Happy Hogan Never Forgets A Face

by Jen27ny

Summary

Happy Hogan never forgets a face.
And suddenly he remembered where he knew that face from. The blood in his veins turned cold and for a second his lungs forgot they need oxygen to function. He counted back the years, hoping it would calm his racing heart. Hoping it wouldn’t match.
But it did.

Notes

Hi!

I saw Endgame yesterday and this is my knee jerk reaction to it. Just started to type away and this happened. I wasn’t really sure if I should post it but it feels like I just need to put it out there, y’know?
That being said: This is my first time writing IronDad and SpiderSon. I’m really nervous about the characterization. It’s not beta’d, English is not my first language and it’s been quite
some time since I wrote a fic in English and there are probably a lot of commas in places they shouldn't be in.

Like I said, this was pretty emotional for me.

Anyways, I hope you enjoy it!
Chapter 1

Happy Hogan didn’t know how he went from being a bodyguard of a billionaire to a babysitter in the span of a few years. Actually, he knew exactly how it happened. Said billionaire was kidnapped by terrorists, became a superhero, found some other superheroes to create some kind of superhero team, had a quarrel with his super-friends, recruited a kid that was bitten by a radioactive spider to fight the super-friends – and got attached to the kid. Tony tends to do some weird things, but after working for him for over a decade Happy got kind of used to it.

That didn’t mean he liked it.

Earlier in the morning – if you could even call that ungodly hour morning – May Parker had called. And when May Parker calls, you answer. It’s one of The Rules that were established after the whole Vulture Incident and, more importantly, after she found out about her nephew’s secret identity. That hadn’t been pretty. Happy had been in the room when May had yelled at Tony for what seemed like hours. It’s been miraculous – he’s never seen his boss just sit quietly while someone screamed at him. Even Pepper would get some banter that was basically just flirting in return. The kid had looked like he was this close to a mental breakdown and Happy didn’t blame him.

But eventually, after about a month and a bit of no Spider-Manning and The Rules, everything got back to – their kind of – normal. Peter was allowed to do his web shooting vigilante thing but only after school and doing his homework. As soon as his grades would slip, he had to stop. There was a curfew and he had to call in after patrolling; which wasn’t really a new rule as he’d already done that before. Happy had several long voice mails to proof it. Peter spend every other weekend with Tony to upgrade the suit, work on his web fluids, get some basic material arts training, and whatever else a young superhero in training need to learn. Lately, they spend more time in the lab tinkering, playing stupid video games or watching movies. Happy isn’t really sure how that’s part of the superhero training but he hasn’t seen Tony that relaxed in a long time, so he keeps his mouth shut.

One of the most important rules was to always, always, pick up the phone if one of the Parkers is calling. Which was the reason Happy was currently in Queens, about to climb up seven flights of stairs – because of course the lift was out of order – to check up on the kid. His aunt had turned to him because Peter hadn’t picked up his phone when she tried call him – she preferred to call Happy instead of Tony because Tony was the complete opposite of subtle and the last thing they need right now were headlines about him visiting some kid in Queens. May was working some insane shifts at the hospital which was why Peter was on his own in the mornings as well as the evenings and better parts of the night. Tony had offered to let him stay at the Tower, but May didn’t trust him to stick to the curfews without Pepper around to make sure both teenager and billionaire would get the proper amount of sleep. So, the kid was mostly alone and his aunt would call in to make sure that he was awake and getting ready for school. It was a system that had worked before and seemed to work now – until this morning.

Peter hadn’t picked up when she called in to make sure he was getting ready for school. Not the first time, not the second time, and not the third time. He said he hadn’t been injured on patrol, May’s words rang in Happy’s ears, but you know how he is. Please just make sure he is okay. It was a reasonable request. The kid had a history of hiding injuries and down playing everything.

When Happy reached the seventh floor, his knees hurt and he was more out of breath than he would like to be. Getting old sucked. He was already mildly irritated as he reached the Parker Apartment but before he could even raise his hand to knock the door swung open and revealed a shocked Peter Parker, hair sticking out in every direction, tooth brush hanging out of one corner of his mouth, clad
in a familiar New York tourist shirt and Hello Kitty pajama pants. “My phone is dead,” he said, not bothering to take the tooth brush out of his mouth. “My alarm didn’t go off and I didn’t get May’s calls and I just woke up because I heard your car outside and –“

“Hey, kid, try to get some breath between all of those words, alright?” Happy interrupted him, his face already pulled in an annoyed grimace. He raced down to Queens for this? A teenager who overslept? However, he couldn’t help but let his eyes scan the boy for any sign of injuries. There were none that he could see and Peter didn’t seem to be in any sort of pain. The tension that had settled in his shoulders since he got May’s call eased away. “How did your phone even die? I thought phones are more important than air for the kids these days.”

“I don’t know!” Peter said, ranking a hand through his hair – which did not help him to look more awake – and finally took the brush out of his mouth. “I thought I plugged it in but maybe I was too tired or something is wrong with my charger or – Happy, you have to help me! I can’t be late again, and I won’t make it in time if I take the subway!”

“I’m just here to make sure you’re alive, not to drive you around.”

Peter used his Puppy Eyes. They always worked on Tony. “Please!”

Happy wasn’t Tony. “It’s your mess, so you find a solution for it.”

He could see Peter deflate in front of him before he picked himself up again. This kid was almost stupidly optimistic. “Well, I guess I could always use my web shooters. It would only take about ten minutes.”

Happy suddenly remembered why this kid needed supervision. “And have your identity revealed? Your aunt would bury me alive if that happens.” He made a shoo-shoo gesture with one hand, trying to get the kid back into the apartment. “Brush your teeth, brush your hair, put on one of your nerdy shirts and get your stuff for school. We’re leaving in five minutes.”

“Happy, you’re the best!” The smile Peter gave him was blinding, even though there was foamed toothpaste in one corner of his mouth. With a sigh, Happy stepped into the small hall and closed the door behind him, listening to Peter’s hurried footsteps. As soon as he heard running water, he pulled out his phone to shoot May a quick text, assuring her that her nephew was in fact not dead and just a typical teenager.

While he waited, Happy looked around in the living room. It wasn’t big, actually rather small, with a couple of mismatched furniture, a TV, and a book shelf that was overflowing. It was nothing like any of Tony’s spacious living rooms but it had a certain feeling of home. It felt like people really lived here, like memories were created in this spot. Or maybe it was just the fact that Tony got yelled at by May here.

“Don’t forget to grab some food!” Happy yelled as he heard the bathroom door open again. “If you’re passing out because you forgot to eat, I’m the one who’s to pick you up. So, don’t forget to eat.” Peter yelled back an affirmation and continued to jump from one part of the apartment to the other. Meanwhile, Happy’s attention had turned to the pictures that covered one of the walls. There were a lot of them, but he had never had a good look at them before. A ton load of Peter – everything from baby pictures to his current age. He spotted May and a man that he assumed was Ben as well.

However, he paused at a particular photo. It was a wedding photo, bride and groom in the middle. Ben and May were there, too, as well as a toddler in a suit. Happy took a wild guess that it was Peter because he would recognize those curls anywhere. The bridal couple had to be Mary and Richard
Parker, Peter’s parents. But that wasn’t what caught his attention. It was a swirling feeling in his deepest pit of his stomach that he knew the face of the bride. Happy Hogan never forgets a face. That was something he was quite proud of. But he just couldn’t quite remember where he’d seen the face before. When had he met Mary Parker? The swirling feeling intensified.

“I’m ready to go!” Peter declared as he came to a stop next to the bodyguard. He looked more presentable than five minutes ago, however, his hair was still doing whatever it wanted.

“Are those your parents?” Happy asked, not moving an inch, eyes still glued to Mary Parker’s face. Of course, he already knew the answer to that question even before he saw Peter nod yes. “They weren’t married before you were born?”

“No, Mom got pregnant and she, apparently, didn’t want to look like a whale dressed in white on all the pictures, so they waited.” Peter pointed to a different picture on the right. “That’s my favorite. It’s the last one we took before they died.” In the photograph were a six-year-old Peter with two missing teeth and his parents who all smiled brightly into the camera.

Happy Hogan never forgets a face.

And suddenly he remembered where he knew that face from. The blood in his veins turned cold and for a second his lungs forgot they need oxygen to function. He counted back the years, hoping it would calm his racing heart. Hoping it wouldn’t match.

But it did.

“Happy?” There was a hand on his shoulder. “Are you okay?”

Happy finally tore away his gaze from the picture and looked at the kid. This stupidly brave kid that couldn’t stop throwing himself in danger to protect everyone else. That was so terrifyingly smart, probably smarter than Tony himself. That fought against criminals with high-tech weapons while he himself was in a painted onesie and some tech he built out of scraps. That experienced more tragedy in his few years than other people did in their whole life and was still able to see the good in everyone.

Happy took a deep breath in a hopefully subtle way – you kind of forget what subtle means when you’re hanging out with Tony Stark – and turned to the door. “Yeah, of course. Now, c’mon, I thought you want to be on time.”

If Peter noticed something was off, he didn’t show it. Instead he started talking a mile a minute like his usual self, telling him all about his last patrol – which was more than unnecessary because Happy already had that report – and the new Lego set he wants to build with his friend. Happy didn’t interrupt him or gave any indication that he was listening; which didn’t stop Peter from continuing. However, there were a few times when Happy almost asked the kid about his parents. It was a burning urge that was tickling under his fingernails but he kept his mouth shut.

As soon as he pulled up in front of the school, Peter jumped out of the car with a Thanks Happy! Bye Happy! and left him alone. Alone at last, Happy sighed and let his forehead slump against the stirring wheel. He could be wrong. He hoped he was wrong because the kid didn’t need any more chaos in his life.

But there was one thing Happy was absolutely certain about: he had to talk to Tony.
“Boss, Mr Hogan wishes to speak with you,” FRIDAY announced as she turned down the music.

Tony didn’t even look up from his blue prints and took another sip of his coffee. “Typical. The moment I have actual important work to do, nobody knows what the words Do Not Disturb mean.” He put down his mug and sniffed once. One of their newest products that was due to launch in a few days was malfunctioning and nobody could figure out what was causing it. Tony finally agreed to take a look at it. Pepper threatened to cut down his Peter Time if he hadn’t found a solution by the end of the day, so he was quite motivated. “Tell him I’ll call him later.”

“He insists that it is an urgent matter.”

“Is somebody dying?”

There was a pause, presumable because FRIDAY was delivering the question. “No, Boss. Nobody is dying.”

“Then it’s not urgent.”

“He is already outside the workshop.”

With a sigh Tony spun around in his chair. On the other side of the giant glass walls was indeed Happy, not looking very happy. “Go away!” he screamed, knowing that FRIDAY would relay the message. Happy said something but no sound came throw the thick glass. Oh, and because Tony soundproofed about every room in the Tower. “What? Oh, I can’t hear you. I just assume that you’re agreeing with me. Goodbye!” He waved and turned back to the blueprints, determined to solve this quickly just so he was done with it. There were so many more fun things to do. For example, the little upgrade he had planned for Peter’s suit.

