... and one time he did not.

Post Spider-Man: Homecoming — Tony is just trying his damn hardest to keep this reckless kid from Queens safe, but it's hard when Peter is, occasionally, ridiculous as all hell.
Chapter Notes

YO, TeaLies — THIS IS YOUR FAULT AND YOU KNOW IT. (Which is to say, bless you for this prompt, I'm already having WAY too much fun.)

“Hey, kid.”

Peter stops just outside the gates of Midtown Science like there’s a sniper rifle viewfinder trained on him. Then he sees Tony standing there, propped against the sleek and decidedly unsubtle car he pulled up in, and his jaw partially unhinges itself from his face.

Tony cocks his head at him. “Get in the car before people start rolling to a stop in front of you, your eyes look like traffic lights.”

“M-Mr. Stark, hi, wow,” says Peter, doing a predictably poor job of collecting himself as he hikes his backpack further up onto his shoulders and walks over to the car. He inexplicably fiddles with the zipper of his jacket, pulling it all the way up to his neck. “Um, okay, where are we going?”

“Chuck E. Cheese,” says Tony, opening the door for him.

“Hey, don’t knock Chuck E. Cheese,” says Peter, getting into the backseat, looking nervously behind his shoulder at his classmates as they start to funnel out. “The Ske-Ball machine on the one in Queens is rigged, you can get tickets for days — ”

“I’m going to do you a solid, kid, and pretend I didn’t hear any of that.”

“Yup, thanks,” says Peter, gazing out at his campus through the tinted windows as the car drives away. He turns back to Tony abruptly, his eyes bright and earnest. “Is there some kind of mission? I’ve got my suit and my passport in my backpack — ”

“Easy, kid. We’re just going upstate.”
“What for?”

Tony wonders for a moment if there’s a gentler, more “kid who hangs on your every word”-appropriate way to put it, but instead he cuts right to the chase: “Look, I promise I’m not trying to cramp your style or anything. But you’re terrible at hand-to-hand combat.”

“What?” Peter’s face is immediately redder than an emergency flare. “But — I mean, I’m fine out on the —”

“Oh, are you? I’m guessing the bruises up and down your ribs from last night beg to differ.”

Peter creases his lips. “Baby monitor,” he mutters, looking out the window again.

“Yeah, yeah, let’s skip past the part where you slam the metaphorical bedroom door and say I’m ruining your life and cut to the chase — you may have super spider strength, but it’s useless if you don’t know how to use it. You’re going to have weekly hand-to-hand combat sessions with Natasha at the tower, starting now.”

“Wait, wait — like, **Black Widow** Natasha?” Peter blurts, all traces of offense gone as soon as they came. “Are you **shitting** me?”

“Language,” says Tony, immediately wincing because dear Jesus, he hates admitting to himself how much Cap has rubbed off on him. Still, it’s not his fault that a swear word coming out of Peter Parker’s baby face is about as jarring as watching a bird juggle.

“Sorry, sorry,” says Peter. “**Wow.** She doesn’t mind?”

“If she did, we’d know. Trust me.”

There’s a beat. “Oh my god,” says Peter gravely. “She’s going to kick my ass. She’s going to **murder** me.”

Tony crosses one of his legs over the other. “Yeah, well. At least you won’t have to worry about the SATs.”
Forty minutes and approximately one hundred questions later, Peter is at the compound and learning the basics from a surprisingly patient Natasha. Tony hasn’t exactly come right out and told her that the punk kid and the Spider-Man that was fighting with them in Germany are one in the same, but only because he figures he doesn’t have to — even if the kid’s voice weren’t painfully distinctive (so much for interrogation mode), Natasha is way too observant to be fooled.

“Not bad,” says Natasha, when Peter actually manages to avoid a blow.

“Thanks,” says Peter chipperly, even though he is nursing Natasha’s recent uppercut to his jaw.

Tony’s not really committed to watching, only looking up from his screen every now and then, but even from here he can tell the kid is sweating profusely.

“Wanna take off that jacket, maybe?” asks Natasha, beating Tony to the punch.

Peter shakes his head almost violently. “N-nope, I’m good.”

Natasha shrugs. “If you’re sure.”

Tony leaves to take a call, and by the time he comes back Peter and Natasha are still at it — and the kid is still in his jacket, sweating so much that his entire face looks like someone lit his brain on fire inside of his skull.

“Kid,” yells Tony. “Just take off the jacket.”

Natasha and Peter answer at the same time, Peter saying, “I’m good!” and Natasha wryly echoing, “He’s good.”

Tony scowls. He clearly isn’t. Why on earth would Peter insist on wearing that ridiculous jacket for all two hours of —

Oh. Oh. Tony doesn’t know why he didn’t think of it earlier; the kid obviously got into some kind of
scrape, and is trying to hide it from Tony again.

“Pause,” says Tony, raising a hand up.

Natasha pulls her punch back, and Peter teeters a bit on his feet, not quite as prepared to come to a full stop as Natasha was. Tony walks across the room to the two of them and crosses his arms in front of his chest.

“Jig’s up, kid. Take off the jacket.”

Peter’s expression is so pained that it looks more like a kicked puppy on the side of the road than an Avenger-in-training. “Um, no thanks,” he bleats.

“Wrong answer,” says Tony. He nods at the zipper. “Off.”

“I’m fine,” says Peter, pleadingly. “Um — if anything, it’s cold in here — ”

“Don’t test me, kid. Take it off.”

Peter doesn’t move for a moment, but Tony knows it will only take a few seconds for the kid to shrink under his gaze. Sure enough, slowly, excruciatingly, Peter’s hand lifts to the zipper of his jacket. He pauses for a moment, his face more miserable than Tony has ever seen it in all the months of knowing him, and unzips the jacket.

At first Tony is so focused on looking for whatever ridiculous bodily injury the kid is trying to hide that he doesn’t even notice the real source of embarrassment; it isn’t until Natasha turns away and tries to hold back a snicker that Tony goes off the offensive.

“It was a birthday present,” says Peter miserably. “Also — I just — it was my turn to do laundry, and I haven’t done it yet — ”

“Oh, dear God.”
Emblazoned on the now painfully sweaty cotton t-shirt on Peter’s torso is an image of the Iron Man logo, accompanied with the words, “KEEP CALM AND IRON ON.”

Tony tries to hold in a wheeze, and even charitably considers, for a half a beat, turning the other cheek and letting the kid off the hook. But he can’t keep it up — he takes one look at Natasha, who is practically holding her breath trying not to laugh, and within a second the two of them burst into merciless cackles as Peter covers his face with his hands and all but melts into the floor.

“Kill me,” says Peter to Natasha. “I know you can. Just do it — ”

“Aw, come on, kid,” says Tony, slapping him on the back so hard that he stumbles a bit despite all of his uncanny, radioactive insect-induced strength. “Don’t sweat it.”

This, of course, only makes Natasha laugh harder, because the kid is so caked in his own sweat from keeping the shirt under wraps that he looks like someone just dragged him out of a lake.

“I’ll never live this down,” Peter mutters under his breath.

“No, you won’t,” Tony agrees, the smile still curled across his face. “Now please go get some water before you pass out.”

Peter obliges, murmuring to himself under his breath as he goes.

“And hey, kid,” Natasha calls. “If you forget what I taught you in training, just remember to keep calm and iron on!”

Peter stops short and turns to her. “Betrayed by my fellow spider,” he deadpans, before he picks back up again and walks away.

“Too harsh?” asks Natasha, her eyes glinting, as soon as Peter is out of sight.
Tony shrugs. “Eh. A little hazing is healthy. Prep the kid for college and all.”

“Exactly *how* old is he?”

“The approximate age of someone who unironically owns a ‘Keep Calm And Iron On’ shirt.”

“... Fair enough.”
“Um, hello?”

Tony scowls as the call comes through, knowing that if Happy bothered to forward it along, it can’t mean anything good. “Ted, is it?” he asks, walking to a less crowded side of the rooftop and narrowly avoiding half a dozen ridiculously well-dressed people trying to flag him down to talk.

“No. Um, it’s Ned.”

“How did you get my associate’s number, Fred?”

“You mean Happy’s?”

“You don’t even know which of the seven dwarves you’ve been calling?” asks Tony, waving back at a man whose name he definitely does not remember, that Pepper will no doubt have to remind him about when she’s back from the bathroom.

“No, I — yes, I’ve been calling Happy. I have it cuz I’m Peter’s guy in the chair.”

“Okay, guy in the chair,” says Tony, deciding to humor the kid for another two seconds. “Happy’s on vacation, so now you’ve got me. Is there some reason you’re calling?”

“Yeah. Um — is Peter with you, maybe? Because we were supposed to meet up tonight and, well, he’s not picking up his phone.”

“Believe it or not, I’m not the kid’s keeper,” says Tony, even as he pulls up a screen on his lenses to monitor the tracker in Peter’s suit. “I am a humble billionaire, genius, and philanthropist who does not involve himself in the comings and goings of 15-year-old wannabe vigilantes.”

“Well. Yeah. I guess I just thought I’d check, in case you, like, whisked him off to Europe or something again,” says Ned. “But for real, we got the tickets to the midnight premiere of The Last Jedi, like, months ago — ”
“Hanging up now —”

“— which is to say, it just doesn’t seem like Peter would ditch me? That’s, like, super unlike him. So. I don’t know where he is, but I thought, all things considered, that you might.”

Tony’s eyes narrow. “You were the one who helped him take off the suit’s training wheels protocol.”

He can practically hear Ned’s nervous gulp over the phone. “Well. Maybe.”

“Impressive.”

“Okay, yeah, it was me.”

Tony sighs. “Well, I’ll keep an eye out for him. In the meantime, if you find yourself itching to hack someone’s tech again, try Oscorp’s, would you?”

“That’d be awesome —”

Tony hangs up before he can plant any more terrible ideas into the minds of impressionable teenagers and turns his attention back to the point on the display in front of him, which is showing Peter Parker’s location in the East Village, in a cluster of buildings in a residential area. The dot hasn’t moved for half of an hour.

“F.R.I.D.A.Y., call Peter Parker.”

Peter doesn’t pick up, so Tony forces the call through.

“Uh, this is Peter Parker’s phone. Please leave a message after the —”

“Try that again and I will hire you for an internship, and then fire you in the parking lot of your
school so publicly you will *miss* your Hello Kitty pajamas.”

There’s a beat. “*Dude,*” says Peter.

