

## Lazarus, come forth

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# Lazarus, come forth

by [iron\\_spider](#)

## Summary

Tony's mind is a chaotic mess but he remembers the moment—remembers his death, remembers the red hot pain and Peter screaming, Rhodey rushing to his side. How he knew he'd never see Pepper again—but they'd fixed it. They'd fixed the world, erased the lost time, set things right—and the kid was back. The kid was crying, the kid hated him for doing what he did, but he was back. He was alive.

Tony Stark was dead. But now he's breathing again, trying to think, gasping, hands tracing the box surrounding him, covering him, suffocating him.

He's in a coffin. He's under the ground. He's under the fucking ground.

(Tony Stark dies defeating Thanos. But then he comes back to life. He has to find out how, why, and how to live again. And how to deal with the changes in the people he's coming back to.)

# Chapter 1

It happens all at once, and it's agony.

He's put back together new, something or someone twisting back the arm of time and making it like it never happened. Rot reversing, the green tint of his skin clearing, the bloating going down, eyeballs and hair growing back in. Like death never touched him, like there was no embalming fluid, no tears, no funeral.

Except he's still under ground.

It happens all at once, and it's fast. Like a lightning bolt, jolting his body back to life, and he wakes up here good as new—exactly as he was, whole, living—gasping ragged, panic pumping through his veins, his weak heart stuttering, nearly stopping his second life before it even begins.

The smell of death still clings to him, to the three piece suit they buried him in.

His mind is a chaotic mess but he remembers the moment—remembers his death, remembers the red hot pain and Peter screaming, Rhodey rushing to his side. How he knew he'd never see Pepper again—but they'd fixed it. They'd fixed the world, erased the lost time, set things right—and the kid was back. The kid was crying, the kid hated him for doing what he did, but he was back. He was alive.

Tony Stark was dead. But now he's breathing again, trying to think, gasping, hands tracing the box surrounding him, covering him, suffocating him.

He's in a coffin. He's under the ground. He's under the fucking ground.

He tries to scream, tries to yell for help because he's fucking buried, because he's not fucking dead anymore he's not dead he's not *dead*—but he doesn't have a voice. He only croaks, desperate huffs of breath nearly choking him. He tries, tries and tries and tries. Nothing. For once, he's speechless.

It's so fucking dark. Pure darkness. Panic, panic, panic and fear, the deep-rooted kind that feels crippling, and he's gasping, clawing at the too-soft walls surrounding him. The voice in his head is screaming, begging, and he feels like he can't breathe—he's gonna die again and they'll never know—they'll never know he came back, he woke up, he defied death and it snatched him back just as quick—

*Relax* he thinks—his head is full of static but he tries to hone in on his own voice because it's lost somewhere inside him. *Relax, you're still you. You're still Tony Stark, relax, you can figure this out.*

Part of him isn't so sure. He's never been buried alive before, he's never come back from the dead before. The silence feels threatening. He can only lift his head a little bit, and he feels around—it's so goddamn dark—there's a dead flower on his chest, and it crunches when he

touches it, a pair of sunglasses next to it—and a fucking repulsor gauntlet beside his hip. He traces the outline of it, and clicks something. It glows blue, giving him a little light.

He stares down at it, trying to determine whether or not he's hallucinating. He tries to keep his breathing shallow. He covers it with his hand. It's real. As real as anything can be anymore.

He looks at the outline of his coffin in the new light. He's crying—he doesn't want to be but he is, and he covers his face with his hands. The despair is heavy, weighing on him like the dirt above. He doesn't know how long he's been dead, how long he can survive down here, what the world is like now, who's still left—he sobs, pressing his fingers into his eyes.

The moment of his death keeps replaying. Over and over. The moment that put him here, lead to this. He can almost feel his arm throbbing the way it did. He can almost taste the blood. He can hear Rhodey talking to him, softly. He can hear Peter crying, begging him not to go.

He has to get out of here. He can see them again. See Happy. See the team.

See Pepper.

He settles. He takes the flower, brittle and breaking, and puts it inside his suit jacket. He sees a couple envelopes stuffed into the pocket there and stares at them for a pointed moment—another incentive to make it out. He sucks in a breath, a big one, because he knows the dirt will start falling in on him as soon as he breaks the lid and he has to be ready.

He silently thanks whoever it was that left him the repulsor. It feels like a Peter move.

Tony slips his hand inside the glove, and it comes to life along with him, lighting up brighter. He doesn't have room to extend his arm and he's glad he's not claustrophobic on top of everything else. He rests his elbow next to his ribcage and holds his hand palm up. Then he shoots a beam.

The dirt comes in a tidal wave and he shoots another one, closing his eyes. He punches and kicks, widens the holes he makes, and groans as he boosts himself up, thrashing and pulling and falling, the dirt in his eyes and his mouth and his throat, under his nails as he struggles, shooting a beam below him to try and push him forward. He can barely think and the earth is smothering him—he's drowning in death, all around him, the dirt crumpling as he tries to maneuver through it. He feels too weak, but he can't give up. He can't, he can't. They have to be out there, somewhere. He has to make it back to them.

He can see light, movement, and he keeps going, pushing his burning muscles, and he feels like his heart is gonna give out. Everything hurts, his bones aching, and he feels raw and exposed, despair and pain clinging to him. He doesn't know if he's gonna make it or if he's gonna move the wrong way and slide back down—the dirt stifling him, snuffing him out.

Then someone grabs him. Grabs the hand not wearing the gauntlet, and Tony doesn't care who it is, the feeling of someone else, anyone else gives him hope, and he kicks and fights harder against the webbing of the soil as whoever it is pulls him up. He feels air, tastes it, coughs as he reaches the surface, the person hauling him up the rest of the way as he goes

boneless with exhaustion. He coughs, nearly chokes, but he's here. The ground sags underneath him.

He made it.

"Oh my God," a familiar voice says. "Oh my God, oh my God, oh God—oh my God."

Peter.

"Oh my God," Peter sobs, and Tony can feel his hands on his back. "This—this—oh—oh my God—"

Tony's whole body feels like it weighs a million pounds, and he knows his unprotected hand is bleeding, but he puts everything he has into pulling his head up.

Peter looks the same. His hair is a little longer, but that's it. That's the only difference.

He's one of the most beautiful things Tony has ever seen in his life. Both of his lives. He's real. A real person that's here, with him. His kid. A person Tony loves, a person Tony gave his life for. It could have been a stranger, some random groundskeeper in the cemetery, but fuck, this is another miracle. Peter's eyes are filled with tears and he's clutching at Tony, brushing dirt off him like he doesn't even know he's doing it.

"Am I—am I dreaming is this happening oh my God," Peter says, all in one breath. "Oh my God."

Tony remembers. He can't speak. He doesn't have his fucking voice. He tries again but nothing comes out, only a small, terrified-sounding groan. And he is terrified, he feels like he's gonna have a heart attack.

"Tony," Peter says, holding tight to his shoulder. "Tony, are you—oh my God, I can't believe this—Tony, Tony—"

Tony is close to a panic attack. He's shaking, terror coursing through his veins, and he starts trying to push himself up. Peter takes Tony's forearms gently and tries to help, and as soon as Tony is even slightly vertical he collapses into Peter, wrapping his arms around him and holding him tight. He doesn't want to freak the kid out even more but he can't think straight, he's shaking like a fucking child and he's glad it's Peter, fuck, he's so glad it's Peter. He closes his eyes.

"I've got you," Peter stammers. "I'm—I'm, I'm—I'm here, it's—oh God—it's okay, it's okay." He rubs Tony's shoulder, pats his back, and Tony tries to level out, focus. Not think about the fact that he was dead less than twenty minutes ago.

He tries to breathe.

"I'm gonna—I'm gonna call—I'm gonna call Pepper, Bruce and Rhodey are there already—they'll come get us, we'll figure this out...I've got you, it's okay. Tony, it's okay."

Tony can tell Peter's trying to be strong for him. He wonders how often he comes here. Why he was lucky enough to have him here tonight. He opens his eyes—the sky is dark, tinged with pink from a dying sunset. He can see the Empire State Building in the distance, and Stark Tower. It's still there.

He can see his gravestone over Peter's shoulder.

*ANTHONY EDWARD STARK*  
*MAY 29TH, 1970-SEPTEMBER 18TH 2018*

*FOREVER LOVED*

*"No stop signs, speed limit  
Nobody's gonna slow me down"*

Jesus Christ. He closes his eyes again and holds onto the kid. He feels insane, in this suit, covered in dirt, wearing one repulsor gauntlet, his other hand bleeding.

But he's alive. He's alive.

He can feel Peter pulling his phone out of his pocket, one hand holding tight to Tony still.

"Bruce?" Peter says. "Bruce, I—I need you to come get me—I—yeah, I'm still here, but I need—something's happened, something—God, I don't know. It's important. Just come get me. Bring Pepper."

## Chapter 2

He hasn't felt like this in years. He hasn't felt like this since he was dying of pallidum poisoning. He remembers every bit of what happened to him, every little detail—the death, the resurrection, and he wonders if the marks are still there. He can move his left arm better than he was able to in the moments before he checked out for good, and in some ways, he feels like a kid again.

That includes the sheer, unadulterated terror that's currently got him clinging to Peter Parker like he'll die if he does anything else. He doesn't even know what he'd be saying if he could actually speak right now, if something cosmic hadn't stripped him of what's supposed to be a perfectly normal thing he can do whenever he wants. Speak. He feels half feral, in fight or flight mode, and it feels like a seizure is just beyond the horizon, a pure breakdown. He doesn't know what's keeping him together. He's hot and cold at the same time, stuck between corpse-temperature and the heat of a person stuck to the surface of the sun. The air is cool around them and the questions start looming on the backs of his eyelids, like locusts, beckoning the oncoming storm.

What month is it?

How long has it been?

How the hell did this happen?

Did they all make it after he faded away?

He knows Peter made it, Pepper, Rhodey, and Bruce too. But the last time he saw Steve he was bleeding too, and he had that look in his eye that Tony recognized. A mask of fear, the true nature buried and hidden to keep everyone else from seeing it. Tony wonders, he shudders with a chill in the air and his own fear. It's holding him tight and he tries to focus on Peter. This stalwart, perfect kid, still on his side no matter what, long after he needed to be. Tony tries to remember what he fought for. This kid is the best, this kid is his favorite. This kid is doing a spectacular fucking job of not absolutely losing his shit right now. Tony knows that if their roles were reversed that poor undead Peter would probably be hauling his sorry ass to the hospital for his multiple heart attacks.

He feels so goddamn weak. He hates it. Peter doesn't deserve this.

"Tony," Peter says, and he's shaking. "Can you....can you, God, I don't know...can you talk, are you—can you—"

*I wish, kid.* He shakes his head. He pulls back and away a little bit, reluctantly, trying not to get dizzy. The human contact is the only thing making him feel alive and not like some dead guy that just pulled himself out of his own grave. He meets Peter's teary gaze and touches his own throat. He shakes his head, and hopes the message gets across.

Peter looks confused for a second, like he's working through the problem.

“You can’t?” Peter asks, following Tony’s movements. “You can’t talk?”

Tony shakes his head.

Peter stares at him for a second and then he nods. “Okay,” he says, still staring at him, wide eyed. “Okay, okay, we’ll...we’ll figure that out, we’ll figure it out, it’s gonna be okay.” He wipes some dirt out of Tony’s hair and Tony can’t help it, huffing out a little laugh at the absurdity of their current situation.

His own death was like a shadow his entire life. It never took shape, it never had a date or a cause, even minutes before it actually happened. He only felt it clinging to his back when he got low, when he was in that cave, when the tendrils were sneaking across his skin and announcing its arrival. He didn’t know how it would happen, whether he’d be alone, whether it would hurt—he only knew it hung like an albatross around his neck. Something he was always running from.

He never pictured coming back from it once it happened. Never pictured this, what’s happening now. It was out of the realm of possibility. For some reason, despite the circumstances, seeing his own tombstone feels like a particularly sour stroke of bad luck.

He looks at it. The tombstone. Really looks at it. He feels displaced, his only anchor in the form of Peter’s tight grip on his arm.

He’s in Greenwood. His plot is fenced off, with two stone benches on either side of the tombstone. He can see his mother’s grave on the other side of the fence, Howard’s next to it, and his stomach turns when he thinks of how close he was to them when he was climbing out. His own headstone is big, a couple notches below ostentatious, and he’s a big supporter of the AC/DC lyrics instead of some lame bible verse. Pepper is still doing him justice, even after he’s gone. He never should have doubted it.

He looks to the left side of his tombstone and sees a thick stone box beside it. It’s overflowing with flowers, action figures, envelopes, little things it’s clear that children made. He feels his throat go tight, looking at it, and his eyes fill with tears again.

“Uh, uh,” Peter says, looking back and forth between Tony and the box. He’s crying too, trying to tug Tony closer. Tony turns, sucking in a breath. He wishes he could focus. Peter clears his throat. “Yeah, uh...people come by here all the time, to...leave you things, letters...I’ve been taking pictures, pictures whenever I come by...I’m doing a project in school, what Iron Man did for the world. I’ve got a ton of testimonials, and we collect the letters and stuff when it gets too full...we were...we were gonna do it tomorrow...” He looks nervous for a second. Like he doesn’t know what to say. “Uh...my letter. It’s in your...jacket...your jacket pocket...”

Tony keeps staring, trying to process. He pats his chest where he can still feel the envelopes. He didn’t lose them, he can still feel all of them there and God, he can just imagine what they wrote to him. He can already feel his heart breaking all over again. He can’t think, the chaos only builds. He leans forward, resting his head on Peter’s shoulder.



This kid. A light at the end of the tunnel. A light always, everywhere. Even now, even here. In the darkness, a place he never thought he'd be.

"It's okay," Peter says. Tony closes his eyes, breathing deep. "Uh...it's late," Peter says. "It's like nine...don't...don't worry, I'm looking out for myself...I'm wearing the suit, just, uh...just in case. There's nobody else here, no one...there's no one here to see this, you..." He sighs, patting Tony's shoulder, and it seems like he's trying to fill the silence, like he's trying to answer all the questions that might be on Tony's mind. Tony smiles a little bit. Jesus, nothing makes sense.

"Well...God, somebody's gonna see you at...soon, somebody...but, uh...well, okay. Okay, we'll...deal with that when the others get here. They'll help us, they'll...they'll help us out. They'll figure..."

Tony looks up at him. He feels terrible, it sounds like he's sending the kid into a panic. He does not want Peter to panic. Neither one of them need to panic. But both of them are panicking anyway.

Pepper is definitely gonna panic.

Tony tries not to think about that yet. His heart stutters at the thought of her. He looks at Peter and puts his thumb up. He means for it to be a positive gesture, but Peter only gapes at the blood, and his torn off nails. He covers Tony's hand with his own and holds it tight, and there's pain in every line on his face.

"Tony," he whispers. "God, I—God, I missed you. I missed you so much, I miss you...so much."

Tony hears the phrasing on the last one and watches Peter shake. He can't imagine what's going on in the kid's head right now. He pulls the gauntlet off with his own fair share of trembling and puts it aside in the grass, and then touches his palm to Peter's chest, nodding at him. Trying to convey *you too. I missed you too*. They didn't get much time to talk when everything was happening, once Tony got him back. He never got to express how much—how fucking much—he missed this kid. How he turned the world inside out and did just about everything he could think of and some things he couldn't to get him back.

And then he knew what he had to do to keep him back. Even if it meant losing his own hold on the world for good.

And now for good doesn't even mean for good anymore. Which, for once, works in his favor.

"Let's, uh—let's get up off the ground," Peter says. "Okay?"

Tony nods. It feels like a good idea. He doesn't know how well he'll be able to walk so he leans heavy on Peter when he helps him up, and he grabs the gauntlet. The two of them hobble over to the bench and Tony's legs feel like static from lack of use, and he twists his toes inside his leather testoni dress shoes. They put him in his favorite suit, his best shoes, his nicest watch and tie. The sunglasses in his pocket are his most worn, too.

He holds the gauntlet up towards Peter and raises his eyebrows.

“Oh,” Peter says, arm still around Tony’s shoulders. “Yeah, uh—me. It felt wrong to let you go without, uh—a piece of a suit. Since you and the suit—you know. You’re Iron Man. Always and forever.” Peter hangs his head, closing his eyes. “God, I don’t...God. I don’t know what’s happening.”

Tony feels bad that Peter feels like he has to keep talking because Tony can’t. He tries to speak again but still, nothing comes out, and he shakes his head, frustrated. He tries to catalogue everything that’s going on with him physically, and weirdly enough, it isn’t as much as he would expect. He has a weird headache, his legs feel like jelly, his hand hurts, and he might be a little hungry...but his heart isn’t racing, he’s breathing fine. He doesn’t know what he should feel like, coming back from the fucking dead. But he doesn’t think it should be this good.

He looks at Peter again. He smiles slightly, and since he can’t fucking talk he just leans in and hugs him again. Peter laughs and hugs him back.

“You can have as many hugs as you want, you can have—you can have a thousand hugs, shit, I’m—I’m never, ever gonna stop hugging you, Tony, you’ve—you’ve started it now, you can’t stop me—”

Tony laughs, and really notices the use of *Tony* now, as opposed to *Mr. Stark*. He wonders if there’s a reason for that, and then he hears a voice.

“I swear to God, if anyone—one single person has desecrated the grave, I’m killing them.”

“I’m with you, Pep, shit, and you know Peter has them.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t kill people, maybe, like...scare them.”

Pepper. Rhodey. Bruce.

Tony doesn’t know why a strike of fear rushes through his heart and he holds a little tighter to Peter, who sucks in a breath.

“Okay,” Peter says, squeezing Tony’s shoulder. “Okay, okay, they’re...all three of them, alright...they’re gonna freak out, they’re gonna lose it...uh, uh, uh...I don’t know, should we...no, no hiding, I just...I mean...oh man, okay—okay, okay...”

Tony’s heart is racing now. He pulls back from Peter and he’s never felt the inclination to hide, not from these people, the most fucking important people in his life, but he doesn’t think they’re gonna react the same way Peter is. He doesn’t know why the kid isn’t completely losing his shit.

“Okay, they’re...”

Their voices are getting louder.

“Peter!” Pepper calls. “Honey, are you—”

Tony looks up. He sees them, all three of them, and sees them see him. They were rushing but now all three of them stutter to a stop, and Rhodey reaches out to grab Bruce's arm. Shock is painted all over them, and Pepper doesn't move, she's completely frozen. Bruce covers his mouth with his hand. The air is thick with what's happening here, the pure shock and awe of his newest fucking situation.

His eyes are straining from how hard he's looking at them.

"Guys," Peter says, slowly, still holding on to Tony. "This—this isn't a trick, this—it happened, he—I was sitting here and he—he just..."

"Jesus Christ," Rhodey breathes. "Jesus...Jesus Christ."

Tony just stares at them. Pepper is wearing one of his Black Sabbath shirts, and her hair is tied up in a bun. Both Rhodey and Bruce have beards and their clothes are too big for them.

They're the best. The *best*. His people.

"He can't talk," Peter says. "I don't...I don't know why...I don't..."

Tony grabs Peter's shoulder. He wants to stand, he wants to go to them, but he's afraid to do it on his own. Afraid to face them, afraid he'll topple. Peter looks at him, and immediately follows his lead when he starts to stand.

"You," Bruce stutters. "You, you...wait—he crawled out and you...you, you saw...you..."

They get closer, moving out from his fenced in plot.

"Yeah, I saw him...I helped, I helped, uh....pull him out..."

The light lands delicately across Pepper's face and Tony kinda feels like he's gonna collapse. It's almost like Peter can sense it and he holds him tighter.

"Jesus Christ," Rhodey says, and his eyes roll back in his head. He crumples to the ground in a heap and Tony's eyes follow him down. He hadn't really been betting on it being Rhodey to faint, he thought there might be fainting but he didn't know who, he definitely wasn't counting himself out.

"Uh," Peter says, still slowly inching forward with him. "Uh, should we...should..."

"Bruce," Pepper says, her eyes shining. "Can you...Rhodey..."

"Uh, yeah," Bruce says, and he stares at Tony for a long second before he walks over and bends down next to Rhodey.

Pepper closes the distance between them, and stops directly in front of him. She's like a goddamn angel, and he can't believe he ever left her. He can't believe he's here, she's here, *right in front of him*. She shakes her head, reaches out a tentative hand to touch his face, and he reaches up, holding it against his cheek.

He feels Peter let go of him, step back. He's standing on his own. He's crying—again—and that gets her started.

"Tony," she breathes, eyes tracing over him. "What...how..."

He shakes his head, and turns his face into her hand. He kisses the core of her palm, closing his eyes, and he hears her let out a little breath.

"Oh my God," she says. "This can't—it can't. You're, you—"

"No, he's there," Bruce says, looking up from where he is, beside a still unconscious Rhodey. "I see him."

Tony opens his eyes again, and she slides her hand down to find the pulse in his throat. She stares at him for a pointed second, and then her whole façade falls. The tears slide down her cheeks and he reaches out, wiping them away. He touches her softly, and he can't fucking believe he's been allowed this. More tears come and he wipes those away too, stepping even closer to her.

"Tears of joy," she says, sniffing. "I hate the idea of trying to date again."

He laughs, feeling weightless and heavy at the same time, his vision going blurry with way too much emotion. She steps forward, wrapping her arms around him, and she holds him tighter than anyone has before. He melts into her, clawing at her back, and he never wants to let her go. He's here, he's fucking here, he's alive, he made it, he's here, she's here, she's *with him*. He's not in the ground anymore, he's not dead, he's not dead.

"I can't believe this," she says. "I can't believe this, I can't believe it."

She kisses his cheek over and over and goddamnit he wants to talk, he wants to tell her how much he loves her, how he wishes she had been there in the end, that going out without one more look at her face was one of the stupidest things he's ever done.

"Tony," she whispers. "Tony, Tony. God, oh my God. Tony. How is this...how..."

He pulls back, cups her face in his hands. He shakes his head, shrugging a little, smiling. God, she's gorgeous. Everything about her, fuck, he's so lucky. He leans in, kisses her hard, tries to put everything into it

"Tony," Rhodey's voice says.

Tony reluctantly breaks the kiss, brushing their noses together. He looks down.

Bruce tugs Rhodey to his feet and they both sway there, just staring at him. He grins, shaking his head, and nearly falls down against them, hugging them both at the same time. He can feel Pepper's hand in his hair.

"God, I can't believe this," Pepper says.

"How is this possible?" Bruce whispers, against Tony's shoulder.

“Jesus Christ,” Rhodey says again. “Jesus....Jesus Christ.”

Tony knows this not talking thing is gonna get real old, real fast.

“Peter,” Pepper says, hand at the base of Tony’s neck as she moves behind him. Rhodey and Bruce don’t feel like they’re gonna let him go anytime soon, and it kinda feels like Rhodey is gonna pass out again. “Nobody was here?” she asks.

“No,” Peter says. “Just...just me.”

“Nobody was here doing anything?” she asks.

“No,” Peter says. “And nobody saw us, either...we should probably, uh...go, so we can keep it that way.”

“Right,” Pepper says. “Right, right—yes...guys, let him go, we’re gonna take him back to the compound.”

“Lemme get the gauntlet,” Peter says. Tony turns, sees him rush back to the gravesite to retrieve it, and he pushes some of the dirt around like he’s haphazardly cleaning his room.

Rhodey pulls back and Bruce holds on a few extra seconds, looking at him like he’s some science experiment or something. Tony has seen that look before and he quirks up an eyebrow, and Bruce narrows both of his. *It’s me, buddy. It’s me.*

“Christ,” Rhodey says, and Tony wants to quip something about taking the lord’s name in vain but he *can’t fucking say anything*. That’s becoming a main concern, after the abrupt resurrection. “I feel like we’re all having a mass hallucination. I mean, shit...you know...seeing the thing you want most? Isn’t that a thing?”

Tony smiles, leaning in and resting their foreheads together. The thing he wants most. Goddamnit he loves him.

“I need to look at him, like...not look...well, look...but give him, uh—full checkup, a full checkup at the compound,” Bruce stutters. He touches Tony’s arm quickly before pulling back, as if proving to himself that he’s actually there.

“Let’s go,” Peter says, coming back and taking Tony’s left arm, while Pepper takes his right. Rhodey and Bruce stare at him for another few seconds before Peter taps Rhodey’s chest and jolts him back to earth.

“Right, right,” Rhodey says, hitting Bruce too, and they both start walking, stealing looks over their shoulders at him. He smiles, watching them, and lets Peter and Pepper lead him. He’s leaving, he’s leaving the cemetery. He’s not in the ground anymore, he got out, he’s alive. He’s here, he’s here—he’s gotta keep reminding himself that he’s here. He’s here with them.

“Tony,” Pepper says. He looks at her and she narrows her eyes, like she wasn’t expecting him to respond to his name. She looks at Peter. “Why do we—God, this is...God.”

“I know,” Peter says, holding Tony’s arm tighter. Peter swallows hard and looks down at their feet as they weave around other gravestones. Rhodey and Bruce keep looking back at him, talking softly amongst themselves. Tony hates not being able to explain shit—that’s what he does, he figures things out, works them down to their core—but this—nothing about this makes sense. Not the waking up in the coffin thing, climbing out thing, not being able to talk thing. Being alive thing.

“Why do we think he can’t talk?” Pepper asks.

“I don’t know,” Peter says. “Maybe shock? Hopefully shock.”

Pepper nods, shakes her head. Nods again. “And he—how did he—”

“He blasted his way out,” Peter says, and there’s pride in his tone. “With the gauntlet. When I saw his hand coming out of the ground I just...I didn’t even think, I just...it was like my brain shut down. I just grabbed it, I pulled him out. I didn’t think.”

Pepper holds Tony tighter and reaches over with her free hand, cupping Peter’s cheek.

“Thank you,” she whispers. “Thank God you put that thing in there.”

Tony nods, and leans a little bit Peter’s way. Yeah, thank God. He doesn’t even want to imagine how hard it would have been to get out without it. A chill creeps up his spine whenever he thinks about being down there, and he wants to stop focusing on it. Needs to focus on the here, the new, the solid earth beneath his feet, the fresh air in his lungs, his people all around him. The world buzzing and new and alive, everywhere. The trees swaying, the stars in the sky. It’s here, it’s all here, he’s back in it again.

He’s getting really, really annoyed at his own silence. He needs a goddamn piece of paper, or a stupid robot that can read his thoughts. He knows he invented one of those at some point.

“I’m getting the car,” Rhodey yells, and he breaks out into a sprint, disappearing in moments through the cemetery gates, looming like the broken wreckage of an ancient castle. The spires cast long shadows, delve this place into darkness, and Tony just needs to get the hell out of here. He looks at Pepper—she’s clenching her jaw, pressing her lips together, and a few tears roll down her cheeks. He leans her way now, planting a kiss to her temple. She laughs wetly, nodding at him.

“God, I can’t believe this,” Pepper says. “I can’t...”

“Me either,” Peter says, clearing his throat. “Tony, you’re not too hot, right? God, I just realized I haven’t asked, I’m sorry.”

Tony is way overdressed for anything that’s happening right now but he shakes his head. He figures he can take his jacket off in the car, which quickly squeals around the corner just a few paces away.

“Compound?” Bruce asks, turning around and walking backwards. “Compound,” he says, before anyone else can say anything.

“We’ll sit in the back with him,” Pepper says, as the four of them walk through the towering gates and up to the car. “And Rhodey,” she yells, when Rhodey rolls down the window. “Drive as fast as you can, as fast as won’t get us stopped by the cops. I don’t want... anyone finding out about this until it’s on our own terms.”

Smart. Incredibly smart woman.

“Got it,” Rhodey yells.

Bruce opens the back door when they get there and Pepper climbs in first, taking Tony’s hands and helping him in. Peter steadies him with a hand on his back and he sorta feels like an old man with all of this shit, and he immediately peels off his jacket and dumps it on the floor. He insists on putting on his own seatbelt, and both Pepper and Peter watch him closely as he does so, refusing to buckle up their own until he’s done.

He sits back when Rhodey takes off, letting out a heavy sigh. Everything feels like it’s moving a mile a minute and he can’t *can’t* process it all in his head. He hopes this isn’t purgatory, he hopes this isn’t his brain misfiring in the last moments of death.