“Boss,” FRIDAY chimed in again, “he says it concerns Mr Parker.”

Tony stilled immediately. For a second, raw panic overpowered him. Did something happen? He didn’t get any reports about injuries or something alike from Peter’s AI yesterday. However, as soon as Peter took off the suit Tony had little to no way of knowing if something happened to him. He was still perfecting the watch that would fix that problem. Had he been too slow? “Let him in, FRIDAY.”

As soon as he heard the soft *woosh* of the opening doors the genius turned around again. But before he could even form his next words, Happy was already talking. “The kid’s fine. Don’t panic.”

His blood pressure returned to a normal rate and air was flowing back into his lungs. “And you couldn’t have led with that?”

“You wouldn’t have opened the door if I did.”

Well … that was true. Accepting that Happy wasn’t leaving any time soon and arguing that he deserved a short break from all the problem-solving Tony leant back into his chair. And that was the only reason. Definitely not because he liked talking about Peter. It was the first reason. For sure. “So? What’s up?”

Happy didn’t answer right away. Instead, he sat down on a chair, stood up again, took a couple of steps in one direction, then in the other, and put his hands in his pocket just to take them out a few
seconds later. He was fidgeting which was quite unlike him. Tony tried to ignore the bad feeling inside his chest that threatened to overwhelm him and just waited. It took his ex-bodyguard a couple of moments before he got his thoughts in order. “May called me this morning to check up on Peter because he didn’t answer his phone.”

And there was that special kind of worry again that always grabs a hold of Tony whenever Peter’s involved. “Is he okay?” he couldn’t help but ask again. There was a strange urge in him to send the kid a text, just to make sure everything was fine.

“Yes, I told you, he’s fine. His phone just ran out of battery.”

“How does that even happen? Teenagers always charge their phones.”

“It doesn’t matter why; the point is his alarm didn’t go off and he didn’t get any calls from his aunt. When I got there he just woke up and I drove him to school.”

Tony knitted his eyebrows together in confusion. “So, what’s all this about? Do you want me to build him a phone that never runs out of battery? Buy him an old-fashioned alarm clock?” Another thought crossed his mind and his mood darkened immediately. “Did this Flash kid gave him any trouble? I swear if Peter would just let me talk to him –“

“It’s not about the bully or his alarm or any of that, okay?” Happy snapped. Tony blinked. It’d had been quite some time since Happy lost his patience like that. Whatever happened must’ve really left an impact on him. The man took a deep breath to calm himself down, stuffing his hand back into his pockets and keeping them there. “I took a look at the pictures in their living room while I waited.”

Tony nodded. Of course, he knew the pictures. He’d teased Peter endless about the one where he had chocolate ice cream all over his face. Happy hesitated to continue. “What about those pictures, Happy?”

“You know I never forget a face,” he said. Tony nodded again, after all Happy had been the one to recognize Aldrich Killian. “I recognized one of the faces. And, no, it wasn’t Peter or May.” Happy took another deep breath and the look in his eyes turned almost … soft? Sympathetic? Definitely nothing Tony liked. “What do you know about Peter’s parents?”

“Richard and Mary Parker,” Tony answered instantly, reciting all the information FRIDAY duck up on them all those months ago. “They’re both absolutely brilliant scientists, specializing in bio- and genetic-engineering. Worked for Oscorp but quit shortly before their tragic plane crash that left Peter with Richard’s older brother Ben and his wife May. Why?”

“Because it was Mary Parker’s face that I recognized,” Happy finally confessed and looked at Tony like he expected him to get it.

He didn’t. Instead he just blinked a couple of times. “Where and when did you meet Mary Parker?”

“Where and when did we meet Mary Parker,” Happy corrected him. It still made no sense to Tony. “It took me a minute, but I remembered.”

“Remembered what?”

“The conference in Detroit. About sixteen and a half years ago, give or take.” It seemed like Tony could do was to blink. His brain had stopped working, refusing to process the words and their meaning. Happy pressed his lips into a very thin line. “You talked with her and … spend the night in a hotel room. Together.”
“Are you … do you …,” Tony tried to take a deep breath but it was like there was not enough air in the room. He felt claustrophobic and the only thing stopping him from having a panic attack was the hope that he misinterpreted Happy’s words. He had to. Because he couldn’t possible mean –

“I think there is a chance you might be Peter’s biological father,” Happy said and took the last bit of hope away.

“No.” The word was out of Tony’s mouth before he could think about it. “No. Not possible. I would remember.”

“Would you?”

No, he wouldn’t. He barely remembered the conference but knowing himself and his past-playboy ways he could imagine what went down. But if it was true …

“FRIDAY, try to get a hold of the guest list from that conference, please,” he ordered, his mind racing to prove Happy wrong, to prove that it just couldn’t be true. “Check for a Mary Parker.”

“Mary Fitzpatrick,” Happy corrected again. “Her and Richard married after Peter was born.”

“Right away.” A tense silence spread through out the workshop while the AI fulfilled her tasked. Tony was painfully aware of the fact that Happy was watching him like a hawk. His hands began to tremble and he longed for a drink. Or a whole bottle. But before he could even move a finger FRIDAY spoke up again. “There is a match, Boss.” Immediately, there was a picture of a young, beautiful woman on the holographic screen.

There was a burning stone in Tony’s stomach. “And that Mary Fitzpatrick is the future Mary Parker?”

“Yes, Boss.” A second picture popped up. Undeniably the same woman, only a bit older. All the genius could do was slump back into his chair, raking his hand through his hair, gripping a few strands tightly between his fingers. It couldn’t be. It couldn’t be true. It just couldn’t. Because if it was true, if he truly was Peter’s father it only meant he screwed up even more.

Happy said something but he couldn’t make out the words. His thoughts raced through his head, trying to remember that night – but nothing came up. He must have been quite drunk. Which wasn’t really a surprise.

Suddenly, there was a hand on his shoulder, shaking him. “Tony, you need to calm down.”

“How can I calm down?” he exploded, jumping out of his chair, pacing around the room. DUM-E beeped somewhat concerned in a corner of the room, trying to wheel closer but Happy gave him a signal to stand down. “How can I be calm when there’s a chance that … when I could be … I can’t be calm!”

It couldn’t be true. There was no possible way that it was true. Because a Stark could only create weapons and destroy. They couldn’t create things like Peter – so innocent and good and brave and sweet and intelligent and kind-hearted. He was everything Tony wasn’t, so how could he have made him? Yes, sure, the kid had grown on him to the point where the billionaire would eagerly wait for him to stop by to work with him in the lab or tinker around or help him with his school work or watch a movie with him or just talk to him. Unlike Happy, he always smiled when he got multiple text from Peter – because the kid wasn’t afraid of double texting – no matter the memes, GIFs or vine references. There was an unfamiliar, fierce protectiveness in him whenever Peter was in the slightest chance of danger. And, okay, maybe he had imagined what it would be like if he was actually his
son but that was just that – imaginary. A fantasy to distract him from the chaos that was his life. Nothing more.

But if … if it was true? If it was true, he utterly failed Peter. Starting with not knowing that he even had a child to having him go through so many traumatic events – losing his parents, the spider bite, losing his uncle – without being there to comfort him and ending with taking him to Germany to fight superheroes. Taking his suit. Letting him fight the Vulture alone. Having a building collapse on him and being completely alone. Those things had been painful when Peter had just been his mentee, but now … now they were unbearable. Tony wasn’t a father. A father wouldn’t let anything like that happen to their kid.

“Tony!” He was spun around and looked right into the face of a concerned Happy Hogan. “You need to breathe!”

*I am* was what he wanted to say but there wasn’t any air in his lungs to get the words out. Gulping, he took a few short breaths. His whole body trembled and he gripped Happy’s arms to ground himself on something.

“You okay?” Tony tried nodding but his body wouldn’t do what he wanted. Happy guided him to the closest chair and sat him down. “You need to calm down, okay? There’s no need to panic.”

“No need to panic?” Tony repeated and sounded so much weaker than he liked.

“No, not one bit,” Happy continued before Tony could, “because it’s just a theory. It could be a coincidence. We have no concrete proof. You hear me? It’s *just* a theory.”

Those words seeped through his thick skull and calmed his nerves enough for him to form a coherent thought. Happy was right. It was a theory. There was no proof that Peter really was his son. Everything could be a stupid scare. And a reminder that he should drink himself into oblivion ever again.

He needed that proof.

“FRIDAY, do we have anything in the lab to perform something like a paternity test?”

“Tony -,” Happy tried but Tony was already on his feet again and pacing around the workshop.

*“There should be the proper equipment for such a test in Dr Banner’s lab, Boss,”* FRIDAY answered.

He turned towards the door, his mind already in the lab two stories below. He was perfectly aware that he didn’t need to go down there, after all FRIDAY could just tell him the results. However, it gave him something to do, gave him a reason to move and he just couldn’t stand still right now. Happy was hot on his heels. “Do we still have samples of Peter’s DNA on file?”

“Yes, Boss.”

“I take it we have mine as well. Will they be enough for the test to work?”

*“They should be sufficient.”*

“Excellent. Run the test.”

“Tony, just wait a second, will you?” Happy almost yelled as they reached the elevator. The only reason Tony did stop was because the doors weren’t open yet. “Don’t rush into it.”
“I’m not.” The doors finally opened and he stepped inside, immediately pushing the button for what once was Bruce’s lab. Happy followed him.

“You’re running a DNA test.”

“Well, what else am I supposed to do?!” His voiced boomed in the small space. “I need to know if it’s true or not and then I can act accordingly to it. Because if it turns out that I’m not … that we don’t share the same DNA then all this worrying and talking and whatnot is completely superfluous. Just a stupid conversation that kept me from working.”

“And how do you act accordingly if it turns out you are his father?” Something burned inside Tony’s chest but he refused to answer that question. There was no point in thinking about what ifs.

The doors opened once again and Tony didn’t waste a second stepping out of them and into the abandoned lab. He hadn’t been in here ever since Bruce went MIA but he couldn’t dwell on that. Maybe after he finds out that he and Peter weren’t related. His eyes locked onto the only flickering screen that seemed to illuminate the entire room. For a second uncertainty and something like fear – though he couldn’t say fear of what exactly – kept Tony from taking another step.

Did he really want to find out? Couldn’t he just continue without knowing? He seemed to do alright as a mentor, why should he change that? Afterall, he would be a terrible father.

“The test is completed, Boss,” FRIDAY announced. For an AI, she sounded almost sensitive.

Blood rushed in Tony’s ears. He could feel Happy’s gaze on him again. Without really knowing how, he moved over to the still flickering screen, holding his breath. Tony wasn’t a doctor. He preferred tinkering with robots instead of humans. But he knew enough about biology to understand the results.

It was a match.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Hey!

You guys, I'm totally blown away by all your support and love for this fic? Like, I wasn't expecting it at all. Thank you so much!