“Try me. Anyway, I just heard from your little friend Ed, who seems very distraught that you might be wasting a Star Trek ticket right now. Wanna tell me what’s up?”

“*Star Wars,*” says Peter. “And, um … not particularly.”

“Too bad. Looks like you knocked yourself off a building earlier — ”

“I’m fine,” says Peter quickly.

“Why is your voice muffled?”

“It’s not?”

“Sit tight, kid. Unlucky for you, I’m ten blocks away.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa — you definitely *do not* need to come down here. Everything is — the most fine. Like, I only fell a little bit, not a scratch on me, just ask Karen — ”

Tony hangs up, leaves a quick text for Pepper, and maybe shows off just a little bit unnecessarily by engaging the Iron Man suit in front of his fellow partygoers before taking off from the rooftop in a less than untheatrical fashion. It takes about a minute to reach the kid, but when he lands Peter’s nowhere in sight.

At least, until he sees a red foot lurking behind a dumpster.

“Are you *hiding*?”
The response is muffled enough that Tony knows he wasn’t imagining it over the phone. “Kind of,” comes Peter’s miserable reply.

“Can I ask why?”

Peter mutters something that Tony doesn’t quite catch.

“No earthly person could possibly have heard that.”

“You’re going to make fun of me.”

“Kid,” says Tony, exasperated, “whatever it is, I promise I won’t. Now listen, this is getting a little too Phantom of the Opera for my taste, so if you don’t mind — ” Tony squints into the alley when he makes it to the other side of the dumpster, not even really sure what he’s looking at. And then: “Oh, kid.”

Peter’s hand flies to the stormtrooper helmet lodged on his head. “It’s a little bit stuck,” he says defensively.

Tony puts a hand in front of his mouth. “Is it?”

Peter, mistaking Tony’s follow up question for mercy, goes on and says, “It’s why I fell, I couldn’t see cuz of the helmet — ”

“You were wearing that while you were webbing up the city?”

“Well, it didn’t fit in my backpack with the rest of the costume,” says Peter, nonplussed.

“It didn’t fit in your …” Tony has to turn around. The mental image of Peter swinging around the city with this clunker on his head is too much. He tries to hold it in, but even just looking at the kid in the periphery, standing there and gangly and slouching with that giant white helmet making him look like a dejected lollipop —
“Hey,” says Peter indignantly, over the sound of Tony’s peels of laughter. “You said you wouldn’t make fun of me!”

“That was before I knew you were dressed as a child stormtrooper.”

“Well, I’m supposed to be Luke Skywalker dressed as a stormtrooper — ”

“Oh, good, that makes this whole thing so much less embarrassing. Turn around, kid.”

Peter’s right about it being stuck — whatever mechanism that was supposed to unhinge the thing from Peter’s head evidently got crushed on the way down when Peter fell, making it damn near impossible to get off. All things considered, the kid is lucky it was there to break said fall, since that could have very easily been his head.

Granted, he probably wouldn’t have been plummeting from 12 story buildings if he wasn’t the kind of unrepentant, ridiculous nerd who dressed in Halloween costumes in the middle of December to go see a damn space movie in the first place.

Of all the uses Tony anticipated when he installed the low power laser in the pointer finger of his suit, unhinging Peter Parker’s cranium from a plastic toy was not what he had in mind.

“Why can’t I just catch you smoking pot like a normal kid?”

“I don’t even know where to get pot, Mr. Stark,” says Peter.

“How is that even possible? You fight crime in Brooklyn. They practically invented pot.”

“Well, yeah, but nobody’s like, ‘Hey, thanks for busting the party, here’s some weed’, ” says Peter, gesturing for effect.

“Hey, hold still. I don’t want to slice your head off.”

“Ah, sorry.”
Tony manages dislodge the smashed bit by tracing it with the laser, then says, “Okay, turn around again.”

Peter does just that, and without missing a beat, Tony pulls out his camera and snaps a picture.

“Hey — ”

“Sorry, kid. Consider it payment in kind.”

“What are you going to do with that?”

“I’m sure I’ll find good use for it someday, don’t you worry,” says Tony, pocketing his phone. He nods at Peter’s helmet. “In the meantime, you should be able to pop that right off.”

Peter pulls it off and lets out a sigh of relief. After a brief scan of the alley he pulls of his mask, too, shaking out his hair and breathing the words, “I’m free.”

“You’re welcome.”

Peter looks adequately sheepish at that. “Sorry, for, uh …”

“Hey, don’t sweat it. I designed this suit specifically so that no teenager would ever get his head trapped in a glorified bucket without being able to call for help. Now go put your clothes on over that suit, I’m calling you a car.”

“Oh — uh — you don’t have to …”

“You’ve got two minutes before it pulls up.”

“Oh,” says Peter, his eyebrows lifting comically. He shifts his backpack off his shoulders and scrambles for the contents inside, which turns out to the full stormtrooper costume.
“Are you seriously going to pull a unitard on over that unitard?”

“Desperate times,” says Peter, unceremoniously shoving his foot into one of costume’s legs, “desperate measures.”

“At least run the cooling system so you don’t die before they blow up whatever big death machine they’re blowing up this time.”

“Good call.”

Tony strides out of the alley, Peter half-hopping behind him as he secures his costume, just in time for a black car to pull up.

“Anyway, don’t do pot,” says Tony, grabbing the door for him.

Peter looks at him quizzically as he slides in, holding the broken helmet to his chest.

Tony holds the door open for a moment and leans his head into the backseat. “And for the love of god, kid. Stop falling off of things. That’s the third time this week.”

He shuts the door, then, and Peter rests his forehead on the stormtrooper helmet through the window, looking adequately humiliated. Tony watches as the car turns around the corner and pulls out of sight, a rueful smirk on his face. Then pulls out his phone and finds Ned’s number, texting the picture of Peter with the caption, *Do with this what you will.*
Tony’s been sitting in the little Italian restaurant in midtown Pepper picked out for ten minutes when her text comes through: *Smoothing things over with a late shipment, promise I’m on my way!*

He’s about to flag down the waiter to go ahead and order a drink while he waits, but his line of sight is interrupted by the hostess, who is shepherding a teen who looks so out of place by himself in this moderately nice restaurant that Tony can’t help but look up.

Of course. Of course the one time Tony is stopping for dinner in a city of millions, he would end up seated across from one Peter Parker.

The kid hasn’t seen him yet, fidgeting with his phone, his eyes flitting between the time stamp on the screen and the restaurant’s front doors. He’s dressed in a pair of khakis and with a button down shirt under his sweater, a step up from his usual ironic nerd tees, but the whole look is slightly thrown off by the kid’s unbridled panic and the fact that his hair looks like a stuffed animal someone accidentally ran through the washing machine.

Tony clears his throat. Peter looks up, locks eyes with him, and immediately registers the kind of horror on his face of someone who stepped out in front of a bus.

“What are you doing here?” he demands, his voice cracking.

“Good to see you too, kid,” says Tony, leaning back in his seat. He looks around the restaurant with its fifteen dollar entrees and its candles lit on the tables and its total lack of proximity to Queens and says, “I think the real question is what are you doing here?”

Peter’s cheeks flare. “I — I’m … eating dinner.”

“Ah. Well, you’ve got a little something in your teeth.”

Peter’s eyes widen. “I do?” he says, running his tongue over them.

“No. But you are bleeding slightly out of the top of your head.”
“Oh, shit,” says Peter. His hand flies up to his forehead, where he starts rubbing at it with his palm.

Tony sighs. “Do I even want to know?” he asks, dabbing his napkin in his glass of water and leaning across the table to hand it to Peter.

“In my defense, the tree ran into me.”

“Never mind. Plausible deniability.”

Tony watches carefully as the kid pulls the napkin away from his forehead, but he can tell whatever he did to himself is already healing and decides not to press the point.

“Um, so — are you … eating here? Or are you finished eating?” asks Peter hopefully, his eyes flitting back to the outside window.

“Relax, kid. I’m not going to tell your aunt about that little incident in the East River last week.”

“I’m not waiting for my aunt,” says Peter, “I’m waiting for — ”

“Yo, dork squad.”

Tony ducks his head into the menu just as the girl walks up to the table seemingly out of nowhere. He can only see the back of her — long hair, jeans, a pair of combat boots, and a slouch with a defiance in it Tony can detect without even seeing her face.

Only then does it dawn on him what’s happening here: the kid is on a date.

Tony has half a mind to call Pepper and tell her they’re calling off the Broadway musical she wants to see tonight. The real show is right here.

“MJ,” says Peter, standing up so quickly that he bangs his knee on the table and nearly knocks the
silverware off it. “You look — you look nice.”

She seems to hesitate for a moment, then reaches forward and half-nudges, half-punches him in the shoulder in response.

“You don’t look terrible either,” she says.

Peter smiles at her like it’s Christmas, but he’s also a little scared about it. Then his eyes shift a bit to the left, where Tony is still watching him with mirth, and the smile half-slides off his face.

“Um, uh, let’s sit,” Peter stammers.

“Banner idea.”

As they settle in Tony’s gives Peter a thumbs up and mouths the words “You got this” as Peter’s face steadily turns redder and redder.

“How’s your … day going?” says Peter, trying to duck his head so Tony can’t make eye contact with him. (It doesn’t work.)

“You mean in the last two hours since you saw me?” the girl — MJ, the kid called her — asks.

“Yeah, those two,” says Peter, seeming to relax into himself a bit. “Give me all the deets.”

“Blogging. Reading. Making quiz cards for you dweebs so we can crush regionals.”

Peter tilts her head at her. “You mean flash cards?”

“Mm, no. I don’t want Flash’s ego inflated anymore than it already is so I renamed them in an abundance of caution.”
“Ah,” says Peter, a broad, knowing smile curling on his face. “Smart thinking.”

By now the kid’s completely forgotten Tony is here, which is remarkable, considering Tony has been making faces at him behind his date’s back throughout the conversation. Maybe Tony even feels a little bit bad about it, watching the way the kid watches her — with that wholehearted, rapt kind of look in his eyes, that brand of skittish teenage love that is all good intentions and awkward nods and knocking over the water glass with your elbow before the waiter takes your order. It’s a relief, almost, to see the kid capable of something so … ordinary.

“How was another day of polishing Iron Man’s boots?” the girl asks.

Peter’s eyes flit back to Tony for a split second so fast that even Tony almost misses it. “Oh, you know. Long hours,” he says. Then, very clearly and with undisguised irony, he deadpans, “Sometimes it feels like they have no regard for my personal life.”