When Pepper takes his hand again, he knows he’s really here. He’s here with them. Somehow, for some fucking reason, he’s gotten a second chance. He needs an explanation, he needs a fucking explanation, and he squirms under uncertainty. He tries to relax. *Tries*, key word. He focuses on them, all of them.

“Jesus, Tony, your fingers,” Pepper says. “Bruce, do you have a first aid kit in here?”

“Uh, maybe,” Bruce says, opening the glove compartment in front of him. “Lemme see.”

Rhodey keeps staring at Tony in the rearview. Tony points two fingers at his own eyes and then back at him, and Rhodey’s eyes widen. Jesus, he needs them to be normal, more than anything. He knows his voice is half of who he is, and he needs to offer up something that proves he’s not an empty shell for them to be afraid of. He’s him, he’s still him, he needs them to know they really got *him* back. The real Tony Stark, in the flesh, defying the goddamn odds because death wasn’t ready for him yet.

Tony pats Peter on the knee to get his attention, and then he mimes a phone up to his ear.

“You want a phone?” Peter asks. “You want my phone?”

Tony nods at him.

“Okay, one—one sec,” Peter stutters, almost frantically palming his pocket and pulling his phone out. He unlocks it and hands it to Tony.

Tony takes it with his free hand and opens up the notes app, quickly typing out a message to show to Pepper. He finishes it, and hands it to her when Rhodey slows down at a red light.

Pepper reads the first line and then she clears her throat. “Um...okay, he typed a note here on Peter’s phone. Here. *You can read this out loud. First of all, I love you. I love everybody in this car so fucking much I feel like I’m gonna explode. Rhodey, nice fainting job, I’m glad I*

*still have that effect on you. I don't know why this is happening but I'm okay, my legs feel a little off and the hand you're holding hurts, but I'm good—not at all thinking about what happened, at all. I just woke up. That's it. Memory's intact. Fuck, I'm just....happy to be back. Don't know how, or why, but I'm happy to be back. Were you guys at the compound? How did you get here so fast? How long has it been?"* She holds his hand tight throughout the whole message, and looks at him, her expression soft.

"Found it," Bruce says, handing the first aid kit back to her. His voice breaks a little bit.

"Well, we all," Pepper says, shaking her head, "we all love you so much."

"Yeah, man," Rhodey says, and then they all add to the chorus. "Jesus, of course I—"

"We love you, Tony."

"God, we love you so much."

"We missed you—"

"This has been like torture—"

"God, yeah—"

"Honey, it has—"

"I feel like...I wonder if we just prayed so hard that God gave us a fucking break, for once —"

Pepper takes some Neosporin and bandages out of the first aid kit. "And, uh—we weren't at the compound. It's an anniversary, uh...every month we go out, go get dinner on the day. Peter decided to visit you tonight—it's uh...today is seven months, Tony." She clears her throat again and kisses him on the shoulder.

Seven months. Seven months, he's been dead. Peter sighs heavily beside him, and leans in closer.

Seven.

Months.

Seven's supposed to be a lucky number.

"But we're going home now," Rhodey says, his voice breaking as the light turns green.

"We're bringing you home."



## Chapter 3

Tony falls asleep in the car, and his dreams are out to get him. In his dreams he doesn't make it, in his dreams the rot stays, the rot clings to him, the rot seeps through and adds years and years and years onto his death sentence. He's a corpse, he's decay, he's worms in eye sockets and skin falling off bone, he's dead, he's dead, he's dead—

He sucks in a breath and wakes up on Pepper's shoulder.

"Hey," she whispers, her hand in his hair. "Hey, hey."

"He okay?" Rhodey asks, still driving. Okay, they're still driving. He's still alive, he made it. Trial one, naptime—passed. Not with flying colors, but he'll make due. He's good under pressure, good in competition with himself.

"Tony," Pepper breathes.

He nods, turning his face into her shoulder. He tries to blink away the fear, tries to will his heart to slow back down to normal levels. He'd been managing the panic attacks pretty well before, well...before he died, but now he can see they're rightfully making a resurgence. He nods again, trying to control his breathing, and he sits up a little bit. He feels Peter move, and notices that the kid is sleeping too, his face pressed into Tony's arm.

Tony feels stuck between needing to be taken care of and wanting to take care. He moves gently, pulling his arm out of Peter's grasp and wrapping it around his shoulders. He holds him tight and Peter readjusts in his sleep, head on Tony's chest now as he breathes through his mouth. Tony looks up, watches Pepper watching Peter, and he can tell just by the look in her eyes that they've gotten closer since he's been gone. She meets his gaze and he smiles softly—he doesn't think he's ever gonna get tired of looking at her. He needs to make more of a habit of it now. Needs to memorize every inch of her face.

He leans on her shoulder again, closing his eyes, exhaustion settling in his bones. She's got his injured hand in her lap and there are a bunch of little band aids covering the wounds. He gives a thumbs up so Rhodey and Bruce can see.

"We're a couple minutes out," Rhodey says. "I messaged Happy..."

Tony's eyes snap open and Rhodey sees.

"Uh—just told him to wait on us," he says. "He should be at the compound already. It's sort of a difficult thing to just message. Hey, our favorite person's back from the dead, let's have a party."

Tony smiles a little bit and nods. Party, yes. Party—small, intimate party, but party all the same. He thinks he deserves it. He also deserves a hundred hours of dreamless sleep. A hot shower. A tuna fish sandwich. A cheeseburger. A strawberry shake. His goddamn *voice back*.

“We’re all gonna stay over tonight,” Bruce says, turning around and looking at him. “I’m gonna check you out, see what’s going on, and then we’ll...figure it out from there.”

Tony nods, sucking in a breath. Bruce is giving him a weird look and Tony figures he should expect that kind of thing for a while, but this one seems loaded with a question he doesn’t know how to ask. Tony raises his eyebrow and shakes his head at him.

“Uh,” Bruce says, tapping his hand on the console between him and Rhodey. “Do you want me to...tell the rest...of them...shit, I don’t know, do we wait? Is this like, when you find out you’re having a baby, you like, wait a little bit?”

Tony snorts. A baby. A fucking baby. He lets out a couple silent laughs and watches Rhodey push Bruce’s shoulder. Pepper shakes her head. He doesn’t think about the implications of why people wait to tell their friends and families about pregnancies, because he’s sticking around this time. Nothing is gonna happen to screw this up.

Peter’s phone is still in his lap. Tony carefully takes it with his injured hand and opens notes again, trying not to make too many typos while typing with his left hand. He finishes and hands it to Pepper.

“Okay, he says...*I’m seven months along, that’s plenty of time to tell the team. We all made it, right? Steve, Tasha, Thor, Clint? Strange? We can tell the kid’s aunt too, since he’s probably gonna be hanging around.*” Pepper looks at him. “Yes, they’re all fine—Steve had the uh, leg thing for a bit—”

Tony cocks his head, and he can see them pull onto the compound grounds. Pepper hands him Peter’s phone back.

“He’s fine,” Bruce says. “He and Bucky are living in Montreal, actually—”

Tony shakes his head, taken aback, and Bruce seems to read his mind.

“I know. Captain America in Canada, yeah. It is what it is.”

“We’ll tell him once we’re settled,” Rhodey says, and he tenses up when they roll through the first checkpoint. Tony doesn’t really hide, exactly, but he does turn towards Peter when Rhodey flashes his badge through the window. He wants the whole coming back process to be totally on his own damn terms, down to the cufflinks he’ll be wearing during the first press conference and the commercials that’ll play after the coverage. He doesn’t want the news getting out because one of their fucking night guys catches sight of him in the back of Bruce Banner’s truck. While Rhodey is driving. None of it looks right, none of it makes any sense, and he wonders if people are questioning it already. Everybody in this car, including Pepper, is a goddam superhero, but none of them can act like a normal person when they’re caught off guard. He once saw Bruce fall head over heels down a stairwell. And the shit he’s seen Peter do...he’s slick when he wants to be, but he’s a complete mess the rest of the time.

“Tony, uh—are you good with straight to the medbay?” Bruce asks, looking at him.

Tony nods. He prays a little bit for his voice back, and he’s glad they can’t hear his thoughts.

Rhodey pulls around back so they can head right up into the living quarters, and he stops under the overhang. He turns the car off and they all just kinda sit there for a moment, breathing and looking around, like something might break the spell.

Tony heaves a sigh. Peter is still sleeping and he shakes him a little bit, squeezing his shoulder. Peter makes a little protest noise and crinkles his brow, and Tony brushes some of his hair back from his forehead, craning to look at him. Peter looks up at him as he wakes, confusion spreading across his features for a second before he remembers. Tony smiles at him, and Peter stares. His eyes are bright and searching, and Tony can see all his pain there. Everything he did by leaving him behind. He wants to make speeches to everybody in this car, wants to tell them how he never wanted to leave them, how he'll never leave them again.

But he can't. So he just ruffles Peter's hair a little bit, nods towards the building, and Peter smiles softly, nodding back. Tony puts his phone into his hand. Pepper scoots over and Tony follows, takes her hand when she offers it to help him out. He's sweating now and he can't wait to get the hell out of this suit. He wonders if they kept everything the same inside, if his clothes are put away or still in his drawers. He can already imagine the fine layer of dust over everything that's his, seemingly frozen in the moment he last touched it all.

Peter grabs his jacket and holds tight to the gauntlet as he gets out of the car and shuts the door behind him. Rhodey takes another long look at Tony before he turns to lead the way directly to the elevator, and they follow in a tight-knit group. Tony is still holding onto Pepper's hand and he brings it up to his mouth, kissing her knuckles.

They still all surround him once they load into the elevator, like they think there could be a threat anywhere and they're ready to dispatch it. Tony finds he doesn't mind the closeness, he actually wants it, really wants it, and thinks in some strange way it might be making him stronger. Bruce punches their floor and they slowly start to go up.

"Peter, you're staying, right?" Rhodey asks.

"Duh," Peter says.

"Text your aunt and tell her," Rhodey says. He shoots a look at Tony. "I mean. Tell her you're staying over. We've decided this news isn't really text message news."

"Okay," Peter says. He quickly types up a message and sends it, slipping his phone back into his pocket. He clears his throat. "Can we, uh—have a group hug? I feel like we need it. I know I need it."

They look around at each other, tentative little smiles on their faces, and Tony nods, grinning.

"Yeah, good idea—"

"You're right—"

"Okay, c'mere, Tony in the middle—"

Tony holds them as good as he can and closes his eyes, feeling them all cuddle up close. Pepper tucks her face into his neck and he breathes her in, and both Rhodey and Bruce hold him so damn tight he feels like his ribs are gonna break. But he thinks it would be worth it. Peter has his arms wrapped around Tony's middle, and he seems to shrink in on himself, shaking a little bit.

The elevator doors open.

"What the hell are you guys doing?" Happy's voice asks. "Did you all get drunk? I thought we weren't doing that again after..." He trails off as they pull apart and Tony looks up, meeting his eyes. All the color drains from Happy's face and his mouth drops open. He slowly starts to back away.

"What is this?" he asks, his voice sounding foreign. "What...what—"

Rhodey steps forward to stop the elevator door from closing, and Tony's heart is beating a little faster. Disbelief is all over Happy, and Tony can't fucking blame him. He holds up his hands like a surrender, and the others are standing close to him. As if Happy would ever do anything, even if he did think he was a zombie.

"Happy," Pepper says, walking out in front of him. "It's him, it's Tony...we don't know how, or why, but Peter was visiting the cemetery and he just...he just started to climb out of his..." She looks at him as she's about to say the word *grave*, like it's something dirty, and she shakes her head and directs her attention back to Happy again. "It's actually him, and we're gonna...we're gonna figure it out, but it is...it's him."

"He can't talk," Peter says. "We don't know why."

"We're gonna figure that out too," Bruce says, squeezing Tony's shoulder. *Thank God. Hopefully.*

They all walk out of the elevator and Happy stays rooted to the spot he's in, but he's looking Tony up and down, his mouth forming words that don't meet the air. He keeps blinking and there are already tears in his eyes as Tony walks up to him, slowly putting his defensive hands down.

"This...this isn't possible," Happy stutters, his voice getting caught in his throat.

"Yeah," Bruce says. "The Hulk shouldn't be possible either, but we all know too well—"

"I can't—I don't—"

Tony's heart fucking *aches* and he puts his hands on Happy's shoulders, trying to steal a moment of normalcy. He raises his eyebrows, tries to keep the tears at bay because his headache is only getting worse. But Happy sucks in a shuddering breath and reaches up, latching onto Tony's wrists, and that's enough to tear him apart again.

"God, oh my—Jesus Christ, Tony..." He bows his head but looks up just as fast. "Putting you in the ground was the worst thing that ever...ever happened to me..."

Tony shakes his head and moves in to hug him, and Happy sobs into his shoulder. Tony tries not to sob too and he knows these reunions might just might kill him right after he's made his miraculous escape from the jaws of death.

"C'mon, Hap," Rhodey says, walking over and patting him on the shoulder. "We're going down to the medbay." Tony doesn't quite want to let him go yet, but he knows they're at the beginning of a very long night.

~

He feels a little bit like a lab rat. A lot like a lab rat. They're all standing around staring at him, muttering to each other and amongst themselves, and Bruce checks everything he can check. Heart, brain, lungs, kidneys, and he spends longer trying to see if there's anything wrong with Tony's larynx, which there isn't. He doesn't know if that makes him feel more or less nervous about the whole insufferable silence thing.

He loses the tie, the vest, unbuttons the top couple buttons on his shirt, and they give him some aspirin for the headache. Bruce takes better care of his hand now they're not working with a half full car med kit, and shines so many lights in his eyes that he feels like he's gonna lose his eyesight, too.

It takes two hours, and at the end of it they stand in front of him like a firing squad.

"He's fine," Bruce says, almost like he's disappointed. "He's fine—he has a headache. He's a little dehydrated. But he's fine, it's like...it's insane. I feel insane, I've lost my mind."

"What about the voice thing?" Peter asks.

"I don't know," Bruce says, and he looks at a loss. "Everything seems fine, I'm hoping it's just...shock, stress, I don't know, I'm gonna have to do some more research. Not that there is research for this...particular situation, but I'll...I'll have to make due."

Tony doesn't want to think about it. He just wants it solved. He's already thinking of things to try for the interim. He rubs his eyes, and points at Peter even though he has the inclination to snap. Peter comes rushing over, eyes wide and expectant.

"What's wrong?" Peter asks. He holds out his phone before Tony even has to throw his hands around asking for it, and Tony ruffles his hair, not even trying to mask his fondness. He types out a quick note, makes the font large, and shows it to the five of them. He nearly splutters watching them narrow their eyes and read it aloud in their separate, distinctly monotone voices.

*I AM IN DESPERATE NEED OF A SHOWER*

They snap out of it quick and Pepper nods, approaching him. "Okay, um—um—okay, let's go, I'll—I mean, it's in the same place, but I'll—"

He nods at her to stop the awkwardness.

"Food!" Happy says. "You need food? You need food."

Tony points at him, nodding enthusiastically. He types up his order below the shower message, feeling a little bit off the tuna now but more on the burger. He finishes and hands it to Peter, and the others gather around to read it.

“What about fries, you need fries too?” Rhodey asks.

Tony shakes his head.

“Not even those ranch cheese fries? I know you like those.”

Tony tilts his head to the side, smiling. Yeah, okay, that sounds good, Rhodey knows him too well. He nods, and Rhodey grins.

“Okay, you two go,” Bruce says, gesturing to Rhodey and Happy. “Pepper’ll help him with the shower, Pete can help me figure some things out down here.”

“Okay,” Happy says. “Air drop me that note, kid.”

They look like they’re gonna start moving fast for a second, but then their gazes swivel to find Tony and it’s like they’re stuck going through the emotions of having him here again all over again. He smiles softly at them, eyes traveling from face to face.

“Sent,” Peter says, still looking at Tony.

“We’ll be right back,” Rhodey says.

“*Right back*,” Happy adds.

Tony can’t help but beam at their exuberance. He feels like people were never this excited about him before.

~

He’s had his fair share of awkwardness with Pepper in his life. Mostly before they were in a committed relationship, when he was tip toeing around the thing they had like a moron before they found that rooftop, but right now the awkwardness feels like it’s seeping through his pores as he shadows her, floating like a ghost through his own bedroom. Their bedroom, here, in this place that was theirs that transitioned into hers, except there are still things of his everywhere.

She didn’t change much. She changed the sheets, though the others are in the corner of the room in his chair, folded nicely like they could be used again at a moment’s notice. The new ones are black instead of the original light tan, and he wonders if that has anything to do with the mood she was in when she bought them. And the chair, too, it’s clear she relegated the old sheets there because he was mostly the one that sat in it, lounged in it, slept in it when he got too caught up in his research or was too exhausted after whatever the hell he was doing before he crashed there. His things are still on the bedside table, though, and he feels like they haven’t been touched. His Gendarme cologne, the keys to his Audi, his comb, his wallet, and his cell phone. He stares at it, as she opens drawers and pulls an outfit out, muttering to herself. It doesn’t feel like his anymore.

“Okay,” she says, turning around. “Got your sweats, that soft gray shirt you liked, favorite boxers...” She looks at him and follows his gaze. “Oh, your phone—uh—it’s not active anymore...I mean, I can turn it back on, set it back up. I can—I mean, I will, you’re here. You’ll—once you get your voice back, I mean—you’ll need it then.” She sighs, wiping her forehead, and he can tell she’s struggling.

She walks over and ushers him towards the bathroom, hand around his waist. “Little different in here,” she says, opening the door. It is different—pretty significantly different. New tiling, new color scheme, bigger shower. Two sinks. “Because I maybe—maybe punched a hole in the wall? And broke my wrist? Maybe, I don’t know, that’s what the Daily Star said.”

He turns around, raising his eyebrows at her. She shrugs.

“I had it remodeled after that,” she says.

Which makes him think of big burly guys all up in his goddamn bathroom, his *bedroom*, close to his fiancé, his recently widowed fiancé—

“Natasha is surprisingly good at that stuff,” Pepper says. “Clint and Maria helped too, but they were decidedly not as good as Natasha. Happy was the supervisor, which mostly meant sitting in a rolling chair and pointing out things he didn’t like.”

Okay. Now Tony feels better.

Pepper clears her throat and walks over, putting Tony’s clothes down on the counter. “I’m not gonna pretend that I don’t have your shampoo in there or that green soap you like so, uh, you should have everything you need.” She turns, looking at him, chewing on her lower lip. “Please *don’t* lock the door, please come out if you need anything, I’ll be right outside.”

He nods at her. Part of him wants her to stay, and another part of him feels weirdly embarrassed. He hates that part of himself, hates that it seems to be in control right now. She gets closer, cupping his face in her hands, and has that sad look in her eyes again. She doesn’t say anything, just smooths her hands down his throat and over his shoulders.

“This outfit, let’s...I know you like this whole suit, but let’s just...put it aside...just fold it, just...put it aside.”

He nods at her. He did love this suit, these shoes. They literally gave him the outfit he would have chosen to bury himself in. But he never wants to see this fucking suit again.

He leans in, kissing Pepper on the cheek, because he knows if he kisses her for real something might start to happen that he’s not exactly prepared for. She smiles and leans into it, rubbing his arms up and down, and leans back to meet his eyes.

“For real, Tony,” she says. “Anything, if you need—anything—you come out here, I know it’s been a while but I’ve seen you naked—thousands of times. Remember, it’s still me.”

He’ll never goddamn forget that, death or no death.

She kisses him on the cheek this time and he can tell she still has some things to say that she's keeping to herself, but she brushes past him without saying any of them. He glances back at the door once it's closed and sighs to himself. He toes his shoes off, lets the rest of his dead man clothes pile up at his feet. He takes the letters out of his jacket pocket—there are three envelopes, and two of them bulge a little bit. He gently puts them aside, next to his clothes, and puts the broken rose and sunglasses on top of them. He gets into the shower, closing the opaque sliding door.

It takes him a couple seconds to get the temperature right but as soon as he steps under the spray the dirt starts coming off of him, tracking down his legs and swirling down the drain. He closes his eyes, running his fingers through his hair. He can feel the bandages on his bad hand getting wet, but for the moment he doesn't care. It feels like the hot water is putting him under a spell, and he realizes that this is the first time he's been alone since he pulled himself out of the earth.

He looks down, and sees that the scars are still there, pointing at and parallel to the curved ghost of his arc reactor. They look older than they should, and they shouldn't have managed to heal like this on a dead man. He wonders if whatever it was that brought him back belayed the damage but left the marks, like reminders. Two heavy, jagged wounds in the center of his chest, raised and stretched, stark and white, like a clear tattoo of the anguish he felt in that moment. The pain dripping down inside him, the shock seared there on his skin. He runs his fingertips over the scars, almost afraid he'll trigger something if he touches them the wrong way. But nothing happens, and the water runs over them too, rivulets gathering on the broken skin and continuing on their way.

The burns are still there on his arm, too, only the left one, though they're more muted than they were before. Crawling up his veins like smoke. He'd only used that thing for a moment, just one short, turbulent moment, but it tore him apart.

He sighs, turning around and arching his neck back. He doesn't want to think about it, he doesn't want to remember, and he wishes when he came back that those memories had been taken from him. He'd be better off. He runs his hands over his face and tries to focus on the better things, the things he has now, the things he had then that he didn't appreciate as much as he should have. He thinks about them, his people, his goddamn support system, the ones that always came running whenever he got himself into some shit. Which was often.

It makes his throat go tight. He never looked at everybody enough, before. He didn't listen to their laughter enough, the cadence of their voices, the way they said his name. He didn't stand back and look at anything—he was always moving too fast, trying to keep up with himself, with the memory of Howard always three steps ahead of him. Everything he had to live up to was always surrounding him, consuming him, and he forgot he needed to actually live. He was gifted with people who deeply loved him, who he deeply loved in return, and nothing he did was enough.

He wonders what the hell this is. Who did this, *what* did this, if it has any repercussions or if this is it—a second chance. A real miracle. He turns back around and rests his forehead against the warm tile wall, the steam lifting up around him. He doesn't know why he doubts it, why something like that can be so out of this world to him. He's seen things that shouldn't



be possible. He's traveled to other worlds, he's met fucking aliens—but it isn't the coming back from the dead that's stopping him, somehow.

It's the fact that someone would save him.

There are plenty of other heroes. He was one of the weaker ones. Steve is still alive. Nobody really fucking needs him.

He digs his thumbs into his eyes and leans hard against the wall. Pepper would slap the shit out of him if she knew he was thinking like this, especially now, after he's literally come back from being a goddamn corpse. Peter would too. Rhodey definitely would. Shit, they all would.

He's gotta make this one count. He's gotta do better by his family, by his team. And he's gotta get over the self-hatred bullshit. Something...whatever did this, they thought he was worth betting on.

He's gotta stop fucking crying.

He's gotta figure out how he got back here.

He grits his teeth, turning around and grabbing the shampoo, because he can't stand underneath the water forever.

He's gotta get his fucking *voice back*.

~

He sits in front of the iPad as it rings, and takes a big bite out of his second cheeseburger. They're all gathered around him and somehow they managed to all fit in the frame. He feels ten times better after the shower and the food, but his heart rattles a little at the prospect of talking to Steve.

Talking. What he means is, staring at Steve like a fucking idiot while the others explain what's happened.

He's been looking up sign language for the past half hour on Peter's phone and he already knows forty words, and a bunch of phrases. He wonders if the others would learn for him.

"He knows, right?" Peter asks, a little panicked-sounding from beside Tony. "Like—he's gonna answer this call and Tony's just gonna be sitting there."

"I said it was something important," Bruce says. He sighs. "He better answer."

"You're gonna give him a heart attack," Peter says, shaking his head.

Tony snorts, taking another bite of his burger and a quick sip of his strawberry shake.

And then Steve answers the call. He's got a beard too, again, and he sucks in a clipped breath like he had something he wanted to say but it immediately dies on his tongue. Their

connection isn't the clearest or the strongest but Tony can see him pretty well, and Steve can see him too, that's clear by the look on his face. Tony smiles—it's so fucking good to see him—and Steve gapes.

"Steve," Pepper says. "Uh, as you can see—"

"Something happened," Rhodey says, leaning forward, his face between Tony and Pepper's. "Something serious, but we've—we've got our boy back."

Tony waves a little bit, smiling wider at him. His heart booms against his chest.

Steve stares, his eyes going glassy, and then his screen gets really blurry and goes black. They're all quiet, and Peter's brows furrow.

"What happened?" Pepper asks. "It just went dark."

Rhodey leans forward, refreshes the screen, but nothing happens. He closes out the window and looks at it quizzically. "I don't—I'm not sure—"

Tony keeps eating his burger, and doesn't say what he's thinking. Well, he can't fucking say it, but he wouldn't say it even if he could. Because he's thinking Steve went and smashed his thousand dollar iPhone in his hand because that's how super soldiers react to seeing their dead friends alive again, Tony guesses. He feels strangely flattered.

"You gave him a heart attack," Peter says, crossing his arms over his chest. "I knew you would." He is clearly *not* talking to Tony, but chastising the others, and Tony is interested in how the dynamics here have changed in the seven months he's been gone.

"He's not answering," Pepper says, her phone pressed to her ear.

Tony sucks at his shake until he reaches the bottom of the cup, and he tries to level out his breathing. His heart is still going out of control. Why the hell is he nervous to talk to Steve Rogers? Is he embarrassed because he fucking died? Steve sorta died once, too. Buried in ice is similar to being buried in dirt.

"Anyone call Barnes?" Bruce asks. "I know he has a phone. I don't think I know his number..."

The iPad starts ringing again, an unknown number flashing on the screen.

"I think this might be it," Pepper says, leaning forward to accept the call.

The exact same screen that they saw before pops up, except Steve is a little further back and a much more settled-looking Bucky Barnes is standing beside him. His eyes find Tony, go a little wide, and then he promptly walks out of the frame. Tony snorts, and eats the last bite of his burger. *Don't be nervous. You're both alive. It's fine.*

"What happened?" Rhodey asks.

“I...I broke my phone,” Steve says, shaking his head. “It doesn’t matter, what’s—what’s happening?” His eyes hone in on Tony and Tony doesn’t think he’s ever seen him look this panicky. “Is...a clone...is this a clone? A trap? Do you need...I can be there. I can be there.”

Tony laughs a little bit. He doesn’t blame the guy for being suspicious. He’s the only one out of all of them that didn’t trust this right away, probably because of his experiences with Barnes and the brainwashing. Tony is happy to report his brain is just the same as it ever was, and that doesn’t need to be on the list of Cap’s things to worry about.

If only he could say the same for his voice.

“Not a clone, not a trap,” Pepper says, fast. “It’s him, it’s our Tony.”

“And he’s...well, he can’t speak,” Peter says.

Tony is at his wit’s fucking end with this no talking shit. He wants to be able to explain himself in his own words, he feels like a kid in a preschool surrounded by all his goddamn teachers. It’s rare there’s a dynamic where he needs other people to speak on his behalf, and along with being a recently deceased person, he isn’t quite used to this new route in his life. He looks down at Peter’s phone in his hand and starts searching through the app store.

Peter starts telling the story again, and Tony tries to track the wavers in his voice. He wants to stay on top of how they’re all feeling—just because he’s the newbie here doesn’t mean he’s the only one whose feelings matter. Peter clenches his hands in his lap, Pepper keeps her hand on Tony’s shoulder. Happy can’t seem to decide whether he’d rather sit or stand, and he keeps getting up to pace before resuming his seat again. Rhodey and Bruce keep stealing looks at each other, like they’ve developed some sort of silent language, one that Tony definitely needs to get up on. He finds an app that might work for his needs, and he downloads it, hoping Peter doesn’t care.

Steve, as he hears the details of Peter pulling Tony out of his grave, looks a lot worse for wear. There have been a lot of instances in his life when he wanted to know what Cap was thinking, and this is definitely one of those times. He hopes he can gain his trust back... again...and prove he isn’t some fucking robot or clone or zombie or whatever the hell Steve might be imagining. Somehow, someday, he’s himself. And he’s back. He really needs Steve to believe that, as unbelievable as it may be.

