

Peter Parker stood and made his way to the front door of the apartment, the buzzer for the main entrance ringing periodically. He pressed the intercom button to connect it to the buzzer, already pretty sure who was on the other side.

“Hey Peter, it's Ned! Come down and help me!” The familiar voice of his best friend came through immediately, cutting off any question he might have.

“Alright, be right down!” He said, a smile on his face as he opened the front door and rushed down the hall and down the two flights of stairs, letting Ned into the apartment complex.

Ned was carrying three bags, one filled with snacks, another with drinks, while the last one was carrying a singular, large box, though its contents were hidden. Peter took the drinks and snacks, which Ned handed over gratefully.

“Thanks, the drinks were cutting off the circulation in my fingers,” Ned said, shaking his hand out while Peter started to lead him up the stairs.

“So what's in that bag?” Peter asked as he led the way.

“It's a surprise,” Ned responded, smirking eagerly. “Your gonna love it! It's something to do while we wait for the press conference to start.”

For weeks now, Ned had been talking about how a new company, closely tied to Stark Industries had been hiring more and more people, and how his friends on the conspiracy theory forums he frequented had been going crazy trying to figure out what it was about. When the news that Tony Stark was organizing a press conference to announce what he had been working on, Ned insisted on a watch party.

Not that Peter would have argued against it. Junk food, hanging out, and then a video game tournament afterward? What was there to not want? Besides, when Iron Man had something to announce, nerds everywhere tuned in.

“Did you settle on your prediction?” Ned asked. “I'm still going with Tony announcing a superhero team. We know he was working with another guy in armor at the fair at least.”

And hadn't that been a nightmare? He had spent months begging to go and see some of the tech that some of the most advanced companies in the world were working on and the whole place almost blows up. Aunt May hadn't let him out of her sight for *weeks*.

“I'm going with Tony Stark turned them all into vampires, and he is announcing his run for the presidency,” Peter teased, referring to one of the crazier theories that one of Ned's online friends had been convinced of. “That or werewolves and he is trying to become the pope.”

Ned groaned as they stepped into the Parker apartment. They both headed for the living room, the TV already on their preferred news agency. The station already had its cameras pointed up at the recently completed Stark Tower. The anchor was discussing how much extra money Tony Stark paid out of his own funds to get the building completed almost four months early.

“We have about thirty minutes before the press conference starts,” Ned said, checking his watch. “Do you want the pizza rolls now, or while the conference is going on?”

“Now, it's easier to watch and eat chips,” Peter reasoned seriously, Ned nodding back just as seriously.

“Good point.”

Ned went into the kitchen to heat up their snack while Peter started clearing off the coffee table. He pulled out the still-cold Code Red Mountain Dew from the bag, pulling out one for himself and one for Ned before putting the rest in the fridge.

When Ned was done in the kitchen, he returned with a plate of hot, perfectly microwaved pizza rolls, putting the tray down on the coffee table.

“Ready for the surprise?” He asked, pulling the box out of the bag.

Ned was clearly excited because he didn't even pause to wait for a response, instead just pulling off the final covering to reveal a Lego set, a large model of the Millennium Falcon. Peter jumped up and accepted the box from Ned, his mouth hanging open.

“No way! How did you convince her to buy it?” Peter asked, staring down at the box, and turning it over to look at the back.

“I convinced her it was a good reward for doing well in school,” He explained while nodding, taking it back from Peter, sitting down by the coffee table, and starting to unpackage it. “That and I agreed to help her around the house more.”

The two eagerly unpacked and started organizing the Lego set, pre-reading the instruction manual before finishing the pizza rolls, washing their hands, and getting to work. They were only half listening to the news anchor as they continued to talk until a quick tone change of the anchor caught their attention fully.

“We are getting reports that someone has been spotted flying around the top floors of the Tower, we are going live on location, just a short while before the presentation begins.”

The feed changed to a live view of the tower, angled steeply upwards to catch a distant figure, flying around the tower before landing on the long stretched balcony. The figure clearly had wings, which flapped as they adjust their flight.

“We can confirm that the balcony this flying figure landed on is attached to the personal suite of Tony Stark,” The reporter said, the camera coming down to focus on them. “The winged figure does closely match the description and recordings of the individual seen flying around the tower previously, as well as spotted flying around the world at various locations, occasionally with another winged individual. Most recently they were seen with Tony Stark in his Iron Man persona in several locations around the world. Who this winged man is is still a mystery, but perhaps we may find out soon.”

The reporter continued to talk, before directing the video feed back to the news anchor, who started discussing possibilities. Behind them older images of the figure began to appear, including one with the second winged, vaguely feminine figure. Meanwhile, Ned smirked smugly.

“Look who’s prediction is looking more and more likely. We have Iron Man, the similar suit that was fighting alongside him a the fair, and now a winged guy, and the winged guy’s female partner” He said, counting off on his hand. “And don’t forget that armored guy that was jumping between cars in the Big Apple Battle.”

The Big Apple Battle, the title given to the gunfight that started at Shield’s New York headquarters and ended almost a mile away, had been recorded by several people, with dozens of photographs. One particular image of the armored individual leaping between a large green truck of mysterious make and model and the armored APC had been on every news network and site for days.

“Nobody has seen him or the truck for a while,” Peter pointed out, shaking his head. “He’s been gone for months at this point.”