Just like last time: it's not beta'd, there are probably commas in place they shouldn't be, I don't know anything about DNA tests or any details about the American school system. In fact, the only thing I'm qualified to talk about is cake and cake isn't even mentioned.

By the way, I do have tumblr if you like to talk to me over there. I'm still trying to get used to posting stuff (after several years of using it) so it's not all that exciting right now, but I'm trying to be better. So, yeah. Maybe you can encourage me?

I hope you enjoy it!

Healthy coping mechanisms and Tony Stark was not something that was used in the same sentence – except maybe this one. After all, he dealt with being kidnapped by becoming a superhero. Not your usual knee jerk reaction. So when he found out that the kid he discovered on YouTube who could catch a bus with his bare hands and talked his ear off on a regular basis – without Tony being bothered by it one bit – was his actual, biological son, he did not cope well.

He let FRIDAY run the test three more times. After Tony demanded a fifth test, the AI informed him that it was highly unlikely the test results would change if they didn’t change the DNA samples. It took Happy everything to talk Tony out of flying to Peter’s school or cutting open his own arm to get fresh samples. Thus, Tony did what he always did whenever he tried to ignore a problem that was directly connected to his emotions.

He locked himself in his workshop and built something.

It took the genius five minutes to figure out the problem of their newest product. Three to fix it. Ten to find two other problems that would make trouble after a few months of using the product, and another ten to fix those problems. That wasn’t nearly enough time for him to come to terms with his emotions, so he just kept going. Made a new version of the product; smaller, smarter, more durable, and with more features. Tony knew it would be too late to get this version launched on time – and he didn’t even want to think about what kind of nightmare it would be for the marketing department – but it was always good to think about the next step. He kept himself busy; looked at projects he’d lost interest in, looked over other Stark Industry products, fixed a few bugs, tried to figure out how to supply New York City with an endless supply of clean energy – just whatever popped inside his head. As long as it distracted him from the problem he should actually figure out and kept his hands busy, it was good enough for him.

Time was irrelevant. A weird concept that exists for everyone else but him. That’s why the billionaire had absolutely no idea how much time had passed as his deafening music was replaced by a very familiar clicking noise of high heels. There were only two people beside him who could enter his workshop after Tony ordered FRIDAY to lock the door. And he was quite sure that Rhodey didn’t start wearing high heels. “Hey, Pep,” he said, not moving his eyes from the holo-screen in front of him, “I thought your conference in Washington wouldn’t end until tomorrow.”
“It doesn’t, but Happy called me,” she answered in a somewhat vexed voice. Suddenly there were slender fingers in his hair, working through the knots and easing some of the tension Tony refused to acknowledge away. Out of reflex, he closed his eyes for a second, finding familiar comfort in the motion. How did he deserve such a woman? “Said something happened and that it would be better if I came home right away.”

So Tony was the one who had to tell her. The thought was almost as daunting as the one about talking to Peter – his son. Surely Pepper would be disappointed. How could he not know he had a son? How could he take his son to Germany to fight his fight? How could he put him in so much danger?

Tony did what Tony always did. Deflect.

“Nothing happened.” His eyes were still glued to the screen. “Everything is good. You shouldn’t have come. I mean, obviously I’m happy that you’re here and not stuck at some boring conference, but you didn’t need to worry.”

“You’re happy to see me?”

“I’m always happy to see you.”

“Then why won’t you look at me?” Her voice was soft, not irritated. Maybe she felt that something stirred him up. She’d always been really good at this – emotions and all that stuff. Not like him. Her nails scratched over his scalp and he sighed silently. Defeated, Tony turned around to look up to his fiancé. Her strawberry hair was up in her usual ponytail, she was dressed in a white business costume and looked absolutely radiant. A small smile tucked at the corner of her mouth. “Hi.”

“Hi.” And then, because he was such a coward, he changed the subject. Again. “I figured out what was wrong with the new product. Fixed it as well. And some other stuff. Shouldn’t make any problems now.”

“Tony,” Pepper tried again, her hands cupping his face, but once he started talking, he just couldn’t stop.

“Yeah, I also made the next version of it. And I thought about some other stuff that we should take a look at. Like alarm clocks. Or phone batteries that never die. Like ever. Or at least get some features in the phone, so some stuff should still work even though the phone isn’t turned on. Like getting calls. Or alarms. I really can’t stress the alarms enough. I mean, if you think about it, what opportunities were missed because someone overslept? What tragedies had happened because of it?”

“Why are alarms so important?”

“They’re always important. We just forget that because we take them for granted.”

“Tony.” Pepper raised one eyebrow and gave him one of her patented looks. He crumbled under it. Like always.

“Peter overslept this morning,” he explained. Pepper didn’t say anything. Maybe she already suspected that Peter was involved. Tony was always in this special kind of crazy when the kid was involved, and she had always been exceptionally good at recognizing the different kinds of crazy.

“Happy went to check on him and drove him to school.”

“Did something happen at school?”

“No, the kid’s fine. Probably swinging around Queens right about now and being busy making the
world a better place.” He took another shaky breath. He had to tell Pepper. Maybe she could help. She’s great at dealing with his problems. An absolute pro. “But Happy saw a picture of Mary Parker and recognized her face – you know how he never forgets a face – and … well, long story short, I’m Peter’s father. And, no, not like a father-figure. His actual, biological, blood-related father.”

Whatever Pepper has suspected, this wasn’t it. She looked at him, probably trying to figure out if he was messing with her. Wouldn’t be the first time. But he was serious and she seemed to realize that as well. Her gaze turned soft and she opened her mouth, even though no words came out. It wasn’t often that Pepper Potts was speechless. With every second that passed in silence the uneasiness in Tony’s chest grew to an almost unbearable pressure.

“And you’re sure about it?” Pepper finally asked.

“Yeah, pretty sure,” Tony answered, not able to look her in the eyes anymore. “I mean, I did four DNA tests and they all came back positive. Though, there’s always a chance that there’s a bug or something in the programming, so maybe I should do some more –”

“Tony, you’re rambling.” He shut up. Her thumb stroked his cheek. “Look at me.” Sheepishly, he met her gaze again. Even though her gaze was still soft, Tony could see the resolve, too. He knew that look. Whatever she was about to say, she believed in her next words. “This isn’t a tragedy.”

“Isn’t it though?”

“No, it isn’t. Is it shocking? Yes. But it’s not a catastrophe, Tony.”

“I failed him, Pep,” he confessed in a shaky voice. “Again, and again.”

“You did not and you will not. Peter adores you. You’re his hero.”

“I don’t deserve it. I don’t deserve to be his hero and I sure as hell don’t deserve to be his father. I don’t even know how to be a father.”

“I hate to break it to you, but you already kind of are.” There was this small smile again but it was warmer this time around. “Peter isn’t an infant or a toddler. He’s a teenager.”

“Which is objectively worse.”

“I’m serious, Tony. You’re already doing everything any parent would do. You make sure Peter is safe –”

“I gave him a suit to fight crime. What parent does that? That’s the opposite of keeping him safe.”

“You gave him a suit with countless settings, a GPS tracker, a heater, a parachute, a direct link to you, a personal AI, and about everything one needs when being a superhero. We both know that Peter won’t stop being Spider-Man, whether he has your suit or not, so you made sure he is properly equipped. And, for Goodness sake, there are two of your suits on standby all the time, just in case Peter needs help. That sounds pretty safe to me.” Tony didn’t say anything, and Pepper took that rare chance and continued. “You teach him everything you know, whether it’s about building something or how to tie a tie properly. You help him with whatever he needs help with, be it something simple like homework or something like all the negative side effects of being Spider-Man. You give him a place to stay whenever he needs one, you feed him, you make sure he sleeps, you take care of him when he’s sick or injured, and, most importantly, you make sure he’s loved. How is that any different from a real parent?”

His throat is dry and raspy. “But I wasn’t there.”
“You’re here now, and that’s what matters.” Tony took a moment to let Pepper’s words sink in. He did care for Peter. More than he would like to admit. And everything she said was true: he had a very active role in the kid’s life and he chose to have this role – yes, he did try to keep him at an arm’s length, but that hadn’t worked out at all. He would drop anything and everything if Peter needed him. A world without him was unimaginable for Tony.

But was it enough? He had no clue what good fatherly behavior was like. Howard had always been strict, cold, and absent, barely talking to him unless it was to scold him. All his life, he’d thought being a father was an incredible difficult task that he had just no patience or talent for. The closest thing to children were his robots and he threatened to turn them into lamps at least once a day. Was it really enough to just continue like nothing had changed? To do anything just to ensure Peter was happy?

With a sigh, Tony dropped his head against Pepper’s stomach, closing his eyes. “Why are you always so good at this? It’s annoying.”

“Oh, you love it,” she replied and he could hear the smile in her voice.

Out of an impulse, he put his arms around her middle. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” She dropped a kiss on his hair before gently lifting his head to make him look into her eyes. “You’re going to be okay, you hear me? I know it’s quite scary right now, but there is no need to be scared.”

“I have no clue what I’m going to do.”

“You’ll figure it out. You always do.” His fiancé brushed his hair back and stepped smoothly out of his embrace. He already missed her warmth. “I’ll leave you alone for now. After all, there is a lot of work I’m missing because I left the conference.” Tony was about to make a comment that would at least imply he was sorry for making her leave early, but her quick kiss shut him up. “Don’t panic.”

“I never panic.”

“Right, whatever keeps you asleep at night.” The billionaire watched her go and slumped back into his chair as soon as she was out of his sight. He took a look at his flickering holo-screen that still displayed his latest project, but he’d suddenly lost all interest in it. Instead Pepper’s words echoed in his head. There was truth behind them, Tony knew that, but his own doubts distorted every logical thought he tried so desperately to form.

It was FRIDAY who ended his misery after … some time. He had, as usual, no idea how much time had passed. He should work on that. “Boss, I just received Mr Parker’s latest report from his AI.”

“Play it,” he ordered without thinking about it. All off Peter’s reports were saved in a special folder, though the kid didn’t know that. He still thought he just left a voice mail for Happy that’s why every single one of the reports started with the excited words Hi Happy!

At least until now.