They’d been able to stand strong together in the end, in the face of what they’d lost. He always felt more level-headed when he had Steve by his side, and he isn’t afraid to admit he’s glad Steve is still alive.

“So yeah, uh, that’s it,” Peter says. “Now we’re here.”

They’re all quiet, then. Steve stares at Tony so hard that he isn’t sure if the call broke, but then Steve hangs his head and lets out a few heavy breaths.

“And there are...no leads on his voice?” Steve asks. “Bruce?”

“Not yet,” Bruce says. “I’ll probably call Helen, see what she says.”

“Not like we have any examples to draw on,” Steve says.

Tony opens the new speaking app he’d downloaded, and quickly types in his message, turning up the volume on Peter’s phone.

“*HELLO STAR SPANGLED MAN*,” the mechanical voice says. She sounds kinda like Siri, and it makes him miss FRIDAY something awful. Another thing he needs to work on. Rebooting his world. “*WOULD LOVE A FACE TO FACE VISIT, IF YOU’RE SO INCLINED*.” The corner of his mouth quirks up in a smile, and Steve blows out a breath, nodding.

“Tony, I—God, it’s good to see you,” Steve says. “So good to see you. Yeah, we’ll...we’ll be there as soon as we possibly can.”

“*LOOKING FORWARD TO IT*,” Tony’s app says, and he can see Peter beaming at him.

~

It’s hard to get off the call. It’s hard to try and go to bed. It’s really hard to stop making his new app stop saying stupid things to try and make the others laugh. Peter lets Tony hold onto his phone, and then he hugs him for what feels like a minute straight. They decide to tell everybody else tomorrow morning, since it’s already really late, but Tony can already guess that Natasha is gonna kick his ass when she realizes he waited to pass the news on.

They all kind of hover around after they insist he should try and get some sleep, acting like complete goddamn hypocrites because he would have stayed up with them all night if they hadn’t been ushering him to bed. He hates the looks on their faces, like they aren’t sure he’s still gonna be here in the morning. He decides right there and then to make sure that he is.

And once he’s alone in bed with Pepper she stares at him for a while, they kiss like teenagers for a while, and finally he stops himself because a different kind of fear hits him, the kind of thing he’s never really worried about before. But he’s never been dead before, never had a second first night sleeping in the same bed as his fiancé before, never created the awkward silences instead of filling them.

He closes his eyes tight, their foreheads pressed together.

“You’re okay,” she whispers, stroking his cheek. “You’re fine, we’re good—you just need to sleep. Just relax.”

He nods, and she leans in, hugging him tight.

“I love you,” she whispers. “I love you so much. God, thank you. Thank you for coming back to me.”

~

Once she falls asleep, he gets back up. He takes the letters, Peter’s phone, and heads down to the workshop. The lights buzz on with a bit of difficulty and he figures no one has been down here in a while. The dust floats in the air and reminds him of bad memories, so he puts the

phone and the letters down and gets to work. He refuses—refuses—to get emotional over Dum-E and U—but he lets them help a lot while he constructs and programs the new robot that's gonna follow his ass around and speak for him until he can do it on his own.

He should be happy. He should be ecstatic. Instead a weird pain and sadness drapes over him, and he can't explain it, and he can't shake it. He watches the news. Something about an oil spill. Something about a fire in the Bronx. Something about a kidnapping.

He builds the robot like he's a machine himself, thinks about letting it measure brainwaves before he realizes that's stupid and it'll be saying shit he doesn't want it to say. It cheers him up a little bit that Peter is gonna think this thing looks like Tony's personal droid, and it does kinda look like BB-8. It's a perfect black sphere that rolls around after him, and he's got the remote he can type his responses into with shortcut buttons. He figures it'll do, for the time being, until they solve his problems. His problems, which feel like a goddamn pit of despair. Dark and empty, bottomless, like death. He doesn't know how they're gonna solve something they know goddamn nothing about.

He finishes learning sign language, just in case the robot doesn't work out. It takes a couple hours cramming it into his brain, memorizing everything and practicing, and he watches the hours tick by until the weak light of morning starts trickling in through the windows. He makes a cheat sheet for everybody else, with what he hopes will be his common phrases.

He finds himself gravitating towards the letters. He sits down on the floor against the wall, and he feels like he's intruding on something, when he starts opening the first one—like these are meant for a version of him that doesn't exist anymore. He rubs the back of his neck and keeps going.

There's only one letter in the first envelope, and it's from Pepper. It's on his own stationery, it's a little crumpled like she was unsure of it, and it feels delicate in his hands.

*You were all I had, this was my worst fear and now it's happened and I'm living in a world where it's real, where it came true, and I hate it, Tony, I fucking hate it, I hate it. I wanted to spend my whole life with you. My life isn't my life without you in it. Jesus, I'm hardly writing this, I just felt like I should leave you with something but I can hardly breathe, hardly go through the motions of this, of any of this, and I can't imagine letting you go. I'm not gonna be able to do it.*

*I love you to the moon and back. I love the stupid way you hold your fork. I love your omelets, how long it takes you to make any meal. I love how your hands sink into long sleeved shirts. I love how you say my name. I love your softness, your goodness, your strength. How hard you always try.*

*I want you back. I want you back, I want you back. I want that stupid Alps vacation we were supposed to recreate. I can't breathe without you, Tony. There will never be another you. Never, ever, ever. When I close my eyes I'll be in your arms.*

*I'll love you forever.*

*Yours, Pepper*

He sucks in a pinched breath and now he's the one that can't breathe. He feels like he's drowning. There's a kiss mark next to her name and he coughs, trying to settle, trying not to be dead, trying not to be that guy that they put into a box and buried under the earth. He can't sleep because that looks too much like dead.

He handles her letter carefully and puts it on the floor next to his knee, next to where the robot is balancing and somehow, looking at him expectantly.

He opens the other envelope and there are three individual pieces of paper in there—the first one is from Happy. It's just two lines.

*I'll never stop looking out for you, pal. Thank you for the home you gave me.*

*All my love,  
Happy*

Tony cracks his jaw and shakes his head. He's hating himself more with every word he reads. Happy usually has a lot more to say, and with his reaction today Tony feels like he killed something inside of him when he left. The next letter is from Rhodey, and this one definitely looks like it's been crumpled up more than ten times before someone took it from him and sealed it away.

*Do you remember your sophomore year? Undergrad? When someone filled Mrs. Hicks' Kia with shaving cream and they blamed you and you had to pay for it to be cleaned and you were so mad, because the prank was stupid and not at your level at all? Well, it was me, and I purposefully made it cliché and lame because you told Colleen Henderson I still slept with teddy bears. You were the worst and I loved your little stupid ass.*

*You're my best friend. I don't know how to face the days ahead of me. I always thought you'd keep swerving away from death but somehow it got you, but that prick is dead, Tones. He's dead, he's dead because of you, so at least there's that. I know you'd make fun of me for saying this but I feel honored I got to be there for you, in the end. I'm glad I got to be right there with you. And I know you'll be there when it's my time, waiting for me on some fluffy cloud or something, ready to show me around.*

*I miss you like hell. We all miss you so much it hurts. Thank you for coming into my life.*

*Love you, buddy. Always.*

*Rhodey.*

Tony puts it aside on top of Happy's and covers his face with his hands. The tears are hot sliding down his cheeks and he just lets them come. He's cried more in the last seven hours than he has ever. A new life, full of guilt and crying. At least the guilt is familiar. His heart beats in anticipation of the next letter because he knows it's from the kid. He sighs, wiping his eyes, and looks down at it in his lap.

*Dear Tony,*

*I don't know what to say. You've been my favorite person since I was little. You were always my idol, the ideal I looked up to, so actually getting to have you in my life was like a dream, and it made me feel cooler than I've ever felt before. Even when I realized I was a superhero. But I'm pretty sure I got too attached, because I feel like something is ripping me in half.*

*I'm sorry you died because of me. I wish I hadn't disappeared because maybe you could have stayed, maybe it would have gone down differently. I'm so sorry. And I'm so sorry I was crying so much, when you were—when it was happening. I'm so sorry. But I just couldn't imagine this, I couldn't accept it, I still can't. You're like a father to me, you've made me feel stronger than I ever thought I could, you took time out of your busy life and made me feel important. Like I was worth your time. I lost my parents, I lost Ben, and now I've lost you too. I don't know what's wrong with me that the universe just wants to keep taking people I love. I'm scared to lose May now. She's sad you're gone, too. She's been crying, but not as much as me.*

*I miss you so much, already, and it's only been a couple days. I can't imagine the rest of my life without you, the distance between us just getting bigger. I hope you're proud of me. I'm so sorry I couldn't do more. I want to do more. I want to be better. I'm gonna do everything I can to be better.*

*I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, I miss you, and I love you, Tony. Thank you for everything you did, for me and for Spiderman. Thank you for being my hero.*

*Peter*

Tony looks up at the ceiling. He sorta feels like he's gonna pass out. This poor fucking kid, putting all of it on himself. Tony can't believe it. He feels sick. He's gonna need about eight hundred hugs from all of them tomorrow, and he hopes they all appreciate the new and improved overly affectionate Tony Stark.

He opens the last envelope, because he has to get this over with now. It's a picture. Him and the Avengers, from that one party where they all got drunk and Thor broke a coffee table. He'd given Steve the good stuff from Asgard, and Steve couldn't stop telling everybody how much he loved their outfits and the stars that night and the way Tony designed his floor tiles. Natasha and Clint nearly killed each other over Mario Kart, and Tony carried Bruce around on his back and listened to him laugh like a little kid right into his ear. In the picture they're in the living room, draped over each other, Thor with his head in Tony's lap, Bruce kissing Steve's cheek, Natasha standing behind Tony with clear intentions to put him in a headlock, and Clint cuddled up close to Steve's chest, sleeping peacefully.

Tony stares at it, his heart straining. He knows Pepper took it, and it's one of his favorite pictures. They'd printed it up in black and white, folded it as easily as they could for the envelope, and when he holds it a certain way he can see the message on the back. He turns it over.

*We will always be with you.*

It's Steve's handwriting. He'd know it anywhere. He shakes his head, staring at it until he thinks he falls through the fabric of time. He doesn't think anything can distract him from his

bubble of happiness, pain, death and rebirth and the full extent of what they all feel for him, revealed once he was dead and gone, supposedly forever.

But then he catches sight of the images on the muted TV.

The headline is *TONY STARK BACK FROM THE DEAD?* And the line underneath that *NEW CELL PHONE VIDEO SHOWS SHOCKING UNCONFIRMED FOOTAGE FROM TONY STARK'S GRAVE.*

His heart nearly falls out of his chest. It's grainy cell phone video, from somewhere off in the bushes in the cemetery, but it's clear what's happening. They got it all. Peter standing there, staring down at the torn-up dirt, panicking. Then Tony's hand shooting out of the ground. Peter pulling him out, the two of them sitting there, then it cuts to Pepper, Rhodey and Bruce coming to take him away. They show the footage over and over and over.

Tony closes his eyes, and he accidentally hits one of the shortcut buttons on the robot's remote control.

*"Oh fuck,"* the little black sphere says.



## Chapter 4

Tony watches the coverage for a little while, silently mourning his privacy, and then he reluctantly wakes Pepper up to try and deal with this. It grows like a wild fire, builds and builds until he can feel the weight of it from all sides, bearing down on him.

About an hour after the initial news break, he finds out who his betrayer is—a groundskeeper that works at the cemetery, named Randall Dour. Not a supervillain, not Thanos himself back for some sublevel revenge, not an old girlfriend who had shown up to shit on his grave—no, some innocuous groundskeeper with a lazy eye. He starts giving interviews, he talks too much, and Tony has seen a lot of angles of angry Pepper in his life, but he's never seen her seething quite like this. The tiredness around her eyes is catching, and he semi-regrets taking most of his night to depress himself half to death. The words in their letters echo in his head, and when he thinks too hard about the things they said he feels like he's a kid again, trapped at the bottom of a well, trying desperately to claw his way out.

It's been storming outside since a little while after the news broke, and the claps of thunder keep startling him. Sometimes, he wonders if the world really did want him back.

"Well, he's fired," Pepper says, rigorously typing on the computer. "And I'm also trying to get him on filming a minor without his consent."

Tony looks up. Peter's in the kitchen with Rhodey and Tony stares at them both, trying to make eggs at five in the morning for his sake. He kinda feels like shit that everybody is awake right now because of this dumbass development in an already insane situation. He wishes he could find normal again. He just wants normal. He hates this stupid asshole that emotes way too much, who decided to get rich on his resurrection, and he hates—*hates*—that he didn't get to control the narrative here.

They still don't know enough, there are still too many questions for the world to know about this shit already. But he knows Pepper hasn't confirmed or denied anything...not like they can actually deny this, especially now. Despite the quality of the video, it's pretty goddamn clear what happened. It's pretty clear that it's him, Tony Stark, crawling out of his goddamn grave. He hates that Peter is involved in this, that his face is plastered all over this particularly predatory news cycle.

They don't have the TV on in the living room because he's already tired of seeing it, though he figures they'll have to turn it back on sooner or later. Tony watches Pepper send e-mails and compose texts, an angry line between her brows. He makes the robot roll over to her, and it nudges her leg.

"*Sorry, sorry,*" it says, rolling back and forth on the spot. She looks down, glaring at it for a second before she looks up and glares at him too. He doesn't know if she likes the robot. He can't tell, since everything is so shitty right now.

"Don't you dare apologize for someone invading our privacy," she says, her words sharp. "I don't care if he saw a beam shooting out of the ground, it's a cemetery, that's...I mean, it is

what it is!” She gestures hard, her hands cutting through the air and landing in her lap with a smack. Her cheeks are getting red, the furrow in her brows getting deeper. He loves how she looks when she’s angry, especially if she isn’t angry at him, but he tries not to think about that right now. “It isn’t his business! How dare he share something like that with the goddamn world, and start up these rumors. It’s disgusting.”

Tony sighs. The robot says “*rumors?*” and Pepper sets her jaw.

“I don’t care if they’re true,” she says. Her voice breaks a little and she shakes her head. She looks at the robot, almost like she’s analyzing it, and then she meets Tony’s eyes. “It isn’t fair. And I know not everything is fair, obviously, I just...hate...the human race. Right now. And a lot of the time.”

Tony nods. He gets it. He was already harboring his fair share of fear about what’s to come, dealing with the reaction, the blowback, people wanting to pick him apart and do experiments on him, but now they’ve gotta juggle the press speculating before he can even break the damn story on his own. Sometimes he wishes he wasn’t Tony Stark. Sometimes he thinks someone lame like Joe Smith would be a lot easier. If he were Joe Smith, nobody would give a shit if he broke out of his grave. He could die and come back a bunch of times and nobody would even know it.

Notoriety is a bitch.

“We’re just gonna stay quiet for now,” Pepper says, and quickly looks away because he knows she’s probably thinking that Tony is quiet all the time now. “Who cares what they say? It doesn’t matter. We didn’t wanna speak on it yet, so we aren’t going to. Until we want to. I just wanna get this asshole off the air.”

“*Doesn’t matter,*” Tony makes the robot say. “*Already has a million hits on YouTube, and counting. I’m trending on twitter. So are you. So is War Machine and Hulk.*” Tony is terrified somebody is gonna find out who Peter is. It’s weighing on his mind just as heavy as everything else, and he’s got about ten alerts set up to inform them if anything gets out.

The storm keeps raging outside.

Pepper sighs, leaning back on the couch and pinching the bridge of her nose. Tony scoots closer, leaning in and pressing a long kiss to her cheek. He nuzzles her neck and she laughs a little bit, hands skimming up his side. He wants to say he loves her. He wants to *say it*, and not in a little robot voice from a small cute black robot.

“Okay, this is uh—way too much food,” Peter says, walking over and carrying a giant tray, its contents rattling with every step he takes. Rhodey is right behind him, carrying a similar tray.

“Pepper,” Rhodey says. “I’m pissed. The kid can cook and he’s been fucking hiding it for months now.”

Peter shrugs but doesn’t say anything as he puts the tray down on the coffee table in front of them. It’s a shit ton of breakfast food—fried eggs, cinnamon toast, pancakes and waffles and

hash browns and bacon. Pepper gapes at it, laughing as Rhodey puts down more, and she shares a beautiful smile with Tony that he immediately tucks away in a mental picture.

“Wow, guys,” Pepper says. “Thank you...you better be helping us eat it.”

“We will,” Peter says, standing off to the side and looking proud. He stares out at the rainy morning. “I figured we deserved something nice.”

“*Good job, buddy,*” Tony makes the robot say, and Peter preens. Tony is also glad that Pepper seems to be distracted enough by breakfast to take a break from yelling at people about the news. He’s stressed out, they’re both stressed out, and it’s nice to be thinking about eggs and pancakes for a few minutes and not death and stupid reporters. He tries to pretend this is a moment from before—before Thanos, before Peter disappeared. A pure, perfect moment where there are no villains, only the people he loves, and breakfast. He can speak if he wants to. He still has his voice.

“Where are Bruce and Happy?” Pepper asks, leaning forward and grabbing a piece of toast.

“Happy is taking what he said was gonna be the fastest shower ever,” Rhodey says, weaving around the coffee table and crashing down on the couch. “And Bruce sounded like he was on the phone when I popped up there a couple minutes ago.”

“With who?” Pepper asks.

“Not sure,” Rhodey says, reaching across and grabbing one of the glasses of orange juice. “But he was getting a little loud with them.”

Tony has a couple ideas, number one being Natasha giving him shit for not sharing this secret. The news is really fucking them over. Tony sinks down on the couch a little bit and narrows his eyes at Peter, who’s still standing. The kid seems strangely on edge when he thinks people aren’t paying attention to him. He catches Tony’s gaze and plasters a smile on, and Tony motions for Peter to come sit down. Peter does, patting the robot a couple times before he sits.

“Tony, uh,” Peter says, wringing his hands and not making eye contact. “I just wanted to say I’m sorry, uh—I should have sensed this asshole filming in the cemetery, I was distracted, I wasn’t paying attention, I should have known and I just...I’m sorry, I wanted to say it.”

It’s like a fucking gut punch.

“Peter, no—”

“Peter, you couldn’t have known.”

Tony smacks him on the leg. It reminds him of the goddamn letter and his eyes strain with tears just thinking about it. He doesn’t want to say anything through the robot right now because it doesn’t feel right, or powerful enough, and he doesn’t think he’ll ever be able to pry this guilt from Peter’s pleading hands. It’s like ingrained in his DNA now. So Tony just

looks at him, wraps an arm around his shoulders, and shakes his head, holding his gaze. Trying to convey *I will never, ever blame you*.

Peter nods back, and Tony hopes he's gotten through to him, at least on this. It's this asshole Dour's fault, and nobody else's. Especially not Peter.

Tony can hear Bruce's footsteps before he sees him, but then Bruce shouts "okay!" and it's just as loud as the clap of thunder that follows.

Tony twists around to look and the others do too. Bruce is on the phone, and he looks pained.

"What is happening?" Rhodey asks, narrowing his eyes at Bruce as he marches over to them. "Somebody chewing you out? If that's the press hand it to Pepper, she's been demolishing them all morning."

Bruce just looks up, shaking his head. He pulls his phone away from his ear, presses a couple buttons, and then turns the screen around. He hands an active Skype session with Natasha and Clint to Tony. Tony quickly pulls his arm back from around Peter, holding onto the phone with both hands. Peter ducks a little to the side so he's out of the frame.

"There you go," Bruce says, standing behind him and leaning down so he's in the picture. "Now cut it out with the yelling or I'm gonna get angry."

"Jesus Christ," Clint says. Natasha stays silent. They both just blink for a few long seconds, and Tony smiles fondly. Whenever he sees someone else he loves, the unimaginable pain crops up again in the core of his chest, the understandable but embarrassing need to latch onto everyone and never let them go. Natasha's hair is a little longer, and Clint's is cropped short. They both look at him like he's a ghost, and he doesn't blame them. It's a pretty apt description of what he should be.

He wishes he could say something. Anything. He can almost feel all the times he's had that thought build up in his head, boiling, growing larger, taking brain matter and replacing it with that one simple plea: voice, voice, voice. Pepper leans closer to him, flips the screen so she's in the image, and their knees press together. For a moment Tony feels like he can sing. Recite odes to her skin, her voice, that fierce, protective look in her eyes that's reserved only for him. For a moment, all of that feels like it's on the tip of his tongue. When he looks back at Natasha and Clint, eyes so expectant and searching for answers, he feels it again. Like glass breaking. Like there's a wall up in his head and he's slowly, surely chipping away at it.

The robot rolls back and forth in place, like it actually can read his brainwaves, the pressure of his blood, and it's waiting for something to happen.

"I'm sorry we didn't call sooner," Pepper says, her chin on Tony's shoulder. "Uh...we didn't expect this news to break. We were going to call you first, this morning, get everyone here, then see how we wanted to approach this, but Mr. Dour had to make things difficult."

"Fucker," Rhodey mutters.

“How is he? Tony?” Natasha asks, leaning forward. She swallows hard, eyes flicking back and forth between Tony and Pepper. “Tony—how—God, how are you?”

He shrugs a little bit. He has the inclination to hold the robot like a baby in his lap and let it do the talking, anything to fill the damn void of silence that’s clinging to him and swallowing him whole. Tony looks up when he sees Happy walk into the room, his eyes trained on Tony like he didn’t actually believe he was gonna be there. Tony raises his eyebrows at him, smiling, and Happy smiles back. Tony hears Bruce whisper something to him about the robot.

“How did this happen?” Clint breathes, before Pepper can answer. “What the hell...I didn’t know this was a goddamn option, shit, we woulda done it a while ago if we knew.”

“Yeah, for real,” Peter mutters, quiet. Tony smiles at him, nudging into his shoulder a little bit.

“He’s good,” Pepper says. “Except he doesn’t have his voice. But we’re gonna work on that.”

Natasha narrows her eyes, shaking her head. “Is Peter there?” she asks.

“Right here,” Peter says, leaning on Tony’s shoulder.

“And, uh—does Steve—”

There’s a particularly loud clap of thunder, and Tony can feel it in his bones. It almost sounds like it’s inside the goddamn room.

“God, this storm is insane,” Rhodey says. “I don’t know where the hell it came from, it wasn’t on the radar.”

Happy narrows his eyes down at his phone. He looks up at Pepper. “You getting this?”

“Yeah,” she says.

Tony claps his hand on his knee a couple times, trying to get their attention.

“Uh, it’s saying the roof door—saying someone opened it,” Pepper says. She opens up the video feed, but there’s nothing that looks out of the ordinary.

“What’s going on?” Natasha asks, leaning closer to the screen.

Tony shrugs at her. Is someone goddamn breaking in? That’s the last fucking thing they need right now.

“Now it’s saying there’s someone in the goddamn elevator,” Happy says, getting up.

“Okay,” Bruce says. “Rhodey, you wanna—”

“I’ll come too,” Peter says, starting to get up, but Tony shakes his head, pulling him back down.

“Wait, Pep, is this shit still running slow like it was—”

“Tony!” a booming voice says, and they all turn around fast, Tony’s heart absolutely fucking sinking from the shock but not from fear, because he’d know that voice anywhere. Tony turns to see Thor Odinson striding down the hallway. He isn’t all decked out in his normal God-gear. He’s wearing fucking jeans, and a white t-shirt. His hair is still short, but his beard is a little longer, a little unkempt. As he gets closer, Tony can see he’s still using the glass eye Rocket gave him.

“Holy shit, Thor,” Bruce says, his hand over his heart, the other one braced on the back of the couch. “Jesus Christ, you almost killed me.”

“Goddamn security breach,” Happy mutters, shaking his head and nearly toppling over the lazy chair across from them. “We need to fix those goddamn—cameras—shit, we really need to do that.”

Rhodey also looks sufficiently struck, but Tony is pretty happy to realize the weather wasn’t the universe rejecting him, but just Thor being pissy they didn’t tell him their secret.

“Evidently Earth has discovered a way to cure death,” Thor says, his eyes locked on Tony as he slowly approaches the couch where they’re all gathered.

“Hey, is that Thor?” Clint yells, on the phone that Pepper plucks out of Tony’s hand. “That isn’t fair.”

“He...” Peter starts, sitting up on his knees like a little kid and grinning as Thor gets closer. “He broke into the compound!”

“We’re coming,” Natasha says, deadpan.

“Wait,” Pepper says, “we didn’t even get to explain—”

But then the call ends. Tony shakes his head, putting the phone aside. Way too much is happening right now.

“Dammit,” Pepper breathes. “Thor, did you really just break in here? Because you didn’t need to break in.”

“Oh, did I not?” Thor asks. It looks like he still has lightning clinging to his fingers.

“Let’s check on the cameras,” Pepper sighs.

“Yeah, okay,” Happy says. “We’re gonna have to make up some beds. Think we’re gonna have a full house soon.”

Tony blows out a breath and gets up, walking over towards Thor. He has a sort of childlike wonder on his face as he takes Tony in, like he, too, can’t believe what the hell he’s seeing.

He quickly closes the distance between them and wraps his arms around Tony, lifting him into the air. Tony snorts and holds on as Thor actually swings him around like a ragdoll,

holding him tight and laughing raucously as the others all exclaim. Tony never really got much of this kinda thing as a kid, definitely not from Howard, and for a second he feels like a five year old before Thor sets him right again. Tony has always loved this dude. Thor always made him feel more alive, and now is no exception.

“This is incredible,” Thor says, his hands on Tony’s shoulders as he grins brightly. “Incredible, amazing.”

“He can’t talk,” Peter says, walking over to stand beside Tony. “We don’t know why. But he’s good, otherwise.”

Thor’s smile fades fast, even as he ruffles Peter’s hair in greeting. “That isn’t good,” Thor says, looking back and forth between Tony and Peter. His gaze lands on Tony and seems gravely concerned. “You always have so much to say.”

Tony nearly chokes and he grins at him. He holds a finger up and then he turns, reaching over the back of the couch and grabbing his remote. Pepper and Rhodey are both watching him with fondness in their eyes, and Tony has to remember he owes them a hug each for daring to ever look at him like that.

The robot rolls around the edge of the couch and stops at the toe of Thor’s boot.

*“But I made this little guy, for the interim,”* Tony makes the robot say. *“So hi Thor! Hi I missed you!”*

Thor stares down at it like it’s actually the one that missed him, as opposed to Tony, and Bruce laughs, bowing his head. “You’re very proficient at all that,” Thor says, looking up at Tony. His eyes get bright and shiny and he stares at Tony hard, his jaw tight. He squeezes his shoulder. “I’m—I’m immensely glad the news was true. That you’re back. I’m sorry for breaking in. If it makes you feel better, it was only easy because it was me. I made sure to...readjust your locks and security. I was just so unhappy I didn’t receive a message—”

“In our defense,” Peter says, just as Rhodey and Pepper start to say the same thing. “That dude on the TV totally outed us before we wanted the public to know.”

Anger simmers in Thor’s eyes then and he shares a look with Bruce. “I saw that man. Dour, was that his name? Should we kill him? I think we should kill him.”

Bruce puts a hand on Thor’s shoulder. “I don’t think that’d be a good look.”

“Thor, we have breakfast,” Rhodey says. “The kid made most of it.”

“Oh,” Thor says, looking at Peter. “Should I be wary?”

“No,” Peter says, sounding offended. “It’s good. I sampled.”

Thor smiles, and when he looks at Tony again it gets wider. He wraps his arm around Tony’s shoulder and beams down at him, and Tony gets that feeling again as he leads him back over to the couch, as Thor asks for more details of his resurrection and keeps looking at him like he’s so important, like him being back is one of the best things that could have happened.

Having him and Bruce here at the same time brings back the ghost of those nights with the Avengers, and he can hear the echo of their happiness before it all went sour. The reason why the team is so close to his heart, why they feel like kindred spirits to him, like family. He can hear the echo of his own voice, too, his own laughter. There are so many echoes in his head, reverberating and settling in his throat, ready to be repeated.

He can't wait for everyone to be together. He can't wait for Peter to be a part of it now. Tony can already see the stars in his eyes. He knows they've spent time together, without him, but their reactions to him being back have finally convinced him that maybe he is the final piece of the puzzle. That maybe it was incomplete without him.

