separately after that, because fucking Brexit, that’s why), and then sit through a half-day debriefing with a UN special council to debate (and hopefully push through) some of the major Amendments to the Accords.

And then he can finally, finally go home.
The first place that’d ever felt like home was a shitty little attic apartment that he’d shared with Rhodey while attending MIT. (The landlord turned a blind eye to what he did there so long as he paid thrice the rent money every month, and Tony converted the basement into a makeshift workshop where two of his robot babies got made.) For the longest time after that, home was a swanky cliffside mansion in Malibu, with an AI butler and an efficient redhead who kept him on his toes. The Avengers Tower (with its superhero frat club) had the potential to be home – a potential that kept getting snuffed out before it could ever draw full breath. But since Ultron and Sokovia, maybe even before that… For years now, nothing has ever really felt like home. Like something he wants to go back to.

But now when he thinks of the word, all he can see in his mind are earnest brown eyes, so painfully good and full of hope for the whole world. Home is the excited whoop from a teenager trying out a cool new gadget. Home is the hyperactive voice talking his ear off about some nerdy little detail in the latest Star Wars movie, or the rumpled head of hair and huge puppy grin that pops out of a Spider-Man mask. He doesn’t know when this happened, but he has a feeling this definition of home is never going to go away.

He reclines back in his seat, staring up at the ceiling of the jet, mind blissfully serene. It’s been over three days since he last talked to Karen. He should probably touch-base with her to check up on the kid, see how he’s doing under the new restrictions on his suit. He hasn’t had any alarms set-off by Karen, so it looks like the kid is actually toeing the line and doing as he’s told, for once.

It’s for his own good. Surely, Peter will understand that… eventually.

Tony doesn’t even know when he became such a stereotype of a parent. Sappy thoughts about his kid after not speaking to him for a couple of days? Grounding his teenager then telling him it’s for his own good? What’s next? Chaperoning prom? Being a soccer dad?

(A little part of him actually thinks he’d enjoy doing those things, to be honest. Yeesh.)

“FRI, get me a status update on Peter?” he requests, because he might as well. There’s no way he’s getting any sleep without checking up on Peter first now.

“Attempting a connection with Karen,” FRIDAY says instantly. “I’ve traced the signal on the tracker in Peter’s suit and it shows he is currently at the Hilton in Washington DC.”

Tony blinks. “According to an earlier phone conversation between Happy and Peter, it would seem Peter and his team are competing in Nationals for Academic Decathlon.”

Tony blinks again. “The team that he quit?”

“Looks like he decided to rejoin, Boss,” FRIDAY quips, and Tony sits back again because huh.

Maybe there really is something to this ‘grounding’ business. Sure, Tony had always used any and all attempts at disciplining him as a springboard to get up to even more outrageous crap when he was younger. But maybe good, well-adjusted teenagers usually reacted in more productive and positive ways to a bit of occasional tough love from their elders. Maybe he’s actually got this whole parenting gig in the bag, and isn’t doing a flaming dumpster pile of a job at it.
Would wonders never cease.

“Connection to Karen failed, boss,” FRIDAY sounds a bit perplexed. “It seems like the suit is… offline. Even the tracer is only transmitting its location and isn’t interfacing with some of the other sub-systems inside the suit. My best guess would be Peter has temporarily shut down his suit.”

“Maybe he decided it’d be for the best while staying at a public hotel with his teammates,” Tony muses with a shrug, getting comfortable again. It sounded like Peter is in no imminent danger. Tony might as well get his much-needed few winks. “Let me know when you manage contact with Karen again, baby girl. Your old man needs his rest.”

“You got it, old man,” FRIDAY’s voice is dry, and Tony smiles as he closes his eyes.

He startles awake when the jet begins its descent towards the private airstrip in Birnin Zana, the capital city of Wakanda. He takes five minutes to refresh himself, then pulls on his computer-fitted sunglasses and Iron Glove wrist watch, before heading out to meet his entourage.

Three of the Dora Milaje are there to greet him, standing proud and tall and powerful in the airstrip as he exits the jet and walks towards them. They are curtly polite and entirely unimpressed with everything about him. The Tony from years past, one with much shittier self-preservation instincts, would have tried to hit on them and probably ended up maimed. The Tony now has a lot more common sense, so he acknowledges that he is mildly intimidated, and masks it by busying himself with his phone for the entire ride to T’Challa’s seat of power and official residence in the capital.

He’s escorted to the private office of the King once they arrive at the magnificent gold-filigreed building. The private office, while not as grand as the throne room where public announcements and ceremonies are held, is still rich with the history and culture of Wakanda. T’Challa is already waiting for him there, seated at a conference table next to floor-to-ceiling glass walls overlooking the city.

“Your Grace,” Tony says, walking forwards to greet him with a handshake as the Dora Milaje exit the room, leaving him alone with the king.

“Dr. Stark,” T’Challa replies, taking his hand in a strong grip.

Tony grimaces. “Just Tony would be fine.”

“And just T’Challa would be fine, too,” T’Challa replies, smirking a bit. Tony smirks back. Touché.

“Please have a seat, I believe we have a lot to discuss.”

And discuss they do.

An entire hour is spent talking about the possibility of T’Challa becoming Co-Chair for the Accords Council, to be the representative for the interests of superpowered or nonhuman people. T’Challa is initially reluctant, but agrees to discuss this further at the UN meeting in a few days.

And then they move on to the topic of the Accords themselves, discussing the Amendments that Tony is trying to implement, and potential clauses and sub-clauses that might make it sell better at the UN. T’Challa delicately enquires into the details of the motion Tony’s been trying to push towards pardoning the outlaw Avengers. Tony narrates what progress he has made and how long he estimates it might take to sway the UN, and avoids asking T’Challa about what said outlaw Avengers are currently up to.

After all of that, Tony finally brings up one of the main reasons for his visit, which he’s been dreading for hours.
With a sigh, he taps on his StarkPad, pulling up some blueprints from his private server and projecting them onto the TV screens before them. A neural-interfacing headgear with paired vision aids pops up, revolving slowly on the screen.

“These are the detailed schematics to build my patented Binarily Augmented Retro Framing, or BARF, technology,” Tony says, looking straight ahead. “Yeah, I know it needs a new name, but I can’t come up with anything better… but anyway. I built it to help people suffering from PTSD, help them reconcile with traumatic events, help the brain cope with the psychological impact of torture or loss or fear, or you know, all the shitty stuff. I tinkered with a bit, updated some sub-systems to make it streamlined for aiding a brain that has undergone extensive electrophysiological torture conditioning. It might… be of use to your scientists, for their special patient.” He taps the screen again and a new schematic pops up, this one for a mechanized arm prosthesis. “I developed some new bionic prosthetics with Helen Cho, while working on the leg supports for Rhodey… anyway, the schematics for those are in here too, for your scientists to take a peek at. It’ll help them design a new arm for… well.”

He initiates transfer of all the relevant project folders to a private Stark Industries cloud storage, and then creates encrypted codes for T’Challa and his team to be able to access it. He feels the heavy gaze of the King resting contemplatively on him the whole time that he’s working.

“You would make an excellent leader, Tony,” T’Challa breaks the silence, and despite himself, Tony turns to meet his gaze. The king looks firm in his conviction, respect and understanding and approval in his gaze. Tony’s eyes skitter away again.

“Hardly,” Tony murmurs, monitoring the data transfer, adding increased layers of encryption and security to the storage cloud. “Couldn’t even keep one team together, could I?”

“Well, neither could Captain America,” T’Challa remarks and Tony’s fingers come to a halt, looking up despite himself. “Mistakes were committed on both sides, but that does not make either of you wrong, or less fit for leading a cause as necessary for this planet as the Avengers. And here you are, before the dust has even truly settled, already working ceaselessly to make the amends that are needed, doing all you can to rebuild the team, to ensure the earth is as protected as it can be from future threats. Despite having just cause for desiring vengeance, having reason to hold a fatal grudge that you could allow to consume you – here you are still, working past it, creating the tools to fix what went wrong. I find your actions…. noble. My father would have been delighted to have had close counsel from a man such as you, and I am honored to be privy to the same.”

T’Challa inclines his head to him, a sign of great respect from a king.

Tony stares back, speechless, a strange warmth in his chest making it a little hard to breathe. He’s been this shocked maybe twice in his whole life, and he has no idea what to say.

He is saved from having to say anything at all by FRIDAY piping up from his phone, “Boss, there’s something you need to see. Relaying a live feed from CNN, now.”

The TV screens before them flicker, then switch over to CNN, where a reporter is saying, “… and multiple eyewitness accounts confirm that Spider-Man is, in fact, now inside the monument. He managed to gain entry by breaking through one of the ballistic glass windows near the top of the monument. Switching now to footage from the last ten minutes, acquired from miscellaneous live witnesses.”

Tony watches as the shaky, stitched-together video from multiple smartphones and handheld-video recorders plays out on the screen, feeling that now familiar worry in the pit of his stomach as Spider-Man scales a vertical 500ft tall obelisk, tries to swing off it to break the reinforced glass windows,
then flies over a police helicopter to crash through the window and into the monument.

“FRIDAY,” he starts, and his girl immediately gets it, of course.

“I already called Karen, boss,” she says, and her calm tone of voice works to quiet his worry too. “She is currently assisting Peter with rescuing his friends who were stuck inside the damaged elevator. She reports Peter is unharmed and not under any immediate threat.”

“Do we know what caused the explosion?” Tony asks, still a little tense.

“Not yet, but I will ask Ka – actually, Karen is back online,” FRIDAY corrects herself. “Re-routing now.”

But it’s not Karen but Peter who speaks to him when the connection goes through.

“Is this – Karen, is this thing on,” Peter’s voice comes through, the same quick-talking voice tripping over its own words, and the last of the tension bleeds out of Tony. The screen flickers minutely and then Peter’s face shows up, in a rather unflattering close-up. Tony did not need to see how many zits are presently adorning Peter’s forehead or the mild sunburn peeling Peter’s nose, but there it is.

(He still makes a mental note to tell FRIDAY to ship Peter some organic moisturizers with high SPF protection, but let’s never mention that again, yes?)

“Whoaaa, oh my god, are you with the Black Panther right now?!” Peter can clearly now see them too. “Hi, we met before at Berlin!” he says to T’Challa with a goofy wide grin. “Your suit is, like, insane, dude!”

Tony bites back a laugh. T’Challa, who had been a silent spectator until this point, turns to him briefly with both eyebrows raised before saying to Peter, “Thank you, Spider-Man. You have done an admirable job of protecting your people today.”