Tony has to cough to cover the sharp laugh that almost betrays him.

“Huh. Well, there’s always OsCorp.”

Tony looks up sharply.

“You know what MJ? That is a great idea,” says Peter. “A phenomenal one. The best idea I’ve ever ___”

Peter’s eyes accidentally meet Tony’s glare and he stops mid-sentence like someone sucked the air out of him.

“... heard,” he finishes, reaching for his water glass and taking an absurdly long sip.

“Look, Parker, you don’t have to suddenly start being all nice to me just because I agreed to go on … whatever this is with you.”

Peter’s brow creases. “I’m always nice to you. You’re the one who’s mean to me.”
MJ snorts. “Oh. Right. I forgot.” She leans back in her chair and seems to give Peter a once-over. “Wow, and you still wanted to do this? Your self-esteem must be at like, rock bottom.”

“Ha ha,” says Peter wryly. He blinks at her then, and looks down at the table and then back up and says, “Seriously, though, I’m … glad you were down.”

There’s a beat, and she must acknowledge him in some quiet way, because Peter lights up faster than he did he when Tony offered to let him design a few of his own web shooter combinations.

“Ugh. Don’t make it weird,” she says.

Peter smiles this patient kind of smile Tony’s never seen before, something grounded and assured and nothing like Tony ever felt as a teenager — hell, even as an adult. “I’ll try.”

Peter’s phone rings, then, vibrating on the table so loudly that they both jump.

“It’s my aunt,” says Peter.

“Take it, take it. I want some alone time with this menu anyway.”

“You don’t mind?” asks Peter.

The girl waves him off. “Go.”

Peter picks up the phone and ducks out of his seat. The moment he leaves the restaurant, the girl wrenches her body around to face Tony so abruptly that he almost startles. For a moment the two of them just stare at each other. Her gaze is so leveling that he might actually be a little bit intimidated.

Oh, for Christ’s sake. These toddlers can’t even drive.

“He’s falling asleep in class, you know,” she says bluntly. The words are innocuous, but her tone is
accusatory.

“Excuse me?” asks Tony.

She leans forward and grabs one of the pieces of bread out of the basket on his table, then takes a graceless bite out of the side of her mouth. “You’ve got to tell him not to patrol so late,” she tells him through her chews. “You’re the only one he listens to.”

Tony doesn’t move a muscle — it’s rare that he doesn’t immediately have a backup plan when he’s caught on the spot. Then again, it’s even rarer that he gets verbally knocked on his ass by a teenage girl in the time it takes for him to tie his shoes.

“Oh, please,” she mutters, her lip curling, a little smug at the reaction he apparently didn’t hide well enough. “I knew something was up before he started running around Queens in those pajamas last year. You don’t go home with the flu and come back three days later with biceps like that.”

Tony watches in mild horror as she yanks another chunk of the bread wedge off with her molars and casually upends every assumption Tony has made in the last ten minutes. He’s used to being wrong, sure, but even he’s not used to being this wrong.

Her voice is low and surprisingly guarded when she speaks again. “Anyway, he doesn’t know that I know, so don’t wreck that for him.” She thinks for a second, the vulnerability gone as soon as it came. “Or me. Honestly, watching him try to lie about dressing up like a giant bug every night is like, my new favorite extracurricular activity.”

“Who are you, exactly?” Tony asks, half in alarm, half in awe.

She ignores him. “I have to pee. Watch my purse,” she says, slinging it on her chair and sliding out of the table without so much as a glance back.

Before Tony can even begin to process what was surely a mild hallucination he just endured, Pepper walks in, cheeks red from the cold and her usual hurry. “Hey, you,” she says, “sorry I’m late. Who was that?”

Tony blinks. “Uh,” he manages. “Either future of SHIELD or the death of us all, I can't decide.”
He fills Pepper in on the situation to afford the kid some small shred of dignity; when he walks back in, Pepper nods at him with a quiet smile and winks, and Peter half-waves back at her, clearly relieved that Tony’s leash has arrived.

“OsCorp, kid?” says Tony, before MJ returns from the bathroom. “Low blow.”

“Lower than you think,” Peter mutters back, settling into his seat.

Tony scowls, but before he can ask for any elaboration on that cryptic statement, Peter’s girlfriend-but-not-girlfriend strolls back out. Tony opens his mouth anyway, but Pepper kicks him under the table.

To be fair, Tony totally was planning on leaving the punks alone after that — he only has to sneak a few glances of the two of them eating their ravioli to get the gist of how insufferably precious and awkward they are. He hates to admit it, but maybe it warms his jaded heart a bit to see Peter, as unsure and unsettled as he is prone to being, look genuinely at ease for the first time since Tony met him — to know that there’s one more person looking out for him, even if he doesn’t know it just yet.

Peter’s a remarkable kid. It only makes sense that he’d have remarkable friends, too.

Of course, that sentimental notion goes crashing right out the window as soon as Peter and the girl get up to leave the restaurant. MJ pauses deliberately in front of Tony, her eyes narrowing at him; behind her Peter freezes like someone has hit him with a stun gun.

“Wow,” she says, leaning over the table as if to get a better look at him. “Has anyone ever told you that you look like a much, much older version of Tony Stark? It’s uncanny.”

Pepper splutters into her drink trying not to laugh as MJ walks away. Peter lingers for a moment, clearly trying to decide whether or not to apologize, and ultimately says something utterly incoherent and half-chases the girl out the door.

When Tony turns back to Pepper, her eyes are shining with her effort not to laugh.

“Not a word,” says Tony warningly.
Pepper smirks at him. “Can we adopt her?”

“Not if you want Peter to live.”
Tony is blasting music and tinkering with a new alloy combination in the lab when the music abruptly cuts itself off, a call coming through. Tony sees the caller ID and immediately pulls up the Baby Monitor feed, hearing Peter before he actually picks up.

“No, Karen, I said don’t call Tony Stark.”

“Calling Tony Stark.”

“Karen. Karen. Stay with me here. I said not to — ”

“Connected to Tony Stark.”

“For fu — ”

“Hey, kid.”

“ — ck’s sake,” Peter mutters.

“Yikes. Do you kiss your aunt with that mouth?”

“Karen’s broken,” says Peter, clearly agitated on the other line. “I told her not to call you.”

Tony peers at the night vision on the screen. “Considering you have two feet stuck in quick dry cement in an empty construction site, I’m going to go ahead and say she’s working just fine.”

There’s a beat. “I can get out of it myself. I just need a second.”
That’s not why Karen called, Tony almost says, but he doesn’t want to embarrass the kid. The less Peter knows about the systems Tony put in place for the AI in his suit to detect any changes in his vital signs, the better. Especially because right now the kid’s heart rate is through the roof.

Tony doesn’t have to ask why. He saw the security footage, in the aftermath of the incident with the Vulture — watched as Peter walked into the building, watched how minutes later the whole thing came tumbling down on top of him. The kid hasn’t said a word about it to anyone, but it only took two weeks of trying to figure out the inexplicable spikes in his readouts to know that he’s been skittish around construction sites and parking structures and anything reminiscent of that warehouse ever since. It’s rare, though, that it gets this bad.

“I’d rather you not attempt a DIY cement extrication in that multimillion dollar suit, so sit tight,” says Tony. “Or, er — stand tight. Be there in five.”

There’s no snappy comeback, no dorky little quip. Tony hangs up before Peter can hear his sigh.

He gets there a minute earlier than he told the kid he would, and he feels a familiar twinge of responsibility and regret when he sees that the kid is completely tense, his eyes trained on his feet, his chest inflating a little too much with each breath. Tony engages the thrusters a bit so the kid hears the noise and sure enough, he collects himself the moment Tony is in his sightline.

Well, collects himself as much as he can for a kid whose feet have disappeared into a murky gray mass and is holding …

“Is that an egg?”

Peter holds said egg a little closer to him, the gesture curiously protective. “Ned said he was feeling too much like a single parent and I had to contribute, so.”

Tony squints at him. “Did you hit your head again?”

“No,” says Peter, “I’m — it’s for school. You get partnered up and take care of an egg. For, like … learning about responsible parenting? I don’t know,” he says, his words coming too fast, his eyes grazing the half-finished roof. “Can you just — ”

“Yeah, yeah, on it,” says Tony, holding back the many merciless comments he plans on making as
soon as the kid is freed. It only takes a few seconds, but the kid doesn’t say anything more, watching with an uncharacteristically still kind of focus as Tony dislodges his feet.

“Thanks,” says Peter, as most of the cement is cleared. “And, uh, sorry.”

“Eh, don’t beat yourself up. You haven’t done anything moronic in this suit in like two whole months.”

“Woo,” Peter deadpans, his feet crunching slightly as he walks out of the construction site with a determination and speed that are too deliberate to be casual.

Tony follows him close behind. “Now, are you going to introduce me to your … son? Daughter?”

“We’re electing to let the egg decide its gender when it’s old enough,” says Peter.

“Ah. That seems like a much sounder parenting choice than, say, taking it out to fight crime with you at 11 p.m. on a school night.”

They finally clear the construction zone and Peter pulls his mask off, his face a little too pale, his eyes a little too wide. He deliberately doesn’t look at Tony, focusing instead on his hand and saying, “What can I say? Like father, like egg.”

There’s a lull, then, where Tony’s supposed to clap the kid on the back, say something embarrassing to take the edge off, and fly home. But he sees that tremor in Peter’s hand, sees that slight glaze that hasn’t left his eyes, and something stalls him.

“Text your aunt and tell her you’re spending the night at HQ.”

“Huh?”

“Someone’s got to chip the rest of that concrete off your suit,” says Tony, “and I’d prefer if the instructions for it didn’t come from YouTube.”
A few minutes and several pictures proving that both Peter and his egg are unharmed later, he has the all clear from his aunt. Tony calls a car so he doesn’t have to half-drag the kid upstate like a limp noodle, and also because even if he did, Peter seems so genuinely concerned about the welfare of his tiny egg that Tony suspects he too would have secondhand anxiety about it being so high up in the air.

When they get into the car, Peter pulls out his webbing and makes a tiny little nest for it, propping it in the empty space between them as if it is the most normal thing in the world.

“Can we talk, or will we wake the baby?” Tony asks.

“This egg is worth, like, half my grade,” says Peter. “And Ned’s. If anything happens to it, he’ll kill me.”

“I think you’ll be able to hold your own against Fred.”