“Hi Mr Stark!” Peter’s voice rang through the workshop and Tony froze. Never ever had one of his reports been addressed to him. Not since the Vulture Incident. Tony wasn’t really sure why the kid thought he wouldn’t listen to him, but he wasn’t correcting him. If he did, he wouldn’t get a dramatic re-telling of his adventures as soon as Peter saw him in person. “Happy said I should send this report to you because he was busy or something?” That traitor. Tony made a mental note to give Happy a raise. Well, depending on the outcome of this little stunt. “I don’t know, he was in a weird mood, but
I didn’t want to pry too much. I think he’s still grumpy that he had to check up on me this morning. Which won’t happen again, I promise! I’ll be more careful! Anyway, I’ll keep it short, you’re probably busy inventing super awesome things. So, I stopped a mugging – not a dangerous one! It was just a pursue and the guy didn’t even have a knife or anything! Just tried to grab it and run. The lady gave me some gum afterwards. There was also a bike thief who I had to stop twice! Like, you would think would stop but he didn’t, so I just webbed him up and called the police. What else? Oh, I gave some directions to a Japanese couple and took a selfie with them. And a kindergarten teacher almost strangled me.” There was a sigh and Tony didn’t even realize he was smiling. “I should explain that. It was about twenty minutes after I started patrolling and I passed this little park and there were all these kids and they waved, so I figured I could make a quick stop. Turned out they had some field trip – which I thought was a bit weird, because it was already kinda late for them, y’know? – to learn about insects and nature and everything. Then their teacher asked me if I could tell them something about spiders because I’m Spider-Man and the kids seemed so excited, so I was like yeah, sure, no problem even though I hate spiders! Which is so ironic, y’know? Spider-Man being afraid of spiders. Anyhow, all my research I did after the spider bite really paid off. I told them that spiders weren’t insects but arachnids and everything and then…” There was another sigh. “And then this boy, a really sweet looking kid, asked if spiders shoot their webs out of their hands just like I do and I, the big idiot that I am, said no, they shoot them out of their butt. I said butt in front of kids, Mr Stark!” Tony couldn’t help but snort. “They all started giggling and saying butt and their teacher looked furious! I felt so bad, but I didn’t know what to do, so I just said that I had to go to stop a crime – which I actually did, so it wasn’t a complete lie – and just ran.” He could practically see Peter’s distressed face. “Mr Stark, what if their teacher tells them Spider-Man is a bad influence? Am I a bad influence?” There was a strong urge in Tony to disagree even though he knew it would be pointless, after all it was a recording and Peter couldn’t hear him. “Man, I bet the Daily Bugle’ll find out about it and write even more bad stuff about me. They don’t like me at all.” There was a moment of silence and Tony could hear some of the traffic noises. Peter was probably sitting on a rooftop, overlooking Queens. He’d told him more than once that it was one of his favorite views. “But, yeah, that’s about it. I think I kept it pretty short, right? Just the essentials. Bye Mr Stark!”

For a minute, Tony just sat there, staring at the ceiling. A weird feeling bloomed in his chest – a feeling that always showed up whenever a certain Spiderling was involved. Peter was just so good in every way, despite all the shit that happened to him. He deserved something good as well – no, he deserved better. He deserved everything. That included a family that wasn’t just May. Not that May wasn’t doing a good job, she did a fantastic job, but every child deserved a mother and a father. Tony could actually give him that. And if that meant that he had to push all his insecurities aside to step up and work on himself to be a father that Peter could be proud of – then he just had to do that.

As soon as the door opened, Tony flashed his most charming smile. “Surprise! Your favorite billionaire is visiting!”

May Parker raised an unimpressed eyebrow. “Oh, you brought Oprah?”

“You know what? I’m not even angry about it because it’s Oprah.”

For a second, she continued to look less than thrilled but then a smile crept onto her face. She stepped aside to let Tony in. “I would’ve said Norman Osborn, but after Peter’s spider bite he slid
down a couple of places on my list,” she said as soon as she closed the door.

“You know him?” Tony asked, actually surprised.

May shrugged and they sat down on the couch. “No, I just met him. He was at Richard and Mary’s wedding and he introduced himself. He was only there for a few minutes, after all a company doesn’t run itself.”

“Well … as long as I’m above Justin Hammer, it’s okay,” Tony joked, but May waved her hand dismissively.

“Oh no, Justin Hammer is at the very bottom of my list. He was the one behind the disaster of the Stark Expo in 2010.” He nodded, even though there was a rush of panic that crashed over him. Peter had told him very casually – between rambling about MJ she is so smart, Mr Stark, and pretty and a bit scary, but did I already mention smart and pretty and his newest Spider-Man adventure – that he’d been there with May and Ben, dressed up as Iron Man. That’d tickled something in Tony’s memory, and as the memory of a little boy dressed in an Iron Man helmet and cloves in front of the drone resurfaced, he almost had had a heart attack. Of course it turned out that that little boy had been his kid. The same stupid bravery and selflessness. He should’ve connected the dots ages ago.

“But I’m guessing you’re not here to ask me about my favorite billionaires.”

“No, I’m not.” His eyes flickered to the wall that was covered with the Parker photographs. Almost immediately his gaze landed on the wedding picture of Mary and Richard, bathed in the morning’s sunlight. For a moment he wondered why he’d never really noticed it before. It had always been there, a bit too the left of his favorite Peter’s-face-is-covered-in-ice-cream-photo.

After deciding to give the father-son-thing a real, actual chance, he’d realized that he needed to talk to May first. He couldn’t do this without her. Not only because May knew what it was like to be a parent, but she was the most important adult in Peter’s life. She’d raised him and loved him like her own child. Tony knew that Peter felt the same way and would do anything to protect her. If she didn’t want Peter to know the truth – which was a thought Tony didn’t like at all – he wouldn’t go against her will. “I’m here because of Peter.”

“Did something happen?” May asked, sitting up straight and worry in her eyes. “He promised me to tell me if something happened, but I’ve been so busy with work lately …”

“No, he’s fine. And by the way, you’re very welcome to work at the med bay at the compound or even at the Tower. Better shifts, way better payment. A shockingly handsome boss.” Tony winked, but she just shook her head no, a small smile on her face, and didn’t say anything else. They’d had this argument a lot of times and May always refused. Despite the hours and the not-really-good payment, she loved her job at the hospital. “It’s actually not about Peter per se, but … about 50 percent of him.”

When he had imagined this conversation, he’d anticipated confusion. There was no confusion. Instead, May blinked once, twice, and then she seemed to understand. He hadn’t been prepared for this. In fact, Tony had a whole speech with a lot of metaphors about finding out that he was Peter’s father. “You found out that Richard isn’t Peter’s father.”

“I did,” he said and sounded way calmer than he felt. His heart felt like it would break through his ribcage any second. His hands were itching with the need to move, but he kept them in his lab.

“And now you want to know who is.”
That took him by surprise after hearing that she was aware of the not-his-father-situation. She knew it wasn’t Richard, but didn’t know it was Tony? “You don’t know?”

“No, Mary didn’t tell anyone.” She sighed, running a hand through her hair. Tony sat still. This didn’t play out like his imaginary scenarios at all. “They’d this big fight. I don’t know about what, but it had been bad enough that the broke up for a few months. Eventually, they worked through it, but Mary was already pregnant. She said it had been a one-time thing because she had been sad and angry and drunk.”

“And Richard was okay with it?”

May shrugged. “Yeah. He loved her and wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. That meant living with another man’s child and he accepted it. Took a few weeks, but he did. He loved Peter like his own, everyone could see that. It didn’t matter to him that he wasn’t his real father, Peter was his son.” Tony could feel the melancholy radiating from her. “Richard was a good, kind, and loving man.”

There was a burning question inside him that wouldn’t leave him alone since the moment Happy broke the news to him. “Does Peter know?”

Suddenly the woman in front of him deflated. “I don’t know. I mean, we’ve never told him, but … A few months after we took him in, one of Ben’s friends made a comment about it. Said it impressive that we took him even though he’s not blood. Peter must’ve overheard it because it asked what it meant. He was still working through the plane crash and we didn’t want to drop the next bomb on him, so we just made some excuses, said that it meant he wasn’t our own child. He seemed to buy it, but …” She shrugged again. “He’s a smart kid. He never asked about it again, though, so we didn’t mention it.”

Tony couldn’t tell if he was relieved or not. Was it good that Peter may have his suspicions? Was it bad? Would it make everything easier? But before he could figure out what exactly he was feeling, May spoke again. “Why is this suddenly important? Why do you need to know who is father is?”

She paused and knitted her eyebrows together. “Do you know who he is?”

Well, he couldn’t get a better opening, could he. His heart was pounding in his chest. His palms were sweaty. He had to force his hands and feet to stay still. Despite knowing that this woman wasn’t afraid to go toe to toe with a superhero/billionaire/genius, he looked her right into the eyes. “As a matter of fact, I do. You’re looking at him.”

For a heartbeat, May didn’t move at all. Maybe she had suddenly forgotten English and couldn’t understand his words. That didn’t help Tony’s rising blood pressure. Her mouth opened and closed a couple of times. Then, after what felt like an eternity, she found her words again. Her eyes were like steel. “If this is a joke, I’m forbidding Peter from seeing you ever again.”

“I’m not joking,” he reassures her quickly, because the thought of never seeing Peter again was panic evoking. “And, before you ask, I didn’t know until, well, yesterday. I swear I didn’t know when I first came here.”

She seemed to soften a bit after hearing his words. However, she still looked very confused. He couldn’t blame her. “I don’t understand. When … How did this happen?”

“You know that Happy was in here yesterday? To check on Peter?” Tony got a tight nod as an answer. “He took a look at your pictures here. And, I don’t know if he ever told you, but he’s really good with faces. Remembers them even after years and years. Not like me, I always forget everything by lunch. Anyway, he saw their wedding picture and remembered her. We met at a
conference in Detroit about nine months before Peter was born.”

“And it’s not just coincident?”

“No. I ran a DNA test, well … four tests. They all came back positive.” He took a deep breath. “I’m his father.” It was strange. A part of him was terrified of May’s reaction, knowing that she would decide what would happen, and simultaneously he felt like a weight has been lifted of his shoulders.

Abruptly, May jumped to her feet, muttered that she would be right back and left the room. Tony didn’t know what to do. He really didn’t expect her to just bail on him. She was quite talkative, just like Peter, so he’d imagined some kind of conversation. But before he could even make up his mind about a possible scenario – maybe she kept one of Ben’s guns and even though she wasn’t the aggressive type, perhaps that changed when she found out a certain not-favorite billionaire was the father of her beloved nephew – she came back with a nondescript envelope.

“I kind of forgot about it because we never needed it,” she explained as soon as she sat back next to him, “but Mary did write his name down. Just in case, you know? Like if there was a family disease or something. I don’t know if she knew that something would happen to her, but …” For a moment May was lost in her thoughts, her eyes sad, but before he could offer some comfort, she already snapped out of it. “We were close to opening it once, back when Peter got bitten and we didn’t know what happened. Took him to the hospital, but they couldn’t explain what was happening. He was fine the next morning, though, so we didn’t.” She turned the envelope in her hands, like she wasn’t sure if she should really do this, but in the end, she handed it to him.

Tony didn’t like being handed things. But he took this eagerly. He didn’t even hesitate, there was no panic looming over him, not like there’d been when he run the tests. Inside was a single paper, not very large, and in curly but legible letters two words were written in the center of it.

Tony Stark

He let out a breath that he didn’t know he was holding. Because what if it hadn’t been his name? What if the samples had been too old or there’d been a bug in the programming? Tony honestly couldn’t tell what he would have done if any other name had been written on this paper. To think – accept – that Peter was his son and then have that taken away? It would’ve been worse than a nightmare.