The kid’s eyes go shiny and starry at the praise, like he’s some kind of animated character from a Disney princess movie. Tony can feel himself making an amused-fond face and straightens out of it, trying to plod on with the important business at hand.

Like what the fuck just happened, and why, oh why, can’t the kid go three days without making national news or mortally endangering himself?

Peter looks shifty when Tony asks him as much, which instantly activates the latent ‘Teenage Bullshit Detector’ that Tony hadn’t even known he was equipped with till about a month ago. It must be an evolutionarily conserved trait that activates in all parents, to ensure the perpetuation of the species beyond adolescent idiocy.

“Um, so we finished the Decathlon competition, and decided to go visit the Washington Monument, right?” Peter says, doing that wide-eyed innocent school kid thing that Tony immediately mistrusts. “And I decided to stay behind with Michelle because she, uh, didn’t wanna go up I guess – “ Wait, who is this new girl in the picture? Tony thought Peter liked a ‘Liz’? Does Tony need to know about whoever this Michelle is? “ – and we were on the ground when we saw like, an explosion at the top of the monument, and so I, um, I ran off to get into my suit behind a, um – behind a tree and – aw, shit.”

“What?” Tony asks, immediately worried.

“I webbed my bag up on a tree, I hope it’s still there,” Peter says, sounding long-suffering. “I’ve already lost two bags since school started, Mr. Stark! This one has my laptop and my Midtown High
jacket, and the Lego Darth Vader! I don’t wanna lose it!"

Tony can’t help it – he lets out a snicker, which he attempts to smother behind his palm immediately. T’Challa looks regally amused, eyebrows raised even higher at the direction this conversation has taken.

“And?” Tony prompts.

“Oh, yeah, so I had Karen scan the building and she said the glowy thing – um, she said it looked like one of those Chitauri space stone things those dudes at the bridge had – like one of those things had detonated inside the monument somehow and taken out the elevator. So I climbed up till I got to the windows high up, and broke in so I could catch the elevator before it started falling.”

The way he narrates it, you’d think he’d walked down a sidewalk to buy a pack of gum, not scaled one of the tallest monuments in the country in nothing but a skin-tight suit, then swung off a helicopter to break through ballistic-resistant glass.

“My friends were in there, Mr. Stark!” Peter is saying, talking faster now, a little bit of the panic he must’ve been feeling earlier bleeding into his tone. “Ned was in there. And Liz and Mr. Harrington and – and everyone! I had to save them.” His face grows more closed-off, defensive. “I wasn’t going after those guys or anything, okay, just like you said – I was just, I was just saving my friends! I was just already there and I saw it and I just was making sure no one got hurt!” Peter finishes his speech, peering at Tony apprehensively.

Like he actually thinks Tony is going to yell at him for being a hero and saving people’s lives. For doing the right thing and using his powers to save those who needed saving.

(He’s really fudged this one up, hasn’t he? Good job, Stark.)

“I’m really proud of you, kid,” Tony says simply, leaning forward in his chair and looking straight at Peter, trying to convey how sincere he is.

The kid looks utterly startled, and Tony feels like a shitty fucking father and human being.

How did he do such a bad job that Peter is stunned that Tony could be proud of him? He feels the echoes of his strained relationship with Howard thrumming in his ears, and tries to shake it off. He promised himself he’d do a better job than Howard. He is experiencing some setbacks on that promise right now, but no matter what, he will keep that promise. For both their sakes.

“You did good, you hear me?,“ he says, voice raising a bit with emotion. “You kept your head, you assessed the situation, and you saved lives that would have been lost otherwise due to the actions of bad people who clearly meant to do harm. You were a true hero today, kid. I’m proud of you and how responsibly you used your powers today.”

He expects Peter to look elated by his praise, expects that stunned look followed by that goofy-grateful grin and sparkling eyes. So it’s a curveball when Peter’s face starts to scrunch up in a frown on the screen, and the kid looks weirdly conflicted and… guilty?

Okay, there’s definitely something fishy going on.

Before he can probe Peter on what that’s all about, there’s a loud noise from the screen and the kid startles, clearly jumping up to alertness.

“Uhhh, it looks like there’s a SWAT team out there to clear the place, Mr. Stark,” Peter says hurriedly, the screen flickering a bit as he starts moving. “I can’t let those guys catch me or hold me
behind for questioning. I gotta go now.”

“Stay safe, I’ll see you in a few days,” Tony says and the kid gives a quick nod before the connection abruptly cuts off.

Tony stares at the blank screen for a more seconds before heaving a sigh and turning to meet the Wakandan king’s thoughtful gaze.

“So Spider-Man is a child,” T’Challa says, no inflection to his statement, but Tony still feels like he’s being judged.

“I’m doing the best I can to protect him while also training him,” he says, trying not to sound too defensive. “The kid’s only fifteen, I know I should make sure he’s just being a regular high school kid, but with his abilities, he’s not the type to sit around and not do anything. In fact, the problem is his tendency for reckless self-endangerment in a quest to prove himself or something, so –“

“We begin training our warriors when they are eight years old,” T’Challa interrupts him. “I understand what you are doing with your… ward. I was merely expressing admiration for how disciplined and well-adjusted he is, despite his youth. You have done well.”

For the second time in as many hours, Tony finds himself at a loss for words. This is unprecedented and he’s not sure it’s good for his constitution.

“Err, thanks,” he mumbles, quickly averting his gaze to go back to finishing up the encryptions on the cloud storage. “Though the credit is not mine. It’s all just the kid. He’s just… good.”

“He is,” T’Challa’s voice agrees. “He is a worthy addition to the Avengers Initiative.”

“Yeah, I’m planning to bench him for a couple more years,” Tony says, deleting a line of code to allow for better interfacing for the scientists accessing the server. “He’s not going to be an official Avenger till he’s at least nineteen. Twenty-one, if I can get away with it. I want him to have a good life, y’know? A normal-ish life, at least as his non-superhero identity. Experience things kids his age would. Go to college, date, do something stupid with his friends. Just, regular things, you know? I don’t want the responsibilities of this line of work to crush him. Not yet.” Or ever. But Tony knows protecting someone that long is beyond even his powers. No matter how much he might wish to.

“That will prove… difficult,” T’Challa muses, steepling his fingers. “How do you plan to legitimize Spider-Man to the Accords Council, if you wish to help him maintain a secret civilian – ah. Of course. The Mentorship Amendment.”

“Yup,” Tony says, looking over the screen to make sure everything is as it should be then signing off. “I don’t think it’s okay for the government to demand the identity of superheroes who might wish to retain some semblance of a normal life. That was a serious failing in the original Sokovia Accords. I aim to fix that with the Mentorship Amendment, where a known superhero could endorse and accept responsibility for an unknown superhero’s actions. As one of Spider-Man’s legal Mentors, I would be responsible for ensuring he abided the laws stated for superpowered or nonhuman people, and I would be equally responsible in bringing him to justice if he crossed the line. I think, by appointing multiple Mentors per vigilante, it could be a decent system that balances accountability with the rights of the heroes.”

“Indeed,” T’Challa agrees, with a quiet nod. “I supported the original Accords because they were necessary, Mr. Stark. But the work you are doing will help to make them enforceable and long-lasting.”
“But I can’t do it alone,” Tony says, turning to hold his gaze. “Would you discuss it with… people, on your side, to ensure they know what I’m doing? To ensure their concerns can be voiced, so we can all reach a resolution?”

“I will,” T’Challa promises, understanding what Tony is saying beneath the surface. “I will call a meeting of our mutual friends when I visit them to talk to my scientists about the blueprints you have provided for our special patient’s treatment.”

“Thank you,” Tony says, standing up and reaching out to shake T’Challa’s hand. The king’s grip is firm and sure. “Though I’m not sure they can exactly be called mutual friends, anymore.”

“Family ties are not dissolved by squabbles over ideology, Tony,” T’Challa says, releasing his hand. “When the time comes, bridges will be mended.”

“Well, we can all drink to that,” Tony says, smiling sadly. And with a final nod, Tony leaves to catch the jet to his next diplomatic visit.

He’s doing the best he can. Beyond this… the ball’s now in Steve’s court.
A quick update to move this forward! I am finally taking a holiday and have time to write some chapters. I swear I'll actually keep regular updates from now. Thank you, thank you, for how patient, encouraging and enthusiastic everyone who has commented or left Kudos has been to this fic. I'll reply to you all soon. Thanks for sticking it out! xx

Here's a brief interlude before we move to the next parts!

P.S. I HAVEN’T WATCHED INFINITY WAR YET. PLEASE DON’T ACCIDENTALLY LEAVE SPOILERS IN COMMENTS. I'M GOING IN LESS THAN 24 HOURS THOUGH.

(Please. I will cry T_T)

Hope you all like this chapter!

**Interlude**

The grounds are calm and serene, a gentle wind stirring the moonlit leaves. Apart from his own steady breathing and footfalls, Steve can hear no other sound as he pushes himself at a faster and faster pace over the stone-paved path winding through the gardens of King T’Challa’s guest palace.

It’s almost midnight, hardly a time he’d usually choose for a run, but after the conversation he just had with T’Challa he just needs to… he needs to get away and breathe for a while.

Tony was here. Tony was here barely three hours ago. Tony was in Wakanda and meeting with T’Challa about the Accords and sharing technology that could help Bucky.

Tony was here and he hadn’t even wanted Steve to know about it, let alone see him.

Steve speeds up even more, the surroundings turning into a colorful blur of foliage as he flies across the ground.

It’s not like Steve expected Tony to just brush off everything that happened and go right back to their old tempestuous camaraderie. It’s why he sent that letter and phone (utterly inadequate as they were to convey everything he felt about all that had happened) – to let Tony know that despite everything, despite all the bad blood between them over the Accords and Bucky, Steve still wanted to be by Tony’s side, to help him in defending their world against all threats, internal and external. And after nearly two months, he’d hoped for… something. Something towards mending the Avengers and rebuilding a team, at least, even if not towards friendship and forgiveness. But this radio-silence from Tony’s end…

He has to admit to himself – he’s going a little crazy.

He still doesn’t regret his decision about the Accords and how he handled the situation with Bucky. Maybe if they hadn’t been backed into a corner – with Ross breathing down their necks, and
T’Challa seeking revenge in the wrong place by hunting Bucky, and a hurried deadline for compliance that barely even gave them time to debate the rights they’d be signing away in those Accords… Maybe if everything hadn’t come to a head so quickly, he would have handled it differently. But with how events unfolded, Steve knows he’d have done everything the same way all over again, even now. Because signing those Accords right then would have either meant standing back while the international council tried to make an example of Bucky, or breaking the Accords anyway to defend his best friend, an innocent man (and Steve entirely believes in Bucky’s innocence, all the terrible things the Winter Soldier did, none of that is Bucky). And he’d just be in the same place all over again anyway.