“Physically, sure. But I meant emotionally. Psychologically. He’d kill me dead.”

The kid, at least, seems a little bit more at ease now, even if he is talking nonsense.

“How long, exactly, is this state-funded, extremely competitive, nationally-ranked school requiring you to walk around tending to an expired dairy product?” Tony asks.

“Two weeks. Tomorrow’s the last day, thank god,” says Peter, with the weary affect of someone who actually has a child.

“Yeah. Parenthood seems to have done a number on you.”

“How come you never had kids?”

The question comes so fast and so unexpectedly that Tony has to fight the reflex that says None of your business or some similarly defensive, snarky variation of it that the kid certainly doesn’t deserve. He isn’t asking the way people normally ask — in that presumptuous, concerned, or even critical way people have asked in the past. Peter, as always, seems just plain curious.
Tony shrugs. “Just was never quite suited for it, I guess.”

Peter looks at him a little disbelievingly, but doesn’t press the point.

“I don’t know. Timing. The lifestyle,” says Tony anyway, not even sure why he’s elaborating or even which part he’s elaborating on. “It’s not very … kid-friendly.”

He finds himself staring at the little egg in its misshapen web nest, blinking away something that never was.

“Anyway,” he says abruptly, “I should probably warn you that I have guests.”

“Oh, cool, cool. I’m fine on the couch — “

“I said I had guests, not a national army,” says Tony. “Your room’s still empty, kid.”

Peter’s ears visibly redden. “Oh,” he says, a happy little lift in his voice that Tony isn’t expecting.

Tony clears his throat. “No nursery, though, so the egg is gonna have to make do,” he recovers. “Anyway, you might want to decide if you’re going in there as Spider-Punk or Peter Parker before you run into anyone in the hallway.”

“Um — I guess I’ll just put on the mask,” says Peter.

It’s late when they get back, quiet enough that Tony walks Peter down to the empty room himself. It’s not a very long walk, but just long enough for them to fall into a stilted silence — just long enough for Tony to wonder if maybe he should use that silence to talk to Peter about the whole panicking in large empty buildings thing. Before he can, though, a shadow meets them in the hall.

Tony looks up, about to remind Vision about personal space, but it isn’t Vision at all.
“C-Cap,” Peter startles, taking a step back.

Tony sizes the other man up — the dark clothing, the newly acquired beard, the dark, brooding shadow of his face. He freezes for a moment, torn between his old loyalties, his fresh hurt, and the unhelpful urge to make a joke about Steve coming full circle with the new Brooklyn hipster look. In the end, all he says is, “I didn’t realize you were coming.”

“Well, you invited us,” says Steve.

“I did,” says Tony.

There’s a beat, then, where the two of them don’t say anything at all. Tony wonders who, if anyone, will yield, or if there’s anything left to be said at all. He is about to settle into the uncertainty of it, when —

“Um, hey, I don’t know if you remember me? I’m, um …” Peter apparently loses his ability to speak, so aggressively extending his hand out for Steve to shake that he nearly trips.

Steve blinks, and just like that, the tension seems to snap, if only for a moment.

“Queens,” says Steve in recognition, taking Peter’s hand. His smile is worn, but genuine. Tony’s only grateful for the kid’s sake.

“I’m Spider-Man,” he says.

Tony takes a step back to Peter is fully visible in the light. “And this is his egg.”

Peter freezes, the egg still clutched protectively in his left hand. He turns to Tony, clearly embarrassed. “Dude,” he says quietly.

“I wasn’t sure if I should ask,” says Steve, who had evidently noticed on his own.

Peter waffles his weight between his feet. “It’s, uh …”
“Midnight snack,” Tony prompts him. “Why don’t you go put that in the fridge overnight, so you don’t have to worry about Humpty Dumpty taking a great fall?”

Peter tilts himself back toward the kitchen. “This is not how I imagined my first legitimate conversation with Captain America would go,” he mutters as he heads back.

“Good to see you again, kid,” calls Steve down the hall.

“You too, Cap,” says Peter miserably.

They wait until Peter is out of earshot — well, until Steve thinks Peter is out of earshot, at least, because Tony knows there’s no way in hell the kid can’t hear them from the kitchen — and Steve asks, “Is he … part of the team now?”

Tony doesn’t want to put any pressure on Peter by saying no, so he says, “I’m not really sure what the team is now.”

Steve nods. “Well — ”

“Whatever we’re doing, let’s not do it now. It’s late,” says Tony, as if either of them actually sleep normal hours. “I trust you remember your way around.”

“Yeah,” says Steve. He waits for a beat, then presses onward in the direct he was headed, toward where his room used to be at the end of the hall. It takes approximately one second after he closes the door for Peter to come bounding back.

“Um, Captain America?” he says, ripping off his mask, his eyes so bright they look like someone put batteries in them. “Who else is here?”

“We’ll do roll call in the morning,” says Tony. “Your room’s here. Get some sleep.”

Peter looks into the open door and his jaw falls open. “You could get lost in here.”
“Yeah, well, the rent’s a bit cheaper upstate.”

“The bathroom’s bigger than my room!” says Peter, who has already dashed back from it and jumped on the bed to get a better view.

“Do you have an off button?” asks Tony, watching Peter’s eyes flit over the room so fast that even Tony’s getting a little dizzy. “Anyway,” he says, heading back out into the hall, “I’d say don’t let the bedbugs bite, but … well. Too late for that.”

He leaves before the kid can see the Star Wars poster hung over the bed, because honestly, he is nowhere near caffeinated enough to handle that kind of excitement right now. Nor is he caffeinated enough when he strolls into the kitchen the next morning to find a tense gathering of Steve, Sam, Clint and Natasha at the table, eating in relative silence.

“Well, this is … homey,” says Tony, already dreading the talks they were going to have to have later today.

Natasha nods to the space behind him. “Morning, Peter.”

Tony turns around, and in that moment discovers two things: Peter Parker is not a morning person, and he is also very, very bad at keeping his own secrets. (Okay, so he already knew about that second one; his eardrums were still scarred from the hour long phone call and subsequent two hour in-person meeting with Peter’s aunt.)

“Hey, Nata — oh.”

Peter’s eyes are comically wide, his cheek still red with indentations from his pillow, his hair so messy that it seems to have grown several inches overnight. He’s wearing a spare Stark Industries shirt and jeans that someone with more wherewithal than Tony must have left in the room for him, and is decidedly not in the suit he’d planned on wearing in front of everyone else.

“Who’s this?” Clint asks.

“I’m …” Peter looks at Tony and then back at them, a little helplessly. “Peter,” he mumbles
eventually.

There’s a beat.

“And what exactly are you doing here?” asks Sam.

“He’s an intern,” says Tony, flashing Peter a look — you’re on your own. It’s not like the kid wasn’t warned upside down and backwards about the other guests.

Clint frowns, looking at Peter suspiciously. “And he spent the night?”

Aaaand not on his own anymore. “Cat’s out of the bag now, kid. Just tell ‘em,” says Tony, reaching into the fridge to grab the milk.

“Please tell me you don’t have secret kids, too,” says Clint to Tony. “That’s kind of my thing.”

Peter splutters. To be fair, even Tony’s a little bit startled by the assumption, so much so that he doesn’t say anything and accidentally leaves the kid hanging.

“Um — I’m — well, I …”

The realization dawns on Steve’s face then. He muffles his mouth to keep from laughing, but it’s too late. “Oh, my god. You’re Spider-Man?”

Sam’s eyebrows shoot up almost violently. “No. That right there is a child, is what it is.”

Natasha smirks. “Sorry, tough guy,” she tells Peter, as his face gets steadily redder and redder. “They were going to find out eventually.”

Clint balks. “You knew?”
Sam isn’t done. “So we’re letting Backyardigans on the team now? That’s how this is gonna go?”

Tony raises a hand up. “Leave the kid be,” he says. “I can’t have him crying in homeroom after Happy drops him off.”

“Homeroom?” Sam repeats. “How old is he?”

“Fifteen,” says Tony, before Peter can open his mouth to lie.

“Aw,” says Clint. And then: “Oh my god. You let us kick some kid’s ass in Germany?”

“Hey,” Peter protests.

“Give him some credit,” says Natasha.

“Yeah,” says Steve, polishing off the last of his breakfast. “He’s not bad, for a punk from Queens.”

“I’m just gonna … grab some food, and … find a place to go die of embarrassment,” says Peter, shoving his face into the fridge.

Steve gets up from the table, clearing his plate by hand the way he always does despite the ridiculous amount of technology at his disposal. Only Tony notices when Peter opens the fridge, stares at Steve scraping his the dregs of his omelet off his plate, and freezes.

“What is it, kid?” Tony asks.

“Nothing,” Peter squeaks, with horror written all over his face.

Steve nods his goodbye to everyone and leaves the kitchen, and the conversation picks back up again on the other side of the room.
“Then why do you look like you just had a ‘nam flashback?’” Tony asks.

When Peter finally turns to him, he looks like he might faint.

“Captain America ate my baby.”

The words are delivered so lowly and with such palpable devastation that it takes Tony a few seconds to even register them — unfortunately, those few seconds do nothing to help him compose himself when he doubles over, laughing so sharply that everyone at the kitchen table looks up in alarm.

“It’s not funny,” says Peter, his voice nearly another octave higher than usual. “I’m going to fail sex ed.”

“Oh, relax, kid, we’ll find another one,” says Tony, leaving the kitchen and motioning for Peter to follow so the rest of the team doesn’t have to witness a pubescent freakout.

“We can’t!” he says, panicking. “That one was stamped at the bottom! Leeds-Parker! Also I was strangely emotionally attached to it and now I feel like this failure is probably going to hang over my head for the rest of my life oh my god I can’t even take care of an egg how am I going to figure out what a mortgage is — ”

“Whoa, whoa, slow your roll. It’s an egg.”

“It’s not an egg, Mr. Stark, it’s a metaphor,” says Peter somberly, his eyes trained on Tony’s. “I’m doomed.”

Tony puts his hands on Peter’s shoulders. “I feel that I must inform you that you are being extremely dramatic right now.”

Peter swallows, hard. “Right,” he says. “Right. I’ll just. Um. Calmly explain to our teacher … that a national war hero ate my homework.”

Tony sighs. “Do you have a picture of the stamp?”
“Yeah,” says Peter miserably. He pulls his phone out of his pocket, revealing an obscene number of pictures of the egg on his camera roll — the egg with googly eyes, the egg in a cape, the egg posed on top of a massive LEGO Death Star.