“I’ll be damned,” May whispered next to him, reading over his shoulder. “It really is you.”

“Told you.” He couldn’t help the sarcasm, it was one of his coping mechanisms, but he sobered up quickly. “What should I do?”

“You’re asking me?”

“Of course. You raised him. I’m not doing anything that you’re not okay with. If you don’t want him to know, then I’ll never mutter a word to him about it.”

She looked taken aback and stared at him. Tony just stared back. He’d kind of hoped that the woman would merely tell him what to do. Like, give him a five-step plan on how to be a good parent. But instead, she simply shook her head. “I’m not going to tell you what to do. Whatever you want to do with this information, I’ll support it.”

“Huh. I … expected more yelling.”

That cracked a smile out of her. “Well, I admit that I haven’t been your biggest fan. But it’s pretty obvious how much you care about Peter and … I mean, you can help him with all this superhero
stuff that I can’t, but that’s not all. Spending time with you makes him happy. And I think you’re filling a gap that Ben left.”

“I’m not trying to replace him,” Tony interrupted because he truly didn’t. Not once had he ever thought he could take Ben’s place.

“I know. But whether Peter realizes it or not, he needs some kind of father. He deserves one. You’ve been willing to be that before you found out about all of this. That’s makes you good enough in my book.” May smiled at him and the billionaire had the strange urge to hug her. “So? What do you want to do?”

“I want to tell him,” he confessed. “I want to give this a proper try. If Peter lets me, that is.”

She nodded, still smiling. “Then tell him. He’s going to the Tower on Friday anyway. That might be a good chance. He can even spend the night, if he wants to.”

Grateful – because Tony still couldn’t believe that the woman that yelled at him gave him so much support – he reached out and squeezed her hand. “Thank you, May. You know, if you would work for me, I would give you a raise right now.” May just threw back her head and laughed.

Tony had been a complete wreck for the last couple of days. Not like he was when he thought he was dying of palladium poisoning. No, he was a wreck in a completely different way because he was so nervous. After basically his entire life in the spotlight, he forgot what being nervous was like. He got used to just act and then deal with the consequences – or simply ignore the consequences. Now he was so terrified of the consequences that he didn’t know how to act.

There was a plan: Happy would drop Peter off at the Tower straight after school to tinker in his workshop, just like always. Tony would be waiting with two pizzas - because the kid’s metabolism was simply off the charts - just like always. Then he would carefully ask him about Richard and what he knew and break the news that Tony was in fact his father. It was a simple plan. An easy to follow plan. Pepper, Rhodey – who had been enlightened about the situation at hand – and Happy approved this plan. The genius had practiced with DUM-E, but the robot just didn’t get Peter’s personality right. He’d been very eager to try, though. He’d been this close to posting something along the lines of Help! My mentee turned out to be my son, what do I do, please help me on a website for expecting parents. FRIDAY had run simulations with the most likely scenarios. Tony was probably as prepared as one could be.

And he was still nervous.

He wanted this to go well so badly. He couldn’t screw this up. Because if he did, he might loose Peter. He couldn’t lose Peter.

“Boss, Mr Hogan and Mr Parker just arrived at the garage,” FRIDAY informed him.

Tony could feel his blood pressure rising. He glanced at the freshly delivered pizzas, at the holographs that displayed one of the more recent projects, so it wouldn’t look like he was sitting around the whole day just waiting for this moment – even though he’d been doing exactly that. “Send him up.”
The music turned down a couple of notches without Tony giving the command. It was one of the protocols he’d installed as he found out about Peter’s heightened senses. As soon as he entered the building, music wouldn’t turn up over a certain point so it couldn’t hurt him, and there were absolutely no flashing lights to irritate his eyes. It only applied to the private areas of the Tower, but still. Tony didn’t want to take any risk. Not if it could hurt the kid. His kid.

There was the nervousness again.

It didn’t take too long for the elevator to reach his workshop and before Tony could be even remotely ready, Peter was already walking into the lab, a spring in his steps and a smile on his face that was bright enough to power all of Manhattan. “Hi Mr Stark!”

“Hey kiddo,” Tony greeted him, turning in his chair to see the boy drop his backpack – number three of the month – next to a worktable. Something burned inside his chest and almost made him throw up the five mugs of coffee he’d had today. Instead he just motioned for the pizza. “Hungry?”

“Starving!” His eyes lit up as he saw the boxes as if it was totally surprising to see them. He did that every time. Like he couldn’t believe Tony would do something as simple as feed him. Eagerly Peter grabbed the first box and took a bite of a slice. “This is so good.”

“It’s even better when you’re closing your mouth so I can actually enjoy my pizza,” Tony teased and pulled his box closer, even though just the thought of forcing down some food seemed impossible. “How’s school?” Like he predicted – hoped – Peter jumped right in and was, somehow, recounting his entire day at school while inhaling his food at once. That boy never ceased to amaze him.

By the time Peter had devoured his pizza, he was also at the point where Happy picked him up from school. “Sounds like you had a very exciting day, kid,” Tony commended, his heart pounding in his chest. A part of him feared that Peter would hear it. But he didn’t say anything, just nodded his head up and down enthusiastically, swallowing the last bit of food.

This was it. This was his chance. He couldn’t postpone it because Peter was already eyeing the project on the screen and would definitely ask about it. If he did, Tony, being the coward he was, would take that opportunity to avoid talking about the elephant in the room. It had to happen now. His hands itched to have something to do, so he grabbed a pen and twirled it between his fingers. It didn’t take anything of the nervousness away. “Pete, there is actually something I want to talk to you about.”

“Yeah?” But Tony only had half of his attention, because the teenager’s eyes had drifted down to the uneaten pizza. After a nod from his mentor, Peter grabbed a slice. “About what?”

_Breathe in and out. In. Out. You can do this._

“It’s about your parents.”

Peter froze, his eyes snapping to Tony who tried – and probably failed, because it felt like a failure – to seem calm. For a moment the kid was just looking at him, the gears in his head turning, trying to figure out where this was going. Then, finally, he took a bite. “Like, their work? Or their death?”

“No, not about any of that.”

“About my dad not being my father?”

Although Tony knew there’d been a possibility that Peter knew, he hadn’t really been prepared for it. He definitely hadn’t been prepared for the impartiality in his voice. A feeling that Tony couldn’t name replaced the nervousness for a second, but it wasn’t better. “You know?” His voice sounded
weaker than he wanted.

But Peter simply shrugged and nodded. “Yeah, I do.”

“How... How did you find out?”

“Well, Jim, one of Ben’s friends, said this really weird thing about me not being blood, right? And I was about, like, seven and didn’t know what it meant, but May and Ben just said that he said it because I wasn’t their son. Hadn’t really made sense for me back then, but I didn’t want to ask too much because they always got really upset whenever I talked about family and everything that was somehow connected to my parents. A few years later when I just started Middle School, we read this book and there was a line that was pretty similar to what Jim had said and the teacher said that it meant that you weren’t related. I didn’t really want to ask them again, because they just started talking about my parents again without being upset, so it just, like, was in the back of my head and I didn’t do anything about it. Until we visited Midtown High to take a look at the school. So, Ned, who knows by the way, and I knew that they would show off all their cool tech to impress everyone. I stole some of Ben’s hair out of the comb and then we ran a DNA test.” Peter shrugged again. “It didn’t match. If Dad was my father, then there should’ve been at least some similarities, right? But there was none at all. And I know that I look like Mom, so the only conclusion was that Dad isn’t my father.”

“You executed a DNA test when you were how old?”

He gave half a shrug. “Ned helped me.”

“Your friend Ned that hacked my multimillion-dollar suit? That Ned?” Of course it was a rhetorical question. Peter had two friends – and that was including MJ, though Tony wasn’t really sure if she could be classified as a friend. “Kiddo, you know that you two nerds aren’t the standard for normal teenage shenanigans, right?” Peter chose to ignore that comment and instead took another bite. “You seem awfully calm about this.”

“Yeah, now. Wasn’t so calm the first time around. After all, it was my first identity crisis.”

“My second was when I find out I had powers.” Tony wondered if Peter would get another identity crisis if – when – he found out that he was Tony Stark’s son. “And I had a lot of time to think about it, you know? I know I’m not related to Ben and May, but they raised me and loved me and we’re a family in everything but blood. Besides, there’re so many families with adopted kids or foster children and they’re still a family, right? So, it’s just like we’re one of them.”

Somehow, FRIDAY had not prepared Tony for this. In every scenario, Peter had had some curiosity about his biological father, but right now he seemed indifferent. Maybe it was because he’d had so much time to thing about it. Maybe it was because he was a crime fighting superhero now and other things were more important now. Maybe he was just acting okay. Maybe it was something completely different, Tony couldn’t tell. In his mind, there was only one question that was on repeat: should he actually tell him? The kid didn’t seem like he wanted to know. Would it be better if Tony just keep his mouth shut? It could prevent a disastrous argument, even if it also meant that Tony would always be a mentor to him, nothing more.

The thought filled him with a cold feeling that was almost hurtful.

“Why d’you want to know?” Peter asked, mouth already filled with more pizza again. “And how did you find out?” Suddenly, his eyes went comically wide and if the billionaire hadn’t been freaking
out, he would’ve laughed. “Did you talk to May about it? She doesn’t know! I mean, she doesn’t know that I know. I don’t actually know if she knows about my dad. Anyway, please don’t tell her! She would freak out, I just know it!”

Tony had been prepared. He’d practiced, he had a really well written speech – that Pepper had proofread - and he had back up plans for his back up plans.

But, in a true Tony Stark-fashion, he made a rash decision and changed his mind.

“I am,” he confessed. Suddenly, words were unbelievable difficult to form and he just prayed that the kid would understand. After all, he was a genius just like Tony himself.

Peter’s eyes grew even more and he paled. Not the reaction Tony had hoped for. “You told her? Mr Stark, I -”

So he didn’t understand what he wanted to say. “No, Pete, I am your father.”

This time, his face transformed so fast if Tony had been able to blink, he would’ve missed it. Peter was beaming, his eyes shining. A knot in his chest started easing away. “Was that a Star Wars reference?”

Of course. Of course, he would be so excited about his favorite movies that he would actually not get the meaning of the words. Tony sighed, wondering why this was so hard even though he was as blunt as he could be. “No. Peter, listen to me. It’s not a movie reference or a joke or anything, okay? I am your father.” His eyes were trained on Peter’s face, making sure he would understand it this time for sure. “You’re my son.”
Chapter 3

Guys, I'm still absolutely floored by your support! I literally can't believe it. Thanks so much!

This chapter took so much longer than I anticipated. It's also so, so much longer than I originally planned. There is a lot of heartfelt conversations in here and, honestly, it was a bit like pulling teeth for me. I don't know why, maybe I wasn't in the right state of mind, or my own problems where just getting in the way, or I'm just really bad at writing heartfelt conversations. So that didn't help either.

This is not beta-read. I still don't know where to put any commas. Also, I still don't know anything about anything except cake, and there is still no cake in this story.