No, he doesn’t regret how he handled his decisions with the Accords. What they were being offered right then was dangerous and wrong and Steve would be nothing if he didn’t take a stand against what believed to be wrong.

No, his regrets?

His regrets are all saved for Tony.

He can see it again, that look of hurt and rage and loss on Tony’s face as he watched his parents’ murders, the utter betrayal on his face when he turned to Steve and –

“Did you know? Don’t bullshit me Rogers, did you know?”

Steve closes his eyes, and the blur of the scenery around him vanishes into the starburst darkness beneath his eyelids.

“He was my friend.”

“So was I.”

He failed Tony. He failed him so utterly by keeping the truth behind Howard and Maria Stark’s deaths from him, and he regrets it more than he can ever say.

Not that it seems likely he might get an opportunity to say it, even if he were able to put those feelings to words, the way things are looking right now.

Steve slows a bit as he nears the entrance back into the palace, contemplating heading in. The running isn’t doing it anymore, his fingers are itching to be taped, his muscles craving the exertion of a good round of boxing. He slows to a jog, turning to the pathway leading out of the gardens towards the gyms.

“Can’t sleep?” he hears a familiar voice call out behind him and his footsteps falter.

“Natasha,” he says, letting warm welcome suffuse his voice, turning towards her. He hadn’t seen or heard her come there, even with his enhanced senses, but then again, this is the Black Widow.

She materializes out of the shadows, lifting the scarf wrapped around her head, revealing straight, short, blonde hair. Steve takes in her appearance, noting the (no doubt intentionally-inflicted) sunburn on her nose and shoulders, the freckles adorning her cheeks, and the dirty blonde color obfuscating the natural deep red of her hair. The loose trousers and airy shirt, colorful scarves, beaded necklace, and wooden bangles complete the picture of a young foreign tourist in Asia, exploring and occasionally appropriating the culture of the country.

Because that’s where Nat’s been for the past few weeks, undercover across East and South Asia, as she tried to scope out the current mood towards the Accords from the countries there.
In fact, only Steve has been here in Wakanda for a while now. Clint and Sam are in another part of Africa with Nakia, assisting her with some of the War Dogs’ current ops and also scoping out the mood about the Accords. Wanda is lying low in Sokovia, taking some time to herself to get her bearings together over everything that’s happened since Ultron. Scott had made it back to America within a week of getting to Wakanda, Hank Pym showing up with his crisply professional daughter to take him under his wing and provide protection and shelter from the Accords Council. And Bucky’s been in cryo, right there and as far away as the moon.

Which left Steve, too recognizable in and out of his mask to be any good at covert ops, to run endless miles around T’Challa’s gardens and do his best to destroy the palace gym punching bags.

But now, Natasha’s back.

Feeling a weight he didn’t know he was carrying drop from his shoulder, Steve jogs the last few steps towards Nat, feeling lighter than he has in weeks. He gives her a quick hug in welcome (they decided five years of fighting aliens, sentient robots, and assorted supernatural threats together definitely qualifies as sufficient acquaintanceship for a welcome hug), and leads the way towards the common kitchen in the palace.

Once they each have a cup of warm coffee and a few pieces of toast before them, he sits beside her on the kitchen island, switching on the TV to stream late-night news updates from CNN at a low, background volume.

“How was the trip?” he asks, taking a soothing sip of the uniquely bitter Wakandan coffee, turning sideways to face her.

“Eventful,” Nat replies, blowing steam from her drink before taking a long sip and sighing in pleasure. Something rigid and vigilant loosens a bit about her shoulders and she finally relaxes. “I have a lot to tell you.”

And so, she starts the informal debriefing, with Steve listening, questioning, and slotting what she tells him into place with intel he has received from T’Challa and the others. In turn, he informs her of the developments here – Tony’s visit and the technology he shared with T’Challa for Bucky’s rehabilitation, what Clint and Sam are up to with Nakia, Scott’s fugitive life back in America. It’s a comfortable rhythm they had established when they were living in the Avengers compound, as co-leaders of the New Avengers.

An hour, four coffees, three slices of toast, and a donut later, Nat is caught up on what she missed and Steve has a better understanding of the current geopolitical climate towards enhanced individuals.

Steve knows Tony’s been a tireless one-man army in driving for changes in the Accords and for the rights and liberties of enhanced persons. What was wrong with the original Accords – the things Steve had refused to sign it for and much more that he didn’t even think to consider – Tony has been fighting to bring all those changes to fruition. The way it is shaping up to be now, Steve can almost see how it could be fair and just, a balance between accountability and individual rights. With T’Challa representing the policy demands of the outlawed Avengers as well, the final document could actually be something Steve could sign and believe in. And Tony has made it possible, has brought about the eventuality of an Amended Accords, through nothing but the sheer force of his formidable will.

A small, secret part of Steve rankles disagreeably at that, rankles at not having his own voice, not being able to represent himself without having to go through middle-men with their own agendas, no matter how much he trusts them. But then he remembers the brief moment of mortal fear in familiar
brown eyes, the clang of vibranium cleaving through gold-titanium, the devastated betrayal and rage in Tony’s voice as he said, “My father built that shield. You don’t deserve it.” And Steve knows he doesn’t deserve to have a part in this conversation, doesn’t deserve the right to fight his own battles here.

He hurt Tony.

He hurt Tony and he knows he would do it again to save Bucky – his best friend, his brother in all but blood, the only person still left in his life from before, an innocent man. And while he was right to refuse to sign away their rights to a nameless organization he can’t trust (not after HYDRA, and SHIELD, and watching a helicarrier with weapons pointed at millions of civilians), he knows a lot of his rash actions that worsened the situation rose from a selfish, personal agenda to protect Bucky. And he did so by hurting the man who continued to stand by his side and protect and defend him no matter how many times they clashed with each other, who gave him a home and a purpose when he was so lost and so alone in this new world, who readily went against the Accords and Ross to come to Steve’s aid in Siberia, who trusted him, and who Steve repaid with a vibranium shield to the chest…

The guilt that crushes him is a familiar weight, and Steve slumps against the chair a bit, quelling the itch to take out and stare at the ever-silent flip phone.

“I saw Tony,” Natasha says conversationally, as though she was reading his mind (and who even knew with her, maybe she was). Steve’s head snaps up from his gloomy contemplation of the kitchen floor.


Natasha’s already shaking her head before he’s finished the sentence.

“I didn’t actually meet him. I was undercover at an Indian Minister’s party at a temple in New Delhi and Tony was attending it.”

“The Minister who brought up the clause for asylum for enhanced individuals fleeing hostile nations?” Steve asks. It’s something Steve would have never really thought to demand for by himself, but an excellent idea.

Nat hums in agreement. “He was probably socializing at the party after his meetings with the Indian task force.” Steve nods, remembering her intel about those from the earlier debriefing. Nat continues, her voice uncharacteristically wan and hesitant. “He looked… good. Clearly way past tired and approaching ‘functional zombie’ stages of exhaustion, but good. He looked happy. Well, until he looked like he was going to pass out, then had a yelling match with a kid on the phone.”

“What happened?” Steve demands. No part of that last sentence made any damn sense.

“I think Spider-Man is a kid,” Natasha says, stirring the last of her now-lukewarm coffee absently then taking a sip.

“We knew that already, Nat,” Steve points out, because it was obvious. Five seconds in the guy’s presence was all it took.

“No, I don’t mean he’s a kid like Pietro and Wanda were when we met them during the Ultron debacle,” Natasha shakes her head. “I think he’s a teenager. Early years of high school, probably.”

Steve pauses, taken aback. A teenager? It’s not like Tony at all, to bring a child to an Avengers fight, not when he’d been so protective of even Wanda who, despite all of Steve’s excuses, was still an
adult when she joined forces with Ultron.

“There’s something else we’re missing here,” Natasha says, correctly reading Steve’s thoughts once again. “Tony had a personal investment in Spider-Man, from the conversation I overheard.”

“Because that’s new?” Steve says with a faint smile. “Tony investing too much of himself in people he thinks of as his responsibility?”

Her mouth quirked once in assent before growing pensive again. “It sounded like the little spider was in some sort of danger. Tony almost had a panic attack. He wasn’t just worried, Steve, you had to have been there. The closest I can compare is Tony’s reaction when we thought Rhodes wasn’t going to make it. It doesn’t make sense to see him care this much for someone new, no matter how young they are or how responsible he feels for them. We don’t have all the pieces.”

As if on cue, the subject of their discussion shows up on the TV. Steve raises the volume and the two of them watch silently as Spider-Man (apparently just a high school teenager) scales the Washington Monument, backflips off a helicopter and crashes through ballistic-resistant glass like it’s made of paper. The suit he is wearing has Tony’s fingerprints all over it. Tony who, after Obadiah Stane and Afghanistan and SHIELD/HYDRA and Ultron, did not just hand over his tech to anybody, no matter how much he trusted them. Who, after the collapse of the Avengers, was surely only more likely to be mistrustful of others and play his cards close to his chest. And for Tony to just hand over such a high-tech, formidable, Stark-signature creation as that Spider-Man suit to a teenager who has barely been on the scene for half a year...

Steve turns to Natasha and nods.

There is more than meets the eye here. They may just have to do something to figure out what.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

I think we're going to have a tumultuous few chapters from this one onwards. I got the idea for this through the next two or three chapters first, which is what spawned this entire fic, so I'm having fun finally getting to write it. I'm not good at writing on a schedule, but I'll try to have another update within a couple of weeks. For now, hope everyone enjoys this chapter! I'm really enjoying reading all the comments speculating at how the fic will go. ^_^ Thanks so much to everyone who has left comments and kudos!! Hope you enjoy <3

P. S. Infinity war absolutely destroyed me. Y'all know which part I'm particularly talking about.

Tony pours himself a celebratory two fingers of 1926 Macallan that he reserves for particularly hard-won victories and moves to gaze at clouds through one of the plane windows.

The UN council meeting over the Amended Accords went better than he hoped.

T’Challa came through and agreed to serve as a Co-Chair for the Accords Council. The UN’s nomination for the other position was Everett Ross, former-Deputy Task Force Commander of the Joint Counterterrorism Center. A man with the skillset to enforce the terms of the final Amended Accords whenever it gets ratified, and who Tony and T’Challa both approved of after meeting with him about it.