“Well, the bad news is that your actual future kids are going to get shoved into lockers in junior high. The good news is I’m 100 percent certain that somewhere in this top of the line multimillion dollar facility we have the technology to recreate that stamp on a different egg.”

Some of the hope returns back to Peter’s eyes again. “Really?”

“Really,” says Tony drily, taking the phone from Peter to take it to the printer.

Peter lets out a breath of relief reminiscent of a man who just got cleared from death row. “Thanks, Mr. Stark,” he says. He follows him a few paces, half-jogging to keep up, and says, “And, uh, sorry for freaking out.”

“Well, now you know how I feel when you get … scrambled.”

Peter blinks, and then looks so momentarily disarmed by the sentiment that Tony almost regrets saying it.

“Fried. Over easy. The works,” says Tony, trying to take some of the weight of what he just said off both of their shoulders.

Peter doesn’t say anything as they walk down the hall, and for a moment Tony thinks that he won’t say anything at all. Then, with a solemnity Tony isn’t prepared for, he says, “Thanks for looking out for me, Mr. Stark.”

Tony shifts his gaze toward the window. He tries to think of something to cut through this unexpected heaviness, something that will distract from that ever present worry that beats in his head like a drum: that there are some things that he can’t look out for. Some things he'll never be able to protect Peter from.

But today is simple. Today is quick-dry cement and teenage embarrassment and a broken egg. So
today Tony looks at him sideways and says, "Of course."

Chapter End Notes

YOOOO y'all can hit me up with prompts at upcamethesun.tumblr.com — some of you already have, and Spidey bless you, I am so excited to hop on them.
Peter shows up to his first post-Avengers victory party with a backpack full of pajamas and textbooks, a slightly wilted looking fruit and cheese plate, and a grin so badly suppressed that Tony’s worried it might break his face.

“Am I late? Did the party start yet? Where should I put — ”

“Kid, you’re 45 minutes early. Vision hasn’t even fixed his hair yet.”

“Oh, shoot. My bad,” says Peter, walking past Tony with that same slightly awed expression he has whenever he visits HQ.

“You can stick that … literally anywhere,” says Tony, referencing the platter that his aunt no doubt sent him with. “Wait. Pause. Are you limping?”

“Nah. Just, uh, party swagger.”

“Kid, what happened out there?”

“Nothing that won’t be fixed in the next 45 minutes!” calls Peter, bounding down the hall toward the rec room like the impertinent teenager he is.

Tony sighs. He was reluctant to even have this … party, or whatever it is they’re calling it, in the first place — and even more reluctant to invite Peter. Not that the kid is unwelcome, but it seems a little counterintuitive, inviting him to a party to celebrate the victory of a battle he was expressly forbidden from joining. Tony has no experience in actually raising a teenager, but he’s 98 percent certain you’re not supposed to reward them for, say, nosediving into a battle of killer robots without a comm, and during a midterm exam, no less.

But the Peter factor aside, there’s an undeniable awkwardness to this whole thing. This morning was the first time the fractured team really had to work together as a unit since — well, since before the Accords blew up in their faces. And they did it with surprising ease. All of the tense hours they’d
spent in and out of the training rooms in the last few weeks had culminated into something not just worth salvaging, but maybe something that had never quite gone away.

And like it or not, Tony knows Peter plays a part in that. The kid was never truly on anyone’s side, so he’s been weirdly instrumental in freezing some of the ice between everyone — and if there’s one thing all the Avengers and non-Avengers and possible war criminals can agree on, it’s that they’ve all got a soft spot for their underage arachnid friend.

Tony sighs. As it turned out, they’d needed him today. Badly. Clint missed it, but Peter spared him from a hit that would have — well, Tony prefers not to think about it. And he got more than a few dozen civilians out of the line of fire from OsCorp’s rogue drones. (Tony’s not going to lie; it’s nice that some other multibillion dollar company is going to have to deal with the fallout from that PR nightmare for once.)

Tony’s not sure, though, if Peter’s brand of semi-suicidal heroics and naive teenage banter will be enough to actually make this party feel like it isn’t a reenactment of the Cold War.

Little does Tony know that by the end of the night, that will be the least of his concerns.

To be fair, though, the “party” starts so tamely that Tony almost resents it. He follows Peter to the rec room to find him scribbling chicken scratch and numbers into a notebook.

“Kid, I thought you were coming in here to watch cartoons or make an adult feel like a crone. What is this?”

“Linear algebra,” says Peter. “I have a test tomorrow.”

“Oh, so now you’re taking your studies seriously?”

Peter looks up from the open textbook perched on the couch. “I think killer robots beat high school.”

“This is your education, not a game of rock, paper, scissors,” Tony grouses. “In any case, don’t think I’ve let you off the hook for today.”
“But I —”

“Wrong answer. Think of a better one by tomorrow, because I’m saving the lecture for then.”

“Cool,” says Peter, nodding, “I’m on it.”

Somehow Tony sincerely doubts that.

Within an hour, the group has convened down in the space Tony uses for entertaining. Everything’s all set up — open bar, pool table, darts, and a hot food bar that Peter diligently retrieved and propped his fruit and cheese plate on, much to the amusement of the team. The floor is so packed with people that it starts to feel like old times; at least, it does if Tony ignores the weird ache in his chest and squints.

Tony slips back into host mode with surprising ease, but there’s not much to be done. Everyone seems to be enjoying themselves. He has every intention of keeping an eye on Peter, but there are enough eyes on Peter in the room that he figures he doesn’t have to.

“I come bearing drinks,” says Sam at one point, after a walk to the bar. “Beer for Clint, whiskey for Nat, vodka for Wanda, and juice for Hannah Montana.”

“Ha ha,” says Peter, taking the lemonade from Sam’s hand.

“A toast,” says Clint, raising their glasses. “To successfully having already navigated puberty.”

Peter groans and Natasha noogies him, messing up his hair. Still, he takes a begrudging drink, his lips puckering. “This is sour.”

“We found his weakness,” Steve quips, walking over. “Turns out kids from Queens can’t handle sour lemonade.”

Peter rolls his eyes and takes another exaggeratedly long sip, pulling another face. “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”
If Tony hadn’t been distracted by a call from Pepper at that moment, he might have recognized that this was the first moment in a series of many moments that he would kick himself for later, when he’d realize that they all low key committed a criminal offense. But Pepper calls, and Tony leaves, and everything is set in terminal, cacophonous motion after that.

By the time Tony comes back, there’s a cluster of them hollering around what appears to be Peter jumping up and down and psyching himself up as Thor smirks at the table across from him.

“What on god’s green Midgard is going on over here?” Tony asks.

“Peter has challenged Thor to an arm wrestling match,” Vision reports.

Tony scowls at the gathered crowd. “You guys know we have cable television here, right?”

“Are you prepared to meet your match, young arachnid?” Thor booms over the sound of everyone’s antics.

“Yeah,” says Peter, hopping between his feet. “Yeah, bring it.”

He props his elbow on the table, and Thor claps a hand into his.

“C’mon, Spidey!” Wanda yells.

“Crush him like a bug, Thor!” Sam yells louder.

Somehow Clint has become the referee. “On my mark. Three … two … one … go.”

Peter immediately and visibly strains his arm against Thor’s, his face flushing with embarrassing speed. Thor yawns theatrically, inciting a few cackles from the audience. Then, seemingly against all odds, Peter gets just enough of an advantage that Thor’s arm creaks backward just enough that there’s an audible gasp in the crowd.
BOOM. Thor reacts by slamming Peter’s hand down on the table so fast that the kid yelps.

Sam whoops and Thor beats his chest victoriously. Peter stares down at his hand and looks up into the middle ground like a war torn soldier and says, “I think my life just flashed before my eyes.”

“How was it?” asks Natasha sympathetically, patting him on the back.

His eyes find hers, his voice cracking, “Really, really nerdy.”

As Thor does a rather ostentatious victory lap around the room, nearly knocking into a row of glasses, Tony calls after him, “Try not to break anything. Priceless art. Glasses. Overly talkative teenage vigilantes.”

Peter bounces off before Tony can say anything to him, but that’s hardly the end of his reckless streak for the night. Tony chalks it up to bluster and teenage hormones and the fact that the kid gets about 80 percent more hyper whenever he leaves the border of Queens, but throughout the course of the night, as Peter aggressively establishes himself as The Life Of The Party, Tony can’t help but wonder if something is up.

A half hour later, for instance, he finds the kid’s sneakers lined up against the couch. It doesn’t take a genius to connect the dots and look up, where Tony sees that the kid is hanging upside down from the ceiling.

“Is anybody else reliving the ‘80s right now?” Tony mutters.

“Clint bet me ten dollars I couldn’t drink water upside down!” says Peter, his face slightly red either from the excitement or the blood rushing to it.

“Kid, is your allowance that bad? How about I give you twenty to sit on the couch like a normal person.”

Natasha pulls Tony away then for a game of pool. He’s wincing from a particularly badly aimed shot when Natasha nudges him, and points halfway across the room with a smirk. Wanda, clearly a little tipsy and uncharacteristically loud, says, “Oh, come on, Peter, don’t be a coward.”
“Wait wait wait,” says Peter, one hand wrapped around his lemonade glass and the other reaching into the air, where Wanda is holding — no, levitating — his phone over her head. “I already accidentally liked one of her Instagrams from, like, March a few minutes ago. It’s social suicide. I can’t text her — ”

“What are you so scared of?” Wanda taunts.

Peter pauses for a moment. “You wouldn’t ask that if you knew MJ.”

“Then tell me about her,” says Wanda.

Peter stammers for a moment. “I — I don’t know,” he says, “she’s — she’s smart and mean and beautiful and kind of scary and basically the best person you’ll ever meet?”

“Aw,” says Wanda, levitating the phone back down.

Peter extends his hand out in relief to take it from her. Wanda smirks devilishly and leans her mouth into the phone.

“Send audio recording.”

Peter blanches. “Send audio recording?” he asks. “Recording of what?”

Wanda blows him a kiss, plopping the phone back in his hand and dashing off. “You’re welcome, little spider.”

Peter chases after her then, saying, “Wait, you have to help with the damage control! Wanda!” And then, mercifully, the two of them are out of earshot.

“Ah, young love,” says Natasha wryly.