I hope you enjoy it! :)

Peter had an incredible expressive face. Tony loved it. Every little emotion was amplified. Whenever the kid was excited or happy, his whole face would light up, making it impossible for Tony to look away. Somewhere along the way, the billionaire had made it his unofficial goal to see this blinding joy as often as he could – it was quite handy that the kid got excited very easily. Unfortunately, it also meant that whenever Peter was sad, it was absolutely heartbreaking to watch.

But watching him trying to process the news was nerve-wracking. Tony could pinpoint the exact moment Peter understood the words. His first thought was that it had to be a joke – just like everyone else – because he was searching his face for any indication of it. He found none. Then there was the confusion. Tony could basically see all the questions that were running through Peter’s head. The kid didn’t even blink, just kept staring at him. It was the longest Peter had been silent in Tony’s present since they met.

Meanwhile, the billionaire started fidgeting. Should he just start with a lengthy explanation? Would Peter even listen to a single word he said? What if he had different questions than Tony plant for? The kid had always had a strange habit to ask weird questions during the most inappropriate of times.

Eventually, Peter opened his mouth, and actual words came out of it. “I’m … your son?”

“Yes.”

“Like … like a family?”

Tony simply nodded. There was a sarcastic response on the tip of his tongue – something along the lines of Geez, kid, I thought you inherited my brain. What other kind of son is there? – but he had to be serious right now. Normally Peter would always understand his coping mechanism to play everything off as a joke, but Tony couldn’t risk him misinterpreting it as teasing. The kid may clam up and stop talking which was the complete opposite of what Tony wanted. He needed to have this conversation with him, no matter how uncomfortable they were.

Peter looked like he wanted to say more, but stopped himself. Closed his mouth, thought some more,
opened his mouth again – and stopped again. Tony had to actually bite down on his tongue to not say anything.

*Give him time to process,* he repeated in his head. He’d read on a lot of parenting websites that time – to process or whatever – was important. If Peter wanted time, then Tony would give him all the time he needed.

Finally, he found his voice again. “I … don’t understand.”

“What exactly?”

“All of it.” For a second, Peter looked like he was actually in pain from all the questions running through his brain. “I have so many questions.”

“Sure, whatever you want to know,” Tony offered eagerly, relieved that Peter was talking to him. “Shoot away.”

“How did this,” he made a vague gesture with his hand which could’ve meant anything, “happen? Like, everything. The whole story.”

“Well, it started when Happy drove over to your place because your phone died. That morning, he took a look at your pictures and recognized Mary.”

“Happy’s very good with faces,” Peter whispered, almost like he didn’t even realize that he said anything. Tony nodded, briefly wondering why he knew that. What kind of conversation were they having that that particular fact came up? Probably something about movies. Peter loved movies and Happy was excellent at recognizing actors.

“He is. Anyway, he remembered that I met her at a conference. We talked, we drank, and we … left together.” For a second, Peter grimaced, but Tony couldn’t blame him. No kid wants to hear about their parents having sex. “We didn’t keep in touch. About nine months later, you were born.”

“And you’re sure that you … I mean …” Peter’s face was bright red and he couldn’t look him in the eyes. “You’re sure that you didn’t just, like, … fall asleep or played some cards or something like that? I mean, you said you were quite drunk, and maybe you just …”

“I ran four tests. They were all positive,” Tony said, deciding to save the kid from his own stuttering. However, there was a sharp pain in his chest. Was the thought of Tony being his father so terrible that he needed to make sure they weren’t playing some cards or something like that? “Also, May had an envelope from your mom with your father’s name in it. With my name.”

“May knows?” Peter asked, head snapping up, panic written all over his face.

“I went to talk with her,” he tried to calm the kid down, but somehow it only felt like he was making it worse. His own panic started blooming in his chest. He couldn’t screw this up. He couldn’t. This was too important. “She knew that Richard isn’t your father, but she didn’t know that I am.” Peter was staring at him, eyes wide and he looked so, so young. Tony grew incredible nervous. “I couldn’t not talk to her.”

“And you never tried to contact her? My mom, I mean.”

Tony’s guilt quadruplicated. “No, I didn’t. Like I said, we drank. A lot. We didn’t exchange numbers or anything.” He didn’t mention that he had barely any memories of the night. The few that he had were very vague – so vague that he wasn’t completely sure they were of that particular night. But Peter didn’t need to know that, right? “And, honestly? Normally women with pregnancy claims
come to me, not the other way around. They’re all false, of course, so I never thought about checking up on … the others.” Suddenly, he was very aware about his carelessness. Another thing he had to fix in order to be a father Peter deserved.

“So … it was Mom’s fault for not contacting you?”

The billionaire almost winced. “That’s not what I said. Look, Pete, there isn’t just one person to blame, okay? I didn’t try to talk to Mary, and she didn’t tell me. The situation was … badly handled.”

For a second that felt like an eternity, the only sound inside the workshop was their heavy breathing. The emotions on Peter’s face were changing so fast that Tony couldn’t identify them properly. Was it anger or worry he was seeing? Disappointment or sadness? Denial or disgust? Damn it, he should’ve stuck with his Pepper-approved speech. He was using all the wrong words; his usual charisma threw itself out of the window the second he diverged from his original plan.

“So,” Peter said, eyes lowered in concentration, like he was trying to solve an especially difficult equation, “what you’re saying is … that it was an accident? A mistake?”

Tony’s blood turned to ice. Shit. “No,” he said as firmly as he could. He knew Peter good enough to understand the true meaning behind his words. “No, it wasn’t a mistake. You hear me? Not a mistake. Was it unplanned? Yes. Poorly handled? Definitely yes. But it wasn’t a mistake, because you’re here because of it. And you’re – “You’re one of the best things that has ever happened to me. You are the future of the Avengers and you will change the world, as Peter Parker and as Spider-Man. You’re too good to be in the same room as me, much less related to me. I don’t deserve your idolization, I don’t deserve to be your hero or mentor, and I sure as hell don’t deserve to be your father. You’re so unbelievable important to me that it scares me. You’re my son and I’ll do anything I can for the rest of my life to be worthy enough to be in your life. “You’re not a mistake.”

Peter looked up again and Tony’s heart broke a little – well, not a little. A lot. Tears were welling up in his big brown eyes, his shoulders were hunched and he pulled at the already worn out hemline of his sleeves. The words Tony wanted to say – had to say – were stuck in his throat, unable to come out of his mouth. He knew he should say them, let Peter know how important he was to him. But he couldn’t. There was this unshakeable fear of rejection in him that forced him to be cautious. After all, there were plenty of examples why everyone he trusts ends up betraying him.

But this is Peter. This isn’t Obadiah. This isn’t Steve. This is Peter.

However, before Tony could gather every ounce of courage in his body, the boy before him already acted. Faster than he could blink, Peter was standing, his head bowed. “I-I should go,” he said to the floor.

“What?” Tony asked breathlessly and for a second – a second in which Peter already gathered his backpack and was two feet closer to the elevator – he was completely unable to do anything. He screwed up. Peter was leaving. He didn’t want Tony to be his father. Peter took another two steps and, finally, Tony snapped out of his daze, jumping to his feet. “No, hey, kiddo, wait a second. Don’t leave. I - … we have to talk about it.”

“I’m sure May’s already waiting for me,” Peter lied, because they both knew she wasn’t.

Tony hurried to catch up with him, but he was almost at the elevator, the doors already open. “Peter, stay. We should talk about this.” Peter didn’t stop. Tony’s heart was beating wildly in his chest, panic overriding every logical thought in his brain. “Or we don’t have to talk. Not about this or anything at all. Just complete silence. We can tinker around, upgrade your suit – or my suit, you want
to play around with one of them anyway, right? We could even go for a quick flight through the city.” Peter was inside the elevator now. Desperation made the billionaire ramble. “Or we could watch a movie. Or – or a Star Wars marathon? You can choose the order, and I promise I won’t make any snarky comments. Or, maybe, if you’re not in the mood for sci-fi, we could watch that cop show, Brooklyn Nine-Nine? You wanted me to watch it, remember? We could totally do that now. We’ll just order enough food to feed an army and watch TV.” Tony could literally feel all his chances run through his fingers as if it were sand. “Please.”

Peter slowly lifted his teary eyes and it felt like the Hulk punched Tony in the gut. Repeatedly. Without his suit. “I’m sorry,” Peter whispered, barely loud enough to reach his ears.

For a split second, Tony thought about ordering FRIDAY to initiate the Lock Down Protocol. The doors wouldn’t close. No elevator would move. No door or window would open. Peter wouldn’t have a way to escape, unless he would punch an actual hole through the wall. The thought almost made him sick. He wanted Peter to stay because he wanted to, not because he trapped him. Unable to move even the smallest muscle in his body, Tony just watched the doors close right in front of him, taking Peter away from him.

Feelings – too many to identify them – came crushing down on him, almost knocking him off his feet. Suddenly, breathing was so much more difficult than before. A single thought was on repeat: He screwed up. He screwed up. He lost one of the most important persons in his life. Peter didn’t want him. Didn’t want to be related to him. That’s why he ran. What other reason could there be? He was probably disappointed. Was Tony only good enough to be an idol or mentor, but not a father? He shouldn’t be surprised. Tony always knew he would be a shit father. He’d had a shit father, so it was inevitable that he would become a shit father, too.

“Boss,” FRIDAY interrupted and sounded almost caring, “Mr. Hogan was made aware of the situation, and is driving Mr. Parker home.”

Tony wasn’t sure if he managed to nod or not. He sure as hell didn’t manage to form some words. His eyes roamed through the workshop, making his heart ache. Wherever he looked, he was reminded of Peter. The kid’s workbench with his half-finished project, and dirty beakers from his last batch of web fluid. The beaten couch where he would occasionally take naps. The old car engine they disassembled, so Tony could teach him how to put it back together step by step. The little hole in the wall where they tested a batch of web fluid that turned out to be acid. The slightly bigger hole a little to the left where Tony let Peter try out an Iron Man repulsor. His own holo-screen that had several folders about Peter: his patrol reports, new ideas for suit upgrades, data about his mutation, every single message he’d ever sent him, numerous ideas for his birthday and Christmas presents, files about May, Ned, MJ, his teachers, and that bully Flash.

He couldn’t stay here. It was physically impossible for him to stay in the workshop and not think about Peter and what he just lost because he was such an idiot. Tony’d had a plan! A good plan! And he screwed it up. Screwed up what had possibly been his only chance to do this right. Without really knowing what he was going to do, Tony stepped into the elevator. “To the penthouse,” he ordered. FRIDAY didn’t answer, just executed his command, and he was grateful.

But it turned out that the penthouse wasn’t really that much better. As he walked into the open living area, Tony was overcome with more memories. Movie marathons on the couch, eating take out on the floor, playing video games, trying to get Peter to come down from the ceiling while the boy was sleep walking, eating home cooked dinners at the way too big dining table, helping him with his homework, falling asleep on the couch together. The Tower had started to feel like a home because of Peter. Because he created all these memories with Peters in here. And now he was gone. There wasn’t a room in this damn building that wouldn’t remind him of the kid – and what he’d lost.
“I screwed up,” he breathed, needing to get the words off his chest. “I screwed it all up.” Unshed tears started to burn in his eyes.