The guy is straight-forward, no-nonsense, not given to bouts of starry-eyed idealism (Tony mentally chuckles at the memory of Steve and Sam’s faces when their Shield and Wings were reprimanded with bored professionalism by Ross in Berlin), or political alliances with any particular country or government body. Also, he somehow came out squeaky-clean and on the right side of the story despite operating directly under Thaddeus Ross. Tony is impressed.

Apart from a functional chain of command, most of the proposed Amendments were approved or at least not downright rejected, and the final Amended Accords document is starting to take shape. He feels optimistic about the future of super-powered jurisdiction and regulation.

Negotiations for pardoning the Outlaw Avengers weren’t as successful though. Tony takes a sip of his expensive scotch, sighing deeply, remembering the vehement demands for making an example out of the vigilantes by multiple countries, for daring to refuse the Accords in the first place. Tony has his work cut out for him on that front.

But overall, he won, in whatever minor and amorphous form that victory takes. At this point in life, Tony has learned to count his blessings no matter how small.

He drains the glass and washes it at the sink, then reclaims his seat to the front of his private jet, fiddling with the straps of his Iron Glove watch. The stripper pole in the middle catches his eye and he huffs out a tired laugh, remembering a time long ago and the person he used to be, one he barely recognizes now. He looks around again, taking in the details around him for the first time since boarding the jet. He thinks this might actually be the plane he took with Rhodey that time for Afghanistan. That Tony is so alien to him now, hiring expensive strippers as air hostesses and
arriving hours late to take-off just because he *can* and throwing in high-priced champagne bottles as gifts for millions in missile sales.

Broken and beaten down as he is now, ruminating in the empty silence, and mistrustful of his own shadow leave alone hiring in-plane staff (he’s learned his lesson from that time AIM hijacked Air Force One and took Rhodey’s suit; and that one thing sure hasn’t changed, he’s always, *always* learned from his mistakes) – the point is, even if he’s so damn tired he can’t explain even to himself sometimes why he’s still fighting, Tony is proud that he is no longer the person who once sat in this same jet, drunk off his ass and flirting with scantily-clad women while on the way to sell missiles that can wreak destruction more efficiently.

He sighs, presses the switch to convert his comfortable plush seat into a small bed and settles back for a quick nap before he lands in New York in a few hours to face a new day of finalizing the resolutions passed at the UN meeting. His back creaks and Tony lets out another tired chuckle. Look at him, really. A creaky old man mulling over past mistakes alone in the middle of nowhere. He’s become such a cliché, so embarrassing.

With that bit of melancholy self-introspection done, Tony proceeds to settle in and pass out.

He startles awake what feels like minutes later to FRIDAY’s voice trying to wake him.

“I’m up, I’m up,” Tony grumbles, sitting up and rubbing a weary hand over his eyes. “What’s on fire?”

“Nothing yet, Boss,” FRIDAY replies ominously. “But May Parker is on the line, demanding to speak to you.”

Tony curses under his breath, feeling that familiar knot form in the pit of his stomach that he’s named ‘Peter is probably being a self-endangering idiot’. He gives himself five seconds to put on his game face then takes the call.

May’s irate voice fills the jet instantly, “Tony? Are you actually there or is it your robot assistant again? Tony?”

“Hey, May,” Tony says in a winsome voice, trying to calm her down a bit. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your call?”

It doesn’t work.

“I thought we had a deal,” May says testily. “I let Peter continue to be Spider-Man and you take him under your wing and look out for him.”

“And I have… been doing that?” the sentence somehow becomes a question without Tony’s intention.

“Well, clearly not very well!” May snaps. “Why did I just get a call from Peter’s school that’s he’s skipping out on detention and a Spanish quiz?!”

“Peter has detenti-?”

“Yes, detention,” May interrupts, fuming. “The one he got because he rejoined the Decathlon Team last minute, traveled all the way to DC for Nationals, then *skipped out on the actual competition*.”

Tony blinks in confusion. “Wait, he didn’t attend the competition?”
“No, he didn’t,” her reply is biting. “I assumed you knew about it since I figured it’s connected to whatever went south at the Washington Monument! You know, the one where I had to barricade myself in the toilet at work to livestream CNN and watch my teenage nephew wearing nothing but spandex climb up nearly 600 ft. and take on a SWAT team helicopter!”

Tony’s first thought is ‘It’s not spandex, excuse me!’, followed by a resounding ‘Oh!’ that he imagines he can actually hear rattling around through the echoing caverns of his brain.

It’s as though her words are a prism – they focus Tony’s attention and diffract it just right to give him the entire spectrum of the situation. Tony’s brain starts working overtime, matching up disparate pieces of information from those couple of days to form a logical big picture. Peter’s confusing tracker location, his supposedly offline suit. Karen’s stilted communications with FRIDAY. The attack on the DODC transportation van that was later discovered, though nothing seemed to have been taken. The unauthorized opening of one of the Vault’s main doors, but again with no incident. The explosion in the elevator at the Washington Monument that carried Chitauri explosive radiation signature.

Oh. Goddammit.

Peter, what have you done?

“And I still let that go because, fine, I get it okay?” May is still ranting. “I get that it’s not all gonna be rescuing kittens from trees and giving directions to old ladies on the street. Hell, you flew a nuke through a portal to space! I get that sometimes you might have to rope Spider-Man in, what with the Avengers being understaffed and all, but –“

“May, I’m gonna have to call you back,” Tony says crisply, gesturing for FRIDAY to end the call even as May is saying, outraged, “Tony Stark, don’t you dare –“ before she is cut off.

“FRIDAY, call Karen. And track Peter’s location,” he orders, an intense fury rising in his throat, albeit tinged with worry, disappointment, and a fierce protectiveness.

“Karen has blocked my attempts at contact. And Peter’s tracker is still broadcasting from the Hilton in Washington DC.” FRIDAY almost sounds apologetic. Tony expected as much. Goddammit.

“Sorry, Boss. I didn’t cross-reference Karen’s sitrep with other parameters to ensure veracity.”

“No your fault,” Tony says, standing up. “Karen was supposed to be uncompromisable.”

Uncompromisable to the rest of the world. But Peter is his kid and Tony would have found a way if he’d been put in the same situation as Peter when he was a teenager.

This will be the last time Tony underestimates him.

“FRI, deploy the Mark XLVII for pickup from the jet,” Tony instructs, moving towards one of the emergency exits. “Do you have Peter’s location?”

“Nothing from the Spider-Man suit, Boss,” FRIDAY says. “I’ll have an estimated location from social media and satellite footage analysis in – right now. I have him.”

FRIDAY throws up images and videos of Spider-Man on the Staten Island Ferry, in the middle of a shootout.

Tony swears up a storm as he opens the emergency exit and jumps out of the plane. He’s in freefall for about five seconds before the Mark XLVII wraps around him and the HUD forms, FRIDAY in his ear.
He’d checked in with the FBI less than an hour ago about an operation to capture the Vulture and key members of his organization during a deal that was to happen on the ferry at 11am.

It is now 11.07am, and the ferry is a warzone.

Tony feels absolute rage settle in his gut as he pushes his repulsors towards the current location of the ferry. Tony had told Peter to leave it alone. He had expressly told him, repeatedly, to leave it the fuck alone. If he ends up dead now because he had to be a meddling upstart pipsqueak, Tony will reanimate his idiotic ass just to kill him.

“FRIDAY, updates,” he barks, dissecting the live-relay satellite footage. The Vulture is out in full power and Spider-Man is actively engaging him, high-tech weapons of mass destruction firing everywhere. The video freezes a bit and the next thing Tony sees, the ferry is being split in half.

Fuck.

He pushes the suit to the limits of its wind-shear capacity and deploys his remote repulsor units as he comes within view of the devastated ferry.

Spider-Man has webbed up the entire split site in the middle of the ferry with his web grenades and is hanging on by a thread, literally, trying to hold together the two halves of a ship from breaking apart.

The remote repulsors co-ordinate to attach onto both sides of the ferry and Tony joins them a second later, putting his back into righting the slowly toppling ferry.

“What the hell?” he hears Peter’s winded surprise and can’t resist moving up a bit to look straight at him through one of the portholes.

“Hello, Spider-Man,” he greets, letting all his fury bleed into those clipped words.

He then proceeds to almost aggressively ignore Peter as he takes care of shit and cleans up the boy’s mess, soldering the two halves of the ferry together with his arm lasers and deploying a grappling hook to add extra support at the masts. Peter follows after him the whole time, asking him how he can help, sounding panicked and contrite and scared, but Tony freezes him out completely, taking care of the business at hand. He just leaves after that, flying off to rendezvous with the incoming authorities and rescue teams, leaving Spider-Man a forlorn figure atop the ferry behind him.

As he’s flying away, Tony hacks into Peter’s suit (just to show him how easily he can) and to add insult to injury, has FRIDAY take forcible control of the Peter’s suit, employing the web-shooters to take Peter to a safe location near Whitehall terminal. Tony leaves Peter alone after that to stew in how royally he fucked up today.

He co-ordinates rescue efforts with the authorities for the next half hour and conferences with the FBI on the failed operation to capture the arms dealing organization. General Ross calls him twenty minutes out and Tony lets the call go straight to voicemail because he cannot deal with this right now. About forty minutes out, T’Challa and Everett Ross touch base with him to let him know they’re doing damage control and it’s fortunate that there was no loss of civilian life from the morning’s debacle, but the Accords negotiations will likely face a giant setback from yesterday’s tentative resolutions because of Spider-Man’s unauthorized activities.

Tony is thus in a towering fury by the time he flies, nearly an hour later, to where he had FRIDAY drop-off Peter.

Peter’s sitting facing the flurry of activity around the ferry, mask off (the idiot, Tony notifies FRIDAY to scrub all aerial surveillance footage of the rooftop for half the day), looking absolutely
crushed with guilt. Which he should be. Because he fucked up, hard.

Peter doesn’t turn around when Tony hovers to a stop near him. “Is everyone okay?”

“No thanks to you,” Tony says in a clipped tone, trying to keep an iron hold on his temper. Some of it leaks into his voice anyway. Despite what most of the world seems to think, he is only human.

Peter’s back stiffens at that and he turns around, face scrunching in misdirected anger.

“No thanks to me?” he asks, clearly building towards a tantrum. He jumps off the parapet, motions jerky with emotion and walks towards Tony, gesticulating wildly. “Those weapons are out there and they’re crazy dangerous and I’ve tried to warn you but you wouldn’t listen. None of this would’ve happened if you’d just listened to me.” He gets right up in Tony’s face, going almost toe-to-repulsor with the armor. “If you even cared you’d actually be here!”