Tony shrugs a crick out of his neck, eyeing the disaster that he just created on the pool table. “Every time I talk to that kid I somehow manage to miss that year I spent in high school even less.”
Natasha shrugs. “It’s nice having him around. You know? He’s …” She gestures over to the corner, where Peter and Steve and Thor are laughing over something, the phone already long forgotten.

“Yeah,” says Tony, a little jarred by all the smiling he sees in the room. “I know.”

From there, though, Peter’s shenanigans only seem to escalate.

“You know what would be sick?” he overhears Peter telling an attentive but confused looking Vision. “A pet dinosaur. Not, like, a big one, just like, a microraptor or something. I mean, I live in Queens, though, so the apartment’s kind of too small …”

After Tony comes back from a trip to the hot food bar, he overhears yet another gem.

“It’s called Pokemon — wait, wait, but — if I tell you about it, you can’t tell Sam, okay?”

“Kid, I’m one of the most highly trained spies on the planet. I think I can keep your little video game a secret.”

“Okay. Okay. I’m trusting you, Nat. It’s called Pokemon Go, and you kind of just … well like … see, there’s a Clefairy in the compound! Whoa! I wonder if there’s a nest in here! Anyway, you can kind of aim it to catch it? See, like right now, it’s chilling on Thor’s butt — and you just sort of swipe it, and —”

“Can we please keep it PG over here?” asks Tony, looking over Peter’s shoulder at the phone in alarm.

“Caught it!” says Peter, ignoring him completely. “Oh man, I never get high level ones on the first try anymore, that was awesome!”

Honestly, though, even though all signs point to exactly what is happening like a goddamn neon light flashing over the kid’s head, Tony doesn’t manage to make all the pieces make sense until it’s nearly midnight. By then the party is starting to wind down, a quiet, mellow vibe taking over the floor as people start to yawn and start glancing up at the rooms upstairs.
“You know what, Captain Rogers?” he hears Peter saying animatedly by the couches in the center of the room.

“What, kid?” asks Steve, an amused grin already on his face.

“Your eyebrows are super symmetrical.”

Never one to make anybody feel stupid, Steve offers him a somewhat puzzled, “Thanks?”

“You’d think that they’d have frozen off or something, after all that time in the ice? But — ”

“Hold up,” says Tony, standing in between the two of them. Peter startles a bit at the sight of Tony flooding his vision, and lets out an audible gasp when Tony puts his hand under his chin and holds it there, tiling his face up. “Look at me, kid.”

Peter blinks at him. “Um,” he says, his brow furrowing slightly, “your eyebrows are cool, too?”

Tony narrows his eyes at the kid, at his glossy, unfocused expression and the way he seems to be swaying slightly on his feet.

“Are you drunk?”

“What?” asks Peter, shaking his head so violently he nearly knocks himself over. “What, no, I — I’ve been drinking lemonade all night!”

Tony takes the cup from Peter’s hand, sniffs it, and takes a swig.

“Oh, dear god,” says Tony, the alcohol so sharp on his tongue that he feels like he just got knocked into a frat house. “Kid, how many of these did you have?”

“How many lemonades?” Peter asks. “I don’t know? Sive or fix?” His eyes widen. “Five or six,” he
corrects himself.

Tony sets the glass down on the counter so hard it nearly spills over. “There’s enough alcohol in here to ruin a prom.”

“Wh-what?” Peter asks. “Are you kidding?”

“Are you kidding?” Tony counters. ”How did you not realize that you were getting tanked?”

“I—I’ve never had alcohol before! I thought it was just weird tasting lemonade!” says Peter, looking so earnestly guilty that Tony reminds himself to take a beat. Of course, that beat comes a bit too late, because by now the entire room has gone silent and is staring straight at them.

“Well?” says Tony.

“Erm,” says Clint guiltily. “Did you get that from the cooler under the bar? Because I put a ton of vodka in it earlier in the night.”

Tony pinches the space between his eyes with his fingers. “It’s been hours. Why didn’t someone say something?”

Thor is the first to respond, scowling at Tony. “Are all Midgardian warriors not entitled to partake in the revels of victory?”

Tony rolls his eyes. “Anyone else?”

“Mr. Stark, I — ”

“I had no idea there was any alcohol in it,” says Steve, holding his hands up in surrender. “I don’t metabolize it, I’ve been drinking it all night!”

Wanda is cackling, but says, “I didn’t know, I didn’t know.”
Natasha lets out a little scoff. “I knew. Thought the kid did, too. Can’t he have a little fun?”

Sam clears his throat, accidentally leading everyone’s eyes straight to him. “What?” he says. “I only gave him the first one because I thought it would be funny. I didn’t think people were gonna go around refilling it for him all night.”

“That’s it. I’ll deal with you later,” says Tony, whipping around to face his very intoxicated charge. “It’s your bedtime. Tell everyone goodnight.”

“Aw, come on, Tony!”

“Lame.”

“I fail to see the fault in the young spider warrior's actions — ”

“Seriously, man, it’s not the pipsqueak’s fault — ”

“Enough. Regardless of the complete disregard for the law and the welfare of a minor you’ve all had, it’s a school night. He’s going to bed. So long, farewell, auf wiedersen, good night,” says Tony, corralling Peter toward the stairs.

“Well, if the kid’s going to bed, party’s over,” says Clint with a sigh.

Wanda shrugs. “Regrettable, but true,” she says, following him toward the stairs.

“Yeah,” says Sam, “if Dora the Explorer’s headed out, so am I.”

Even Thor sighs, tilting himself toward the stairs and saying, “I bid you all a good night, comrades.”

“Wait, dude,” Peter pipes up. “Don’t forget your hammer.”
And then Peter, in all of his drunken, ridiculous, 15-year-old glory, leans down and picks up Mjölnir from the floor and extends it out to Thor.

For a moment it is so quiet that nobody in the room seems to breathe. And then, so lowly that Tony barely hears it, Clint says, “Well, shit.”

It only takes one look at Thor’s face for Tony’s anger to completely evaporate as he loses his shit, and just like that they’re all laughing loud enough to do permanent damage to each other’s eardrums. Tony nearly doubles over, his rib cage pressing in on itself with the utter absurdity of the image of Peter, holding the hammer with his unique brand of cluelessness, and Thor, a full-grown demigod who's looking at a kid a third of his size like he just beat him up on the playground.

It takes a beat, but then Peter starts laughing with them, looking a little shaken by their reaction but not at all questioning of it.

“Hammer is such a weird word,” he says, entirely missing the point. “Hammer. Haha. Oh, god,” he says, putting down Mjölnir, his face suddenly going slack. “I’m hammered.”

“That you are,” says Tony. “C’mon, kid … let’s call it a night.”

He claps Peter on the shoulder and guides him over to the stairs, where, to his credit, Peter only manages to trip once. There are mixed cheers and whoops and a “Get it, Spidey!” as he departs, and Peter turns around and does a clumsy little half-bow before tripping again, making Tony responsible for yanking him up by the elbow before he face plants down the stairs.

Only after they round the corner and everyone else is out of sight does the magnitude of the drunkenness seem to dawn on Peter. “Oh my god,” he says, his eyes wide on Tony’s. “Am I gonna go to jail?”

“No, but the rest of us might.” He cocks his head toward the toward Peter’s quarters. “Bed. Now.”

“Wait — but how can you get … un-drunk? How do I fix it?”

“By pretending this never happened and never, ever speaking about this again.”
Peter follows him dutifully to the open door to his room, where his backpack is strewn out on the bed, spilling over with textbooks, old junk food wrappers, and the sleeve of what appear to be Iron Man pajamas.

“Oh no, Aunt May,” he breathes. “Why?”

“She has good taste. Now get some sleep and pray that your healing factor extends to hangovers. Otherwise tomorrow is not going to be pretty.”

He’s heading out the door when the sound of Peter’s quiet voice stalls him.

“I’m really sorry, Mr. Stark,” he says, the sincerity of it cutting through the dim light of the room. “I swear I didn’t know.”

Tony stops, holding in a sigh. He turns around to look at Peter. “I know, kid. I know.”

Peter opens his mouth to say something more, and then seems to lose the thought in the breath he takes. Tony waits. He knows what’s coming before Peter does.

“And I’m sorry about not listening,” says Peter, his eyes unexpectedly rimmed with a redness that wasn’t there even moments earlier. “Before, I mean. With the — with the robots and stuff.” He takes a shaky breath, trying to master himself, and says, “I just … it’s hard, because I don’t want to let you down, I really don’t, but I can’t just be there and not be there, you know? I can’t just — when I can help, and I can’t help, I just — I can’t do that, Mr. Stark. I can’t not help. And I’m always going to be like that. And I’m sorry.”

Tony crosses the room to him and puts his hands on the kid’s shoulders, steadying him. Then he says, "Kid, if you're only going to remember one thing about this night when you wake up dry heaving like a college freshman tomorrow morning, remember this." He searches Peter's eyes, those wide, absurdly trusting eyes that Tony knows have been watching him for a lot longer than he has even been aware. "You could never let me down. Ever. You understand?"

Peter doesn't say anything, a helpless expression on his face that Tony hasn't seen before. And then, for the slightest beat, something deeper — Tony looks at him and sees demons that are all too familiar to him, brewing in the eyes of someone far too young to contend with them. The eyes of someone who has lost far too much, far too soon.
"I think the idea of fate is stupid, kid. I really do. I think people who believe in it are even stupider." He pats Peter on the shoulder one more time before taking a step back, and looking him in the eye. "But I think this — whatever it is — it happened to you for a reason. I think it chose you. And I know I can't ask you to turn your back on that, even if it scares the hell out of me every other damn day."

Peter nods then, with a solemnity that makes him look much older than his fifteen years.

"Now get some sleep and pass that math test tomorrow. We've got a world to save."

Peter cracks a smile at him then, and Tony is reminded yet again at just how little it takes to put the kid's world back into orbit, just how much he internalizes every little thing that Tony says. He leaves the room with an inexplicable ache in his chest, knowing that there will be no more lectures, no more banning from battles. He knows he might not be able to live with himself for letting Peter get involved, but he finally understands — he'd rather bear that burden than have the kid live with the burden of not being able to help, when he is more determined to than anyone Tony has ever met.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, Thor's here. I'm officially non-canon compliant. But to be fair, so is adulthood, so.
Hey, Aunt May, it’s me. Camp is good. Lots of trees. I’m making friends — uh, there’s Rob, and Harriet, and a guy named Anthony that we just call Tony. Um, I miss you. Try not to burn down the apartment while I’m gone.

It takes them three days to figure out something is wrong.