“If I may, Boss,” FRIDAY interrupted, not unkindly, “based on my research, I do not believe that you failed.”

“I don’t need you to lie to me.”

“You programmed me. I could never lie to you.” Well … that was true. “According to my observations and research, Mr. Parker did not reject you, but left to process and evaluate the situation. After all, you needed time to think as well, Boss.” The AI paused, maybe to give Tony time to see the truth in her words. “Therefore, I do not believe that you screwed it up. You simply need to wait.”

Tony wasn’t sure if he should be ashamed that an AI was better with emotions than he was, or proud that he could program an AI like that.

“I’m shit at waiting,” he finally said, not sure what to make of her words. Everything seemed too raw, too hurtful, too hopeless.

“I’m positive you will manage, Boss.”

Oh, Tony did manage. Somewhat. Well, not really. He went to the only place in this damn building that didn’t hold any memories of Peter: his bar. Sometime after his second drink, he got a message from Happy, saying that he dropped the kid safely off at his place. During the entire ride, Peter had been silent, except for a quite thank you. Even later, when the bottle of scotch was almost half empty, he got a message from May. Peter was quiet and shaken, and she’ll keep an eye on him for the next few days. Tony didn’t answer any of the messages – neither the ones from Pepper or Rhodey – and just kept drinking.

“Dude.” Ned’s eyes were comically wide, and if they’d been in any other situation, Peter would have laughed. “For real?” Peter only managed a nod. “Tony Stark, the Tony Stark, Iron Man is your father?”

“Yeah,” he said, and there was that pressure on his chest again. He had to clear his throat to get rid of that sticky feeling on his vocal cords. “Apparently he is.”

“This is insane,” his best friend whispered in awe. “Flash will lose his shit. Peter, I swear your life is literally like a movie. You’re a superhero and the secret son of a genius billionaire who is also a superhero? I mean, c’mon!”

Peter didn’t answer. Instead he picked at a lose threat of his hoodie, desperately trying to force back the tears that were already gathering in his eyes again. He hoped that the numb feeling would return soon. That was way easier to deal with than the constant need to cry. It felt like he had been doing this for the past twenty-four hours – crying or feeling numb. Ever since Tony told him about … the situation, Peter was going through emotional overload. It was a bit like his sensory overload, except with emotions. Well, not every emotion. Just the crying-emotions. The smallest things would make him want to cry. It didn’t even have to make sense. This morning, he looked at his usual cereals and,
boom, tears in his eyes. And then, as if nothing could bother him, he felt nothing at all, thought nothing at all. His head was filled with white noise and everything seemed less important.

It didn’t help that everyone he was talking to looked at him with so much sympathy. First Tony who’d looked like he was in actual pain explaining the situation. Then Happy who didn’t even had to ask what happened, and lastly May who had just hugged him so tight that Peter had been wondering if she had super strength as well. Everybody knew. Everybody but him. That thought hurt more than he liked to admit, and he had to do something. He needed someone who was just as unaware of the situation as him. So, he went to Ned. Needless to say, he was just as surprised as Peter. However, he was handling it way better.

“Yeah. Awesome.” He almost choked on his own words.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Ned asked, his eyes brows furrowed together in confusion. “Why aren’t you excited about it? I mean, it’s obviously shocking, like, so surreal. What even is your life? But you were talking about Tony Stark being your father all the time when we were younger.”

“Back then, it was just a stupid fantasy.”

“Well … it’s not anymore.”

There was a lump as big as Queens in his throat. “No, it’s not. I’m his son.” Tears were blurring his vision and his voice cracked. Half hoping Ned wouldn’t hear him – and because he really needed to get it off his chest –, he whispered: “It all makes sense now.”

“What makes sense?”

A single tear spilled from the corner of his eye, and he wiped it away quickly. “Why Mr Stark spends time with me.”

Even without looking at him, Peter could see Ned deflating, his shoulders slumping down. “Peter …”

“I’ve been wondering about that the whole time, y’know?” He couldn’t stop now. It was like a dam inside him was broken and all the words were just tumbling out of his mouth. “I mean, I get why he would be interested in Spider-Man. But I never understood why he would be interested in Peter Parker. I’m just some loser from Queens, who laughs way too hard about science puns, and watches too many movies, and still plays with Legos, and gets bullied every day at school.”

The lump in his throat was growing, and more and more tears were escaping his eyes, but the pressure on his chest was decreasing with every word he said. Those thoughts didn’t just appear in Peter’s head over night. They had been there ever since Tony invited him into his lab for the first time. Peter could understand the billionaire’s interest in Spider-Man, after all he built him a suit and it was more or less public knowledge that Iron Man was mentoring Queen’s vigilante. Of course, he had to make sure that Spider-Man wouldn’t do anything that would harm his reputation.

Tony’s interest in Peter Parker, though? That had been very suspicious for him. Still, he’d answered all his questions, too polite and too starstruck to ask why he wanted to know what they were doing at school or what colleges he was interested in. For weeks, Peter waited for the other shoe to drop. Something, anything, to explain all the questions. After their fourth movie night – the second time Tony had fallen asleep on the couch and the first time Peter had dared to rest his head on his shoulder and nothing bad had happened –, he started to entertain the idea that Tony maybe, maybe, enjoyed his company. That he liked spending time with him, even though Peter got too excited, and was always talking, and they were discussing the stupidest movie theories, and building silly things just
for the fun of it.

That thought had filled Peter with a giddy, excited feeling for a week.

And then the other shoe dropped. In form of a paternity test.

Tony started spending more time with him because he was his son. Not because he wanted to, but because he felt obliged to do it. Because he felt guilty and he had to. And, yeah, maybe Tony got used to him. Maybe he just accepted that his son wouldn’t be as cool as himself. Because, seriously, how could anybody be as cool as Tony Stark? That was an impossible bar to pass.

“But me being his son?” Peter shook his head slightly. “Now it makes sense why he wastes his time one me.”

“He’s not wasting his time on you.”

“No, he is! He’d canceled at least three very important meetings because of me. He spends so much time just fooling around with me instead of inventing new tech for his company. Why else would he do that for some random kid?”

“Well, if that was true – which I don’t think it is – the timing is all off. You’ve been hanging out for months now, and he just found out that he’s your father.”

“Yeah, he says that he just found out.”

“You don’t believe him?”

“No, not really. I mean, he’s Tony Stark, tech genius of the millennia who has access to the best labs and technology in the world, and he didn’t do a DNA test before he recruited me?” Peter shook his head as if to support his words. “I don’t buy it. He has to lie.”

“Dude, I don’t think Tony Stark is even able to lie or keep a secret. I mean, he told the world he’s Iron Man after, like, a week.”

“It was longer than a week.” Ned had a point, though. Mr. Stark was terrible at keeping secrets. Which begs the question why he told him now, on a seemingly random Friday? Why not when they first met? Or after Germany? After the ferry? When he offered him a spot at the Avengers? Did something happen at Stark Industries? Something that forced Tony to reveal this secret? Maybe he needed to secure an heir or something?

The thought that Tony only told him because he needed him to take over SI someday left a bad taste in his mouth – not unlike the taste of vomit.

For a moment, neither of them said anything. Peter was still hoping the numb feeling would return soon and banish all the tears from his eyes. Ned slipped from his bed to sit next to him on the ground. He bumped into his shoulder. “Peter, you’re not a loser,” he said with some kind of solemn honesty. “You’re like the smartest person that I know, and you’re a superhero.”

“Spider-Man is a superhero,” Peter corrected, not looking up from his sleeves.

“Peter Parker and Spider-Man are the same person. Dude, seriously. This isn’t a Dr Jekyll and Mr Hy – … not wait, I got a better one. This isn’t a Bruce Banner and the Hulk situation.” Ned was beaming, proud of his joke, and Peter couldn’t help but let the corners of his mouth twitch upwards. “You are Spider-Man, just without the mask. And if Mr. Stark doesn’t think you’re cool – which I do not think he does – then … he’s the uncool one.”
“Mr. Stark can’t not be cool. Iron Man is your favorite superhero.”

“My favorite superhero is Spider-Man. Iron Man may be my favorite Avenger, but that solely based on the fact that he thinks Peter Parker is cool.” Peter peered at Ned who was looking back with a firm look on his face. Ned was a huge Iron Man fan, maybe not as obsessed as Peter, but big enough to still have three Iron Man posters in his room. For him to say something like that wasn’t just nothing.

Peter smiled a little. “Thanks, Ned.”

“You’re welcome.” Ned gave him a proud nod, before eyeing him again. “Are you okay?” For a heartbeat, Peter thought about just shrugging everything off. Just saying that everything was okay. But nothing was okay. And he needed to talk about it. In this moment, Ned seemed like the only one who would understand him.

“What if I’m cursed?” he asked, almost inaudible, choking on the few words, and he just couldn’t stop the tears anymore. In an instant, Ned’s arm was around his shoulder, pulling him into a somewhat awkward half-hug.

“Peter, you’re not cursed! There is no such thing as curses.”

“You yourself said that my life is like a movie. And it’s a tragedy in which the protagonist is cursed.”

“Okay, first of all, your life isn’t a tragedy, it’s an action movie, alright? Maybe a comedy, because we’re hilarious. Or a sci-fi, because you literally have your own AI! But definitely not a tragedy. And, secondly, you need a witch or a wizard for a curse, and there aren’t any of them.”

“Dude, Scarlet Witch?”

“Okay, yeah, but she only does like mind stuff, right? And letting things float and flying around? No curses.”

“But what if there’re other witches or wizards out there and we just don’t know about them? I mean, New York was invaded by aliens and we get visits from actual gods. There could someone with magic out there.”

“Dude.” Ned’s eyes sparkled, a big grin on his face, and his excitement was almost enough to pull Peter out of his misery. Almost. Oh, how he wished that he could just forget about his misery and discuss magic with Ned instead. “What if there is, like, a secret coven somewhere in New York? Or … or like wizard-monks?”

“See? There could be someone who cursed me!”

“Well, maybe there’s someone with magic, but they wouldn’t curse you! I’m sure they’re busy protecting our dimension or time or something.”

“But …” And there were the tears again, mixed with a fear that gripped his heart and just wouldn’t let it go. “Dad, I mean, Richard, and Uncle Ben … they were both like my fathers. And they both died. Mom died, too. What – What if Mr. Stark dies because of me?” There was absolutely no stopping the tears now, and he didn’t even have the strength to try. His shoulders were shaking uncontrollably, even though Ned had pulled him in another too tight hug.

That hug was the only thing that was keeping Peter together right now.
It took him a while to calm down. He wasn’t sure how long – it felt like a few seconds, but it had to be longer. He had never voiced that particular fear, never even uttered them under his breath. Because he was too afraid to make them true by putting them out there in the world. He couldn’t lose another parent. Not May nor Tony. He was absolutely terrified of it.