They give Thor details. They eat breakfast. The storm stops because Thor isn't pissed off about being left out anymore. Happy keeps staring at him like he doesn't believe he's real, and finally Tony nearly knocks him out with a hug to get him to stop. Pepper keeps handing reporters their asses, and Tony tries not to think about the inevitable press conference he'll have to give without his fucking voice. He makes the robot rap to distract himself and make the others smile, and Peter laughs so hard orange juice comes out of his nose. He kinda looks like he's been water boarded for a couple minutes afterwards, to Tony's horror. Peter's phone starts lighting up once May sees the news, and Peter has to have a long conversation with her that ends with her crying into Tony's ear and him unable to fucking respond, and he thinks they make a plan for her to come over here and see him soon, he can barely hear through the sobbing. They get updates from Natasha and Clint when they're about forty five minutes out, and eventually, they find out what's happening outside when Happy turns on the TV.

"Jesus Christ," Pepper says, seething. And she is *seething*, she looks like she's about to breathe fire. Tony just feels kinda resigned as they all stare at the TV, and Peter runs over to look out the window.

The news is showing a helicopter shot of the outside of the compound, where the press is swarming at the gate. Apparently they all showed up in a wave, within the last fifteen minutes, and from that high up in the sky they look like a swarm of ants, fire ants, the kind of fucking ants that Tony wants spray with a gallon of Raid.

He runs his hands over his face, and he wants to fucking yell or something, to get the frustration out. He doesn't like this feeling, how they're pressing down on new wounds, digging into his psyche, making up their own facts and figures and stories and using him as their dress up paper zombie doll.

"Security's already out there trying to get rid of them," Happy says, looking down at his phone.

"I can't see them in the picture," Pepper says, typing something on the laptop.

"*Maybe we should move to Canada like Steven did,*" the robot says, and Tony raises his eyebrows, holding his hand out at it like it just made a good point on its own.

"I'm not entirely sure he actually likes it there," Thor says, walking over to stand beside Peter at the window.



Tony looks at Bruce. Bruce shrugs, shaking his head.

Peter huffs heavily. “Can I go down there?” he asks.

“No.”

“No.”

A chorus of no’s.

Peter crosses his arms over his chest.

“Don’t blame him though,” Rhodey says, gruff. “Kinda wanna go down there in the goddamn suit, teach ‘em a lesson.”

“*Let’s set a good example,*” Tony makes the robot say. Both Rhodey and Peter narrow their eyes at it.

They watch for a couple minutes in a thick kind of silence as security manages to get rid of a couple of them, but they don’t make any kind of dent in the hundred or so that are out there, fucking leeches.

“Steve is here,” Pepper says, looking down at a message on her phone. “I’m having him go around back.”

“Uh,” Bruce says, staring at the TV with his arms crossed over his chest. “You sure?”

“Yes,” Pepper says, holding her phone so tight in her hand that Tony thinks she might smash it like Cap did. “Why, what’s—”

“That’s his vehicle,” Thor says. He points at the TV, and then looks out the window, back and forth a couple times. Tony doesn’t know how much he can see from here. Probably not much.

“What?” Peter asks, standing on his tip toes.

Tony breathes hard through his mouth, the frown line between his brows going so deep that it almost hurts. He watches as the camera switches to another angle that’s up close, in the middle of the chaos—Steve’s car is a black SUV with tinted windows, and it pulls right up through the crowd, nudging them and their cameras out of the way.

“Well, he got to the gate,” Rhodey says. “I guess—”

Tony’s heart drops.

“*He’s getting out,*” he makes the robot say, and it doesn’t properly convey his goddamn shock.

All the reporters start shouting at Steve as soon as he exits his vehicle and he’s got that look on his face that reminds Tony a lot of a disappointed parent. He’s wearing a suit, which is sweet, and he stands higher than the others on the step of the driver’s side.

About ten microphones are shoved towards him.

“You all should be ashamed,” he says, and the words seem louder than Tony expected them to. The yelling dies down around him, and he sends his glare over the crowd. “How dare you be out here like this? Like vultures? With everything that this man has done for you, for the world? None of you would be alive if it wasn’t for him. He literally gave his life for you and you’re here, trying to make a story out of his trauma. This is shameful, this is exploitation—”

“Yeah,” Bucky yells, leaning over from the passenger side and sticking his head out of the open door. “So fuck off.”

Then the footage is cut and it changes back to the reporters in the station, who are looking considerably more shamed than they were before.

“I feel like Steve just declared his love for you on live TV,” Rhodey says.

Tony smiles to himself, shaking his head. He appreciates Bucky’s addition too, considering it contained a bad word which is a big no no on live TV. Tony figures Bucky knows that, and the impact it would have. It was a great team effort.

“Hopefully Captain America being stern shames everybody into minding their own goddamn business,” Peter says, walking back over and sitting on the couch again.

A few minutes later the elevator opens and Steve himself walks through it. Tony turns around, and can see him stop from down the hallway. This was about the distance away he was when Tony took that final blow—in those last couple moments he felt like he could see more, like he was honed in to everybody all around him, their thoughts, their feelings, the exact spots where all of them were standing, and he remembered seeing Steve, far away, frozen in horror. He’s shared battlefields with Steve on many occasions, faced him on some, too, but that moment is etched in his memory above all the others, clear and bright. Probably because it was the last one.

Tony gets up, glances at the others, but none of them say anything, just look up at him with stupid smiles on their faces. He rolls his eyes, and the robot rolls back and forth in front of Happy like a guard dog. Tony gets up, striding over to meet Steve like this is any old day, and not the day after he woke up from the dead. Just a regular Tuesday.

Steve is quiet too. He steps to the side when Tony is close, bracing one hand on the wall and the other on his chest, and Tony is a little afraid he’s gonna have a heart attack like Peter said before. Bucky is standing next to him wearing a button-up shirt and slacks, and it’s fucking weird. His hair is still long and tied up loose on the back of his head, and he gives Tony one of those awkward smiles before nodding at him.

“Tony,” he says, and the smile gets a little more genuine when he really looks at him. “I’m... I’m really glad you’re not dead.”

Tony nods at him. He’s glad Bucky isn’t dead either, because he knows how much Bucky being dead upsets Steve. Steve, who still kinda looks like he’s about to collapse. Definitely a little green in the cheeks.

Bucky clears his throat. “I, uh—that thing out there—”

He doesn’t get to finish his sentence because Steve rushes forward, wrapping Tony in a hug. They’ve only hugged a couple times in their lives but Tony closes his eyes and relishes this one because, unsurprisingly, the world’s most well-crafted man gives incredible hugs.

He would definitely say something, if he could. This is absolutely the time when he would say something. But he has no idea what the hell he would say if he could talk. Steve claps him on the back a couple times, shaking his head.

“I’m not gonna say anything either.”

These tears come fast and he’s fighting them like hell—he cannot be crying into Captain America’s shoulder with half the world’s press outside, they’ve probably already got a goddamn drone in here somewhere.

“Do you mind if we stay?” Tony hears Bucky ask. “I know...I know he wants to ask, but he doesn’t wanna impose. Especially not, you know, with shit so...”

Tony pulls back, looking Steve in the eye. Steve shakes his head, looking down. Tony nods, and the robot rolls over, stopping eagerly at their feet. Tony keeps one hand on Steve’s shoulder, and types in his commands into the remote.

*“You can stay as long as you want. Ps I made this. Ps I learned sign language too, but everybody else still has to learn.”*

Steve laughs, still teary. “Always gotta go above and beyond, huh?”

*“Just trying to keep up with you,”* the robot says, and the corner of Tony’s mouth quirks up.

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Natasha and Clint show up a half hour later. Tony can’t say he’s done much to surprise Natasha in his life, and somehow, this feels no different. Even though they spoke before, he expected more shock from her, more shock along the lines of Clint fainting when he gets too close and looks at him too hard, which Rhodey takes as a win. But Natasha just frames Tony’s face with her hands, kisses his cheek, and holds him like the gratefulness is outweighing anything else. Clint finally manages to get up once Thor rouses him, and then he cries into Tony’s shoulder and hugs him forever. Natasha just watches them from over Clint’s shoulder, and Tony really can’t read the look on her face. She hugs Peter for a long time, too, and Tony wonders how long it’s been since they’ve seen each other.

The press dissipated a little bit after Steve’s talking-to, and then the rest of them leave when the cops show up. The coverage shifts, then—not so much speculation but more sympathy, and Tony can’t tell if he likes it. He doesn’t want pity, that’s the last thing he wants next to a reintroduction to death, and that’s why he doesn’t want to do a fucking press conference until he gets his voice back. He knows how it looks—he looks small, insignificant, broken—not anything like the man he once was. These people—his people—they can see him like this because they make him stronger, because they build him up, because every single smile from

Peter and Rhodey erases the sobbing and horror from the moments before Tony died—and he feels like he’s on the right track. They’re allowed to see his silence, live in it with him, watch him build robots and learn sign language and Tony takes a fucking picture of Pepper and Peter holding up the *I love you* sign and tries not to cry *again* in front of all of his favorite people.

They get him. They understand, they care, they forgive. The general public, on the other hand, is a different story. And so is the fucking press, which they have proven today on numerous occasions.

Tony can feel his voice. Feels it when Natasha asks about the asshole who leaked the video. Feels it when Steve talks about moving to Canada. Feels it when Thor’s voice breaks talking about the first month he was gone. They all commiserate, share his feelings, talk about that time they all went out together on the first anniversary, to the Double Eagle Steakhouse, and got so drunk that they were actually kicked out. Of course it showed up on the news, of course Happy threw up in a back alleyway, of course Rhodey nearly got hit by a car and Peter almost got arrested for underage drinking. Tony tries to raise the robot’s voice to chastise them for actually getting Peter a fake ID—a really shittily made one—and his own voice rises in his throat. It’s so close, so damn close, but it isn’t enough to break through. The wall is still up, but the cracks are growing larger.

He wants to start doing research, but starting is the goddamn main problem. What does he look for? Where does he look? He feels like he always just leapt into these things in his former life, but now everything feels veiled, hidden, like he’s lost in a fucking fog and can’t find his way out.

He’s gotta remember, he’s Iron Man. But more importantly, he’s Tony Stark. There’s no problem he can’t solve. He’s just gotta find the strength to break through.

“That was the third picnic,” Clint says, bracing his feet on the coffee table.

“You sure?” Pepper asks, barely looking up at him as she types something long on the laptop. “I thought it was the fourth.”

“No, the fourth was when we stopped,” Bruce says, standing behind the armchair and eating a bag of chips. “When the TMZ guy broke his nose.”

Happy snorts. “Broke, sure,” he says. “All on his own.”

“Couldn’t help it if he ran into my fist,” Natasha says, with a shrug. Rhodey grins, nodding around a mouthful of ice cream. Tony loves that they’re all just sitting around and talking and eating. Now that the press is gone, this day is shaping up to be pretty good.

“Yeah, we were already in Canada when that happened,” Steve says, sharing a look with Bucky. A shroud of guilt comes over him then, and he doesn’t make eye contact with anybody. The robot hovers by Tony’s feet like it wants to ask its own questions, and Tony wonders what the story is here. Everyone seems to have their own levels of resentment, even Peter, who’s been hovering by the window since the last NBC guy left.

“Guess it wasn’t the smartest thing to have picnics in the cemetery,” Clint says, cracking his jaw.

“Once everything is settled,” Thor says, his voice softer than Tony has heard it before, “we must have another picnic. All of us. Not in the cemetery, somewhere...nicer. Like your Central Park.”

“That’ll be a media field day,” Steve says, but he’s smiling.

“He’s right, though,” Bucky says, abruptly. “We, uh—should.” He clears his throat. Tony grins hard.

“*Didn’t know you cared,*” the robot says, and rolls over to knock into Bucky’s leg.

“Just...like picnics,” Bucky says, looking away.

Tony snorts. He looks up. Peter’s been being pretty quiet, which isn’t like him, and it’s reminding Tony too much of his damn new and unimproved self. He sends the robot over and it rolls directly into Peter’s foot.

“*Peter Parker. Please return to the party. You are being summoned.*”

Peter laughs, looking down at the robot and slowly following it back into the living room.

“Peter’s project, Tony,” Pepper says, looking at him with wide eyes. “It’s the most beautiful thing—”

“Uh, yeah, talk about a fucking tear jerker,” Happy huffs, giving Peter a little glare as he sits back down next to Tony. “He ran a bunch of it past me when I picked him up from school all through the third month and I almost crashed the goddamn car.”

There’s that fondness again. He feels like it’s radiating off of him whenever he looks at the kid. Tony wants to give Peter the world, wants to help May bring him up and present him with opportunities Tony didn’t get himself, show him how good and important he is. Peter’s heart is ten sizes too big, and Tony just wants him safe, wants him happy. Doesn’t want him to have the kind of pain he’s already sent his way.

Peter shakes his head. “It’s far from great. I gotta—well, it’s gonna have a better ending now.”

Tony ruffles Peter’s hair, and is granted a tiny smile.

Then a portal opens up just to the side of where Thor is sitting. A portal, in the living room.

“What in fresh hell?” Happy exclaims, twisting around and nearly falling out of his seat again.

Tony knows what this is. He’s seen this kinda thing coming from one magical asshole and the aforementioned magical asshole steps right through the portal, brushing himself off and looking around like he isn’t sure he’s in the right place.

“Alright,” Happy says, looking at Pepper. “We really need a superhero protocol. What if one of you that can do this shit gets mind controlled? Chaos. We’ve got Tony back, we need to protect him—”

“*So sweet,*” Tony makes the robot say.

“Tony is the precise reason why I’m here,” Stephen Strange says, closing the portal behind him with a flourish. He still looks the same as the last time Tony saw him, cape and all. Tony gets up but Strange is already rushing to him, rounding the corner of the couch at the same time Tony does, not paying attention to anyone else here.

“Uh, yeah, not surprised there, that’s why everybody—” Rhodey starts.

“Tony,” Strange says, cutting him off, a little out of breath. “We need to speak.”

Tony narrows his eyes.

“*No shock?*” the robot asks, sounding accusatory as it rolls around the corner. “*No hugs? No soliloquy on how much you love me? I know we didn’t get a lot of time together, Doctor—*”

Strange just looks at the little black orb like it hardly fazes him. He meets Tony’s eyes again. “We need to speak alone.”

“Alone?” nearly all of them exclaim. Even Bucky. Tony tries not to fucking laugh. He feels crazy again. He’s almost getting used to it.

“Uh...” Peter says, getting up and stepping closer to Tony. “What Happy just said about mind control...”

“I assure you, I’m of perfectly sound mind,” Strange says, hardly looking in Peter’s direction.

“Tony can’t talk,” Pepper says, standing up but still not moving from behind the couch. “Physically, he can’t. That’s why there’s, uh, a robot, if you were wondering—”

“That’s fine,” Strange says, and he really sounds serious, more so than usual. It all feels really weird to Tony and it makes him a little nervous. He tries not to show it, and he also tries to hide the fact that he’ll probably share whatever the hell Strange tells him anyway. At least with Pepper. He turns and nods at the group of anxious faces, and then he motions for Strange to follow him, gripping the robot’s remote in his hand as it rolls along behind.

Tony takes him into the hallway and down into one of the guest bedrooms, which he’s sure is going to be occupied at the end of the night. They step inside and the robot pops up a bit trying to get onto the carpet, and then Tony pushes the door closed. He never really pictured himself alone in a bedroom with Stephen Strange, but apparently in this new world, everything is possible.

Strange puts his hands on his hips and looks at a loss for a moment, which is surprising considering his previous focus. He shakes his head and sighs.

“Before I, uh...I am glad, I’m...I’m very glad to see you, Tony,” he says, nodding. “Your sacrifice, it’s...you’re...well, I’m glad this was the outcome.”

Tony doesn’t know how to *be* right now, faced with this, and his mind is rushing in too many different directions, like one of those choose your own story books he used to get lost in on long car trips when he was little. He can tell whatever Strange has to say, *really* has to say, past this embarrassing and heartfelt introduction, is important.

“*What happened?*” Tony has the robot say. “*I’m happy to be back. Real glad to be not dead, but I feel like there’s something rotten in Denmark with you.*”

Strange sighs. “About a week ago, we had a break in at the sanctum. Usually we’re able to stop those kinds of things before they even begin, but this person—persons, we aren’t sure—they knew what they were doing. They wiped out all my security, they moved like a shadow in the night, I didn’t know that what they took was gone until almost a full day later, then I realized what had happened.”

Tony’s heart is beating wildly.

“*What did they take?*” the robot asks, rolling back and forth anxiously of its own accord.

“A book,” Strange says.

Tony’s face falls.

“*A book?*” the robot asks, and it almost sounds like it’s trying to yell. “*You’re freaking out over some reading material?*”

“A spell book,” Strange says. “The likes of which you’ve never seen or heard of before. The kind of thing I feel very negligent for letting out of my sight, despite the fact that it may have been the reason you’re back with us.”

Tony stares at him, putting the pieces together.

“*Wait,*” the robot says, and Tony can feel his voice rising again. Kind of like a geyser warming up and getting ready to shoot into the sky. It almost gives him hope. “*Wait,*” the robot says again, and Tony would give fucking anything to be the one saying it.

“I don’t know for sure,” Strange says. “But it seems like the most likely conclusion. I’m still trying to work through my encrypted backup files, but I do believe that whoever stole this book did so with the intention to cast the rebirth spell and bring you back to life.”

The sentence hangs in the air like the dawn of an oncoming storm, and Tony feels frozen, stuck weak and in this moment where he knows more but not enough, little bits of light peeking through the darkness, but he can’t connect them.

Magic. Of course it had to be fucking magic.

“It’s been said this is the spell that Merlin used to resurrect Arthur. So you’re in good company, if I’m correct. And the coincidence of the timing leads me to believe that I am.”

Tony shakes his head and feels a little sick.

“But this spell,” Strange says, clearly priming to make him sicker, “well, from the lore that surrounds it, it’s dangerous. Most of the information is lost, I’m trying to find out more, but it hasn’t been used in a millennia for a reason. One detail I do know...it tries to test the strength of the person that’s resurrected. Their worthiness of being back in the world, after being lost to it. And hearing about your voice, well—it’s essentially confirmation, for me. Anybody who knows anything about Tony Stark knows he’s a gifted orator.”

Tony snorts without meaning to, nearly chokes for the second time today, even though they’re talking about fucking magic spells and coming back from the dead and goddamn King Arthur and Merlin and shit. He feels. Absolutely insane. He came back from the dead, and he left his mind in the ground.

“*So you think...*” the robot starts, and even though he’s controlling it, half the time it feels like it’s speaking on its own and he feels an involuntary and irrational pang of jealousy. “*So you think...*” he makes it say again, “*that whoever stole this book—*”

“Must have known the rebirth spell was in it,” Strange says, pacing a little bit towards the dresser and back again. “They knew I had it, they knew enough to get past my defenses, and their intention was to bring you back, despite the danger surrounding the spell. It’s too much of a coincidence, that this happens and then you come back. It had to have been stolen for you.”

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There isn’t much to say, after that. There haven’t been any real confirmations or denials on anything, all day, and this is no different. Just an air of heavy suspicion, new ideas and possibilities. He knows Strange’s place is under strict lock and key, his own set of magic spells holding just about everything in place, and he wonders who the fuck was able to get past that sight unseen. He wonders if they stole other things, stole the book for him, to bring him back, or for some other reason, and he was just an afterthought. It can’t be that, it’s a big goddamn decision, unless they’re bringing people back willy fucking nilly, and if that’s the case he doesn’t think he’d even make the shortlist.

Strange leaves, and assures Tony he’ll keep him in the loop with further developments. Tony is already planning on trawling the surveillance cameras on Strange’s street for the last week, searching for fingerprints they could have left behind, and he’s gotta do some serious goddamn research on this rebirth spell or whatever the hell it is and see what kind of dirt he can dig up.

But first, he has to get some fresh air into his lungs before it kills him. He decides to go up to the roof without telling the others—the press helicopter is gone, and he knows he won’t be long. He leaves the robot in the elevator, and it almost seems like it’s watching him when the doors close. He feels the itch to name it, bouncing back and forth between a dog’s name like Ginger or a human name like Arnold. He feels like he needs to run it by Peter first before making any rash decisions.



He likes thinking of dumb shit like that, instead of magic and death, and unsolved mysteries. Some kind of fucking spell that's trying to make him prove his worth in the world since he's been brought back in it. Of course it takes his voice, of course it does. He feels like there's a version of himself that's locked up in the core of his chest, rattling chains and slamming on bars and screaming to be let out until he can't breathe anymore.

He can hear his voice. He can hear it rumbling in his throat, he can feel the vibrations on the tip of his tongue. Maybe he is fucking strong enough. Maybe he just needs a push in the right direction.

And he gets it when he opens up the door to the roof and steps out, getting a big old eyeful of Peter goddamn Parker standing on the ledge of the building, looking down.

Tony's heart leaps into his throat and it's like everything shifts into hyper drive. It's not Spiderman, there's no suit and that means there's no excuse, it's just Peter, Peter in danger, Peter close to death, Peter without the suit and if he falls that's it—that's it—Tony would need his own goddamn fucking rebirth spell book because he won't let the kid stay dead, no way, no goddamn way, they already fucking know that for sure—

He rushes out towards him with fear in his heart, fear of losing him, fear of spooking him, fear of making the wrong move. His eyes are straining and his chest is tight and his body is having a hard time keeping up with the way his mood keeps swinging.

And then he yells. His voice comes back with a vengeance, everything he's feeling in this moment latching onto it and yanking it back up and into the air. With the word that means the most right now, with the word that has to be said to get his fucking attention because Peter in danger just doesn't fucking fly with Tony. Not before. Especially not now.

So he yells.

“Peter!”

So loud he hardly recognizes his own voice. And Peter turns, his eyes wide, shock all over him.

And then he grins.

## Chapter 5

Tony doesn't think about how the wall in his head is torn down, how he just said a word—his first word!—no, right now, the thing that's mattered most doesn't matter. Right now he just surges forward, grabbing Peter's arm and yanking him off the ledge.

"What are you doing?" Tony yells, tugging Peter away, closer to the middle of the roof where Thor apparently landed, because there's a giant, burnt spot there. But that doesn't fucking matter right now either. Tony's eyes are wild as he searches for answers in Peter's face, but all he finds is lots of shock and surprise. "What the hell are you doing, Peter? Trying to give me a goddamn heart attack?"

"Oh my God, I've never been so happy to have you yelling at me."

"Peter!"

"No!" Peter says, shaking his head vigorously. "No, no, I was trying—"

"You were trying?" Tony asks, cocking his head to the side. "To—what? To what, Pete? Decorate the sidewalk with your insides? Give the press something else to talk about?"

"I wanted to—freak you out!"

Tony pauses. "Excuse me? Is this the fucking Twilight Zone?"

Peter sucks in a breath, shaking his head. "I wanted to see if—if maybe—you know how you scare someone to get rid of their hiccups? Well, well—I wanted—"

Tony stares at him, and he opens and closes his mouth a couple times. He feels like this whole moment is happening in a vacuum, and he doesn't know how many times he can think he's crazy before he officially loses his fucking marbles. He laughs, because it's so stupid, because it actually goddamn *worked*. He shakes his head, and laughs again—really, really laughs, because he can. He reaches out, taking the kid's shoulders and shaking him. Peter looks startled, like a deer in headlights, but he smiles a little bit when Tony keeps laughing.

"You—you are such a little shit, Parker," Tony says, punching him in the arm lightly. "That is—you are so—you are such—how the hell did you even know I was coming up here?"

"I was creeping around after I saw Strange leave," Peter says, struggling. "I could, uh—I know you used to come up here, when you wanted to get some air, have a moment alone—I could tell where you were gonna go, so I went around and got up here first."

Tony grits his teeth, still shaking his head at him. Then he steps forward, wrapping an arm around Peter's shoulder and pointing a finger in his face. "Never. Ever. Again. You hear me?"

"Yes," Peter says, fast. "Sorry, sorry, I—"

“No, nope, no apologies,” Tony says. “But if I ever have to see you standing on the edge of a building again I will swiftly return to the nice box you guys decided to bury me in, you got that?”

“No, no,” Peter says, looking a little horrified. “Bad, bad, that’s the last—last thing I want.”

Tony stares down at him. “Goddamn lunatic, hiccups—you’re the worst. The absolute worst.” He tugs Peter into a big hug and finally the world seems to open up. The day is bright around them, giving way to a cool night. Peter Parker is *not* trying to jump off a building, everyone he loves is downstairs and he’s got his goddamn *voice back*.

“Tony,” Peter breathes, holding onto him. His voice breaks on the word.

“It’s okay, kid,” Tony says, rocking them back and forth. “Don’t worry, I’m not—how can I be mad? Shit—I can go on and on and on now, just like old times. My favorite, forcing everybody to listen to me.”

Peter laughs a bit, pulling away and looking at him.

“C’mon, Spidey,” Tony says, pulling him towards the door. “Would you like me to regale them with your startling plan or do you want me to make something up? Considering it did give me my voice back, I’m willing to be flexible.”

Peter sighs, looking down at their feet as they head towards the roof door, which Thor clearly did fuck with when he broke in earlier. “Yeah, uh—yeah—I guess you can tell them.”

“Yeah, they deserve to hear that you’re an evil genius,” Tony says, grinning and tugging him a little closer. “Who woulda guessed?”

The robot is still waiting for him in the elevator, and he’s definitely not gonna abandon the little guy now that he’s got his voice back. He and Peter decide that Neo is the perfect name, and Tony decides that Neo is gonna continue being his voice as a distraction before he announces their new development, which is decidedly more exciting than their last major one.

He hears them chattering amongst themselves from down the hallway, and Neo rolls along in front of Tony and Peter.

Pepper turns around and looks at them. “God, we were getting worried,” she says. Her eyes land on Peter. “Where were you two?”

“On the roof,” Peter says, raising his eyebrows.

“*Just wanted to get some air,*” Tony has the robot say. “*Ps the robot’s name is Neo now, so I wanna hear some respect. If he’s anything like his namesake he’s gonna save us all.*”

“Noted,” Steve says. “I actually enjoyed that movie.”

“Everything fine with Strange?” Rhodey asks, and he’s sitting with his hands behind his head like he’s pretending to be comfortable. “Guess he swept out of here real fast, he didn’t even

come say goodbye.”

Tony definitely isn’t completely prepared to tell any of them what Strange told him, because yeah, he suspects each and every person that’s sitting in this room right now. Even Pepper. He can see Pepper learning all kinds of shit to get into the sanctum without being seen. Shit, they could have all done it together.

*“Yeah, it’s good,”* Neo says. *“He was just—sending his regards, catching me up on some business, it’s all good.”*

Rhodey looks at him like he doesn’t believe him, so Tony needs to distract them with something more exciting. He steals a look at Peter, and Peter tries to suppress a grin.

“So,” Tony says, clearing his throat and rubbing his hands together. “We need to put together this press conference. I definitely want to do it here, and we’re gonna pick and choose who we invite based off who was more shamed by Steve’s speech and Bucky’s very eloquent use of the word ‘fuck’.”

He grins. They all turn around, fast, like there’s a fire. They’re staring at him, eyes wide and mouths open, and now it’s their silence that’s deafening. He wants to keep this moment forever, he wants to have it painted or etched somewhere. He laughs, coughing slightly and looking down. It’s almost too much, all of that directed at him.

“Holy *fuck*, Tony—”

“Oh my God, oh my God—”

“Tony! Tony!”

“Oh—oh shit—oh shit—”

“What the hell? What happened, what—”

“You just got it back? Right now, just now?”

“Jesus Christ—”

“No—how—what—”

“Say something else! Say something else!”

They all talk over each other like they’re in a goddamn cartoon and the last one comes from Thor, who’s beginning to get out of his seat with pure excitement in his eyes. They all start arguing with each other but they’re still smiling and it’s one of the stupidest and sweetest things Tony has ever seen in his life. Peter beams with absolute delight beside him.

“Alright,” Tony says, holding up his hands. “This one, here,” Tony says, grabbing Peter’s shoulder and hauling him closer. “He decided to treat this like a bad case of the hiccups—and scared the shit out of me by pretending he was gonna jump off the goddamn building.”