Tony sees red. He disengages the armor in a flurry of shifting gears and takes grim satisfaction in how Peter’s eyes widen, the kid scuttling back a bit looking cowed as Tony steps out of the suit and bears down on him.

“I did listen, kid,” Tony says curtly. “Who do you think called the FBI and arranged an operation, huh?” Peter looks stunned. Clearly this hadn’t even occurred to him, which, typical. “Everyone – Happy, Rhodey, Pepper, hell, even Vision, who is like two years old – everyone thought I was insane to put so much trust in a kid barely out of middle school –“

“I’m a high school sophomore,” Peter interrupts, clearly unable to help himself.

“No this is where you zip it, alright, the adult is talking,” Tony practically yells, absolutely at the end of his patience. Peter flinches back from him and a lodestone drops into Tony’s gut.

A dozen different memories play in his head, an angry voice intimidating him from above, towering over him with disappointment and pity infusing the rage, and he never, ever wanted to be Howard in this situation, not like this with Peter, never wants Peter to see him the way he saw Howard…

He takes a deep, shuddering breath, trying to calm himself.

“What if someone had died, huh?” he asks, and Peter’s large brown eyes go shiny with held-back tears and guilt. “Coz that’s on you. And if you’d died…,” Tony’s voice cracks a bit and he clears it, because no. Now is not the time to think about how easily it could have been Peter cleaved in half by a weapon strong enough cut through reinforced metal. “If you’d died, I feel like that’s on me.”

The fight’s gone out of Peter. His shoulders have slumped in shame and guilt, and he’s swallowing convulsively while staring at the ground.

“I just wanted to be like you,” he mumbles to the ground, voice choked with tears, and Tony can feel his heart breaking.

“And I wanted you to be better,” he says and he’s just so, so tired. He can’t do this anymore. “Alright. This isn’t working. I want the suit back.”

Peter head shoots up, stricken and panicked.

“For how long?” his voice is pleading.

“Forever,” Tony says, steeling himself for the what he knows will be Peter’s reaction.
He’s not wrong.

“No, no, no,” Peter practically begs. “No, please, Mr. Stark. I’m sorry, I’ll be better, please don’t—”

“Sorry doesn’t cut it, kid. C’mon. Hand it over.” Tony tries to tell himself it’s for Peter’s own good, that Peter deserves to be punished for how much he screwed up today.

It doesn’t help in the face of Peter’s devastation.

“But I’m nothing without this suit,” Peter’s voice is desperate, he looks lost.

A phantom pain runs up Tony’s arm, and he remembers sleepless nights and panic numbing his whole body, countless armors built to protect him against a threat he can’t even describe.

*Imagine a suit of armor around the whole world.*

He massages his left wrist, trying to put his ghosts back in their closet.

“If you’re nothing without the suit, then you shouldn’t have it.”

Is this how Howard felt every time Tony acted up against him and he had to be an asshole in return? Surely Howard never gave Tony half as many chances or even a portion of the care and attention Tony’s given Peter, probably never felt a portion of the gut-wrenching pain Tony feels now looking at Peter’s agonized face but…

Is this how he felt anyway?

“God, I sound just like my dad,” he says, the words slipping out without his permission.

His ghosts are here to roost today apparently.

“I don’t have anything else to wear,” Peter says dully, eyes glassy, the futility of begging anymore clearly having sunk in.

At least that’s something Tony can fix. He sends the armor off to grab some clothes from the closest retail store selling them. He regrets his unspecific command when the armor returns with a ‘I survived my trip to NYC’ T-shirt, Hello Kitty pajamas and green flip flops, each at least three sizes too large for Peter. He hands them off to Peter wordlessly and the kid takes it without protest, eyes still brimming with unshed tears.

Tony turns away to give him some privacy, busying himself with his phone to shoot a message to Happy. When he turns back, Peter’s changed into the appalling clothes, the folded Spider-Man suit held in his hands like it’s the most precious thing to him. His eyes plead when Tony moves towards him but he remains silent as he hands off the suit to Tony.

Tony looks at the downturned head of messy brown hair and the forlornly slumped back, and tries to will himself to give Peter a comforting pat on the shoulder, a one-armed hug, *anything*, to let the kid know it’ll all be okay, that Tony will always be here to look out for him. But the minutes pass in silence and Tony just stands there, unable to put any of his feelings into words or action.

The ghost of Howard rears its head again and Tony forcibly pushes it back.

His phone chirps, breaking the silence, and Tony reads the reply from Happy.

“Happy’s waiting down the block, he’ll give you a ride home,” he says, stashing the Spidey suit into a storage compartment in the Iron Man armor before stepping into it himself. The suit closes around
him, the view of Peter’s wan face transferring from eyesight to the HUD cameras. “Hop on, I’ll carry you down.”

Later, Tony lands with a thunk on the newly-installed landing strip adjoining the terrace of the Stark Mansion on Fifth Avenue, his new New York address after the sale of Stark Tower.

It just hadn’t made sense to keep living floors at the Tower anymore, not when the place had a tendency to get trashed by the villains of the season, and he has a perfectly serviceable mansion in central New York anyway. Not when there were floors upon floors dedicated to teammates who stabbed him in the back or just left him and they had their own Compound in upstate New York now so even if they returned, why would they want to come back to the Tower? The Tower he’d redesigned, piece by piece, with the dreams of building a team, a group of people who trusted each other, who had each others’ back, who could be a family…

(I hate the thought of you rattling around that big old Tower by yourself.)

No, shut up brain, that was most definitely not the reason he finally got off his ass and sold the place. He’s been planning this move since the Compound got built, the timing has nothing to do with the stupid damn letter from Captain fucking America. Nope.

Tony walks inside, shedding his armor as he goes, Spider-Man’s suit clutched in his hand. He heads straight to the giant basement lab – newly constructed and without any of the marks of Tony-doing-science damage his labs eventually end up bearing. He flicks the lights on as he walks – he still hasn’t finished installing FRIDAY to the house’s mainframe – and heads to the back where his armors stand on pedestals like sentinels. At the very back of the room, looking simultaneously out of place and so painfully like it belongs there, hangs Captain America’s vibranium shield between two glass-walled pods. Tony stops before it, staring at it for wordless seconds before sighing and turning his attention to the pod on the right. A suit so deep blue it almost looks black in the dim light of the armor room hangs before him.

It’s not completely finished yet, this suit. Tony’s secretly been calling it the ‘Iron Spider’ in his head, because of the way the red of the suit contrasts with the intricate gold metal framing the insignia of the spider, reminiscent of Iron Man, almost like a claim of who will always stand behind the person wearing this suit. The new suit is made with the same titanium-thread, vibranium-reinforced clothing as Cap’s suit, slightly heavier than the previous one Tony built for Peter (which was more like Black Widow and Hawkeye’s, made for agility and stealth over a head-on firefight), but extremely durable and capable of taking some serious hits. By the time Tony’s done with it, it will also pack enough tech to let Peter Parker safely survive an alien attack in space, let alone a weapons-making goon in Queens, New York.

He was going to have Peter come in next weekend, show it to him – a promise of what he will have if he can just be patient, and not try to grow up too soon.

But instead.

Tony crumples the suit in his hand. He deposits it into the pod to the left of the shield and watches it unfurl to hang on proper display.

All his recent failures, right here in millions worth of one-of-a-kind weaponry. His very own wall of shame, mocking him. It’s almost ironic, considering his checkered past.

His phone rings in his pocket, the noise cutting through the silence and his bout of self-loathing.

He almost groans out loud when he sees that it’s May.
(The temptation to just ignore it is so, so high.)

But Tony is now a better, more responsible man. Or something.

With a deep breath, he picks up the call.

“I fixed it, okay?” he says without so much as a greeting. “I’m sorry I fucked up but I’ve made sure he’ll be safe now, alright?”

Silence. Just when Tony’s about to lift the phone away from his ear to see if it disconnected or something, he hears her on the other end.

“I actually called to apologize,” May says, and now Tony definitely lifts the phone to double-check he’s not hallucinating or being pranked because what? May Parker, the rightfully angered aunt of the teenage superhero Tony has been endangering, is apologizing to him?

“What?” he asks, baffled.

“Peter fessed up, on everything. I thought it was you all along, sending him on these missions since you’re short-staffed or something, but I didn’t know it was him trying to – to like, show off or show he’s grown up enough to do this superheroing business or something. I didn’t know, okay? But I see I was wrong, so. I’m sorry. That’s all I wanted to say.”

Tony digests this for a moment and then grinds to a halt as a very important bit in there hits him.

“Wait, Peter told you he’s Spider-Man?!”

Wow. Gotta give it to the kid. He had balls.

“He tried to bullshit for a while, but he’s so bad at it. It eventually came out. And then I fessed up to knowing all along.”

It all sounded like a very emotional, heart-to-heart kind of situation with lots of feelings being shared and earnest attempts made towards trying to understand one another. Tony’s extremely glad to have missed it.

He says as much and May laughs. There’s a beat of silence, and Tony has to ask.

“How – how is he? Um, dealing, I mean,” Tony says, voice rather raspy. He clears it.

“He’s devastated,” May says, tone soft and sympathetic. “But he knows he screwed up. He really does regret it, Tony. He’s very sorry, and not just because he lost the suit. I think what’s hurting him the most is that he disappointed you.”

Tony swallows, feeling a lodestone settle in his heart.

“I’m not disappointed in him. He just – he went behind my back, May. He put himself in danger, he was in so deep, and I didn’t even know – well, I am disappointed in him too, I guess. But mostly, I was just –“ he swallows again, remembering the rushing panic, the sheer terror of seeing Spider-Man at the shootout on the ferry as it broke in two like a matchstick – “I was so scared. I can’t be worrying about him like this right now. Not with the Accords and everything that’s changing in the superhero world and – I have to protect him from all of that. He’s still so young.”

Tony sighs, turning back to stare at the two Spider-Man suits in their pods again. The Iron Spider isn’t finished yet, but when it’s done, Tony knows he can keep Peter safe.
“I know I told him he’s never getting the suit back but, I just need some time. Time to sort out the thing with the Amended Accords and get the Avengers up and running again and then I can – can spend time with him a bit. Make him understand that I trust and respect him as a hero, that Spider-Man is amazing, but he just, it’s too early for him to be doing things like this. We’ll just, have a chat maybe, in a couple of months or so? And I can promise him he’ll get the suit back when he’s like, in college or something. Just. Older. Not a 15 year old kid trying to keep a ferry from being split apart by an alien-weapons selling maniac. We’ll have that conversation in a bit, once I put out the fires from all of this.”