Hey, Aunt May. Me again. Today we went on a hike. I learned some really corny camp jokes. Like what do you call Tony the Tiger when he runs a copy machine? A copy cat. Yeah, I know, it’s lame. Hope work is good. Miss you.

Peter gets a scholarship to go to a week-long summer camp upstate. A hybrid camp for science and nature. “Tell the team I’m going somewhere super badass,” says Peter, “like — uh — backpacking, or something.”

“Disneyland it is,” says Tony.

He looks into the camp. It seems impressive. Peter worries about being gone for a full week, but Tony tells him not to sweat it, they can keep the world from imploding long enough for him to go squint at butterflies and make friends with some other age-appropriate nerds.

Hey Aunt May. Long day at camp. We told ghost stories by the fire. Some kid said he had a full conversation with the ghost of Alexander Hamilton. I tried to call Tony a liar, but he wasn’t having it ... Anyway — um — I miss you. I love you. Bye.

It’s the way Peter says “I love you” that stirs something in May; the way he says “I love you” that makes her call the camp and demand to talk to Peter, only to be told that they received her letter saying Peter had to drop out for a family emergency, and that he had never arrived. It only takes a few moments for her to loop Tony in, forwarding him every voicemail Peter left on her phone while she was at work over the past three days.

Tony doesn’t even get far enough into the messages to hear the “I love you”. What he hears is the thread all of the messages have in common, the two repeated words Peter had been so desperately trying to convey: Call Tony. Call Tony. Call Tony.
The words thrum into him like a second heartbeat, growing louder and angrier with each passing second.

Somebody has their kid.

Tony’s first instinct is to go out on his own — find whatever security footage he can and tear the goddamn city apart if he has to. But he can be reckless like that when it’s his own life on the line — he can’t afford it with Peter’s. Within minutes he has everyone on the compound assembled, Natasha pulling up street footage using Tony’s facial recognition technology, Sam sending out heat-seeking drones, Clint trying to backtrack the number from the “camp phone” that Peter’s been using to call his aunt.

Dead ends. All of them. Someone was one step ahead of them, and all the security cameras from Peter’s street were wiped out on the day he left for camp. The only thing it suggests is that whoever got to him did it early, and did it in his neighborhood — Peter never even made it on the bus. But where he ended up after that is anybody’s guess.

May doesn’t go to work the next day, insisting on staying in the apartment in case Peter somehow makes it home; they send Natasha to try and trace the call when it’s supposed to come on the fourth day, but it doesn’t.

Tony doesn’t think time has ever moved more slowly or more agonizingly in his life.

The entire compound is thick with collective panic — Tony doesn’t see a single person sleep a wink that first night or into the next day. By chance Natasha finds a YouTube video of some kids doing stunts on Peter’s street the day he went missing; they scan the license plate of every single car that is visible on the street in the time window, dozens and dozens of them, looking into the backgrounds of their owners until —

“Stop,” says Tony. “Pull this guy up.”

It doesn’t matter; he already knows they’ve got the right hit. The word OsCorp burns like a brand in Tony’s eyes. Apparently the man had been working for the company for ten years, and was abruptly let go nine months prior.

The same month Peter went on a field trip, and was bitten by a rogue spider that had escaped from its
“Get me a facial recognition scan on this guy everywhere in the country. Now.”

They have a lock on him within minutes, walking into a convenience store in Queens only two hours earlier. They manage to scrap enough footage together to trace him back to the entrance of a warehouse.

“Tony, wait — ”

He doesn’t even know who said it — he’s in the sky and yelling coordinates to Natasha without looking back. It takes ten long minutes that seem like an eternity to find the warehouse; as it comes into view Tony is unwittingly remembering those spikes in the kid’s heartbeat, the footage of Toomes dropping that building on him.

Natasha’s motorbike is outside of the building; she was already in Queens and must have beat him here. He all but blasts through the open door behind her — the first thing he sees is the former OsCorp employee, on the ground, undeniably dead.

Tony’s heart seizes. Natasha wouldn’t kill someone they needed information from. Not unless she had a damn good reason to, and Tony is suddenly terrified to know what that reason could be.

“Natasha — ”

“Shhhh,” he hears her saying. It’s coming from the back corner. “Shhh, I’m going to get you out of here, okay?”

Tony freezes, as if he can blink away the image through the viewfinder of his mask. The kid is propped in the corner, his wrists and ankles shackled, his body slack like a rag doll. The screen zeroes in on him before Tony can even fully feel the impact of it, magnifying every gash and bruise from the fresh to the barely healed, picking up on a sick pattern of what appear to be round holes in both of Peter’s upper arms.

But he’s breathing, and his eyes are open. Bloodshot, listless, and heavy-lidded, but open.
“You’re not here,” Peter says thickly.

“I am,” says Natasha, fiddling with the restraints with a tool from her belt. “We’re going to take you back home and fix you up. Tony, don’t move,” she says, using the same soothing voice without missing a beat — she doesn’t even have to turn around to see that he has poised the thin blasters on his suit and targeted the shackles because he just wants to _get the kid out of there_, he can’t even _think_. “I don’t want to scare him.”

But _fuck_ that, they’re way past scared, they’re at fucking _terrified_. Tony disengages the suit, practically stumbling the last few feet over to them and onto his knees at Peter’s side. Peter sees him there and closes his eyes.

“This isn’t real,” Peter murmurs, with the practice of someone who has said it many times before. “You’re not here, you’re not …”

“He thinks he’s hallucinating,” says Natasha. “These marks in his skin … I’ve seen them before.”

Tony opens his mouth to say something, but for a moment his throat is too tight. “No, kid, we’re here.”

“Keep talking to him. I’ve almost got him out.”

But he doesn’t know what to say except _I’m sorry_.

“Peter, could you keep your eyes open for us?” prompts Natasha, when Tony is still at a loss.

The first shackle finally comes loose, and Peter flinches, his wrist raw from struggling against it. He opens his eyes and lifts his arm, looking at his hand like he can’t quite believe it.

“He’s gonna come back,” says Peter. “He’s gonna — ”

“No, he’s not,” says Tony, trying and failing to keep the edge out of his voice. “I promise you, he’s not.”
Only then do Peter’s eyes snap onto his, only then does he see the recognition finally creeping into them — and then, just as swiftly, the shame.

“Shit,” Peter mutters, resting his head back against the wall.

“I’ve called for med evac,” murmurs a voice behind them, and only then does Tony realize Sam was tailing him.

Natasha clicks another one of Peter’s arms free, and the kid starts to shake.

“Hey, hey, almost out,” she says to him. “Two more to go.”

Peter nods sluggishly. “Th-thanks,” he says, trying to prop his head up again to look as Natasha moves onto his legs.

Some gear finally snaps back into place for Tony then, and he puts a hand on the kid’s forehead, easing him back down. He looks up at Tony, and something in Tony’s expression must scare him a little, because his eyes widen a bit in response.

“M-Mr. Stark?” he says.

“Yeah, kid.”

Peter makes the slightest grimace that, if he weren’t covered in blood and muck and god knows what else, might have looked like a smile. “Disneyland was shit.”

Tony knows what the kid’s doing, only because he’s done it a thousand times himself. Trying to crack a joke. Trying to ease the tension. Trying to minimize his own agony for the sake of everyone else around him. And maybe if Tony didn’t know the kid so well, he’d be able to do him the favor of laughing, of letting him to just that.

But this is Peter, and he can’t.
The final shackle comes off then, and Tony moves to scoop him up from the floor.


Peter’s eyes are sliding shut again.

“Kid.”

Natasha grabs Tony by the arm and says into his ear, “Those marks on him — he installed capsules into him to administer injections. They’re still inside his arms. We can’t pull them out here, and we can’t move him too much, or we might set them off. He could OD.”

“What can we do?” Tony hisses.

Natasha’s eyes are firm on his. “We can wait for someone equipped to — shit.”

Evidently one of the devices has set itself off, and god only knows what is in it, because Peter’s entire body starts to seize. It happens so fast that they don’t even reach him by the time it stops — and then, horrifyingly, the kid goes completely slack, his eyes still open but unseeing.

“Peter,” says Tony, louder than he means to. He puts a hand on the kid’s face — don’t move him, don’t move him, fuck. “Peter, can you hear me?”

The kid sucks in a breath that might be acknowledgement and might not be, but it’s proof that he’s still with them, and for one moment it’s enough.

“I know it’s hard, but I’m gonna need you to stay still, kid.”

Peter nods into his hand.

“Can you — did someone …” He bites his lip like he can’t decide whether to say it or not. “Aunt
May,” he says, his voice finally cracking.

“Of course, kid. I’ll call her right now.”

Peter doesn’t answer, his eyes sliding shut again, a single tear leaking from them slipping down his cheek. He’s out cold, but Tony can hear the chopper landing outside.

“Sir,” someone says, ushering Tony out of the way.

“Right,” he says, finally letting go of Peter — there was something he was supposed to do — call May, he remembers, and then — call Tony, call Tony, call Tony …

For three days Peter’s been down here, enduring god only knows what, just waiting for Tony to find him. And Tony let him down.

The call to his aunt is excruciating; he somehow manages to keep his voice level and calm as he explains to her what’s happening and where they’re taking Peter and that someone is coming to collect her and take her upstate. Then he hangs up the phone and his eyes find Natasha’s and he lets out this painful huff of a breath that he’s been holding in, that he has to hold in, that he can’t let himself think about —

“That fucker was going to kill him,” says Tony.

Natasha glances over at the corpse. “Yeah, well. We got him first.”

“What the hell is all this?” Sam murmurs, walking toward the abandoned tech a few feet away. He presses a button, and before anyone is prepared for it, they can all hear the audio on it plain as day —

“Please don’t hurt her.” It’s Peter’s voice. He’s crying. “Please.”

“Turn it off,” says Tony instantly.

Sam is frantically pressing the buttons. “I’m trying, I — ”
“You think I wouldn’t figure out your little plan? Your stupid fucking secret code? I swear to god, if I see one fucking Avenger within thirty miles of this place, I’ll head back to your apartment myself and blow that aunt of yours to — ”

“Please, no, I’ll — I’ll say anything you want, you can — the next time you call her, just tell me what to — ”

The words abruptly cut off by a scream; Tony doesn’t mean to look, but it’s just there on the screen, and he can see the electric shock pulsing through the shackles, coursing through the kid’s body.