Then all their shock is shifted to Peter, both Natasha and Clint looking like disappointed parents, Pepper and Happy more disturbed, Steve concerned. The others might look a little proud, Tony can't tell.

"Listen, it worked!" Peter says, holding his hands up. "And I have good balance!"

They all mutter a little bit, but Rhodey definitely looks proud now.

"Wow, Pete," Rhodey says, shaking his head. "Wow."

"Alright, I definitely think I've earned a full group hug, at this point," Tony says, holding out his arms. "And prepare yourselves for the indefinite sound of my voice, I'm never gonna shut up. I'm gonna be singing, I'm gonna be reciting poetry, the works."

"I think we're all good with that," Pepper says, as they all walk around the couch and approach him with arms wide open. Surprisingly, the rest of them mutter their agreement.

"You need to sing Donna Summer again," Steve says, smiling wide. "That's one of my favorite memories of you."

Tony snorts. He barely remembers that memory. Only Steve wheezing and Clint yelling at him to shut the hell up.

"Maybe *someone* will let you finish this time," Natasha says, elbowing Clint in the gut as they scoot up close to him.

"Yeah," Clint says. "I definitely will this time."

"And poetry," Rhodey says, grinning something evil. "Tony wrote some...very special poetry back in college—"

"Okay," Tony says, grabbing him and pulling him closer. "Let's not. Let's never."

They were all never really the huggy types. Tony definitely wasn't, but there's nothing more he wants right now than this. They all swarm around him and Tony knows Peter loves this shit, loves hugs, and he presses himself close as soon as he's able, Natasha coming up behind him. They all hold each other tight and sigh in quiet happiness, and Tony grins hard, his cheeks hurting.

"This is wonderful," Thor's voice rumbles. "Group hugs. What a beautiful sentiment."

"This is somewhere I never...ever pictured myself," Bucky says, and he's somewhere back behind Steve.

"Well you're here, buckaroo," Tony says. And he's glad for it. He rubs Pepper's back, listening to Bruce laugh when Clint pokes him in the side. "Alright. Just—one more full minute of this, and then dinner and press conference talk. It's gonna be short and sweet, tomorrow morning. No goddamn questions. But tonight, sleepover."

He hears a camera sound, and then Happy clearing his throat.

“Hap, did you just take a picture of this?” Tony asks, grinning.

“Yeah,” Happy says, easily. “A selfie. For me and the kid, I know he wants one.”

“Thank you,” Peter says, still tucked up against Tony’s side.

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Tony sort of. Doesn’t stop talking. He voices every concern in his head, down to comments about cracks in the walls, what kind of rice is better, critiquing Pepper’s new furniture choices and picking apart old episodes of *I Love Lucy* that they’re watching instead of the news. Tony and Peter video chat with May for a bit while Pepper and Happy set up the press conference, and Tony isn’t filled with dread anymore about the whole thing. Apparently, he’s got his strength back.

He watches everybody closely and kind of feels like he’s in a game of Clue. Was it Peter with the candlestick in the study? Rhodey with the revolver in the billiard room? Steve with the dumbbell in the library? Thor with the fucking book in the sanctum? Tony doesn’t believe Thor can do anything without pomp and circumstance, so he pretty much counts him out. But the others—all of them—are still on the suspect list. He doesn’t know why they wouldn’t tell him. Guilt for stealing? Worry because the spell is some ancient, dangerous shit? Fear that something could still go wrong?

Tony watches the looks in their eyes, for anything that could give them away. He knows it could be them—or some random fucking person in the rest of the world. A villain who wants to bring him back just to kill him again. Someone that wants to use him like a science experiment. Someone who wants to know what it looks like on the other side.

His head hurts when he thinks about it for too long.

They order Thai food for dinner and apparently the delivery guy seems really depressed that he only gets to drive up to the first checkpoint. After they eat Tony sets everybody up in their rooms, and finds out that Steve and Bucky only need one bed.

It sends him into a strange daze, and he almost feels like he’s gonna lose his goddamn voice again. “Oh,” he says, clearing his throat. “Oh, oh—okay, follow—follow me, right down here, get you something, uh—not two Queens—I *mean*—one king bed. One king bed, c’mon down, phew, right over here.”

He takes them a couple doors down and opens it, stepping aside.

“Thanks, Tony,” Bucky says, not looking at him. “I’m gonna grab the bathroom real quick.”

“Sure, sure,” Tony says, and Bucky leaves Tony alone with Steve. There’s a brief—but substantial—silence, but Steve has a little smile on his face. “So this—this is a thing,” Tony says, chewing on his lip.

“Yeah, I didn’t wanna—it didn’t feel like the real time,” he says, leaning on the doorframe and crossing his arms over his chest.

Tony mimics Steve's stance. "How long has this been a thing?"

"Since...about a week after you di—left us," he says, briefly looking down at the ground. None of them really like to say the word die or dead in reference to him, which feels like a nice gesture.

Tony cracks his jaw. "I'm happy for you," he says, nodding, trying to pretend this isn't blowing his mind. "You deserve it, you guys deserve—you know—relationship. I'm just—wow—this really is a whole new world. Captain America lives in Canada and he's in a relationship with a man. You know, I'm glad, I'm—I'm glad I'm back to see this. You know, you. Happy."

"I'm glad you're back, period," Steve says. He looks very young for a second, eyes tracing over Tony's face and his shoulders like he's still not positive on this whole thing. "Uh, I just—I never, ever thought 'retirement' would be an option for me, but after what happened to you—well, it was just—it was too hard, Bucky didn't want any more danger for me, Natasha and Sam didn't either...it still—it's still difficult, knowing there are things I could be helping with and I'm just—sitting in Canada like an asshole—"

"I get it," Tony says, fast, his throat a little tight as they both avoid each other's eyes. "Shit, I don't know what I would have done if it had been you, or any of the others—you saw what happened to me when it was Peter—"

"And all that, too," Steve says, finally looking up at him. "I feel like—I mean, we did all have that time where it was like we were frozen, stuck in our pain and the impossibility of it all—but we did fix it. And I feel like we should have—well, there's a level of shame there, too. That we were able to do such a thing, bring back half the world but we haven't—we couldn't—for you—"

"But you did," Tony says. "Or someone did." He holds out his hands, gesturing to himself. "Here I am in the flesh, back to be a pain in everyone's ass."

"Whoever it was," Steve says, staring at him. "We owe them a great debt. The world just—it isn't the same, it isn't right without you in it. I don't want to experience it again."

"Me either, Cap," Tony says, effectively crossing Steve's name off the list of potential suspects. "Dead just...didn't really suit me."

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He really feels like he's in Clue, now. He feels like he needs an actual list. He's gonna ask Pepper, straight out, and they're good at reading each other so he feels like he'll be able to tell as soon as he presents the idea to her. He walks down the hallway to say goodnight to Peter, pushing the kid's door the rest of the way open.

"Hey, you in here?" Tony asks.

"Yeah, yeah," Peter says. "I'm right here."

Tony steps inside just as Peter is pulling his pajama shirt on, but it's just enough time to catch sight of the new scars and bruises on his chest. Usually the kid heals up so fast that scars and shit don't really have time to form on him, so Tony crosses his arms over his chest, leaning against the wall inside the room. "What the hell is all that?" he asks. "You've been here this whole time, what are you, fighting invisible bad guys? Beating yourself up? Don't beat yourself up." He's trying to sound lighthearted even though his heart is panicking.

"Oh, these?" Peter says, patting his chest and purposefully not pulling his shirt up to look at them again. "That was actually from the day before yesterday like, late at night. I stopped this mugging but the guy was a real dick, it was pretty hard to take him down but I finally got him to the police station. He cut my hand too, he had a big knife!" Peter holds up his palm and Tony sees a very faded pink line across his skin, something he chastises himself for not noticing before. It's so light, he can only see it because of how the overhead hits it, and it looks like it's healing better than the ones he glimpsed on Peter's chest.

"He did that to you?" Tony asks, narrowing his eyes.

Peter nods. "Sucks," he says. "Things happen, but they should be gone probably by like tomorrow night or something." He stands there, nodding. "Man, I'm so glad you can talk again."

"Me too, so I can tell you I hope you're being careful," Tony says. "We haven't gotten to properly—well, buddy, tomorrow after the conference sometime I just wanna sit down and talk about everything. I want you to tell me everything, every little thing you've been doing since I've been gone. Grades, this project, and don't mind me if I cry like a little bitch during that conversation, by the way, I'm already anticipating it."

Peter snorts, looking down at his feet.

"College plans, we gotta talk about that—I don't wanna pressure you but I wanna help." He tries to think of everything he was thinking about when Peter was gone and the world felt lost, everything he thought the kid would never get to do again, or do in the first place, the kind of shit that made him throw up and get close to collapsing under the weight of his own sorrow.

"Okay," Peter says, nodding.

"I wanna know about Ned, MJ, that idiot Flash and whether he needs a stern talking to from Steve or a beat down from me, either or, we can provide. Uh—your favorite new snacks, whether you're still eating that shitty wicked trail mix blend or if your taste has gotten better. Favorite TV shows, books, movies—the weirdest encounters you've had as Spidey and if any of them need to meet Iron Man too, you know."

Half of him, most of him, regrets how he treated Peter in the beginning. He was already attached and he didn't want to be attached, so instead he hoarded data about the kid like a squirrel but didn't return his phone calls. But then eventually that façade crumbled, and now he just wants to hear every little thing the kid has to say, whether he's talking about the new Lego thing he's built with Ned, some shitty Mexican pizza lunch at school or a dude in a Nixon mask breaking into his ex-wife's apartment. Everything. All of it.



“Iron Man—you’re—you’re gonna—you’re gonna be Iron Man again?” Peter asks, and Tony can’t tell if it’s excitement or panic in his voice, or his expression. “I mean. You are Iron Man, always, like I said before, but—but—”

“Not quite yet,” Tony says, and he hasn’t really thought about it, not in depth anyways. He is only one day old. Well, one and a quarter, almost. “But yeah, I’m gonna. I doubt I could ever stay away.” He clears his throat. It fills him with dread, and it fills him with need. He was dead, he’s been fucking dead for seven months but now he’s back—and he’s not gonna be able to stay still for long. There’s nothing wrong with him. And even if there was—he’d do it anyway. “Now, I need you to go to bed, kid,” he says. “We gotta be up early. You know what you’re gonna wear?”

“Yeah, I still have that suit here,” he says, and he looks down at his feet, and from the expression on his face Tony thinks the suit in question might be *the* suit he wore to Tony’s funeral, which makes him sick to think about, so he decides not to.

Tony steps forward, getting a little closer to him. “You’re doing okay, right? The whole roof thing...was just you being a pain in the ass, right? Nothing...nothing more than that?”

“No, definitely not,” Peter says, fast, and from his tone and the way he’s looking at him Tony can tell he isn’t lying, at least about this. But that doesn’t mean he’s okay.

“You’d talk to me, right?” Tony asks, trying to read Peter’s eyes. “If anything—I mean, kid, I understand things have been hard, I do, and I’m sorry, I’ll never stop being sorry—”

“Don’t be, it’s not—”

“It is,” Tony says, definitive. “But I’m here now, okay? I don’t want you—hiding shit because you think I’ve got too much on my plate, or because you think I’m gonna get pissed off—I don’t, and I’m not. This whole deal—it just reminds me of what’s important, what’s really, really important—and it’s not silence, that’s for sure, it’s for this little Spider-baby to share every little detail of his life. Full stop.”

Peter laughs tiredly, shaking his head. He sags forward, pressing his forehead to Tony’s shoulder, and Tony grips the back of his neck.

“So you’d talk to me, right?” he asks again, thinking of Peter on the goddamn ledge, Peter crying before Tony faded away for good. Strange and his talk of the book with some ancient, dangerous rebirth spell that was stolen right out from under him. Tony ruffles Peter’s hair, worrying. About everything. All of it.

“Yeah,” Peter says. “I will.”

Tony nods. He pulls away, smiling down at him, and Peter smiles back, though his looks a little sad. “Night kid,” Tony says. “I’ll see you tomorrow bright and early.” Peter nods and Tony turns, reaching for the door.

“I was worried, this morning,” Peter says. “Uh. That it was all a dream. That I was gonna wake up and you’d be gone and I’d—I’d lose it all over again.”

Tony's heart sinks and he turns around to look at him. Peter lowers his chin and blinks, wearing an honest, open expression.

"You're not dreaming," Tony says, his voice breaking. "And I'm not going anywhere, Pete. You're stuck with me."

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Tony is heading up to his own room, a little worse for wear, when he passes Thor in the hallway. He's wearing a yellow bathrobe that's way, way too small for him—it doesn't even go past his hips, and shows off the orange boxers he's wearing. Tony chuckles at the dude's complete lack of self-consciousness. Even though Thor is already off his list of suspects, Tony has a brief thought that makes him stop him in his tracks.

"Are you alright, Tony?" Thor asks, when he sees the look on Tony's face.

"Yeah, I'm good," Tony says, the two of them circling each other a little bit as Tony takes another slow step towards his door. "I was just, uh—curious—if you ever got your brother back. We didn't get to resolve it when I was still around, so...I was wondering..."

Thor's face falls and Tony really hasn't seen this kind of look in his eyes since he met back up with them in Wakanda, after the goddamn world ended.

"I assure you, he is no threat to us," Thor says, shaking his head. "He's—he's tucked away, he's repentant, the majority of the time he lives his life as a large, Persian cat—"

Tony snorts, raising his eyebrows. "O—okay, yeah, I guess I can see that. But I wasn't really worried about him being a threat, I was more wondering if he might have had a hand in this. Like—this," he says, gesturing to himself.

Thor just looks at him, his brow furrowing. "Oh," he says. "No, I—even though he knows I have great love for you, Tony, I doubt he would do such a thing. And I keep a close watch on his movements and he hasn't done anything out of the ordinary lately—well, out of the ordinary for him. I'm sure of it."

Tony nods to himself.

"Do you know something?" Thor asks, putting his hands on his hips. "Did Strange inform you of something?"

"Sorta, yeah," Tony says, shifting his weight. "I'm kinda—waiting to pass it on to everybody, wanna check out a couple avenues, but you'll know, don't worry."

Thor nods, and his features soften. "Whoever it was is a hero."

Tony grins. "Thanks, buddy. I'm glad to see you too. And you're really rocking Pepper's old bathrobe, I like the yellow on you."

"Thank you very much," Thor says, beaming, looking down at himself. "She said I could wear it for the duration of my stay, I thought it was a very nice gesture."

“She’s the best,” Tony says.

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“Your bathrobe looks really good on Thor,” Tony says, walking into their bedroom and closing the door behind him. Pepper is in bed on her laptop and she snorts, covering her face with her hand. “Don’t play with me, I know you did that for yourself,” Tony says, pointing over at her. “He’s a fine male specimen, I don’t blame you.”

“Please,” she says, shutting her laptop. “I only have eyes for you.”

“Uh huh, and not the hulking God we have traipsing around in a yellow kimono type deal. Sure, I believe that.”

“You’re the worst,” she says, putting the laptop on her bedside table.

“Yeah, I’m well aware,” Tony says, looking at himself in the mirror. It’s one of those moments where he stares too hard at the wrinkles around his eyes, the curve of his lips, his mustache, the size of his ears—and he wonders who the fuck this guy is. All he can think, for a raw broken moment, is *you were under the ground, you were under the ground, you were under the ground*.

“So are you gonna tell me what Strange told you or you gonna hold onto that?” Pepper asks, sitting cross-legged on top of the comforter.

He clears his throat, turning around and looking at her. “Apparently, about a week ago, someone broke into his place and stole this—ancient book, which he knew contained a rebirth spell. They wiped out his security, popped in and out without anybody seeing them, and now here I am. Strange doesn’t seem to know all the details about this thing, but it’s got a lot of lore attached to it, and supposedly it tries to test the worthiness of the person that’s resurrected by taking one of their strengths, so with me—my voice. That’s why Strange thinks it has to be whoever stole this book that brought me back, the coincidences and timing are just...too weird.”

Pepper stares at him for a second. “Wow,” she breathes. “Wow, that’s—”

“Was it you?” Tony asks, flat.

Her face falls. “Me?”

“Yeah, yeah, you.”

Pepper sucks in a breath, sighs. Sorta glares at him. “I wish it was,” she says.

Her sincerity is clear, and he doesn’t wanna say he’s disappointed, but he really, really was enjoying the idea of Pepper heading up this break-in. But he’s gotta remember—this shit is dangerous, this shit is crazy, and he doesn’t know if whoever did it is at risk of any repercussions.

“Rhodey?” he asks. “Peter? Happy?”

“If it was them, they didn’t tell me.” She sighs, looking down at her hands. “Honestly, whoever it was—I wanna thank them. They did something we all wanted to do.”

“Could be somebody bad,” Tony says, shrugging. “Could be some—magical villain that wants to fuck with me.”

Pepper shakes her head. “It doesn’t...it doesn’t feel like that. If that was the case I feel like they would have been waiting, I feel like they would have claimed this already.”

“Maybe,” Tony says, with a sigh.

They’re quiet for a moment, and he’s trying to sift through all his ideas when she starts talking.

“Peter’s been here all the time, since it happened,” Pepper says. “May lets him stay, sometimes she comes and stays too. He’s a little sassy thing, but he’s such a sweetheart, everybody loves him. He’s such a part of the family, everybody knows now, what you saw in him. The rapport, uh—it really grew, between all of us. Rhodey’s been here all the time too, it’s like we were all just...trying to hold onto you, trying to feed off the others’ memories of you. I feel like we all got to know each other better, through the way we hung onto you.”

Tony wipes at his eyes. He’s so glad they had each other, it’s the only goddamn solace, because he knew what he was like when he lost Peter and it was hard to drag him out of that pit of darkness, hard to make him stand up straight and think properly and fucking eat when he was supposed to. So knowing they all had each other eases the pain in his heart a bit. It also makes him miss them more, even though he’s surrounded by them on all sides.

“So you feel like you’d know?” Tony asks, his voice a little rough. “If it was...one of us?”

Pepper stares down at her hands. “I don’t know,” she says. “I hope so, but I don’t...all of us were so desperate, it could have been anyone. It could have been a random person, someone who—who lost somebody in the snap, somebody you brought back to them later. Everybody loves you, Tony, and I’m just—I’m happy you’re getting to see just how much.”

Tony nods, rubbing at his chest. The love all around him lately feels like a physical thing, wrapping him up in warmth and softness, and he isn’t used to it, the overwhelming extent of it. He isn’t fucking strong enough to face it, to protect it, to keep it safe.

He glances over at the clock and knows he has to be at his best tomorrow. He has to get ready for bed—he strips off his pants and pulls his shirt over his head so he’s down to his boxers, and when he looks up Pepper is moving over to him. She braces herself on her knees when she’s right in front of him, and he sees where her attention is focused.

She touches the scars softly, running the pads of her fingers over them. He rubs her arm up and down, reaches up to tuck her hair behind her ear. Her touch makes goosebumps crop up all over his body. She kind of looks mesmerized, and deeply sad.

“When I was, uh—getting you ready for the service I just...I just sat there, for a while with you, and I keep touching these. Over and over again, like...like I could do something about

it, like if I touched them for long enough that they'd go away, that they'd—like maybe you'd wake up.” She looks up at him, shifting her mouth a little bit in an attempt not to cry that he's seen before. She looks down again. “It was just...it was like someone tore a hole in my heart and I just...I just didn't wanna stop looking at you because I...because I knew I wasn't going to be...be able to anymore.”

He tips her face up to look at him. Her eyes are shining with tears and he knows his are too—he leans in and kisses her, holding her face in his hands. She straightens up, pressing into him, wrapping her arms around his neck and running her fingers through his hair. He slides his hands down and around her middle, tracing his fingers up and down her spine. He's kissed a lot of people in his life, but he's never felt at home with anyone like he does with Pepper. She kisses him like she can read his mind, like she knows the way he's gonna move, can feel every beat of his heart, the way his blood is pumping.

Something in his stomach simmers as they press closer together, and he gets onto the bed, the two of them climbing back towards the pillows, never breaking the kiss. Pepper stretches out on top of him and he settles his hands on her hips.

“You're gonna get sick of looking at me, now,” Tony whispers, biting a bit at her lower lip. “I'm just gonna be...hanging on you all the time, it's gonna be really annoying, you're gonna be wishing for those seven months after seven days of me being back here.”

Pepper shakes her head, moving against him a little bit. “I never wanna be apart from you, Tony,” she whispers. “Ever, ever. I never wanna stop looking at you.”

The world is only her, that look in her eyes and the way she feels in his arms. He arches his neck up, kissing her again.

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The press are talking loudly behind the door. Tony can't make out anything they're saying, it sounds like some kind of crazy ass party. And these are the good guys, the respectful guys, none of these guys were outside yesterday and still, they sound like they're gonna bring the house down. He doesn't know how the hell they're gonna get them out of here when it's over. He feels like Rhodey might actually have to put on the suit, like he's been fucking anxious to do since the whole damn group of assholes appeared at their gate.

“You definitely don't have to go out there, kid,” Tony says, clapping his hand on Peter's shoulder. “You can stay right here at the door and we'll meet you afterwards. You'll be able to hear everything.”

“No, no,” Peter says. “I wanna support you, I wanna be there with you.”

“You wanna stand out there with everybody else?” Tony asks. He isn't really sure about it, he doesn't ever like anybody looking sideways at Peter, and he feels especially protective after the fucking video. “You don't have to.”

“No, I want to,” Peter says. “I won't say anything, I'll just stay with the others—honestly, they know who I am, that I'm...close to you, and Pepper, and Rhodey. The paparazzi

followed us around like every day after we lost you, they've, uh—they know who I am, it isn't weird for me to be there."

Tony's eye twitches at the idea of the fucking press following them around when they're in goddamn mourning. He rubs his hand over his face. Well, Peter should get to face them on his own terms, for fucking once.

"You sure?" Tony asks. "Absolutely positive?"

"Yeah, I'm sure," Peter says, holding his chin up high. "I wanna—I'm there, I'm part of this."

Tony stares at him, trying to figure out if he's up for it. "Alright," he says. "But if you want to walk out, you can."

"I'll walk out with you," Natasha says, coming up behind him. "So it doesn't look weird."

"Okay," he says, and they give each other a sort of meaningful look.

"Alright, are we ready?" Happy asks, standing by the door and looking at the group of them. "Security's surrounding the whole room, they're ready to take anybody out who gives us a problem."

"I hope take them out means literally removing them from the room and not removing them from the planet," Tony says, as Pepper walks up alongside him.

Happy shrugs, glancing at the door where all the sound is coming from. "I didn't specify."

Tony sighs, looking back at the rest of them. They're all standing there, dressed up, looking at him expectantly and ready to back his play. He feels like his heart grows ten sizes in that moment, and he turns and looks at Happy. "Alright, let's go."

They push the door open and instead of the dissonant talking gaining volume, it's like all of the voices are sucked from the room. Happy holds the door open and Tony leads the charge, their footfalls loud against the stark silence. All the members of the press stare at him like he has three heads. He thinks it might be a little over the top—he isn't an alien mass murderer, he just spent a little time underground, that's all. It's like they didn't believe he'd actually be here.

He tries not to let their reactions freak him out. This is the first time anyone but his family is seeing him, really seeing him, and it's on the goddamn TV too, even though the camera men only have a lax hold on their equipment as they stare at him, dead-eyed.

Tony walks up to the podium and taps the microphone to make sure it's on, and then he turns to watch the others line up behind him, Peter wedged between Natasha and Pepper near the end of the line. Tony worries for a moment that he made a mistake bringing him out here, marching him out and lining him up with all the other super heroes, but he gets a brief flash of the things Peter mentioned, these goddamn cockroaches following them around when Tony wasn't there to do anything about it, and he grits his teeth. He wonders how much speculation there's been about Spiderman since he's been gone, if anybody has gotten closer

to figuring out who he is. He sighs, trying to tell himself the kid wanted to be here, trying not to listen to that little voice in the back of his head that's saying he should have made him stay behind.

Tony figures they'll figure out who Spiderman is eventually, and the thought makes his whole body feel too heavy, like he's a stone sinking to the bottom of the ocean, unwillingly plummeting through fears and darkness he's never wanted to imagine before.

He watches Peter's face change and he looks stalwart now, casting his gaze over the crowd with a level of maturity Tony hasn't really seen before.

All of them stop in a line behind him and Tony meets Rhodey's eyes, getting that last extra boost of confidence that he needed. He clears his throat and turns to face the sharks.

They're still all quiet, like they're afflicted with the effects of the spell just like he was. But for them, it's a welcome change.

"Alright, uh, this is a very polite class," Tony says, adjusting his glasses again. "Very...nice, waiting for the professor. I appreciate it." Nobody laughs, which he doesn't take as rude, because they're all still staring at him with that shell-shocked expression on their faces, like someone froze them all that way.

Tony sucks in another long breath, taking a look over his shoulder. All of them there, like individual pillars of support, each reinforcing him in their own ways, bearing different parts of the trauma and panic within him. Clint nods at him, Thor smiles, Happy puts his thumb up. Tony turns to face the crowd again, and finally he sees Gary from the Tribune slowly take a photo, his face still a mask of shock.

"Uh, first of all, hey, yeah, it's me. I can tell you right off the bat, the only doctors that are gonna get anywhere near me are Bruce Banner and Helen Cho, and if I need a dentist that's gonna be Doctor Richard Fry in Manhattan, but otherwise, if you're thinking you wanna check this out, see what's going on, do some experiments, think again, because it's not happening." He sorta wishes he wrote this shit down and he gets mad at Yesterday Tony for acting like he was gonna remember everything, but he's still a goddamn new baby, after all, he's got a lot to learn.

He's so surprised they're this fucking quiet. It's starting to freak him out. "Um, second of all—I have no. Idea. How this happened. None whatsoever. I'm gonna do my research, I'm gonna bring in my own liaisons, we're gonna get deep into this, bring it to the surface, figure it out, but right now if you start coming at me with questions about how I'm here, what I did to get here, you're just gonna get a big fat *nothing* from me. I was...I was gone," he says, clearing his throat. "I was dead as a doornail, and then all of a sudden I wasn't. And here is where we get into what *you* did," he says, looking into the nearest camera. He looks around. "Not any of you, in this room—you were the few respectful souls with press credentials, but because some groundskeeper decided to take things into his own hands, my whole terrible, horrible, no good very bad night was broadcast all over the world stage before I could even *think straight*."

He's getting a little fired up and that's good, but he doesn't wanna have a heart attack. He tries to regulate his breathing.

"I get it. You see a beam of light shoot out of the ground, you start shooting a video, you see a guy start climbing out of the ground, you keep filming because God, what's happening here, right? I would have preferred if Mr. Dour had come to my people instead of CNN, but what can you do? But I'd like to share with everybody—one, you exploited this kid—this kid," Tony says, pointing over his shoulder at Peter, "who is like a son to me, who was there mourning, who was there and had to deal with one of the most difficult and confusing moments of his life—you all decided to take that, make money off it, speculate on it, plaster it everywhere just because you could—I hope you're ashamed of that. I really hope you're ashamed of that. None of these people deserved the way you treated them after I died, but this—this was a particular low point that I hope you're able to acknowledge."

He puts his arm down, gripping the edge of the podium. Everybody looks a little different now, more downcast, but they're still quiet.

"And second—I've seen a lot of things in my life. I've been kidnapped, I've been tortured, I've literally been killed—and this—this was like hell on earth, waking up in that coffin. I felt every second of coming back, I felt what it was like to be a corpse, I felt it, it was one of the most painful, insane things I've ever experienced and you exploited that. I just wanted you to know that. If this ever happens again, which it hopefully won't, I trust you'll handle it in a different way." He looks down, picking at his cufflink. "Um. Like I said, I'm gonna...I'm gonna figure this out, see how I got back, see if it's viable—and I mean viable—if this is some kind of life for a life thing, that's not what I call viable. Trust me, there are plenty of people that deserve to be brought back to life more than me, I'm thinking that, I know you're all thinking that, and if the way I got back here is a no strings attached potion or whatever someone had to pour on my grave, like watering a seed or whatever the hell—fine, we'll see what we can do with that. But you know it can't be that easy. So like I said—I do not want anybody coming at me on how to cure death. You know there has to be some danger attached to this, and how it happened," he says, hoping whoever did it is listening, hoping they'll fess up. "And the last thing I want is people putting themselves in danger."