“I think you should also tell him who you really are to him when you do,” May replies, almost conversationally, and Tony chokes on his own spit.

“What? Absolutely not. He’ll hate me! He’ll probably never speak to me again.”

“He idolizes you,” May points out. “And you’ll have to tell him at some point. No, you do,” May cuts him off as he starts to protest. “It was fine when you were keeping your distance from him, but you are right here now. He knows you, respects you. Your approval means so much to him. And with Ben… with Ben gone. You are the closest thing to a father figure he has left.”

Tony stands still, staring at the wall in blind panic. A million different ways this can go sideways runs through his head.

May huffs a put-upon sigh on the other end. “I’m not saying it has to be tomorrow. Just, think about it, okay? You are such a big part of his life already. It’ll come out sometime, Tony. I’m just saying you should tell him soon, yourself. He deserves it. You both do.”

“I –,” Tony’s voice cracks and he clears his throat. “O-okay. I’ll think about it.”

“Okay,” May says, sounding warmly exasperated. It’s almost comforting, the familiarity of it. “I’ll go now. I saw a recipe for some flax seed brownies yesterday that I think will cheer him up.”

“I’m sure it will,” Tony lies through his teeth in agreement before saying goodbye. He shudders at the memory of the horrendous date loaf he was made to consume in May Parker’s house and sends Peter his mental sympathies.

An hour later, he’s already back on a plane to Berlin, to meet with Everett Ross and his team about the potential setbacks to Accords negotiations due to Spider-Man’s actions today and how they were going to manage it.

Three days later, he’s just back to his hotel in Vienna after a meeting with five countries’ military bigwigs when FRIDAY alerts him to a video message from May Parker. Tony opens it with a frown, then laughs out loud. It’s a shaky, badly-lit smartphone video of Peter trying – and failing – to learn how to tie a half-Windsor knot from YouTube.

‘Peter asked Liz out for the Homecoming dance and she said yes!’ the text accompanying the video reads. ‘He’s been crushing on her since first day of high school. He’s really nervous but also really excited.’

Tony grins at the video again, swiping a hand over Peter’s face on the screen as he huffs in frustration at the piece of fabric around his neck. He vaguely remembers Karen mentioning this ‘Liz’ to him. Head of the Decathlon team, high school senior. He mentally pats Peter on the shoulder for having serious game.

He is made to take back this assessment when he gets another message from May a couple of days
later, a picture at 2am this time as he’s just settling down to sleep after a tiring day of reading legal
documents with his European team of lawyers and co-ordinating with Happy about moving the last
of the Avengers tech out of the Tower.

Peter’s dressed in an off-the-rack tuxedo with a reasonably well-tied tie around his neck, next to a
very pretty girl in all pink. He’s pasty white and stiff as a board beside her, looking absolutely
terrified, as if he’s facing down the gallows instead of a night of dancing with a lovely girl who is
into him.

Tony chuckles lowly, staring fondly at his ridiculous kid, before tossing the phone on the bedside
table and getting under the sheets.

His mind jumps to what May said to him a week ago and he can't help but imagine it.

He imagines being there to help Peter pick out a suit for another school dance and teach him how to
tie a tie. Imagines taking a picture of the kid with his date and printing it out for his fridge. Imagines
cheering him on in competitions, helping him with homework projects. Imagines going to Peter’s
high school graduation because he has a right to be there, because he’s Peter’s parent.

He wants it, he has to admit to himself. He really, really wants it.

May was right. Maybe he should try to tell Peter this last big secret between them, try to form this
connection they’ve both been deprived of for so long.

Maybe it’d all turn out okay.
Chapter 14

Peter’s plans for Homecoming night: wear a nice suit, smell good, impress Liz’s parents, hope Liz likes her corsage, try not to be a complete nerd, dance with Liz, and maybe – if he is really, really lucky – maybe even kiss Liz.

Not on Peter’s plans for Homecoming night (so of course that’s what fucking happens): find out flying Vulture guy is Liz’s dad, get threatened with murder in the back of a vintage car, abandon Liz in the middle of the dance floor to go arrest her dad, get beat up in the parking lot by some dude with an electric fist, and commit Grand Theft Auto, Spider-Man style.

(The tiny cherry on the giant shitcake is Flash’s dumbfounded face as Peter hustles him and his date off the car and takes his phone away. Very tiny cherry, but it exists, he has to acknowledge it.)

And now here he is, driving through the streets of New York though he doesn’t (a) know how to drive, or (b) know where he’s driving to, with the only saving grace being Ned’s voice in his ear, trying to hack into Peter’s phone to track it, because he planted it in Mr. Toomes’ car.

Mr. Toomes, who is Liz Toomes’ dad, the girl he’s been crushing on for ages and whose house he was in the night he got dropped into that lake by the flying Vulture guy, who is his Homecoming date’s dad, and holy shit, what is Peter’s life?

“Pete, I’m in,” Ned’s urgent voice comes through the speakers of Flash’s phone and Peter swerves, narrowly avoiding head-on collision with a truck, yelling the whole time. “The car’s heading down Jackson Avenue, he just passed the Gamestop there.”

“Where’s he going?” Peter asks rhetorically, before letting out a screech, and dodging around a parked bus, thanking his Spidey-instincts the whole time because holy shit, he’d be so screwed otherwise. Well, even more screwed, because he definitely crossed the threshold from Baseline Level of Screwiness to Everything’s Completely Fucked somewhere between the gun pointed in his face while his date was taking selfies outside and getting knocked through a bus with ABBA playing distant in the background.

“Ned, get into my phone contact list and call Mr. Stark,” Peter says, because he knows better now. He knows he’s completely and utterly in over his head on this and knows he needs the help, he cannot do this by himself, he cannot mess this up.

He cannot let Mr. Stark down again.

“Did you just say ‘Call Mr. Stark?’” Ned asks breathlessly. “Holy shit, that is the single greatest sentence anyone has ever said to me. Am I going to be able to talk to Iron Man? Like, directly talk to him? Oh my god, how should I introduce myself?!!” He deepens his voice, sounding like there’s a baseball wedged in his throat. “Hello, Mr. Stark, Iron Man, Sir, I am Ned Leeds, an associate of Spider-Man Peter Parker and we have a situation to be handled that we would like your assistance wi...”

“Ned, quit fucking around!” Peter yells, cutting a corner too close and feeling the taillights hit a lamp post. He feels bad about that. Poor Flash. “Are you into my contacts yet?!”

“I am getting there, jeez, wait a – Aha,” Ned whoops in victory and then goes silent. “Hey Peter, you
have Mr. Stark saved under a codename or something? Coz he’s not here under Tony Stark or Iron Man or anything else related to those words.”

And, Peter realizes – damn – he never actually had something as mundane as Mr. Stark’s phone number or e-mail address. Initially, Mr. Stark always reached out to him through FRIDAY and later, Peter had Karen to initiate contact. And now, Mr. Stark is beyond his reach when Peter needs him the most.

Fuck.

“Happy,” Peter says, and gets distracted by an oncoming Limo blocking his way. He swerves ungracefully around it, feeling the tire squealing on gravel as he makes some entirely unorthodox turns.

“Happy what?” Ned is asking tersely when Peter tunes back in. “What on earth is there to be happy about in all this?!”

“No, look for Happy Hogan, on my phone,” Peter snaps, taking a right turn on a red light with a sign saying ‘No Right Turn’ above it. He likes to live on the edge. “He’s Mr. Stark’s Head of Security, he’ll get in touch with him for us!”

“Hey, Pete, Liz’s dad is stopped at an old warehouse a ways out from Brooklyn,” Ned says, and Peter can hear the clacking of a keypad on the other end over the whine of his car’s engines as he floors it.

That makes no sense. Why would Liz’s dad be at an old warehouse in the middle of nowhere if he was supposed to be leaving town, like Liz’s mom had mentioned earlier?

It starts to make sense when Ned manages to video call Happy, gets hung up on, and reports on the boxes surrounding Happy being loaded into what appeared to be a quinjet.

It clicks together in Peter’s head in a crystalline moment of clarity.

The news report a couple of days ago about the sale of no-longer-to-be Avengers Tower to the heiress of some Japanese biomechanics empire, looking to venture into the North American market in collaboration with Stark Industries. The report that Avengers operations will solely be restricted to the Upstate New York compound from now on and that Mr. Stark’s primary address would become the old Stark Mansion on Fifth Ave. The fact that the Vulture’s main move has always been to steal Avengers tech while its in transit because they’re too well-protected at other times. The boxes surrounding Happy, wheels up in 15 minutes, Liz’s dad is leaving town…

“It’s moving day,” Peter whispers, then louder. “It’s moving day, Ned, he’s going to steal Mr. Stark’s weapons and tech from the quinjet as they’re moving out of the Tower! It’s moving day!”

And he pushes the car even faster, finally out of the main streets of New York into backroads now, letting Ned act as his GPS to guide him towards his destination.

After an, um, unconventional parking (he mentally apologizes to Flash again as he takes in the car that’s finally stopped after doing multiple flips and colliding with a lamp post), he scrambles for the phone where it’s wedged under the passenger seat. Ned’s yelling his name, clearly having heard the sounds of the car crunching against gravel and metal.

“Ned, I’m here, I’m fine,” Peter says, finding that he’s not even lying, really. God bless his Spidey powers. “Keep trying to contact Happy, okay? As soon as he picks up, tell him everything. I’m heading in to stop Mr. Toomes.”

“Thanks, Guy in the Chair,” Peter says with a quick grin, then cuts the call, dropping the phone back into the decidedly-worse-for-wear car.

It’s showtime.

He jumps up onto the roof of the warehouse, slipping in through an open vent and sliding down on one of his webs.

The inside is a large, open, industrial-looking space. The hard cement walls are bleak and cold, heavy stone pillars supporting the high ceiling. The entire place smells musty, like it hasn’t been used in a long time.

At the far end of the hall, the Vulture is standing within a small area of illumination, before a table with a bay of computers set up on it. He’s right there out in the open, his back to Peter, without a care in the world, typing something on a keyboard. His wings are nowhere in sight, and the only thing on that table apart from the computer screens is an open beer bottle, dewy like it’s only recently been taken out of a cooler. Like the man is absolutely certain no one will find him here, that there’s no need for him to keep weapons handy to defend himself.