“Doesn’t mean they aren’t still around,” Ned countered. “Maybe it’s just been a slow couple of months.”

They chatted and continued putting together the Lego model, Peter eventually agreeing, however reluctantly, that while Ned’s theory was still totally wrong, it was looking slightly more likely than it had before. After a few minutes of listening to the news and working on the Millenium Falcon in relative quiet, Ned looked over at Peter.

“So... how is Aunt May?”

Peter was quiet for a moment before he shrugged.

“She is busy. Like really busy,” He said, letting out a long breath. “Between the community center, trying to raise money for her project, and Uncle Ben in the hospital, she is running around a lot.”

“How is he?”

“Good, still recovering. He got really lucky, but he still got shot. Just because by some miracle he survived doesn't mean the road to recovery isn't going to be hard. But he is awake, and apparently, the new job he got didn't let him go, even though he won't be able to work for a while, which means his new insurance is covering everything and then some.”

“They still haven't said what his new job is?”

“No, Uncle Ben was going to but after the shooting... Aunt May assumed they would just let him go.”

The two sat quietly for a while, focusing on the project in front of them. About twenty minutes later, when the press conference finally started both of the boys took a break from the building and sat on the couch, watching the conference start.

The news camera panned around the slowly settling crowd, which was made up of quite a few people. There were people in military uniforms and, people in suits and ties, as well as a whole lot of reporters.

“Hey, I recognize him, that's Erik Selvig, I have a signed copy of his book on relativistic energies,” Peter said. “Who is the beefcake he is sitting next to?”

“And the woman next to him?” Ned added, focused on the beautiful woman next to the broad-shouldered blonde.

“That might be Jane Foster. I've never seen her picture before but I know she works with Erik Selvig a lot, he is her mentor.”

When the crowd eventually settled, Pepper Potts, CEO of Stark Industries stepped forward and began her speech. Peter had seen her speak before, a few times during events and announcements for Stark Industries. She had a way of being personable but still professional and formal, despite the fact that many would consider that paradoxical.

This time she was talking about Stark Industries and their many charities, even mentioning one that Peter had heard of before as Aunt May had been petitioning them for support for her latest project. When she was done she stepped aside and let Tony step up to the podium.

“Who is that guy?” Ned asked, referring to the other man standing on the raised platform. “Do you think that it’s the flying guy?”

Peter shrugged at his question, still focused on the screen, waiting for Tony Stark to start. The billionaire’s speech was a lot more casual to start off than Pepper Pott’s had been, teasing the reporters and acknowledging that he spent a lot of time with the press while making a joke. Peter couldn’t help but wonder whether his confidence in front of all these people was a learned skill, or if he was just born that confident.

As Tony Stark talked, his casual tone faded to a more serious one as he talked about his company, his father, and his father’s legacy. It brought back thoughts of his own parents, and what their legacy could have been. Not for the first time Peter wondered what kind of people they were, and what they would have thought about him.

Ned started to say something about the person that Stark introduced as Maker, but he quickly fell silent as Tony kept talking.

“Once upon a time, the sky was the limit! But now, together, we will reach for the stars!”

Behind the genius inventor, the large archway that Peter had mistaken for a fancy decoration, started to glow, carved lines and shapes, almost like runes, lighting up along the matte bronze arch. When the light of each side met at the highest point of the arch the space inside it all but exploded with orange energy, before it shimmered, and the entire space filled with an entirely new view. A park of some kind, with a black sky that was hard to make out.

“I happily introduce the Space Technology and Research Station, a lunar base focused on research in all fields, done by the greatest minds of humanity. Here we will forge a better tomorrow, among the S.T.A.R.S.!”

Stark paused, the loud shouting and flashing of cameras making it temporarily impossible for him to be heard. It took minutes for the crowd to finally die down, though there was still plenty of talking going on in the background when Tony continued.

“STARS will strive to improve human existence in every aspect, with advancement in medicine, engineering, chemistry, biology, and everything in between. Built with state-of-the-art facilities, our scientists will have access to everything they could possibly need to strive in their field, to solve the greatest problems of our generation, of the next generation, and even those of the generation before us.”

Tony continued to talk, his voice somehow cutting through the clamor. He looked at the people sitting in front of him, before focusing on the camera for a moment, winking once and continuing.

“STARS will work closely with Stark Industries and other manufacturers, making sure that our solutions are distributed to humanity in ways that are affordable and fair. We are here to help, to further humanity, and stand proud while doing it. Already our scientists have plans to tackle global warming, the energy crisis, the availability of food to those who struggle financially and some of the most dangerous diseases and illnesses that curse us.”

The billionaire inventor kept talking before concluding the first part of the introduction, promising to answer questions during the second half. The camera cut back to the news anchor, who, at first, said nothing. After a moment they seemed to recover enough to simply regurgitate what had just been explained, discussing what Tony Stark could have possibly meant by a lunar base. They promised that the conference would return shortly before cutting to a commercial.

“That...” Ned said, still staring at the TV.

“Yeah...”

“He said....”

“Mhmm...”

“Damn....”

Peter and Ned sat in the living room in relative silence, their food, drinks, and Lego model completely forgotten. When Aunt May eventually returned home an hour or so later they were still there, watching the news roll in.