He had expected more interruptions at this point, and he's fucking freaked out at how this is going. He looks around at everybody—some of them look upset, most still look shocked, a few of them are actually crying. He doesn't know what the hell is going on. He decides to keep talking.

"I wanna ask for some privacy, honestly, for everybody on this stage with me and their families. We didn't get off on a good foot with that one but I think you guys can manage it. And I wanna thank these people standing behind me, each and every one of them. They're my team, they're my family, they're the reason I'm standing here able to speak today," Tony says, specifically looking at Peter, and Peter smiles a bit, looking down at his feet. "And they're the reason why I didn't just have a heart attack and die as soon as they brought me home. They walked me through the first early hours of my new life, and they're standing here with me on my second full day, and I actually believe them when they say they don't wanna be anywhere else. I'm—eternally lucky to have such support. I wouldn't be who I am if it wasn't for them, and seriously, guys—leave them alone, leave us alone, let me deal with this



thing on my own time. We don't have a timeline for this, so if you don't see me out there as Iron Man immediately don't act like it's the end of the world, if you see me out there eating cookie dough ice cream and gaining weight, just let it happen, maybe that's my new coping mechanism. I'll keep everybody updated, if you all act like human beings and not rabid animals airing videos of things people don't need to see. Obviously, I would have told you. I wouldn't have hid this. You think I could have stayed in the shadows forever? Taken on a new identity, changed my hair? If you do, you don't know me as well as you think you did. I do want to thank everyone that did respect normal boundaries, which is why I chose everybody in this room to get this scoop first. But I'm not gonna take questions, not right now, because honestly I can't deal with it, I'm just a child." He gets a little laughter out of that, and he smiles.

"So, uh, thank you," he says. "For listening, for not shooting me on sight, I know how we all are about zombies—and thank them," he says, gesturing behind him, "for being the strongest and most wonderful people, Gods, super soldiers in the whole universe. Alright, I'll keep everybody updated."

He starts to walk away from the podium. He doesn't really know what he was expecting. Maybe some yelling, yeah, a lot of yelling, questions he couldn't answer that he already said he couldn't answer, way off topic bullshit that might set off another one of those killer headaches, but instead—the only unexpected thing that happens is Janice Nichols from the Times warily standing up, staring at him.

"Janice," Happy says, stepping forward slightly. "He said no—"

"It's not a question," she says.

She was never too hard on him in the past, so Tony narrows his eyes, still drawing strength from the way everyone is standing there with him, Rhodey and Steve ready to follow the second he steps down.

"I just, uh—I wanted to say thank you," she says. "For what you did, for—for everything you've done, all along. You didn't deserve what you went through and I just—well, thank you, Tony. Thank you."

She nods at him, emotion in her eyes, and Allan Boxer from the Observer shoots out of his seat and starts clapping. It only takes a second for Janice to start clapping with him, and then the whole Times section starts clapping, the guys from CBS start too and they're hooting and hollering like they're at a goddamn concert, and the whole room erupts in it, which has never, ever happened here.

Tony has to get the hell out.

"Alright, thanks," he yells, smiling awkwardly as he heads towards the door. Happy holds it open and the others follow close behind, Rhodey's hand on Tony's back.

Once they're all back out and Happy shuts the door, Tony can still hear the clapping.

“What the hell is this?” he asks, gesturing towards it. “*Remember the Titans*? I’m sending Neo out to these things from now on.”

“Is that a film where someone comes back to life?” Thor asks, and he looks excited.

“No,” Clint says, angrily, before Tony can answer. “I wish.”

Tony rubs his eyes, and he feels really weird. Displaced. Now everybody knows. Now he’s officially in the world again. Now they’re all gonna be watching, waiting, and they won’t be clapping forever.

“I wanna do a checkup in a second here, Tony—” Bruce says.

Tony hears Bucky and Steve whispering to each other.

“You okay, Tones?” Rhodey asks.

Tony can still hear them clapping. But they won’t be forever. Not forever.

“Tony?” Pepper asks.

Tony wants to have that conversation with Peter. He wants to sit each of them down, one by one, and conduct interviews to find out how they’ve been doing while he’s been away. His mind is a scatterbrained mess. “I need to start researching,” he says, letting his hands slide down his cheeks. He’s already behind, he’s gotta look up more shit on this spell, if he can even find anything. And he hasn’t even told them yet. And he still doesn’t trust them, when it comes to this. He can picture his list in his head.

1. ~~Pepper~~
2. Peter
3. Rhodey
4. Happy
5. Bruce
6. Natasha
7. ~~Thor~~
8. ~~Loki~~?
9. Clint
10. ~~Steve~~
11. ~~Bucky~~

And numbers twelve through four hundred and sixty eight are all random villains that he knows nothing about and maybe himself from the future. He sighs. “I’ve gotta start researching,” he says again, looking around at them. “I gotta—do some tracking, read the papers, see what new assholes have cropped up, see if there’s anyone in particular that loves Iron Man a little too much and might wanna do this—”

“Tony,” Natasha says, from next to Peter. “What you need is some beer. Some video games. Some pizza. Some quality time with us. That’s what we want, right?” she asks, looking around.

“Yes—”

“You should relax—”

“But Peter doesn’t get beer,” Steve says, raising his eyebrows.

Peter rolls his eyes.

“Yeah, kid, we’ve seen you drunk,” Bucky says, and for some reason Tony’s heart goes a little warm at the idea of Bucky hanging out with them at their mourning parties.

“I’m not good with margaritas, but that’s it,” Peter says.

“Yeah, and Pina coladas,” Rhodey says, with the look of a man who’s seen some Pina colada related incidents.

“And daiquiris—Jesus, we’re negligent,” Pepper says, pinching the bridge of her nose. “I’m surprised May hasn’t killed us all.”

“We can start the research tomorrow,” Natasha insists. “But today, let’s just—that was big, you did an incredible job in there and you just—you deserve some normal without this hanging over your head.”

Tony looks away, nodding. The press on the other side of the door are seriously still clapping, and Happy is typing something on his phone. Peter looks anxiously at his hands. Bruce is looking at Tony expectantly, probably eager for that checkup. Clint says something quiet to Steve and Steve looks concerned. Bucky actually seems to have some regard for Tony now, which makes Tony wonder what he’s learned about him in the interim. Thor is happily gazing around at all of them, and Rhodey claps his hand on Tony’s shoulder. Pepper leans in and kisses Tony’s cheek.

Tony needs to know who did this. He feels his panic rising in his throat, because part of him knows it wasn’t some asshole who did this, or the president of the Iron Man fan club. Part of him knows it was someone he loves that did this.

And part of him thinks there’s more danger attached to it than he knows. Much, much more.

# Chapter 6

## Chapter Notes

One more after this. I love you guys. Thank you so much for the response. Remember I'm iron--spider on tumblr if you wanna yell at me about anything!

So they relax, once they get all the press off the premises. So they do things that make Tony feel like a kid again. They sing karaoke, and watching Thor belt out *I Will Survive* is up there with Tony's favorite memories of all time. Steve singing *Tik Tok* is close behind. They eat tacos, they actually make an entire taco bar that transforms this into one of those all day hangouts like they used to have in the beginning, when the Avengers were first getting established. Tony thinks he eats like, six tacos in the first twenty minutes. He loses track after that.

They make daiquiris too. Peter gets a virgin one, even though Tony thinks he sees Bucky of all people sneaking the kid some tequila. *Note: don't tell May.* They watch *Die Hard*, and Natasha and Clint critique the logistics of climbing through the air vents, which they've apparently both done before, separately and together. Then they all watch *Slumdog Millionaire* for some reason and everyone cries, like they haven't been doing enough of that lately. Thor and Bruce start the movement on trying to recreate the ending dance, then Rhodey and Happy jump in, and Natasha sits on the bar countertop with Pepper and just *judges*.

So they relax. So they play around and eat and drink too much. So maybe Tony and Pepper make out in the hallway like teenagers. So maybe Peter beats everybody in pool which sets off round after round of everyone trying to take down Spiderman. But everybody—everybody—is smiling, and maybe Tony gets distracted. Distracted, for just a moment, from the fact that a week ago he didn't have this. Any of this. He didn't have anything. A week ago, he was moldering, full of worms, his skin caving in. A week ago they were still missing him. And now there's this. Life. Love. The kind of love that they're finally letting loose, and he doesn't get it and he's afraid of it and he's never wanted anything more.

But there's a looming danger. He should have known he'd come home to a looming danger. When is there not a looming danger? But then again, he didn't even know he'd be coming home at all. He never meant to die.

They take an hour to answer the respectful notes of shock, sympathy and happiness that flood into Tony and Pepper's inboxes, and Tony doesn't know why it makes him fucking emotional that his e-mail is still active. There are hundreds of unread messages, and he can tell a bunch of them are along the lines of the letters he has sitting on his bedside table, the letters that are living in his head, the words that hurt most repeating themselves in an endless loop. He can see a long line of *Pepper, Pepper, Pepper, Pepper* then *Peter, Peter, Peter, Peter, Rhodey,*

*Clint, Rhodey, Pepper, Happy, Natasha, Happy, Rhodey, Pepper, Happy, Peter, Bruce, Bruce, Steve.* Tony doesn't even think of opening any of them, not right now. There's evidence of seven months of pain everywhere, like a gossamer sheet with too many threads he needs to count. He still hasn't even scratched the surface of it yet.

Pepper reactivates Tony's phone, and as soon as he finishes setting it back up he gets a call from Vision, as if he sensed the new method of communication. It's as emotional as Tony has ever heard the guy sound, and Wanda keeps jumping in from the background to let him know they'll be here in the next couple of days.

He also gets a call from Sam Wilson, but this one comes through on Bucky's phone, which Steve is currently using since his is still broken.

"He's calling for me?" Tony asks, at close to ten o'clock that night. "I wasn't aware he knew who I was." Tony can barely hear himself speak over Clint and Happy singing the goddamn *Grease* duet, and he meets Pepper's gaze. She rolls her eyes, probably way, way tired of all this singing. He knows Peter has filmed *all of it*.

"He isn't aware of who anybody is," Bucky says, and he definitely has a little red in his cheeks from the amount of alcohol he's consumed. But he's just like Steve, and none of it really makes him *drunk*.

Tony takes the phone out of Steve's hand. "Hello, this is the Polar Express."

"Is this Conductor Stark?" Sam's voice asks.

"Yes sir," Tony says, smiling.

"Jesus, uh—wow, wow, man. This is dramatic, even for you."

"I know, right?" Tony asks, looking up. He sees Natasha bringing Peter a bowl of ice cream, and handing Pepper a full package of Oreos, which she takes nonchalantly, like this is a normal occurrence. "You know, I like to keep everybody on their toes. I hope you were surprised."

"Oh, yeah, definitely," Sam says. "But for real, man, I'm—I'm sorry it took so damn long for me to call, you know people have actually been asking me if I'm involved, since I wasn't standing on that stage—"

Tony narrows his eyes. "Oh. Really? That's weird." He pauses. "Were you?"

"Did I bring you back from the dead?" Sam laughs. "I wish I had. Shit, I've never seen Nat like that. And I've seen her run a good gamut of emotions in all the time we were cooped up close with Steve, but that...losing you sent her through the ringer, man. Steve was bad, but she was worse."

Tony hums a little to himself, looking up, watching her yank the microphone away from Clint and tossing it to Peter. She's been a little hard to read this whole time, save for that very first

expression of watery shock. Tony clicks his tongue, and he raises her a little higher up on his list.

“So yeah, I woulda done it for them. Shit, Tony, if I had the ability to bring people back—well, I’d be using it liberally, I can tell you that. So would a lot of other people. With that whole viable thing—stick to that, or some wacked-out shit could start happening, even if people do have good intentions.”

Tony swallows hard. “Trust me, I’m gonna keep a lid on it if it’s even a hair dangerous, which I have a bad feeling it is. I know people are gonna be pissed off at me but I just...” The only thing his mind keeps repeating is dangerous. Dangerous, dangerous. He wonders if something is buried in his head, something related to the spell. He wonders if there’s an invisible wire connecting him to whoever cast it, if there are any kind of indicating markers that only he could recognize.

“I trust you to be good about it, and if you share with the right people I’m sure you’ll be able to shift some of the inevitable blame that doesn’t deserve to go your way,” Sam says. He sighs. “People get into a strange frame of mind when they think they’re capable of doing something they’re not supposed to do, especially if it could help someone they love. So hopefully everybody keeps that in mind when it comes to all this, however you got back here, before they get into that frame of mind themselves.”

“Yeah,” Tony says. He feels like he’s done enough relaxing, at this point. He needs to figure this goddamn shit out, and try to protect whoever did it. If he still can.

“Well I’ll let you go,” Sam says. “I’m really glad you’re back with us, Tony. I know we’ve been on opposing sides in the past, but I—shit, I never wanted you to die. Iron Man is Iron Man, y’know? We all wish you were immortal.”

Tony smiles a little bit. “You getting sentimental on me, Wilson?”

“Shit, no. Don’t know what you’re talking about.” He blows into the receiver a little bit, makes a couple stupid noises. “Oh—I’m losing you! I’m losing you!”

“I’ll catch you later,” Tony laughs. “You better come visit or I’ll find a way to clip those wings.”

“Visit—gonna visit—oh—bye Stark!”

“Bye bird boy.” He hangs up and turns around, handing the phone back to Steve.

“Sounded kinda serious,” Steve says, narrowing his eyes.

“I guess everything is nowadays,” Tony says, with a shrug. He watches the others then—Pepper and Tasha dancing, Peter and Happy singing *Time of my Life* of all goddamn things, while Peter still attempts to eat ice cream. Tony doesn’t know where the movie soundtrack theme came from. Bruce, Clint, Thor and Rhodey seem to be in some kind of chugging war, and Tony knows he’d pay good money to see Thor genuinely drunk.

“What’s wrong?” Steve asks, stepping a little closer to him.

“Nothing,” Tony lies. He pictures more asinine rules this spell could have attached to it that Strange doesn’t know about. The person who casted it dying seven days later. Them having to kill someone else if the person they resurrected lives for another full year. Some kind of oncoming, physical pain that they thought would be worth it.

He pictures them all fading away, like he saw on Titan. Like Peter did.

~

Three hours later he’s the only one awake, or at least he thinks he is. He doesn’t know how anybody didn’t get cabin fever, and he kinda feels like shit for keeping them inside. He knows they could have gone out, but the press is already holding themselves back—Tony can’t really imagine they’ll be able to continue that if they actually see him out in public. If they see all of them together.

Tony knows everybody has to leave sometime. Peter is already missing school, Rhodey and Bruce helped him get his assignments done quickly earlier so the party didn’t need to stop, but May isn’t gonna let him stay here forever, and the school is eventually gonna stop allowing him to miss despite how everyone evidently knows how close Tony and Peter are. The idea of letting any of them go makes him feel dizzy and weak. He feels like a clingy asshole. He has a hard time giving himself the benefit of the doubt even though he probably deserves it here, and he knows he should probably talk to Pepper about the whole thing so she can reassure him.

Everyone is passed out in the living room. Natasha and Pepper are on the pull-out bed, Clint and Rhodey are both attempting to share the goddamn lounger, Bucky has his head in Steve’s lap, Thor and Happy have their heads together and Bruce is half on, half off the pool table.

Peter is on the ground between the couch and the coffee table, and Tony decides that he better tend to him first, then Pepper, and he figures the others can either sleep out here together or make their ways to their rooms when they wake up. They don’t have anything planned tomorrow. Well, *they* don’t. Tony has a date with his computer so he can set FRIDAY back up, and find as much shit on this spell as physically possible. He’s gotta get acquainted with all the new baddies, and everybody who his death affected most, outside of this room. He’s done relaxing. He feels the need to crack this case in his bones.

He bends down next to Peter and shakes his shoulder gently. “Hey, buddy,” Tony whispers. “Get up, drunk.”

Peter’s brows furrow and he turns his face to the side. “Not drunk,” he says. “Had like—two shots of tequila, that’s it.”

“Yeah, that’s two too many,” Tony says, bracing his hands under Peter’s arms and hauling him up. Peter groans but goes easily, leaning against Tony when he’s back on his feet. “Jesus, did you gain weight?” Tony asks.

“You don’t ask somebody that.”

“In muscle, I’m sure,” Tony says, smiling down at him. “C’mon, I gotta get you and Pepper to bed and decide if I’m gonna do the same for everybody else. Buncha babies.” He steers him out of the living room and towards the hallway, and Peter is doing that weird sleepy walk where he’s dragging his feet against the ground, his head hanging and his whole body swaying in Tony’s direction.

“You can leave ‘em out there,” Peter mutters. “We used to—before Steve moved, we’d all crash out there like that,” he says, as they turn into the hallway. He braces his hand on his own chest. “May too, a lot of the time. It was kinda like...we didn’t wanna take our eyes off each other.”

Tony clears his throat. Another glimpse of those painful months. “You called her to say goodnight, right?”

Peter nods. “Yup. Before the—fourth championship pool game.”

Tony snorts. He realizes he’s holding him kinda tight and he loosens his grip on Peter’s shoulder. They walk the rest of the way down the hall and stop in front of Peter’s door. Peter turns and looks at him, a little clearer than a couple moments ago. “You were the best today, at the press conference,” he says. “You always know what to say, it was...so cool.”

“Thanks, kid,” Tony says, and he’s pretty proud of himself, too. “Hopefully those guys can chill the hell out for the time being.”

Peter hurls himself forward, hugging Tony tight. Tony rests his chin on the top of Peter’s head and closes his eyes. *Please tell me if it’s you. Please, please tell me. I won’t be mad. We’ll figure it out.*

But Peter stays quiet. He pulls back, smiling. “Night, Tony.”

“See you in the morning, Pete.”

~

Tony takes Pepper to bed, and then he decides to help them each one by one to their rooms, which he gets chastised for by more than half of them, though they don’t reject the help and the closeness. Not even Bucky, who Tony takes before Steve, earning a few smiles and unattributed *I’m sorry’s*.

He sleeps for ten hours. And when he wakes up, Peter is gone.

Tony has weird pains before he even opens his eyes. His chest aches, his hand hurts, there’s a pulsing in his head that he knows Bruce would love to hear about. But he doesn’t want this shit to be too good to be true, his being back here, so he doesn’t say it out loud, not yet. He just shifts onto his side with a little groan, towards where he can feel Pepper laying.

“You’ve been asleep for a long time,” she says, carding her fingers through his hair. “Before you notice on your own and start freaking out, Peter’s not here.”



Tony pops one eye open. “Why?” he asks. She sounds too calm for him to panic, but the inclination is definitely there.

“He peeked in here earlier and let me know he was gonna go see May, grab a couple things from home and then come back. You can text him in a bit and make sure, but it’s fine, he’ll be back in a little.”

Tony feels fucking selfish for a second because he wants the kid here, but he knows he can’t hoard him, keep him away from May. But he can’t help but feel a little off, knowing Peter isn’t hanging around. He nods, rubbing his chest. Directly over the scars. He wonders if they should hurt like this. When Bruce checked him out yesterday he was still frustratingly ‘perfect’, so Tony isn’t exactly sure what’s going on.

“You okay?” Pepper asks, running her fingertips over his forehead soothingly. “Got a weird look.”

“Yeah,” Tony says, and he figures honesty is the best route here. “Just a couple aches and pains, but I’m gonna...let Bruce know, see what he says. Is everybody else still around?”

“Yeah,” she says, looking slightly worried. “Maybe you should get up and tell him right now. Maybe, for my peace of mind.”

Tony sighs, taking hold of her hand and kissing her knuckles, the center of her palm. “You think?” he asks, eyes flicking up to meet hers.

She nods. “Yeah.”

Tony scoots a little bit closer, peering up at her. “We’re gonna worry about every broken toe now aren’t we?”

Pepper looks at him incredulously. “Broken toes are a level five emergency,” she says.

Tony scoffs. “What’s a level one?”

“Bent fingernail emergency, little scratch emergency, scuffed knee emergency.”

“Everything is an emergency?” he asks, smiling.

She nods. “And that’s just the physical chart. We have an emotional one too.”

He shakes his head, the new aches suddenly covered over with something fine and deep, struck red and glimmering. Like her. He seriously doesn’t know how he ever got this woman to stick with him. Even after all the shit he’s pulled. Even after death.

“You think you’re gonna tell the others about the book any time soon?” she asks, absentmindedly sliding her fingers through his.

He has to. He knows that. Hopefully once he gets all of their individual reactions, he’ll figure out how to move forward. “Yeah,” he says. “I think I will today.”

~

Bruce looks quizzically at him. “And it’s localized where your scars are?” he asks.

“Yeah,” Tony says, putting his shirt back on. “And my hand hurts a little bit, feels like a cramp, maybe? Is all that weird? I feel like everything is weird.”

“Yeah, it sort of is,” Bruce says. “But that doesn’t necessarily mean something is wrong. Physically, you’re still in ship shape, so this has to be related to something we haven’t encountered yet. Something having to do with why you’re back. Maybe related to the voice thing, and why that happened. Which is good and bad. Because we don’t know anything about it.”

Tony clicks his tongue. “Maybe, I, uh...have something else to tell you.”

He watches Bruce’s face as he tells the story Strange shared with him about the book, and Bruce hasn’t ever really had the ability to hide the emotions in his face, and this doesn’t look like acting to Tony. There’s no anger there (thank God) but there’s that familiar shock, horror, Bruce’s eyes widening in pure disbelief.

“Why the hell didn’t you mention this before?” Bruce asks. “He told you this when he came here?”

“Uh, yeah,” Tony says, feeling a little bit like he’s being chastised by a teacher. “I was sorta...holding it close to my chest, seeing if I could determine—”

“You were trying to investigate things on your own, huh?” Bruce asks, stepping back and putting his hands on his hips. “Trying to implicate one of us?”

“Implicate?” Tony asks, raising his eyebrows. “It’s not implicate. What’s that word? I mean, yeah, I can’t really picture you breaking in anywhere, but I’m not trying—”

“I didn’t,” Bruce says. “But you would know that if you’d shared this, wouldn’t you?”

“Alright, don’t hulk out on me,” Tony says, pressing his lips together. “I just—I don’t know, I don’t wanna freak anybody out any more than they’re already freaked out. And plus, yeah, I think—”

“That it actually could be one of us,” Bruce says, sighing. “I mean. I get that line of thinking. And honestly...yeah, it probably was.”

Tony cracks his jaw.

“Or Strange could have done it himself, and he’s just lying to throw you off his trail,” Bruce says.

Tony’s brow furrows. “Huh,” he says. “Interesting.”

Bruce shrugs. “It’s insane, either way, but I guess...I guess I don’t know what I was expecting. But I really do think this is something you should have shared right off. Jesus,

Tony—he says he doesn't know more details? Other than the strength thing?"

"And that the spell is super-duper ancient and medieval and I'm probably connected to King Arthur by a blood bond now or some shit," Tony says. "He said he's looking into it, and I gotta start doing some research myself. I would have yesterday if it wasn't for Natasha insisting on us relaxing. As if singing karaoke and drinking too much is actually relaxing."

"It is for some people," Bruce says. He stares at Tony for a second, like he's trying to work out a problem in his head. "Tony, this...this completely changes how I should even approach everything from a medical standpoint. There could be...any number of side effects we don't know anything about. We can't really anticipate anything."

His words make something boil under Tony's skin. "Yeah, you're really driving the point home that I gotta get started on this shit." He hops down off the table, rubbing his chest. Thankfully, the pain is a little duller now. For some reason, he knows it's not his heart. "Don't, uh, spread that book info around," Tony says, over his shoulder. "No rumors."

"You really need to share this!" Bruce calls. "We all need to be in on this!"

"In due time!" Tony yells, walking out and into the hallway. He pulls his phone out of his pocket and shoots a text to Peter.

*You think you can pick up donuts on the way back here? I'll pay you back! I'm sure I still have money somewhere... :D*

~

Tony reboots FRIDAY, and he's reminded that he's way too attached to his damn robots and AIs. But Neo seems to be making good friends with Dum-E and U, which makes Tony inordinately happy.

He makes a list of all the newest bad guys, and it's surprisingly short. Some guy that can shapeshift, which presents some disturbing prospects. Some guy who can live underwater, which just feels entirely unnecessary. Some woman with a scream that can break people's eardrums, which makes Tony a little nervous, but she hasn't shown up too often save for some threatening bank robberies. There are a few terrorists, evil masterminds, but most of them are either dead or in jail, a few of them taken down by people inside this compound right now. There's some dickhead that gave Peter trouble called Osborn, but he's been in jail for the past two months.

No one really sets off any alarms, and Tony's whole list feels wrong for this situation. Tony stores all the info anyway and puts trackers on their movements just in case.

The rebirth spell doesn't wield results either. He gets a bunch of general shit, nothing that seems like it has anything to do with the one in the stolen book. He nearly rolls his eyes into oblivion when he gets results about World of Warcraft, and almost gives up altogether. He dives into his contacts, searches through library databases, some classified shit, government branches, and he wishes he knew more dudes like Strange and Wong so he could cross-reference more relevant information. He finds some vague mentions of it in some Wiccan

manual, but the spell itself isn't there. Only the fact that it's 'dangerous' and can suck the spell-caster dry if it's done incorrectly.

Tony doesn't really know what that means. It makes him wonder if there's someone dead out there. Some random person who risked it all for him and messed up somewhere, mispronounced some fucking Latin word or something and fell through the cracks while he was rising up.

He hates not knowing. It makes him want to claw his goddamn face off. He spends hours combing through archives, hacking into encrypted servers, trawling message boards, connecting everywhere that might have some kind of information or explanation. He feels like he's gonna have to travel to get it, to ancient tombs or fallen castles, turn into a regular goddamn Indiana Jones in an iron suit.

Pepper comes in a couple times to bring him food, Rhodey and Happy hang around outside the door, and Tony still doesn't tell anybody else about the book. He's starting to wonder why the hell he's keeping the information to himself. Like he wants them to come to him on their own, like he's afraid of saying it out loud to somebody else. Like he's afraid to get the truth. He doesn't fucking know anymore. His chest still hurts and his brain is a jumbled up mess. It's hard piecing any of his thoughts together, and he doesn't know if that has to do with being back from the dead or if it's just who he is, who he was before he left and who he'll always fucking be.

He wants to know who did this.

Even Bruce thinks it's one of them.

He realizes he never got a text back from Peter and that strikes the wrong nerve. He hums a little to himself and grabs his phone.

*Hey bud, I know it might be disconcerting getting messages from this number, but I'd like to inform you that I'm going to be very clingy for the next couple of years for numerous reasons you're aware of, so please shoot me a message to let me know you didn't die. Sharing is caring.*

More research. More hovering, and this time it's Thor, who casually touches and nearly breaks everything in the lab, and informs him that Peter still isn't back. When he leaves Tony finds even less information, somehow, and runs into webpages where people are actually discussing how he came back to life. Thankfully most of the messages are kind, happy that he's back, but none of them get him any closer to finding out about the spell. He wishes he had the fucking wording of the thing, that would be a lot easier to search and trace, but of course nothing about this is easy.

Still no word from Peter, which effectively turns on the panic switch in Tony's head, even though it's only been a couple hours. Neo is hovering around him like a nervous mother and Tony scoots back in his rolling chair, sighing down at him.

"Don't look at me like that," Tony says, to the round black orb.

He chews on his lower lip for a second, and then he calls May. She answers on the first ring.

“Wow,” she says, laughing a little bit. “It’s very strange to get a call from this number.”

“I know, sorry, I should have warned you,” Tony says. He’s really gotta remember that. “That nephew of yours hanging around? He needs to know that I’m more sensitive than usual so every time he ignores one of my messages, I lose a year off my life.”

There’s a brief silence. “Peter hasn’t been here for a while,” she says. “He just ran in earlier, grabbed some stuff, and said he was gonna go see Ned before he headed back over there. Is he not with you?”

Red flags. Alarm sounds.