“You’re lucky I still have tests to run,” says the man, “or you wouldn’t have any skin — ”

“Turn it off,” Tony yells.

Natasha shoots the screen, and it goes silent. Without a word, she walks over to the smoking tech, pulls hard drive out of the computer, and stashes it.

“We’re going to want this when they’re figuring out how to treat him,” she says, with her usual authority. Still, Tony doesn’t miss slightest crack in her expression, just before she turns her back on him and strides out toward the exit.

It takes five hours and a mountain of anesthesia to get the dispensers out of the kid’s arms. Tony is watching and not watching, hovering on the edge of the window with his back turned, the same window May’s eyes are glued on. For a little while other members of the team hover too, until May looks overwhelmed enough by the unexpected company that Pepper swoops in and ushers everybody out.

“I don’t understand,” says May, as they’re prepping to get the last one out. She has barely spoken more than the few words since they arrived, except to politely refuse anything that was offered to her. “Why would somebody do this to him?”

Tony waits for a moment, trying to determine whether May is asking just to ask, or if she really wants an answer. Then her searching eyes find Tony’s.
“The man who had Peter — I suppose he was part of OsCorp’s bioengineering team. The spiders were a side project. Unauthorized. He was ordered to destroy them, and after one went unaccounted for, he was fired … the same day Peter’s class went to OsCorp.” Tony doesn’t realize his fists are clenched until he feels the sting of nearly broken skin in his palms. “He probably knew that spider had something to do with Spider-Man from the beginning, but we have no idea how he traced it to Peter. Believe me, May, every effort has been made to keep that kid’s identity under wraps.”

“I know,” says May. “I’m not — this isn’t anyone’s fault but mine.”

Tony shakes his head at her. “Don’t you do that. Shame spirals over the kid’s well being are my thing.”

May watches, wincing, as they pull the last of the dispensers out with excruciating precision. “It’s been my thing since he was dropped on the doorstep eight years ago,” she says. “Join the club.”

“How are you feeling, kid?”

Peter won’t quite look at him from the hospital bed. Instead he tilts his head toward the morphine drip. “Like someone spiked the lemonade again.”

Tony tries to offer him a tight smile. He’s surprised the kid is lucid enough to make jokes; disappointed that he feels like he has to.

“I got your messages,” says Tony.

Peter stares across the bed at his feet. “Yeah. Some trick. Nobody’s going to be recruiting me for SHIELD intel anytime soon.”

“No, Peter. You did the right thing. That was a smart move.”

“Smart move?” Peter echoes. He tries to hide the bitterness in his voice, but it doesn’t quite work. The kid’s too much of an open book. “I got myself kidnapped.”
“Hey. You’re not allowed to blame yourself for that,” says Tony. “That was — that one’s on all of us.”

“I’m supposed to be — I fight with the Avengers. And some guy just — he just — “

“It happens to the best of us,” says Tony, before the kid can go any further, before he can add anymore fuel to the humiliation he already sees burning in the kid’s eyes. “I mean it. Ask literally anyone on the team, we’ve all been snatched, held hostage, the whole nine yards. Iron Man is only a thing because I got kidnapped. It’s a goddamn rite of passage, really.”

Peter winces, then tries unsuccessfully to turn it into a smirk. “I would have preferred, like, prom.”

Again with the jokes. “Kid.”

Peter’s eyes flash up toward his for just a moment, the expression on his face like a bruise. Then he lowers his eyes back down, the mask back on his face just as quickly as it left.

Tony can’t even be mad. He knows exactly where the kid learned it from.

“I’m not going to make you tell me what happened,” says Tony. What he doesn’t say is, Because I already know. The footage is graphic and extensive, so much so that Tony has gone to great lengths to make sure neither May or Peter will ever be able to access it. “But you have to talk to someone. Your aunt. A professional. Me.”

Peter shakes his head, just once. “I just — think it would be best if we never talked about it again.”

Tony purses his lips. “I wish it worked like that. We both know it doesn’t.”

It’s the closest they’ve ever come to talking about his uncle; Tony doesn’t have to have checked on Peter’s files to know what happened. It was written up in a few local papers. Anyone with a search engine could find out Peter was there that night, when he was shot — anyone with a search engine knows Peter must have watched him die.
Peter’s eyes are sliding shut again. Tony isn’t surprised. He’s been in and out all day seemingly at random, since he finally regained consciousness; the doctors said they don’t know how long it’s going to last, but that his body is still trying to metabolize the toxins and it makes everything a little unpredictable. The first time he did it he stopped breathing on his own for a minute, so Tony is already on high alert, watching him steadily.

“I’m still not even sure if this is real?” says Peter, fighting against the current taking him. “I keep thinking I’m gonna wake back up, and …”

He wants to be able to tell the kid that feeling goes away. Instead, he says, “I know.”

After the drugs start filtering out of his system, Peter doesn’t sleep for three days.

“Must be some kind of after effect,” says Peter dismissively, when May brings it up. “I slept some while you were grabbing stuff from home.”

Tony only hears because he happens to be standing outside the door. Peter knows better than to lie to Tony’s face. Everyone else’s, it seems, he doesn’t have a problem with.

Natasha’s the first to visit him, aside from May and Tony — she doesn’t wait for permission so much as she walks in behind Tony with her usual brand of quiet.

“You only look kind of terrible,” she says, looking him up and down affectionately. “Glad you’re safe, kid.”

Peter smirks. “Too bad for you, though,” he says. “For a little while there you got to be the best-looking spider in the compound again.”

Natasha laughs, that subtle crease of worry relaxing in her face. “Careful there, Tony. Kid’s starting to sound just like you.”

“Then my work here is done.”
It’s the same show every time one of the other team members comes to visit Peter; he’s all snappy quips and wry jokes, deflecting questions with ease, smiling with such practice that it’s almost easy to miss the purple under his eyes, the paleness of his skin. When Sam visits he and Peter spend a good half of an hour craned over the cracked screen of Peter’s phone, watching crude rap remixes of Steve’s high school PSAs. When Wanda comes in they prank call his friend Ned. When Steve busts in demanding to know why aforementioned raps are being broadcast in the downstairs gym, Peter merely answers, “Revenge for my progeny,” and refuses to elaborate as the rest of the team snickers behind his back.

They all come and go in waves, worried and cautious at first, all of them eventually falling for Peter’s charming little charade. But Tony’s the one who watches. Tony’s the one who tells the doctor Peter hasn’t been sleeping, and to fix him up with something that will conk him out. Tony’s the one who deeply regrets it when he hears the scream in the middle of the night from down the hall, and finds Peter wide awake, sweating profusely, gasping for air.


Peter’s eyes find Tony’s then, the panic settling into incomprehension and then, just as quickly, shame. He stares down at the blankets, still heaving, refusing to look at him.

Tony hesitates for a moment before putting a hand on the kid’s shoulder. Peter flinches, but doesn’t pull away.

“Just breathe,” says Tony, feeling a little bit like a fraud when he says it. “It’s over, kid. Wherever you think you are — ”

“I wasn’t supposed to — I didn’t mean to — how was I asleep?” Peter asks. The words aren’t accusatory, just genuinely stunned; it wouldn’t even occur to the kid that anyone would do something to him behind his back. “I just — I swear that I was …”

“You clearly needed it,” says Tony. “You might have everyone else in this compound fooled, kid, but you haven’t slept in days. You look like an extra on a low budget zombie movie.”

Peter takes another rattling breath and seems to swallow it, whatever it is that’s still clouding like a film over his eyes. He lets out another little wheeze that he tries to disguise as a laugh, nudging Tony’s hand off his shoulder and saying, “The undead got sexy again. In like, 2007. Look it up.”
That’s it.

“For the love of all that is holy and unholy and in the gray area in between, can we quit it with the jokes, kid?” says Tony. Before Peter can point out that Tony’s doing it himself, he says, “You’re not nearly old or jaded enough to pull it off, it’s not a good look.”

He’s afraid that he might have offended him, might have pushed it a little too far, but Peter hardly even reacts. Tony leans in, trying to compel Peter to look at him.

“You don’t have to be … tough about this, or whatever you think you’re doing. It was fucked up. Not because you’re a kid. It was baseline fucked up for anyone. Believe me. I know.”

Peter has evened out his breathing, but he can’t quite stop himself from shaking, can’t help the question lingering in his eyes.

“So here’s what you’re gonna do,” says Tony, answering it for him. "You’re gonna quit this not sleeping bullshit before you hurt yourself and further aggravate my publicly known, well-documented heart condition. You’re going to talk to someone about this, and I mean talk like a person, not like a UCB student in the bitch slot of Tuesday night standup. And you’re going to stop feeling embarrassed about a thing that you know deep down was completely and utterly out of your control. Got it?”

Peter raises his eyebrows at him, and it’s such a teenager thing to do that Tony hopes this isn’t some indication that he’s leaning into some rebellious phase two years too late. But then his expression softens, and his shoulders slump a bit, and after a few beats he slowly nods his head.

“Got it.”

“Good. Now, uh … “

Tony leans in to put a hand on the kid’s shoulder again, but then the kid leans forward at the same time. For a second Tony almost deflects, almost says something to puncture the moment before it gets any more heavy than it already is — but the kid needs someone. And damn it all after the past few days if Tony doesn’t, too.
It’s surprisingly easy, pulling the kid in, wrapping his arms around his shoulders. There’s a beat where Peter finally seems to relax, and Tony closes his eyes for the briefest moments, trying and failing not to think of what he almost lost. And then —

“Um, that’s not a hug, Mr. Stark. I’m just adjusting the IV.”

Tony hears the grin in the kid’s voice and pats him on the back as he pulls away, maybe a little harder than strictly necessary. He’s surprised by how thick the words feel in his throat, by how easily he could come unraveled if he let himself say anything but this: “You’re lucky you’ve grown on me, you little shit.”

Chapter End Notes

Welp, that's all for now, folks. Thank you so much for following along and for all of your encouragement and comments — you really and truly make my day and inspire the writing bug. If you are so inclined to check out more in this general vein, I've written another (one-shot) fic this week chronicling Peter's coming of age through the people who raised him, and there is, as usual, plenty of angst and precious smol bean Peter and Tony Stark just tryna do the right thing.

HAPPY WEEKEND!!! Sorry for the emotions (but like, we all knew it was gonna shake out this way, right?). As always, you can find me on upcamesthesun.tumblr.com, my shady side blog where I basically stalk Tom Holland and reblog Spider-Man jokes like the well-adjusted individual that I am.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!