He will pay for underestimating Peter.

Peter feels a tight knot of rage building in his chest. This man tried to kill him multiple times. He nearly let all those people die on that ferry just to sell illegal weapons. This man didn’t care about the countless lives that’ll be lost because of the weapons he was selling to criminals. This man was Liz’s dad and she didn’t deserve this happening to her.

“Hey,” Peter yells in fury, swiftly walking down the space towards the Vulture, removing his mask to crumple it in his hands. “I found you! Surprised?”

The Vulture turns towards Peter, looking completely unruffled, which only enrages Peter more. “Hey Pete, didn’t hear you come in.” He leans back against the desk nonchalantly.

“I’ve got you,” Peter points out, coming into the light, close enough now to get to the Vulture in three leaps. “You can’t get out of this now. I’m going to give you to the FBI. It’s over.”

“You know, when I first saw you today, I didn’t get what Liz saw in you,” the Vulture says conversationally, irrationally, like he still doesn’t realize how fucked he is. “I was like, really, this little twerp? But I gotta give it to you, kid, you’ve got grit. Though I guess I shouldn’t be too surprised. There’s not much I’d give your dear old dad credit for, but he’s got grit too, rich privileged asshole up on his high horse that he is.”

Peter trips on his own feet, the words reaching his reflexes before his brain has even fully processed it. He stumbles to an unsteady halt.

He must have misheard.

“What? My dad?”

He must have misheard. His dad? How would the Vulture know about his dad, when Peter himself doesn’t know anything about the man? When May once told him even his mom hadn’t known who it was? Was Toomes talking about Uncle Ben?
Peter knows he shouldn’t let this distract him, should move in and incapacitate the Vulture, but he can’t. Some instinct, some lizard brain instinct or his Spidey senses or the feeling in his gut or whatever, is telling him Toomes has some piece of the puzzle Peter has been searching for his whole life, and he feels compelled to stop, feels compelled to listen.

Toomes is looking at him the whole while, his face morphing from an expression of studied indifference to one of surprise, before settling on a kind of vicious glee.

“You don’t even know, do you?” he asks, grinning at Peter, mirroring Peter’s own thoughts back at him, but garbled out of shape, twisted and cruel.

Peter blinks, almost forgetting the reason he is here for a second, because the Vulture knows his dad.

How? How does he know? How could he possibly know?

“Shit, I know Stark is a cold and vicious bastard,” the Vulture is saying, observing Peter closely, a savage grin splitting his face. “But to just use you like some lapdog, putting you in a monkey suit and dragging you to fight his enemies, without even telling you he’s your old man. That’s inhuman, even for him.”

Stark? As in, Mr. Stark? As in, the Vulture was implying Mr. Stark is his dad?

No.

“You’re – no – you’re lying,” Peter says through numb lips that don’t seem to want to cooperate. “Mr. Stark isn’t – I’m not – how would you even know this? You’re lying. No.”

It’s a testament to how blindsided Peter feels in that moment that he doesn’t even raise his web shooters when Toomes turns to tap something on the computer keyboard.

The screen on the far right comes to life.

A piece of the video recordings from Peter’s first birthday plays on it.

He’s seen them a million times, because it’s his only birthday his mom was alive for.

The video shows it’s just a small affair, just Aunt May and Uncle Ben and his mom, Peter sitting on his mom’s lap. The boxy TV behind her is playing birthday tunes, the three adults watching and assisting the toddler in unwrapping his presents. They’re on the part where he opens a loosely-wrapped package to uncover a little toy robot. The Peter on the screen squeals in delight as the robot emits myriad lights and does a backflip while reciting Newton’s First Law.

Peter remembers that robot. It was his favorite toy as a child. Some of his earliest memories are of playing with it, mouthing along to the various bits of science the toy spewed out as it did its tricks. It had gone everywhere with him, till it was washed away in the ocean during a trip to the beach when he was five. Peter had cried so much then. It had been a Stark Industries toy, though Peter’s never seen another like it since, on store shelves or on the internet. He’d just thought it must’ve been a limited edition collectible.

He doesn’t remember anyone ever mentioning who gifted it to him.

As if to answer his thoughts, the video cuts to another moment, clearly a little message recorded later in the day. He’s never seen this part before.

It’s his mom, looking tired and happy, speaking in a hushed voice. “I just thought I should send you
something to thank you for the toy,” she says to the camera, holding up the little robot. “Peter loves it so much, though it took some doing to get him to sleep once he started playing with it, so no thanks for all the tantrums I can see in my future. But I’m… touched that you even remembered. I was really surprised. Thank you for the gift. It was very thoughtful.”

Mary Parker takes a deep breath on the screen, looking like she’s preparing herself to say something unpleasant.

“But I think you shouldn’t send anything like this anymore,” she says, looking apologetic but firm. “If you’ve changed your mind about being involved in Peter’s life, that’s fine, we can talk about it, nothing would make me happier than for Peter to grow up knowing his father. But if you haven’t, if you still want nothing to do with him, I think it’s unfair to him, and to me, if you send him things, or – or contact him in any other way. He’s too young now to ask questions, but there’ll be a day he will if he keeps getting things that are clearly not from me, and I don’t want to lie to him any more than I have to. I hope you can understand, Mr. Stark – um, Tony.”

She falls into an uncomfortable silence. “Um, that is all. I really do thank you for the toy though. You saw how excited Peter was. So, um, thank you for that. And I can e-mail you some pictures of Peter a couple of times a year, if – if that’s something you’d like… just let me know. I saw on the news you’re going to South Korea for a weapons demonstration. I hope you have a safe trip. Just, please keep in mind what I said from now on.”

She looks earnestly into the camera for a few more seconds before sighing and reaching to stop recording.

Peter stares at the blank screen, feeling like an explosion just went off in his face.

He can’t make sense of it. What he watched, it couldn’t be false or fabricated, it looked too real, it felt too real, but it also can’t be true. Mr. Stark, he – he couldn’t be Peter’s dad. He couldn’t, right? Peter’s known him for months now. He’s hung out in his workshop, used his tech, sent him videos of cats he rescued or particularly stupid local criminals. Surely Mr. Stark would’ve said something if – if this was true. If he was Peter’s dad. Surely he would have said something. But, he couldn’t deny what he just saw, either. It felt too real, it felt true.

Tony Stark is Peter’s dad.

“I didn’t set out to make an operation this big, y’know,” Toomes is saying while Peter feels his world crashing down around him. “It was just simple scavenging in the beginning, stealing leftovers from the site of an incident before Stark and his cronies could squirrel them away to keep to themselves. Until Stark handed me a better way to do things himself.”

Peter stares at the Vulture mutely, distantly wondering why he’s telling him all this, mind still static with shock.

“We had an in-guy at SI, see,” Toomes continues. “A low-level computer grunt, wasn’t worth nothing, but I kept him around. It paid off during the fiasco with that crazy robot though. Stark’s private servers getting dumped all over the place for a little while there, when nothing had a hope of getting into them before. It was hard for anyone else to get at it, but with access to computers within the Tower, we got some good shit. The early specs from Falcon’s wings helped me build my little beauty. A high altitude vacuum seal. Secret locations to Stark warehouses. Not all useful though. There was also shit like photos of Stark and his ex-girlfriend on vacation, the Avengers’ grocery list, a video of some kid’s first birthday,” he gestures at the now blank screen that was playing the video a couple of minutes ago, “pieces of e-mails between Stark and some lady in Queens who seemed to be looking after his secret kid. Useless shit.”
Peter just stands there, listening, trying to recover, but his brain is still buzzing, processing, understanding.

“Well, not useless,” Liz’s dad smiles bitingly. “Could’ve sold it all to some tabloid, bet they’d have paid a pretty penny for that little video I just showed you. But I don’t do that. I hate the man, but I can get wanting to protect his kid, keep him away from the shit in his life. I will do anything for my family.”

He picks up the bottle of beer casually, chugging it a bit and placing it back on the table. A single drop of condensation rolls down the side of it to pool at the table and Peter can’t look away from it.

“But it all clicked together as I was driving here in that car,” Toomes says and Peter’s eyes snap back to him. “It never made sense to me, why Stark’s trusting some newbie with his tech when there are far more established underground heroes running around in New York. But after today in the car, with everything Liz said, and I remember that video and it all just clicked. Makes sense that that suspicious bastard would only hand off his weapons to his son.”

His son. Figured it out. His son. After the car. The car where Mr. Toomes drove Peter and Liz to Homecoming dance. The Homecoming dance he’s missing because he has to stop the Vulture. The Vulture who is selling weapons to criminals and is planning to steal Avengers tech from a quinjet taking off in less than five minutes.

Peter wrenches his thoughts back to focus and straightens, shooting a web to trap the Vulture’s left hand to the desk almost without conscious thought.

“We are done here,” he says in a shaky, tremulous voice, not dropping his arm, feeling off-kilter, like he’s in an alternate dimension. “I – I can’t do this with –we’re done here. I’m going to capture you and hand you off to the FBI and then – and then I’ll deal with the rest of it, but you’re done. I’ve stopped you.”

The Vulture just stares back at him, unperturbed.

“I wasn’t waffling around just to talk to you, Pete,” he says and Peter tenses. He still feels so unbalanced, like the entire world is twisted out of shape. “I just needed some time to let my Wings boot up.”

And then everything descends into chaos and violence, and Peter is just trying to hold on and stay alive. Doesn’t have time to think about anything except dodging and running and clawing his way out from under tons of cement, breath coming out in panicked gasps from lungs that won’t work right, a fear so crushing it chokes him. Doesn’t have time to think as he runs after the Vulture, then dangles after him as he flies into the clouds, then clings to the side of a jet while fighting off an attack thousands of feet above the ground, then crash lands a flaming failing jet with bone-jarring impact on the Coney Island beach, then rescues the guy trying to kill him before he manages to explode himself.

He doesn’t have time to think which, despite everything, may be a mercy in itself.

Peter climbs to the top of the Cyclone and settles in, resting his back, feeling a thousand different aches flare up in his body as he waits for the cavalry (i.e. Happy and the Avengers response teams) to do something about the literal fire that needs to be put out. He would normally at least try to be present, try to offer Spider-Man’s assistance, but right now – he’s done.

He’s just so fucking done.
They show up within ten minutes, while the Vulture’s still – thankfully, god, because Peter does not have the energy to fight the man again – unconscious. Peter hangs around just long enough to see Happy reach the little pyramid of deadly tech that Peter built, with the Vulture webbed among it with a literal sticky note on him, like some weird satanic offering to the Church of All Things Fucked Up – Peter waits long enough to make sure everything’s in the right hands, and then stands, readying his web shooters to head home.