“No, he’s not here,” Tony says, rubbing his eyes.

“Wonderful,” May says.

“Should I worry?” Tony asks. He worried, back in the day, when this shit would happen. That’s why he tracked the kid like a lunatic, why he eventually started calling him whenever his heartrate went up a notch or whenever he veered away from his normal schedule. But it’s been seven months, and Tony doesn’t know what’s changed. Dynamics are already different with Peter and the others, he’s probably different on his own, too.

“I always worry about him,” May says. “But he does—he does do this. He has been since we lost you—it was really hard in the beginning, I’d chew him out and then he’d get upset and I just—he was constantly hurting, it was hard to juggle it and how to handle it. Therapy didn’t really work, and I just—he knew I was worried, so he tried to call, he’d get all weepy and apologetic when he forgot, but—I just had to—sometimes I’d crack down, other times I’d just pray he was fine and he’d call me back soon. Spiderman doesn’t help, and he dove into that more—it’s been hard to handle all of it.”

“Christ,” Tony says, his voice breaking. He messed up by dying. He really fucking messed up.

“I’ve been wanting to discuss it with you, but every time we’ve spoken he’s been there,” she says, and she sounds sad. “Peter’s...he’s lost so much, and every time I feel like he’s gonna crack under the pressure, but this is the closest he’s come to breaking, I think. It’s all been piling on. He was talking about karma, things like that.”

“He’s got a guilt complex bigger than mine,” Tony says.

“Which I know is saying a lot,” May says. She sighs. “I mean, you’re back now, he’s seemed brighter since it happened, so much—we talked last night and it’s the most optimistic I’ve heard him be in a long time.”

Tony’s heart is aching. “I’m sorry about all of it.”

“Guilt complex,” May says. “Come on, Tony.”

“I should have been more careful.”

“Tony,” she says. “You know better. If you blame yourself for dying I’m gonna come kill you again myself.”

He shakes his head.

“Hopefully he’s just with Ned,” she says. “He forgets to charge his damn phone all the time, so it could be that too. I’ll message Peter, you call Ned, we’ll compare notes.”

“Alright,” Tony says, his throat tight.

“And Tony Stark—no goddamn blaming yourself for any of this, alright? Or I’m calling Pepper and everybody else I know is there and I’ll get them to kick your ass for me.”

Tony snorts. “Even Thor?”

“Especially Thor. I’ve talked to Thor on the phone before. I’ve had drinks with Thor!”

“There are so many stories I need to hear,” Tony says.

“Yeah, well, when we get together for lunch I’ll tell ‘em,” she says.

“Deal,” he says. “I’ll let you know what I find out about the kid.”

“Same,” she says.

They hang up, and Tony calls Ned. After a few *oh my God Mr. Stark you’re calling me’s* and disjointed run-on sentences about his recent resurrection, he finds out that Peter was with him, but breezed out of there about an hour ago, which only adds to Tony’s nerves. He hangs up on Ned and finds out that Peter isn’t answering for May either.

Tony is close to a fucking panic attack. Neo is still rolling around him enough to put a goddamn groove in the ground, and Tony gets up, ready to go to the others and admit everything to everybody. All about the book, how much he’s freaking out about Peter. And he plans on revealing Peter as his number one suspect. This sudden disappearance is nailing in his suspicions. But maybe it doesn’t mean anything. Maybe he did forget to charge his phone. Maybe he’s just off doing some Spiderman shit.

But wouldn’t he have told them?

Tony checks the news, checks Twitter, but doesn’t see anything about Spiderman.

It’s too much. Too much in the dark, too many unanswered questions, too much panic and nervousness and possible impossible things. He gets up, heads for the door, and he hears a portal open up behind him.

He twists around and sees Strange standing there, the portal already closed. Still so weird, but whatever.

“You got something?” Tony asks. “Please tell me you’ve got something. And I’d prefer if it was something good, I need a jolt right about now.”

But then he gets a look at Strange’s face. It reminds Tony of that moment on Titan, when he’d seen their millions of failings, and the one opportunity they had to win. One, out of millions.

He doesn’t beat around the bush. “The spell puts significance on the number seven, which pops up in a lot of theological texts,” Strange says, voice low, like someone else might be listening. “In the bible, seven is the perfect number. It’s the day God rested. So this spell...it will only work correctly surrounding sevens. Seven months, seven days, seven years. The spell is precise, which is why it rarely works.”

Tony’s heart is racing. “Rarely works?”

“This is an unwritten rule,” Strange says, standing there stiffly. “Another reason why this spell is so dangerous. It doesn’t reveal itself. Others only came to this conclusion by following cases, those that worked and those that didn’t. And those that didn’t...they come back half corpse. They come back braindead. They come back and suffocate on their own blood an hour later. Anything can happen, and everything has. You were lucky. Seven months. She stole the book a week ahead of the anniversary, she could have done the spell any time between then and now and been within the margin of error of the seven months. I believe that if it had been cast more than a week before or after, that it wouldn’t have gone correctly.”

“Wait,” Tony says, closing his eyes before slowly opening them again. “She?”

Strange looks serious. Not angry, but there’s worry and resignation in his eyes. “It was Natasha Romanoff, Tony. Wong and I were able to get the footage. She made it difficult, but we were able to break through. She was on her own. And now I know I need to put more fail safes in place, to stop someone of her caliber.”

Tony shakes his head. He rewinds every moment they’ve spent together since she got here. Sam’s words echo in his ears. *Losing you sent her through the ringer*. The break-in does feel the most like her, and out of everyone she’s definitely the most capable of pulling it off. The earth feels different, now that he knows, like he can feel it shifting beneath his feet. She did this for him. She changed the world’s rules for him. He believes it and he doesn’t. All he knows is that he needs to fucking talk to her.

“Shit,” Tony breathes, his chest aching a little more than it was. “Uh, okay. She’s here, uh...I don’t know, I’ll pay for anything she damaged, I know you’ve got a lot of weird magical shit just hanging around in there...”

“Tony,” Strange says. “There’s more, I...I found out more about the spell. What it costs. And these are things she knew, things that were in the text.”

The moment is too fucking loaded. “What?” Tony demands. “What? Tell me.”

“First of all, it marks the spell caster, usually in a way that mimics the death of the resurrected,” Strange says. “So if they died in a fire, the spell caster will get burns. If it was a

nasty car accident, the wounds will be the same. Usually in the same place.”

“Jesus,” Tony says, his stomach turning.

“But worse yet—”

“Worse?” Tony exclaims. “C’mon, Doc—”

“The spell takes from the one who casts it, whether it’s executed correctly or not.”

“Takes what?” Tony asks, his heart beating in his ears.

“In your case—in hers—seven months. The spell takes the amount of time the resurrected person has been dead off the spell caster’s life. So if someone has been gone ten years, the spell will fail, the resurrected person will come back wrong, they probably won’t remain alive, and the ten years will still be taken from the person who casts the spell. So Miss Romanoff has knowingly given up seven months of her life to bring you back into the world. She’s lucky her timing is good, so the sacrifice was not in vain. Only the sevens prevail. I can only imagine those who choose to give up ten years of their lives for the entire thing to fail. It’s difficult to think about. ”

Tony—feels sick. He feels like he’s gonna throw up, pass out. One month is too much, one second is too much—but seven goddamn months? Off of her life? He can’t think, and he can’t believe all this insane shit he knows now that he didn’t know moments ago. Unwritten rules. Horror. Sacrifice. The impending goddamn doom he felt clinging to him. Here it is.

He can’t believe it. This spell was too dangerous, it could have easily been a fucking nightmare—one month ahead of time and...and...he gets flashes of what could have been. Dirt in his eye sockets. Half formed lungs. He could have been a walking, decomposing corpse before it killed him all over again. He has no idea. He has too many ideas.

And seven months. Natasha gave up seven months.

“She knew she was giving up months of her life?” he asks. “She actually...chose that?”

“I was able to locate the wording of the original text,” Strange says. “She was well aware. It’s very simple and very clear, that particular point.”

“Okay,” Tony says, covering his face with his hands. “Okay, okay. Is there anything we can do, to...to, uh...give her the months back?” God, he doesn’t even like saying it out loud. All of this makes him feel sick.

“Not that I know of,” Strange says. “I knew you’d ask that, so I looked into it. No one ever succeeded, but they did try.”

“Yeah, well, they didn’t try hard enough,” Tony says, heading towards the door like he was before Strange got here and blew this whole goddamn thing open.

There’s a fire in his veins. Stoked by panic. Natasha. Natasha. He has to goddamn talk to her right now.



“Stick with me,” Tony says to Strange, without even looking over his shoulder. He feels like a machine, he feels like he has blinders on, he definitely feels like he’s gonna have a heart attack.

He turns into the hallway and sees Clint coming down the stairs.

“Alright,” Clint says. “We’re gonna order pizza, so I think it’s just about time for your self-imposed—”

“Where’s your partner?” Tony asks, cutting him off. He truly feels like he’s gonna fucking explode. He should have known he’d lose his shit when all of this came to light. He can’t place any of his goddamn feelings right now. He doesn’t know if he’s mad, he doesn’t know if he’s grateful or guilty. He doesn’t know if he’s gonna have a goddamn panic attack, because the idea of Natasha giving up seven months for him is unimaginable. He doesn’t know how it works, but he knows this kind of magic is probably woven in with the universe, connected to every time and date and event, and he gets a flash of one of their normal nights together and Natasha just fucking dropping dead. Tony wants to stop death for all of them, not invite it closer, and he nearly cries when he makes eye contact with Clint. Because he knows she didn’t tell him, not the details, anyway. He doesn’t think Clint would have encouraged such a decision, even if it did bring Tony back.

Clint narrows his eyes. “We’re still all camped out in the living room, why, what’s—”

“Just gotta—have a conversation,” Tony says, making for the stairs. He doesn’t see Clint turn and notice Strange, but he does vaguely hear them start talking. His head is fuzzy and he doesn’t concentrate on what they’re saying, and he doesn’t even know what the hell he’s gonna say to Natasha—it’s all said and done, set in stone, and he doesn’t know why he wants her to take it back. He’s here, he’s alive because of what she did, but seven months, seven goddamn months off of her life, he can’t believe it, he has to ask, has to ask her *why*—

It’s like she knows he’s there for her when he walks out of the hallway, and he’s fucking losing it, running around like a bull in a china shop, and they can all see, they’re all concerned—and Peter still isn’t fucking here. Jesus, Jesus, he’s gotta call him again, he’s gotta find him too, but Natasha, first Natasha—

“Tony,” Pepper says, worry in her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

Tony watches Natasha’s expression when she sees Strange, like she’s trying not to give anything away. But it’s too late.

“Did he portal in here?” Happy asks, irritated. “Jesus Christ, guy, c’mon—”

“Tones,” Rhodey starts, but Tony is essentially single-minded.

“Natasha,” he says. “Can we talk?”

“Tony—”

“What’s going on—”

“One sec, guys, we’re good,” Tony says, trying to make himself sound normal, but he’s seeing red, he’s panicking, seven goddamn months for *him*.

Natasha gets up and Tony makes a quick decision, half wanting to take the conversation off his own hands and half needing Strange to explain it because he doesn’t know if he’s gonna be able to make real words soon because the panic is eating away at him.

“Uh, Strange—can you, uh—tell them about the book, the whole deal,” Tony says, meeting his eyes. “You can explain it better than I can.” Strange nods, and the whole group starts talking over each other, asking questions, but Natasha grabs Tony’s arm and takes hold of the situation, dragging him away from the noise and the yelling and out onto the back balcony.

She pulls the door shut, leaving them in silence, and turns to face him.

“You know?” she asks, her eyes intent.

He feels tired all of a sudden. Like now that he’s in front of her he doesn’t know how to be, doesn’t know how to speak or discuss any of it. He leans against the door and laments all of it—every fucking thing—and he wishes he could have been strong enough not to die in the goddamn first place so they could have avoided this whole shit stain of a situation.

He looks down at their feet. “Why did you do it?” he asks, swallowing hard. “Shit, Romanoff, seven goddamn months? For my worthless ass? I thought it might be you but you’re one of the more sensible ones in the group, I would have thought that trade would have made you bail right out—”

“Tony,” she says, and she sounds nervous. “I messed up.”

“Uh, yeah, you messed up,” Tony says. “I get that you missed me, I’m touched—”

“I did take it,” she says, breathing a little faster. “But it wasn’t—God, Tony, I did miss you. We all did. I felt like I failed you, I was too far away there in the end, I wasn’t there in that moment when you needed me, and we were separated for so long, and I’ve had so many regrets in my life, so many opportunities to fix things and I’ve missed them, so when he told me about this book, where it was—when he came to me asking for help I knew I had to, I knew I had to help him, to help you...”

Everything seems to slow down.

“He’d been looking for so long, searching every avenue for something, anything, and I helped him, I was the only one that knew, and when he found out about the book—I just got it, I went in, I found it,” Natasha says, her voice full of emotion, and all of the information comes out in a waterfall. “I wasn’t thinking straight. I took care of it so no one could stop us, keep us from doing it but I didn’t—he wanted to do it himself, he was desperate for it to be him and I didn’t—I never got to read the spell myself—”

“Who...who’s he?” Tony asks, even though he already knows, even though the creeping realization is settling over him like a death shroud. He looks up into her eyes.

“I made a mistake,” Natasha says, wavering. “I shouldn’t have let him do it, I should have done it myself—I didn’t know enough about it, but I just stole it for him, I let him—”

“Are you talking about Peter?” he asks, quiet, and everything hurts.

There are tears in her eyes. “He’s been avoiding me since,” she says. “I had a feeling there was something more to it, that it—that it demanded something of him that it shouldn’t have—he wouldn’t tell me—I could tell from how he was acting, I’ve been trying to get it out of him but he won’t budge—”

Tony sways on the spot. He can’t breathe. He can’t think. This can’t be happening. Not Peter. Not this.

“We did it for you, Tony,” she says. “We couldn’t—we couldn’t let you stay dead, we fucking couldn’t. That kid, he—”

“That kid gave up seven months of his life to bring me back,” Tony whispers, and his voice sounds far away. “And now he’s—now he’s not answering his goddamn phone.” Everything feels cold, and it’s almost like he’s back in that moment when he pulled himself out of the ground.

Peter knew to be there.

The cut on his hand. The scars on his *fucking chest*. In the same place where Tony’s are. Oh fuck, oh fucking fuck.

“I’m so fucking stupid,” he breathes, covering his face with his hands. “I’m such an asshole.”

“Tony, I’m—Jesus, I should have done it myself,” Natasha breathes. “Jesus, I’m so sorry.”

It all makes sense. The way Peter’s been acting. Everything. The voice thing threw him off. He wasn’t expecting it. He was expecting Tony to come back, but not that. A hiccup in his plan. He doesn’t know the unwritten rules. He doesn’t know how lucky he was, in his timing.

Peter fucking did this. He was desperate enough to step into this danger, this darkness, with reckless abandon, no thought for himself or what could happen. What would happen. Fuck. Fuck.

He just wanted Tony back.

“It’s not your—he’s—shit, he’s got us all wrapped around his little finger, I get it,” Tony says, and it’s muffled behind his hands. “He has scars on his chest—my scars, I saw them—Strange said that was part of it too, the spell gives the caster the death markings or whatever—Jesus Christ, I should have known, they didn’t look like they were healing properly, I wasn’t goddamn thinking—”

“He cut his hand for it,” Natasha says. “I know that.”

“But that one was healing,” Tony says, and he feels like he’s losing blood, like he’s bleeding out, like he’s gonna drop any minute. He’s way too dizzy, and everything still hurts. “The

scars—shit, they're probably permanent." He tries to breathe. His chest still hurts. He gets the fucking hand cramping thing now, like he's feeling the cut too. They've got some kind of weird connection going on. But why is it flaring up now? "Did you see him when he left?" he asks, pulling his hands away from his face.

"No, I didn't," she says. She looks at a loss. "Tony, I'm so—"

"Don't be," Tony says, shaking his head. He isn't about the guilt, especially here, with this, after what is essentially a selfless act from both of them. He knows what Peter's like, and if he wants to do something, he'll do it. "I just don't trust him, I don't trust why he's gone right now."

"Call him," she says. "Leave him a really depressing message. Tell him you know."

Tony nods. They both know Peter's not gonna fucking pick up.

Seven months. Seven months off Peter's life. Tony braces his hand on the railing and sucks in a breath, feeling Natasha's hand on his shoulder. He nods, his vision going blurry. He fishes his phone out of his pocket.

Three rings. Then voicemail. He's clearly being ignored.

"Peter," Tony says. "I know what you did, buddy. I know what you did and I'm—I know what it cost." Tears prick at the corners of his eyes. "Jesus, Peter—I don't—I don't know what to say to you." He's deeply fucking sad, every part of him drowning under his own failings. How could he let this happen to Peter? His fucking kid. With all the light and hope surrounding him, and Tony dragged him here. He took from him. "Peter, I—" he gasps, shaking his head. There are no words for what's happened here. He's back, he's back with the people he loves, and Peter gave him that chance. Peter gave up seven months of his life to do that. Peter risked everything for him.

"Please call me," Tony says, his voice breaking. "I need to talk to you, I need—I need you to come home, okay? It's okay. It's all okay, we're gonna figure it out, we're gonna—we're gonna fix this in a way that—that makes me stay, but I just—I gotta see you, kid. Come back, okay?" He swallows around the lump in his throat and hangs up. He wipes his eyes.

"He was in such a bad place, Tony," Natasha says. "He's such a good kid, he's lost so much —"

"I know," Tony says, turning around. "I wish I coulda—done better by him. Not pushed him into this kind of shit. I just—every time I think about it—" He shakes his head. It makes him sick.

His phone buzzes in his hand. His heart leaps and he looks down. It's a message from Peter.

*Tony. I'm so happy I have you back. I'd do it over and over again, no matter the cost. I'm gonna get the rest of my family back, too. I can't wait for you to meet them.*

“Whoa,” Natasha says, wrapping her arm around Tony’s waist. “Tony, are you—what is it? Is it him?”

She’s holding him up. Because he’s gonna fucking collapse. He keeps staring down at the message to make sure he’s reading it right.

Ben’s been dead for four years.

The Parker’s. Peter’s parents. It must be almost twelve years.

“Tony. Tony.”

Sixteen years. Peter is going to sacrifice sixteen years, for nothing. Because neither spell will work. They’ll come back wrong, they’ll come back nightmares, and it’ll break Peter, it’ll fucking destroy him. A goddamn unwritten rule and he clearly doesn’t know it, he clearly doesn’t fucking know or he wouldn’t risk it, he wouldn’t risk sixteen years to get back corpses, walking dead, suffering, moldering versions of the people he loves that won’t get fixed, that won’t stick around, that will only hurt him and tear him apart. He wouldn’t risk it if he knew. He wouldn’t. He doesn’t know, he doesn’t know, he’s in fucking danger and Tony has to save him, he has to save him.

Tony looks at the message again. This is the worst case scenario. “He’s gonna—oh God—he’s gonna—try to bring his dead Uncle back. His dead parents. That’s like—sixteen years. He’s gonna lose sixteen years. Goddamnit. God—it’s not gonna work and he’s gonna give up that time anyway—”

“Won’t work—”

“They come back wrong unless they’re—unless they’ve been dead in sevens, only worked with me because you guys hit it on seven months.” An impossible stroke of luck. He doesn’t fucking deserve it. “It doesn’t matter, I can’t—shit, I gotta—” He’s panicking, sucking in air, but he has to focus. It’s Peter. He has to solve this shit. Now. There’s no time for anything else.

He pushes out of Natasha’s grasp and meets her eyes. “Did he do it for me in the cemetery?”

“I think so,” she says.

“Alright,” Tony says, setting his jaw and heading back inside. “I’m gonna track his phone, but that’s where I’m heading.”

He’s so dizzy. He feels like the world is ending.

He’s gotta protect his kid before it’s too late.

# Chapter 7

## Chapter Notes

Thank you for your lovely words throughout this journey. Your comments have meant the world to me! I hope you enjoy this ending, and I hope you stick with me in my works to come. As always, you can reach me on [iron--spider.tumblr.com](https://iron-spider.tumblr.com) :)

As soon as the words are spoken and the blood hits the dirt, the years are taken. That's the fucking key, here. Tony repeats it in his head as soon as he hears it, turns and twists it in the depths of his mind until the words lose their shape, lose their meaning and take up another one. *You must save Peter Parker.*

"Strange, we gotta go," Tony says, sweeping back inside with Natasha on his heels. "It's Peter. It was Peter."

"What?" Happy bellows.

"No, he said—"

Strange clearly just finished explaining this whole fiasco to the group of them, and they're starting to do that talking over each other thing that's been happening a lot lately. But Tony shakes his head. He's gripped in a panic, it's like there's a fifty pound anvil living inside his chest. And there's only turmoil in his head, dread, everything coated in red pain and the amount of fucking time they don't have. "I don't know what he told you, but Peter's about to try and bring his fucking dead family back," Tony says. "It won't work, his Uncle's been dead for four years and his parents for twelve, he's trying to shave sixteen years off his life —"

"Twenty eight," Strange says, his face white. "He'd have—you can't pair them—he'd have to do the spell three times."

Tony stares at him. They all stop talking. Tony feels amorphous, like he's fading away into nothing—he doesn't think he's seen such abject horror on all of these faces at one time. "Fuck," he breathes, feeling something like vertigo even though he's standing on solid ground. "Jesus, I just—fucking—lose all sense of math when I can't—I'm not thinking straight—" He claws at his own throat, can't breathe, and he rushes past them all into the kitchen, promptly puking into the sink.

Peter doesn't know the unwritten rules. He wouldn't be behaving like this if he did. He doesn't know that this immense unimaginable sacrifice will be for nothing. For hell, for outrageous pain, for a reckoning that might destroy him. There are so many things Tony has to stop, here. He can't let the kid see his family like this. Strange described some terrible shit,

and he didn't even describe it all. Tony's mind provides him with images he doesn't want, images that send chills up and down his spine and nearly make him puke again. He can't let Peter go through that, he *won't*.

Twenty eight years. Twenty eight goddamn years, it's beyond what Tony can comprehend. Sixteen was way, way too many and that was his fucking pain-addled brain panicking and getting things wrong, but twenty eight is more than Peter has right now. It's a massive chunk out of his life, inviting the grim reaper in far too early. It's almost like he's killing himself.

It's—it is goddamn prohibited. It is not allowed. It is the last fucking thing Tony will allow to happen.

He's gotta help his kid. Now.

"The cemetery?" he hears Clint ask. "Would he really do this shit in broad daylight?"

"He's desperate," Natasha says. "He acted like this before, it's like he's got blinders on."

"We gotta go," Tony says. He quickly washes his mouth out, wipes his face, and walks over toward Strange. "St. Mary's Cemetery, quarter twenty-one—if he's not there I'll use my Peter's ignoring me tech and track his phone whether it's on or not. It takes too fucking long to do it right now, we gotta go—we gotta go, right now."

"Tony, be careful," Pepper says, grabbing his arm and leaning in, pressing a long kiss to his cheek. "I know he'll be fine, he has....he has you."

Tony nods, leaning into her. He knows now, that they've all been properly informed, that they'd argue for fate in this situation. Fate, that the timing for him was good, that everything worked out, but he can't fucking say that to Peter. No one wants to hear anything like that, when you're contending with death and loss.

He turns towards Strange, nodding. He can't look at the rest of them because he's panicking, because he doesn't want to see the fear of his failure in their eyes. Because he thinks he might break under any more reassurances. Nothing can really reassure him here, not with something like this. One of the most important goddamn tests of his entire life. Either of his lives.

"Let's go," he says. He turns his back on the others and watches as Strange cuts a portal out in the middle of his living room. Tony sees the cemetery he's been to with Peter on more than one occasion, but he can't take a moment to get his bearings before he's surging forward, because Peter is there. Peter is there, standing in front of Ben's grave.

Tony has faced so many things, including the big purple asshole that took Peter away from him in the first place, but the solemn line of Peter's shoulders from behind terrifies him in a way he hasn't felt before. Tony can't see if he's cut his hand yet. He can't see if he's started something he can't take back. Tony thinks he might throw up again. The mid-afternoon sun beats down on his head and he feels like a raw nerve, exposed, laid bare for his worst fears to consume him. The team isn't standing behind him now. He has to do this alone, if all of them were here, they'd overwhelm Peter in a goddamn second. He worries he will on his own.

The thick breeze that blows through threatens to bowl him over.

He hears the portal close behind him, and Peter slowly turns around. He's wearing one of Tony's hoodies and he looks like he's about to bolt. Tony looks down, and now he definitely feels like he's gonna throw up again—Peter's already started uncovering the grave. There's a shovel a little behind him, dirt all over his feet, and a small but substantial hole at the base of the headstone. Tony sways a little, his vision dotting with frozen panic, and he can't think straight—all he can register is the fact that Peter is here, digging up his Uncle's grave. If that doesn't scream committed to his cause, nothing does. He thinks he sees the book down there too, but he isn't sure, his brain isn't working properly. Nothing seems real.

Tony's heart drops. Peter is shaking, he's holding onto his own hand and he's shaking, and Tony can see the cut, the blood. His eyes quickly scan over the ground in front of the headstone—he doesn't see any blood there, not yet, he's freaking out but there's no blood on the ground or in the hole or in the upraised dirt, not that he can see.

He has to focus. *You must save Peter Parker.*

He glances back up, swallowing hard, and holds out his hand in Peter's direction. "Kid," he breathes. "You can't do this."

"I have to," Peter says, and his face is red, tears already threatening. There's a family in the distance gathered around their own loved one's headstone, and they have no idea what's happening here. What could happen here. But Tony doesn't focus on them. "Tony," Peter says, eyes wide and intent on him. "I can't wait for you to meet them," he says. "Ben was so great, he was just like you, he was so good with computers and he—he yelled at the TV all the time—he was the only reason why I was at that Expo when I first met you—"

"Peter," Tony says, taking one tentative step forward. "I wanna meet them so bad, bud, but there's—this spell, there's stuff about it that you don't know—"

"I know I'm gonna give up a lot of time," Peter says, his voice breaking, and he's still clutching his hand. Tony can't stop looking at it, terrified it's gonna drip. He doesn't know if he's said the goddamn words yet. "I know you're...you don't want me to do it—"

"Pete, I need to—I need to say something—"

"Tony, please," Peter says, and a tear races down his cheek. "Please, let me—I can do this, I can finally have—everybody back, I can do it, I can choose that and—God, I barely had my parents like, at all, and Ben—I can give Ben back to May. And now everyone—all of them, you...you too, you'll all be with me and it's like—finally my family will be—whole—"

He's dead set. Tony can see it in his eyes.

"I have to," Peter says, shaking his head. "I have to—"

"Peter, it won't work," Tony says. The trees close to them sway like beacons and the rest of the world around them sounds muted, the traffic from the street and distant conversations.



Nothing matters more than making this point. Nothing matters more than this kid, not right now.

“Why?” Peter asks, sniffing. “It worked with you, you’re—”

“It only works in sevens,” Tony says, trying to control his breathing. “Seven days, seven months, seven years—that’s the only reason it worked with me. That’s why this spell is so dangerous, there’s a lot behind it that purposefully isn’t included. You were lucky with me, you were really, really lucky with the timing.”

Peter stares off past him, chewing on his lower lip.

Tony knows he needs to jump back in. “When it’s not seven...the person comes back wrong. Strange was telling me details—”

“No,” Peter says, shaking his head. “No, it can’t be. It has to work.”

Tony’s heart beats a little faster. “Peter—”

“No,” Peter says, shifting his weight, looking down at the grave and the work he’s done so far. “No, it—no, look, I do the thing, and then I wait, and then eventually he’s gonna come up—they’re all gonna, because I’m gonna do it all tonight—Ben first, then my parents—they’re gonna need help, they don’t have a gauntlet or anything like you did, that’s why I wanted to get a head start—”

“Peter—”

“—and I’ll get them out, and we’ll all be together. They’ll get another chance at life, they’ll—they’ll get to start over, do things they didn’t get to do and the years thing doesn’t matter, I mean, it doesn’t, twenty eight years? That’s nothing to have them alive again, it’s worth it because they’ll be back, all three of them will be back, they’ll be here—”

“Peter, they’ll be fucking zombies,” Tony says, probably too loud, but he’s gotta shock him, he’s gotta drag him back, he’s gotta make him believe this. Peter goes quiet. “They won’t be alive. They’ll be half formed, they’ll still be decomposing, they’ll be the walking goddamn dead, it’ll be—it’ll be a nightmare. And this spell, this fucking spell, it’ll still take those twenty eight years from you, and give you nothing for it. Only pain,” Tony says. His eyes are straining now too, especially because of the look on Peter’s face. Such sorrow and guilt there, and fuck, Tony wants to take it all away. He doesn’t wanna say this shit, he doesn’t wanna upset him, but he’s got to make him stop. His hand is still bleeding. He could change the whole world any second, with one small motion.

“And Pete,” Tony says, and he dares to take another step closer. “They would never, ever want you to give up that many years of your life. Ever. For anything. They love you, they wouldn’t want you to give up one moment—one single moment of your precious time. Even if it worked. Seven months for me—Peter, I hate it, I hate that I took that from you. I’m gonna do everything in my power to get it back, I’m gonna trawl through every goddamn corner of the galaxy trying to figure it out, like I did when that prick took you away from us.”

Peter just stares at him, teary-eyed, and he looks like a lost child. Tony's heart is breaking, and he can't tell if he's getting through to him.

"Tony, it would—it would be so worth it," Peter says, sounding small. "To—to have them back. It's so worth it, to have you back—I'm so glad I have you back, you don't even know, you don't know—"

"Twenty eight years would never be worth it," Tony says. "Pete, that's...Jesus, it makes me sick to even think about it," he says, staring at Peter's hand. The blood. "You're too important."

Peter looks down at his hand now too. "Are you—are you sure it won't—it won't work?" he asks. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," Tony says. "The way Strange described it, it was like...it'd be like agony, for you and for them. You don't want to see them like that, Peter, put them through...something like that. You'd always regret it." *It might kill you* he doesn't say. *And if it kills you, it's gonna kill me.*

Peter flexes the fingers of his injured hand. The sunlight seems to get brighter before two big, dark clouds move out in front of it, and a stiffer breeze rolls through. Peter is shaking, and Tony doesn't know if he's in pain or if he's cold or if he's afraid, or all of it at once. He feels like they're standing on the edge of a building. He's terrified.

"I just..." Peter whispers. He looks down at Ben's grave, what he's done to it, and then up at Tony again. "I just wanted—I thought I could bring them back. When it worked with you it was a miracle, I was so—so happy and I just thought—I thought I could do this. Everyone I love together, finally..."

"I know, Peter," Tony says, his heart aching. "I know. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry." He thinks of his scars on Peter's chest. What the scars from his parents would look like, where they'd be. He'd be torn up, from the street ripping up their bodies. A gunshot wound, for Ben. And twenty eight years off his life. For nothing. For hell. For some kind of cosmic nightmare. "You haven't—you haven't started it yet, right? The spell?" Tony asks, his voice wavering. He doesn't think he has, from the way he's speaking, but he has to be sure.

"No," Peter says. "I just—I just cut my hand."

"Good," Tony says, wilting a little bit.

Peter's whole face crumbles, and the tears fall faster. "God, I was—I can't, I—I—God, I'm sorry—I'm—I'm sorry, I'm so—so sorry—"

"Don't be," Tony says, still approaching him cautiously, terrified of spooking him. "Don't be, kid, I understand, I get wanting—something so bad that you think anything is worth it, and shit, trust me—if we found a way that didn't have all these crappy, evil rules, I'd jump right on it with you, I'd help you, I'd be all over it. But this—it won't work, buddy, and I'm sorry..." he looks down, every little hitch in Peter's breath breaking his heart open wider. "I'm sorry it was...it was me and not them—"

“No, don’t,” Peter gasps, and he’s shaking so hard, gripping his hand tight enough that it turns white and sickly around his fingertips. “Please, I’m—I’m so—I’m so sorry, I don’t—I don’t want—” He’s gasping, sobbing, and Tony doesn’t know if he’s said the words yet but he can’t let that blood hit the dirt, he can’t, he can’t risk it—

“Pete, c’mere,” Tony whispers, rushing forward now, and Peter rushes at him too, absolutely breaking, sobbing, and Tony has to catch him before he falls. Catch him like Howard never did for him, be there in these moments where nothing seems real, nothing seems possible, and all you need is your dad. Howard never did that for Tony, not when he was around. And Peter can’t have his father, can’t have Ben because of the painfully bad luck he’s been dealt, and now he’s had this hope dashed, too. But if Peter can’t have his father, he’s damn well gonna have Tony. Whenever he needs him. Every single time. “Come here—”

“I’m sorry,” Peter cries.

Tony quickly grabs a handkerchief out of his pocket and wraps it around Peter’s bloody hand when he’s close enough to him, but Peter barely lets him because he’s crashing into him, clutching at him and weeping worse than he was when Tony died in front of him. Tony quickly ties the handkerchief off and wraps his arms around Peter, hauling him away from the grave just in case. Then Peter sags against him, hiccupping and gasping, and the both of them sink down to the ground.

“I’ve got you,” Tony says, holding him tight, brushing Peter’s sweaty curls back from his forehead. “Shh, shh, I’ve got you.”

Peter gasps, turning his face into Tony’s shoulder, holding his injured hand against his chest. He’s trembling, he clings to Tony and Tony clings back, closing his eyes and trying not to think about how close he came to something horrifying. He holds Peter tighter, rubbing his back. He sighs, letting some relief in.

“I’m—I’m sorry,” Peter breathes, clutching at Tony’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, I’m—I’m sorry—I just—I just wanted—”

“I know,” Tony says. “I know, I know, it’s okay.” He knows he would have done it too. For his Mom. For Peter. And if it ever happened to Pepper or Rhodey or Happy, he’d do the same shit. Natasha was right, about blinders. Just thinking about it makes Tony’s brain start to malfunction. It’s hard, to get down off that ledge.

“God, I could have—I could have...” Peter shakes his head and Tony can barely understand him through all the crying. “Like zombies, I could have—I could have—”

“It’s okay,” Tony whispers. “You didn’t. You didn’t, you’re alright.” Tony doesn’t know where to go from here. The kid is still trembling, crying desperately, and Tony just holds him, carding his fingers through his hair and wishing he could take all of this pain away. He wishes, more than anything, that he could save Ben, could save Peter’s parents, could solve all his problems. He wants to cure death to help Peter. He wants to do everything he can.

He squeezes Peter’s shoulder, trying to prove to himself that he’s right here, that he did get to him in time. “Jesus, you scared me,” Tony whispers. “God, I was so afraid I wasn’t gonna

make it.”

“I’m sorry,” Peter says, quietly, gasping a couple times and trying to catch his breath. “I’m sorry, I—I didn’t—I didn’t think—”

“You’re okay,” Tony says. He wants to make promises he can’t keep. Part of him is terrified Strange is gonna find more unwritten rules to this fucking spell, ones that could rip Tony away from Peter too, after all this. But he doesn’t let himself think that way—it’s not gonna happen, it’s not allowed to. There are too many people here that he can’t let go, especially not now when they’ve let their love be known. The full extent of it, hidden in life and revealed when they thought he was gone for good.

He can’t let that kind of shit stay in the dark. Not anymore. Not when he knows what can happen, what’s at stake.

“I love you, Pete,” Tony whispers, pressing his cheek to the top of Peter’s head. “I’m never gonna leave you again, I promise. That shit I said about you being like a son to me, it’s true, it’s always been true, it’s always gonna be true. You’re my kid, you know that. I’d do anything to keep you safe.”

Peter huddles closer, clutching at Tony’s arm with his hurt hand. “I love you too,” he says, even quieter now. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Tony says. He looks over at the gravestone. Ben Parker. Tony knows he was a good person because Peter’s so goddamn great, and he wishes he could have met him. He sees things he didn’t really notice when he first got here, so blinded by fear and the horror of what could have happened. It’s definitely the book is sitting at the base of Ben’s gravestone, under some of the torn up dirt, next to a dozen roses and a plastic bag with what looks like a plaid shirt inside. Richard and Mary Parker’s graves are to the right of Ben’s, and there’s another plastic bag over there, and Tony can’t see its contents. There are flowers there too, a set of daisies and some sunflowers.

He was so close. So close to losing so fucking much.

Tony shifts them a little so Peter is leaning against his chest, and he’s calming down now, still hiccupping and gasping. Tony pulls his phone out of his pocket and texts Pepper one handedly.

*I’ve got him. We’re okay. Is May there? Need Strange to come get us, like five minutes.*

He puts his phone away and cranes his neck a little to look at Peter. The light above them is trying to peek through the clouds.

“Hey,” Tony says, softly. He ruffles Peter’s hair a little bit. “Buddy, can you come with me? Come back home? May’s gonna be there, we can just relax, settle down, figure things out... alright?”

Peter covers his eyes with his hand. “Does she—does May—”

“No details,” Tony says, rubbing the back of Peter’s neck. “You can tell her what you want to, it’s up to you.”

“She’s gonna know,” Peter whispers, shrinking in on himself. “She’ll know as soon as—as soon as she sees where we’re coming from.”

“Peter,” Tony says, tilting his chin to make him look up at him. “May...will understand. She’ll get it, and you’re here, you’re—you didn’t do it. That’s all that matters. She’ll just be glad to see you, they all will be. You know you’re everybody’s favorite, Pete, as much as Clint wishes it was him.” He tries to smile but he still feels achingly sad, the fear still buzzing through his blood and reminding him what he could have been dealing with, if he’d arrived just a bit later. “C’mon, kid, let’s go home. C’mon.” He braces his arm around Peter’s waist and hauls him up, off the ground and onto his feet. Peter sniffles, his eyes red, and leans on him hard.

“I’m sorry, Tony,” he breathes. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry—”

“No more apologizing,” Tony says, looking up when he hears the portal opening, signaling Strange’s arrival. “No more, you’re good. You’re alright. C’mon, I got you. Let’s go.” He leads a very unsteady Peter towards the portal, and he nods at Strange, trying to convey *I stopped him, it’s okay* because he doesn’t wanna say out loud how fucking insane they were all getting when they realized what was about to happen. He doesn’t wanna freak Peter out more.

He feels like he’s run a marathon. And there’s still the stolen seven months to think about. He holds onto the kid tight, and he motions over his shoulder so Strange can see the book and the other things Peter brought with him to do the spell, the hole he dug. Strange nods and sweeps past them, and Tony brings Peter back through the portal into the living room, where May is standing in wait.

She takes a couple steps forward, glancing back and forth between Tony and Peter, and the tears start anew once he gets a good look at her face. Tony eases Peter into her arms, and he collapses against her.

“Sweetheart,” she says, surprised. “Honey, it’s okay. It’s okay.”

“Bruce,” Tony says, finding him in the group and beckoning him over. “Need you to take a look at his hand, he’s got a bad cut.”

Bruce just nods, looking a little green around the edges as he approaches.

Tony tries to will his heart to stop beating so fast. But he realizes just then his hand doesn’t hurt anymore. The scars don’t either. He sighs, ruffling Peter’s hair again and moving past him to where Pepper is standing next to Rhodey. She takes his hand, pulling him closer.

“Did you—”

“I stopped him,” he whispers. And even though Peter is still steps away, Tony feels himself breaking now that he’s not right in front of him. Under the weight of all of it. Coming back,

being faced with this.

“Tony,” Rhodey says, softly. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah,” Tony says, clearing his throat, and Pepper reaches up, wiping a tear off his cheek.

“Yeah, yeah, I just—cut it real close.” He covers his face with his hands. He was dead a couple days ago. He was dead. Peter found a fucking evil devil spell book and brought him back to life with it. Peter gave up seven months of his goddamn life to do it, and then—shit, he can’t even think about it. It’s insane. He’s insane. This is purgatory and he’s lost his goddamn mind.

He hears the portal close and he turns around, seeing Strange standing there with the book in his hands, the other stuff Peter had brought with him sitting on the back of the couch. There’s a knife too, but it’s also in a plastic bag, which leads Tony to believe Peter wanted to make sure his blood didn’t drip until he was ready for it to. “I took care of the grave,” Strange says, softly.

Tony points at the book. “Maybe burn that thing?” he asks. “Or—Thor, can you, like—put it somewhere in deep space? Like a...deep space—prison for books? I don’t know, anything, I need it off the fucking planet.” He’s thinking about the seven year anniversary of Ben’s death. He needs the book gone. He really wants it to be completely incinerated but he’s sure Strange would argue for all the other mystical spells in there that might not be evil or trying to kill Spiderman. Yeah, Tony doesn’t care. The book is public enemy number one right now, even though it did bring him back from the dead.

Maybe it *was* fate. He’s had his bouts of luck in his life, maybe this is one of them. He doesn’t want to think of anything that takes time off of Peter’s life as luck. But he’s gonna solve that. If it’s the last thing he ever does.

“I’ll get rid of it,” Thor says, walking over to Strange and yanking it out of his hands. Strange lets him, which makes Tony think he’s on board with the decision.

There’s a heavy, solemn feeling of *where do we go from here* hanging over everything, especially since most of these people have been chatty as hell the past day and a half and now there’s mostly silence, Peter’s hopeless crying and May’s delicate soothing the only sounds in the room. Tony feels like a goddamn bad guy, stealing away Peter’s opportunity to save his family while he got to come back scot-free, but he knows that nobody, not anybody would be okay with Peter giving away that amount of time. Not his parents, not Ben, definitely not May. Not anyone in this room. Not anyone who has ever been affected by Spiderman. Certainly not himself. He’d give away a lot of shit to get those months back for Peter. He probably will.

He forces a panic attack back with one long look at Pepper’s face, a glance at the others, still there, still supporting him. He turns back around and heads towards Peter, Bruce and May, feeling guilt and relief and pain and everything under the sun, pretty much. He puts his hands on Peter’s shoulders, and he looks up at him, face streaked with tears.

“Mr. Stark, I—”

“You’ve been doing real good with *Tony*, underoos, let’s not swap back here and now,” Tony says. “Uh, May, Bruce, how about you take him down to the med bay.” He leaves out anything about talking about what happened. He told Peter he’d leave that decision up to him.

“Yeah, I need...I need to wrap this up,” Bruce says.

May nods at him, still shell shocked. Tony watches them go down the hallway towards the stairs, and he turns to face the others. Strange is still standing there next to Thor, the book between them, and Tony tries to silence the alarm signals that go off in his head whenever he catches sight of it. He sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose, a wave of dizziness passing over him. He definitely had like one waffle earlier. He probably also puked it up. The gamut of emotions he’s run through feels like it’s catching up with him, and he sucks in a breath.

“Uh,” he says, clearing his throat. “Uh—you guys mind if I, uh—”

His vision goes dark, and he promptly passes the hell out.

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He wakes up a couple minutes later in Thor’s arms, which he has to admit, is definitely something that’s shown up in his dreams before. They’re close to insisting Bruce come back up and look at him, but Tony assures them that he’s fine. He wants Bruce to stay with the kid. He just lays down, his head in Pepper’s lap, and forces everyone to act normal, even though nothing, absolutely nothing is fucking normal right now.

Tony feels spent. Teetering on the edge of something he never could have anticipated, even in his line of work. They all just sit there for about an hour until Bruce comes back upstairs alone, and says that May and Peter are having a very much needed conversation. He forces Tony to drink way too much water, and Rhodey makes soup. Steve and Bucky watch Tony like a hawk, and Tony isn’t sure what they’re looking for.

Thor leaves, goes with Strange to get rid of the book, and they don’t tell anybody where they’re gonna put it. That’s fine with Tony, fine with pretty much everybody. Tony knows Peter is going to wonder where it went, wonder what could have been in three more years, so Tony doesn’t want it anywhere near him. He almost wishes he could wipe the whole thing from the kid’s mind.

This, weirdly enough, feels like his wake, since basically everyone is gathered around him for most of the day. Right after his parents died, he used to think about shit like that, what his wake would be like, just in case he went and got himself killed, too. He used to want a fifty foot picture of himself to be blown up and draped over the front lawn of their mansion. He wanted there to be one model present for every crying mourner, he wanted free cocaine and fireworks and for his body to be shot into the goddamn Pacific Ocean.

But then he realized he was an asshole, and all of that shit horrified him. He hasn’t asked about any of the services they had for him, but he just hopes it was a room full of the people he loves comforting each other and toasting his memory, like the way a normal grown adult

pictures his wake. It sort of hits him, laying there with Pepper stroking his forehead, that he might have actually evolved into a normal, grown adult.

But maybe most normal grown adults don't picture their wakes. And most of them, if they're thinking about it, haven't actually had one already.

Oh well. He's close.

He keeps wanting to go up to the roof to get air, but he stays in the living room, waiting on Peter's reappearance. But he never comes back and May doesn't either, and Tony has to swallow panic down again. He knows he made the med bay comfortable, but they both have perfectly good rooms up here that they can disappear to. He doesn't know if he should go down there and try to bring them back up, if he should see what the hell is happening, but right at the moment when he's about to tear his hair out, May comes up on her own. Which may or may not send Tony careening into another panic attack—about if Peter's alright, if he doesn't want to see him—and he gets up, approaching her.

There's a new kind of fear in his heart. One that he knows, logically, is unwarranted, but creeps in all the same. The kind of fear that twists familiar faces in his head and makes them say things they'd never say. But still, he believes it, believes the echoed, distorted voice in his head that sounds like May saying *you did this to him, you led him here*.

"I'm sorry," he says, face to face with her. "I'm sorry it got to this, I never meant—"

"Tony," she says, crossing her arms over her chest. "Listen—nothing I said earlier has changed. You didn't mean to do anything, you weren't even here, and you know...you know how he is."

Tony clears his throat. "Is he...is he alright?"

May nods. "I finally got him to just go to sleep. He's worried now he's gonna lose you, that—well, the spell was hiding that stuff from him, so he's worried it's hiding more things." Tony shakes his head. He knows he should be worried about the same thing, and he did send Strange out with a request to do some more research, see if he can find anything else out. But, for some reason, he feels solid. He isn't worried about himself. He's only worried about Peter.

"No, I'm—I'm definitely not going anywhere," he says. He'd crawl his way back from hell to get to these people. Spell book or not.

"Good," May says. "Because you're—Tony, you're family. I wouldn't—it's hard, because I'd give anything for Ben back, anything—but you saved Peter, stopping him. I couldn't survive anything happening like Strange explained to me. So you—just—thank God you got there."

Tony nods. He kinda feels like he's gonna pass out again, and it's like Bruce senses it because he slowly gets out of his seat, but Tony waves him off. He doesn't know what to say to May, doesn't know how to look at this situation without being struck with terror. So he just hugs her, and closes his eyes.



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Three days later he's on the roof of the compound with Peter. The sky is darker out here, not so polluted and stained with the city lights, and it's easier to see the stars. Easier to reach up and trace the constellations with his fingers, to watch the space station go by, to realize that they're here, they're where they belong. That maybe, for a moment, there's peace, even though Tony did put the nano tech housing unit back in so he could make use of the bleeding edge armor. You know. If he had to.

They're lying on a pair of pink beach chairs Tony bought on a whim a couple years ago, and they have two bottles of orange soda between them. Neo is rolling back and forth around the perimeter of the roof, occasionally making comments, because Tony has been teaching him to talk more and more on his own. Maybe he's been using him to shock Steve and Rhodey when they least expect it. Maybe he's pretending Neo is becoming sentient. Maybe, because it makes Peter laugh.

Tony sinks down a little into his chair, sucking in a big breath through his nose. He still has to remind himself every morning that he isn't dead. But so far, it doesn't seem like he's gonna be any time soon. He and Peter are finally having the conversation they were meant to have days ago, and Tony listens intently to everything Peter has to say. Everything about every move he made when Tony wasn't around—tests he failed, the Spanish quiz he passed by one point, the time some kid streaked in the hallways during his trig class. His attempts to reread the Harry Potter series, which ended when Sirius died and he couldn't deal with it anymore. The movies he saw, the criminals he stopped, a lot about that Osborn creep who seemed to have affected Peter more than Tony would have anticipated. How he's recently become obsessed with Gouda cheese, and went to a wine and cheese tasting with Natasha under that shitty fake ID. Tony makes a note to promptly shred that thing.

"The whole second month I didn't stop cooking," Peter says, leaning back in the chair. "It was really bad at first—"

"Burning things?" Tony asks.

"I almost served Ned and MJ chicken that was still raw inside," Peter says, gritting his teeth.

"That's brutal, kid," Tony says. "But a valiant effort, I'm sure. I can't cook chicken. I wouldn't even begin to know how to do that."

Peter snorts. "I'm sure you could," he says. "It'd just take you a really long time."

"I take three hours to make an omelet once and nobody can forget it," Tony says, rolling his eyes.

"It's one of Pepper's favorite stories," Peter says, grinning.

"I think you should learn sign language like me," Tony says, leaning on the arm of the chair. "Steve already knows a little, it could be like our secret language. We could talk shit about people right next to them and they'd never know."

“I started the night you learned it,” Peter says, smiling. “I don’t know how the hell you do things so fast. It’ll take me like...probably two months to get it down.”

“I just can’t turn my damn brain off,” Tony says. “I’m like, a trash bin of information, it’s ridiculous.”

“Do you think you lost anything?” Peter asks, softly. “You know, when you, uh—came back?”

Tony can hardly see him out here in the dark, just his wide eyes and the outline of his face, his hair moving a little with the wind. “No, I think it’s all there,” he says. He tilts his head to the side, tapping on his ear a little bit like he’s trying to get water out, and Peter narrows his eyes at him. Tony grins. “Yeah, all there.”

“You’re gonna be really good when you have a kid,” Peter says. “Iron Man, giant nerd—”

“Wow, Peter, thanks,” Tony says, shaking his head at him. “Well, I guess nerd isn’t exactly an insult these days.”

“It’s not,” Peter says. “Definitely not.”

They’re quiet for a moment and Tony watches a star shoot across the sky, raining in a delicate arc before disappearing in the darkness.

“I, uh...used to come up here,” Peter says, in a tentative voice. “A lot, in the beginning. A lot a lot, because you used to do it, you were always up here and I felt like...I felt...” He trails off, chewing on his lip.

“Sometimes it does feel like you can, uh...be closer to someone if you’re somewhere they used to be a lot,” Tony says. Carefully.

“I would stand on the edge sometimes and scare myself,” Peter says, not looking at him. “That’s how I knew it would scare you.”

“Peter—”

“I didn’t ever like, wanna—I didn’t ever want to die,” Peter says, meeting his eyes now, to drive his point home. “I swear, I just—I don’t know. That was the first time I ever did it without the suit, when you were here. I don’t know why I did it when you were gone, I just... I don’t know. Half the time I just felt so numb and I just...it was hard, the whole thing, what happened to me, you guys getting us back but then...just so, so fast afterwards—”

“Listen,” Tony says. “I get it, I really do—sort of the adrenaline thing, pushing yourself, tuning other things out—I did the same thing after I lost my parents, in different ways, but—yeah, same lines, same emotions. But like I said before, no matter who’s here, who’s not—you are too goddamn important.” *Way more important than I ever was.* For some strange reason, right then, it’s very clear to him that they’re both orphans. But Peter had Ben and May, thank God. But then Ben was taken too. Tony gets the desperation, the undeniable pain, the anger and need to change the hand he was dealt. It’s fucked up, and Tony hates it.

“I know, I know,” Peter says, reaching down and taking a long swig of his soda, and sounding like he doesn’t believe it. “But May...I could never, ever leave her.”

“Exactly.”

“But I’m glad you’re here,” Peter says, looking at him. “You’ve been such an important part of my life, for so long. You make me better, you really are like—I’m so lucky, because of you. Seven months, Tony, to have you back...that’s nothing.”

Tony’s heart constricts and he shakes his head. That problem has been hanging around his neck like an albatross. Along with worrying about Peter, he’s been searching for any possible way to fix the side effect of the best gift Peter ever gave him. “I’ll be the judge of that, buddy boy,” Tony says, because if he shares his real feelings he’ll start crying again, like he did when Peter showed him the mockups of his final project on Iron Man.

Peter knows, anyway. How he feels about this. But Tony can’t stop thinking about the moment when it happens, the moment when death steals him seven months early.

Tony won’t stop til he finds a solution.

“So you pretty much know everything now,” Peter says, sinking down a little more in his chair and staring up at the bright pock-marked sky. “You know about the Ninja Warrior thing. The incident at Red Lobster—”

Tony snorts, and definitely has to get Pepper’s angle on that too.

“—the Star Wars villain, the funnel cake problem—that adorable dog—”

“You need a dog,” Tony says, pointing at him. “You deserve a dog.”

“I do,” Peter says, beaming. “I really do.”

Tony smiles back. There are a lot of things they haven’t talked about, like what happened when Tony was dead, what he remembers, and he’s seen it on the tip of Peter’s tongue since everything calmed down. Tony doesn’t want to talk about it, not with anyone, because he doesn’t remember, and that scares him, makes him worry—worry so much that the panic always sweeps in to swallow him up. They haven’t talked about the fact that Tony’s looking for his own magic—cautiously—to try and give Peter his family back. He hasn’t found anything yet, but he’s gonna start scheduling trips, taking Strange with him—maybe he’s crazy, but the look in Peter’s eyes in that cemetery is going to haunt him forever, and he wants to give him what he deserves, if he can find a way to do it that isn’t tit for tat. He knows there has to be a way, somehow.

After all, he’s fucking sitting here, isn’t he? There has to be more out there.

But he won’t let himself get hurt. Because they already lost him once. He never, ever wants these people to have to go through something like that again. And he promised Peter. That’s it.

“You wearing the suit, kid?” Tony asks.

Peter side-eyes him.

“Yeah, I could tell because of the giant hoodie, you can’t play me.” Peter scoffs, rolling his eyes. Tony gestures towards the housing unit in his chest. “Wanna go flying?”

Peter’s eyes light up. “What? Really? You—you want to? You wanna be Iron Man? I mean you are, I mean—”

“Yeah I am, and yeah, I do,” Tony says, before the kid starts stammering. “The only kinda jumping off the roof either one of us are allowed to do. Liftoff kind.”

“Yes, definitely,” Peter says. “This is my favorite.”

Tony snorts, both of them getting out of their seats. They suit up, and having the armor on again, for the first time since he came back, fills him with new purpose. He is Iron Man. Now he really feels like he’s home.

“You ready, Spiderman?” he asks, walking over and standing beside him.

“Oh yeah,” Peter says. “Let’s go up, like, almost to space. Because I can go to space in this suit, but yeah—yeah, you know that, you made it.”

“Let’s not go to space,” Tony says. “We don’t have the best track record in space.”

“I said *almost*,” Peter says.

Tony was *almost* dead forever. Peter *almost* gave up twenty eight years of his life for nothing. They’re a pair of *almosts* but right now they’re here, they’re whole. They’re starting again. Tony does, in fact, have a good record with second chances.

“And just so you know, I kept the spell,” Peter says. He’s wearing the mask, so Tony can’t see his expression.

It seems like it gets a little darker, a chill breezing over the roof. “Uh—what now?” Tony asks.

“I’m not an idiot,” Peter says, crossing his arms over his chest. “And I’m not gonna...I’m not gonna do anything risky, ever, like seven years...I know you’re thinking that. And that’s too much, I’ve learned my lesson with that. But I don’t regret bringing you back. I never will. And if you die, if Ned or May or MJ or Pepper or anyone I love dies or gets killed, I’ll wait a week, and then I’ll do it. I’ll get you back.”

Tony just stares at him, unsure if he’s goddamn hallucinating this conversation or something. “Kid,” he says, after a long moment. “You’re gonna give me a heart attack.”

“Well, if it kills you, I’ll bring you back.”

“Jesus,” Tony says, feeling a headache coming on. “Okay, let’s go before you make me change my mind. Pause on this conversation, to be continued in our group therapy.”

Tony can't see his face, but he has a feeling Peter is smiling.

"Okay," Peter says. "Let's fly."

Tony grabs hold of Peter as securely as possible, and takes off into the night, listening to his laughter, joining in with his own.

They sound like they're full of life. And Tony isn't gonna let this one go. Not this time.

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