He’s just swinging out from Coney Island when it hits him that he doesn’t want to go home.

‘To just use you like some lapdog, putting you in a monkey suit and dragging you to fight his enemies.’

‘If you still want nothing to do with him.’

What he wants is – what he wants is to see Mr. Stark and know.

On the next swing, he turns towards Manhattan.

*

It is the most hellish half-hour of Tony’s life and that’s including the time he was kidnapped in Afghanistan and the time he flew a nuke through a portal to his own seeming death.

Because, for that awful, soul-crushing half-hour, Tony cannot be sure Peter is still alive.

He cannot be sure Peter isn’t lying somewhere right now, slowly bleeding to death, without Tony there to help him, save him, protect him. Cannot be sure even Spider-Man could survive falling out of the sky and crash-landing a burning jet, cannot be sure if Peter even survived whatever confrontation occurred in the air that brought the jet crashing down in the first place.

For those thirty minutes, he isn’t sure he won’t come home to Peter’s lifeless body and the realization that it’s all his fault, his fault, because maybe Peter would’ve lived if Tony just let him keep that fucking suit. Maybe Peter would’ve lived if Tony just did more.

You could’ve saved us. Why didn’t you do more?

No.

He’s been in the air for twenty five minutes now, leaving his hotel room in Berlin within five minutes of that phone call from Happy, where Happy reported a burning jet, a phone call from Ned Leeds who insisted Peter had gone off to confront the Vulture, a man who turned out to be Peter’s Homecoming date’s father.

Tony curses himself for not running a deeper background check on the girl, for never making the connection himself. For dismissing the Vulture at every turn as just some low-class criminal, not worth his full attention because he wasn’t an alien invasion threatening mass extinction of the planet.

He wonders if one day the only emotions he is capable of feeling will be guilt and regret.

He pushes his suit back towards America, trying not to think about what will await him, waiting for Happy to call him back with an update, hating that he took away Karen who could’ve linked him to Peter instantly. (FRIDAY’s already tried calling Peter’s phone. She reported that it went straight to voicemail and tracked it down to some demolished warehouse in Brooklyn where Peter most definitely isn’t anymore.)
Tony hasn’t flown the suit across continents in a while, he’s too old, too weary down in his bones now to do it anymore, but does it matter? Would any of it matter if Peter is dead when Tony gets back?

He thinks this is what will finally break him. After Afghanistan, after the portal, after Ultron and the scepter and losing JARVIS, after that bunker in Siberia and a shield driven into his heart, if he survived all that only for this. He pushes the thought out of his head, trying to regulate his breathing.

He doesn’t have time for a panic attack right now. Not if Peter could be needing him.

Happy gets back to him about forty minutes from his initial call to report the Vulture has been found webbed to the boxes of weapons and tech that fell out of the jet when it crash-landed, unconscious but alive, with a sticky note from Spider-Man stuck to him containing an apology for trashing the jet.

Even as Happy’s winding down with his report, FRIDAY interrupts to throw up a video from one of the surveillance cameras on Coney Island, showing Spider-Man swinging away from there, looking safe and whole and alive.

If Tony abruptly cuts Happy’s call to just hang limply inside his suit, to finally just cry, to just let out all the pent up fear and panic and the crushing relief building in his chest – well, no one except FRIDAY needs to know that.

Tony is twenty minutes out from New York when FRIDAY informs him that she has footage from one of the mansion’s security cameras showing Spider-Man entering the living room. When he hears it, Tony actually closes his eyes in relief, letting FRIDAY take over control for a few minutes while his heart finally settles into something resembling a normal beat.

Peter’s safe. Peter’s alive and safe and under Tony’s roof where nothing can hurt him.

The twenty minutes feel like hours as he heads home, unable to contact Peter or hear his voice. (The second thing he does when gets home, after tending to whatever Peter needed from him, will be to finish uploading FRIDAY to the mainframe of the damn house.)

He finally lands on the Mansion’s landing pad, hurrying rather ungracefully out of his suit to rush to his living room. He turns a corner and feels the last of the worry finally drop from his shoulders, because there Peter sits, battered and bruised, but so very, very alive.

Tony comes to a stop just inside the living room, gripping the back of a plush armchair to steady himself, drinking in Peter before him.

Peter’s dressed in his ridiculous, old Spidey outfit, sweatshirt and cheap tights and the mask with the bug-like goggles clutched in his hand. He is still on Tony’s couch, perched stiffly on the edge, head bowed and shoulders taut. He doesn’t look up even though he must’ve heard Tony come in, doesn’t so much as acknowledge Tony or give a word of greeting.

Tony doesn’t notice anything at first, too busy being relieved and looking his fill at how alive Peter is, but eventually the silence gets to him.

“Hey, kid,” he says, and Peter jerks a bit, tenses in his seat, but still doesn’t look up. Tony frowns, but continues. “I was so worried about you. I’m happy to see you’re safe.”

Tony moves closer a bit, really looking for the first time since he set eyes on Peter tonight, noting things besides the chant of ‘he’s alive’ thrumming in his head. He notes the delicate way Peter’s holding his left arm, sprained collarbone, maybe even a fractured joint. There’s blood caking Peter’s temple and Tony can see a nasty cut on the corner of Peter’s lips. He is covered in cement dust and
smoke, sand and engine oil. Tony feels concern rise in his chest.

“C’mon, you need a bath,” Tony says, crossing the room towards him. “Maybe a small stint at Medical, get you checked out a bit, then a nice shower and some food – I’ll get some pizza? Sleep. Sleep is definitely on the cards, I’ll leave May a message.” Tony knows he’s rambling as he stretches an arm out, to touch Peter, to grab his shoulder, to feel the warm body that isn’t lying lifeless under a plane crash rubble.

But instead –

“Don’t touch me,” Peter says viciously, and it’s so unexpected, so entirely uncharacteristic that Tony is still reaching for him without digesting the words. He stops when Peter’s head shoots up and he is pinned under a furious glare, something he’s never, ever seen from Peter before, not even after the ferry when Peter was so mad, full of guilt and misplaced rage. Tony straightens, staring at Peter, utterly confused, right arm still outstretched towards him.

He drops it slowly, brow wrinkling in confusion.

“Has Aunt May known all along too? Did Uncle Ben?” Peter asks, his low voice shaking with fury, and Tony just looks at him, bewildered. It’s like he arrived at a conversation when it was already half-done, struggling to follow.

“Know what? Peter, what are you talking about?”

Peter stands up, his entire body coiled, hands balled into fists. “Know that you’re my dad. Has everyone known all along except me about my own fucking life?”

You could hear a pin drop in the silence that followed.

Peter knows, Tony’s brain sings at him. Peter knows who he is to him and he is… furious about it. Peter somehow found out and –

“How – how did you,” Tony starts, licking his lips. His throat suddenly feels parched, mouth dry as the Sahara. Peter knows, he somehow knows.

“The Vulture told me,” Peter interrupts him, and oh.

Peter’s voice trails off, and he stops in his tirade to take a shuddering breath.

“Oh.

That wasn’t how Tony ever wanted him to find out, that wasn’t Tony’s plan.

“Showed me a video of my first birthday and that message from Mom, and oh, maybe you should look into that, Mr. Stark,” Peter says the name like it’s a rebuke in itself, like he’s throwing back Tony’s own name at him. “He got it through some mole in SI, maybe the guy’s still around, you should fix your leaks.”

Tony just stares dumbly back at him.

“But I’m glad you didn’t catch him before, because maybe otherwise I’d have never found out,” Peter continues, crumpling his mask in his clenched fist. He is vibrating with contained fury. “Maybe you’d have just never told me, just kept me hanging at your beck and call like some lost puppy…”

Peter’s voice trails off, and he stops in his tirade to take a shuddering breath.

“I heard what mom said in that video,” he says finally, voice almost under control again. “You
“And then I hear it from a guy trying to kill me – were you, were you ever even planning on telling me?” Peter demands, moving forward, leaning into Tony’s space, face scrunched in anger. “Were you just going to – why did you ever even contact me? Is it – is it just because I’m Spider-Man? You didn’t want me, and then I got my cool new powers and I was useful to you? Is that it? Is that – is that all I am to you? A replacement Avenger till you get the old group back together again? Do you even care?”

It finally snaps Tony out of his stasis. “Peter,” he says, trying to find the words, to correct Peter in how mistaken he is, to tell him how much he cares, how it scares him, the sheer level of love and protectiveness he feels for him. Tries to find the words to tell him everything and chokes on air a bit, feeling his lungs constrict under the emotion of the moment.

Peter doesn’t give him a chance.

“Don’t,” he bites out, moving away from Tony, swiftly heading towards the open French windows on the other side of the living room that lead to the balcony. “Don’t. I don’t even want to hear it. I literally cannot with any of this right now. I’m tired. I had a building dropped on me after finding out my lifelong hero is my dad and spent Homecoming night trying to not get chopped to pieces by a quinjet turbine ten thousand feet in the air and I lost my phone and my only tie and god even knows where my dress shoes are and I’m just so – I just wanted to tell you that I know,” he stops with one hand against the window, slumping against it. “I just wanted to let you know and now I’m done, and I don’t want to hear your excuses. Bye, Mr. Stark. I don’t want to speak to you anymore.”

“Peter!” Tony calls out urgently, because he can’t let Peter go now, he needs to tell him, tell him everything, that Peter is his entire world, make him understand. But Peter’s already gone, pushed open the windows and jumped off the balcony, shooting his web at the nearest tree and swinging away in the general direction of Queens, letting Tony’s voice trail off into the quiet night.

You didn’t want me, and then I got my cool new powers and I was useful to you? Do you even care?

Tony stares blankly at the now empty balcony that is decidedly Peter-less, the sheer lace curtains gently rippling under a light breeze.

Fuck.

How did everything get so colossally fucked up? And how on earth is Tony going to fix this?

Because he will, he will fix this.

Just four hours ago – it was just four hours ago! – Tony had been fantasizing about telling Peter, about finally getting to be a dad, about forging the kind of relationship with his son he’d always craved from his own father growing up. He can’t believe everything’s so absolutely royally screwed up already.

But, this is what Tony does. He builds beautiful new things and breaks them beyond recognition, but he always, always fixes his mistakes, builds something even better out of the debris. It’s all out there now and Peter knows, and Tony doesn’t know how yet, but -
He is going to make things right with his son.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed this chapter! :D Thanks, as always, for the comments and kudos :)xx

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