“Listen to me, okay?” Ned said as soon as Peter could hear anything besides his own sobs and ragged breath. “You’re not cursed. Their deaths are not your fault.”

“But—”

“No but. They’re not dead because of you. And Mr. Stark won’t die because of you.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Dude, he’s Iron Man. Even if there was a curse, which there’s not, something like that wouldn’t kill him. After all, he’s Iron Man.”

“I just … can’t loose him, Ned. Not him, too.” Peter honestly thought he wouldn’t recover from losing Tony. Losing his dad – Richard – had been weird. He had been too young to really understand it. Losing Uncle Ben had been crushing and devastating, and it still hurt so much just thinking about him. Losing Tony … Peter couldn’t even imagine it.

“You won’t. Okay? He’s Iron Man. He’s a superhero and a genius. If anyone can break a curse, it’s him. But you have to tell him about it, okay?”

“I’m not sure if I can ever talk to him again, to be honest.” He thought back to their conversation in the lab. The pained look on Tony’s face as he told him everything. The struggle to form the words. Not being able to really look him in the eyes. Peter’s heart ached. “I don’t even know if he wants to talk to me.”

“Of course he does! You’re his favorite intern.”

“I’m his only intern.”

“See?” Peter wasn’t convinced and Ned must’ve seen it. He gave his shoulder a squeeze. “Just … give it some time. It’s a lot to take in. Maybe just … sleep a couple of time over it? And if you still think this is wrong, then … I don’t know. I help you make a new suit? Quit school to be your full-time guy in the chair?”

Despite everything, Peter snorted. That’s one of the reasons why Ned was his best friend. Loyal to a fault, and always able to cheer him up. “Thanks, Ned.”

“Don’t mention it. Hey, anyway, did I tell you about this new video game I got? It’s so awesome, like —” The rest of the afternoon was spent talking about games, movies, rebuilding the Lego Death Star, and discussing the probability of time travel. Not once was the subject of Tony Stark being Peter’s father brought up again, but it still lingered in the back of his mind.
there was something in his bones that physically forced him to find everything the woman did absolutely enchanting, even if he didn’t like it.

Until now.

“No.”

“Tony –”

“No, absolutely not. The biggest no there ever was in the history of no.”

“Listen, you have to –“

“I have to stay here!” He whirled around, finally facing Pepper, who looked a bit startled. “And I will stay here. That’s the end of it.”

“Your presence is required.”

“Well, too bad. I’m not going. And, honestly? I can’t believe we’re even talking about this right now. You know what today is.”

Two weeks. It has been two weeks since Tony told Peter about their shared DNA, but it’d felt like months. The hangover he nursed from that disastrous night lasted two days, though he was a little proud to admit that he didn’t reach for the bottle again. Instead, he’d holed himself up in his workshop, and didn’t leave it for four days. Who needs showers and a proper bed anyway? May, that heaven send saint, had sent him daily updates on Peter. He’d been really quiet which was the most un-Peter-like behavior ever. That had changed after Peter and May had a little heart-to-heart. Tony didn’t know any specifics, but May’d said that Peter got better afterwards. He’d to take her word for it because there was still no contact between them.

His patrol reports were short. Actually short. No off-topic rambling, no explanations, no details. Just a short list of what happened that day. Even Happy, who was going on and on about the kid’s reports being way too long, wasn’t happy about the short version. More than once – or four times – Tony had to stop himself from ordering FRIDAY to override Karen’s system to talk to Peter while he was out Spider-Manning. Sometimes, he’d even hoped that something big would happen, so he’d an excuse to suit up and fly out there. But, of course, nothing happened.

It wasn’t until a few days ago that something changed. May had told him that Peter was hesitant to talk to him, because he wasn’t sure if Tony wanted to see him. Obviously that thought was absolutely abstruse for Tony, because why wouldn’t he want to see Peter? He could understand it if it were the other way around, but this? This was something the genius couldn’t wrap his head around. He told May very clearly and a lot of times that he absolutely wanted to see Peter, but she insisted that he had to make the first move. Which was the adult thing to do. So, naturally, Tony didn’t want to do it. But he wanted to be better. Wanted to be better for Peter.

It took him four and a half hours, sixty-four message outlines, and a whole lot of nerves to finally sent five texts to Peter. In true Gen Z fashion, Peter’s reply came only a minute later. A single text with only one emoji that’d filled Tony with new hope for a second chance. He could fix this. Peter was giving him a second chance and he could fix this.

And then this happened. Corruption rumors about one of the more important board members of SI reached their ears, luckily before they could get to the newspapers. An emergency meeting has been scheduled – for today. The day that Peter would arrive at the compound to spend the entire weekend there. And Tony had to go. Because, apparently, as owner of the company his presence was
absolutely necessary. Which led to Pepper and him arguing, not even 30 minutes before Peter was suppose to arrive. They should’ve left fifteen minutes ago, and Tony could see that Pepper was getting itchy because of the delay. She liked to stick to plans. Tony honestly didn’t know how, after knowing him for so many years, she still thought he would stick to any time table.

“I know what today is,” she said calmly, but he could hear that her patience was running thin, “but this is important.”

“Peter is more important.”

“I know, I get that, -“

“Then why are we doing this?” Tony gestured between them, his face pulled in a grimace. “I’m not leaving. I’m staying here. You don’t need me at that meeting. I wouldn’t do anything productive anyway. We both know that.”

“It’s still your company, Tony. You have to show up.”

“You can have it. Right here, right now. Majority share holder Pepper Potts, how does that sound?” Pepper sighed, rubbing her forehead in frustration, but Tony wouldn’t budge on this.

“Peter will understand,” Rhodey piped up from the couch. Rhodey, who came over to the compound for moral support and was now, apparently, a back stabbing traitor. “He’s a smart kid. He knows that plans can change and he will understand.”

“He shouldn’t have to understand. He should know that he’s my priority.” Tony knew Peter well enough to know what’ll happen. Peter would be disappointed, even if he didn’t show it, and think he was a burden or something along those lines. And Tony just couldn’t let that happen.

“Tony,” Pepper said softly, taking his hands in hers, running her thumb over the back of his hand, and a gentle look in her eyes. Tony just narrowed his eyes. He knew this voice, knew her expression, knew what she was doing. She always did this when he was being especially stubborn. Unfortunately for him, it was a great tactic and had a very high success rate. “Nobody here thinks that Peter isn’t your priority. We know how important this is to you, and we want to help you. But this meeting is important, too, and very time sensitive. We need to act fast, and the faster we act, the faster you can get back here to spend time with Peter.”

He could literally feel his resolve crumble. “He will think I’m going because I don’t wanna see him.”

“I’ll make sure he knows that that’s not the case,” Rhodey said, walking over to them, crossing his arms. “I’ll even show them the footage of your little tantrum if he doesn’t believe me.”

A part of Tony knew that he lost. Damn Pepper and Rhodey and their ability to make him do things he didn’t want to do. “Can’t we leave after he gets here? So I can at least explain the situation to him?”

“We both know that you won’t leave once he’s here,” Pepper said with a small smile on her face. “Tony, I promise that you can leave as soon as possible, okay? But we need to leave now if we want to wrap this up today.”

“I won’t behave,” Tony announced, because it felt like the only thing he could do. “I won’t play nice. And I won’t even pretend that I want to be there.”

“I expect nothing less from you.”
“There won’t be any bathroom breaks. Nobody will step outside to smoke. If we have to eat something, we will do it in the conference room. No unnecessary delays.”

“Of course.”

“And I’m only doing this today. As soon as the clock strikes midnight, this company owner will turn back into a self-absorbed person who only does what he wants. Which is fixing things with his kid. Oh, and I’m taking a suit so I can literally fly out of there.”

If the Tower was like a second home to Peter, the compound was a vacation home. It still felt like home, he had his own bedroom and a closet full of clothes, but it was still something special to go there. The Tower was closer and had everything they needed – the lab, bedrooms, a TV, a big couch and a dishwasher because they were lazy. Whenever he went Upstate, he spent the whole weekend there, alternating between working in the lab, training in the gym and relaxing in the spacious living area.

Spending the weekend in the compound after not talking to Tony for two weeks, had seemed like a risky move to Peter. May had encouraged him to go, had reassured him that he could leave whenever he wanted should he feel uncomfortable, and that he was welcome there. Despite her words, the burning worry that Tony didn’t actually want to see him was still there. A part of him wanted to ask his mentor – his father – if it was okay to come, but he didn’t want to seem clingy or needy. That could drive him away, right? After all, Tony hadn’t been too responsive to Peter’s over eager willingness to talk and share in the beginning. What if it’ll go back to those days? Just an empty suit with a WiFi-connection?

But then Tony had reached out to him.

**Tony Stark:** Hey buddy, it’s a compound weekend. Is that still on?

**Tony Stark:** You can say no, of course. If you don’t want to. Or if you have other plans already. No pressure.

**Tony Stark:** But I would really like it if you’d come.

**Tony Stark:** And I hope we can talk about everything. If you want to. If not, that’s okay, too. We can just tinker around in the lab. That’s cool, too. Tinkering around with Tony Stark is still cool for you nerds, right?

**Tony Stark:** I also already forgot what happens in Star Wars because no one makes me watch it for the millionth time. So that has to change as well.

Not going to lie, Peter had almost cried as he read them. Pushing his internal happy dance away and letting go a relieved breath, he sent a quick affirmation with just one smiling emoji, because he didn’t want to seem too overbearing. Small steps. Now he could barely contain his nervous energy. Happy
picked him up from school – Ned had spent every second of the day giving him pep talks and, honestly? That boy could make a living out of it – and Peter spent the entire ride doing his homework. He didn’t want to waste a second of his time with Tony on something trivial like homework.

As Happy pulled into the drive way and the massive complex got bigger and bigger, Peter’s nervousness turned into a positive, giddy feeling. This would be okay. They would fix this awkwardness. Tony wanted him here, he wanted to spend time with him. Like a mantra, he repeated these thoughts over and over, and the second the car stopped, he opened his door, grabbing his backpack. “Thanks for driving me, Happy!”

“Kid, wait –“ Happy said, eyes glued to his phone, but it was too late. Peter’d already slammed the door shut, skipping along the graveled path. Tony would be inside, maybe waiting in his lab or watching TV or even cooking in the kitchen, which he did only on very rare occasions, but Peter had caught him from time to time.

“Hi FRIDAY,” Peter greeted the AI as soon as he stepped through the threshold.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Parker,” FRIDAY answered.

“Could you tell me where Mr. Stark is?” He could do this. They would have a proper talk, Peter wouldn’t just run away like he did a fortnight ago, and then everything would be fine. No need to worry. Tony specifically asked him to come here. Everything was fine.

“I am sorry to inform you that Boss is currently not on the premises.”

Once on patrol, Peter had slammed into a building, while swinging full speed. It’d knocked all the air out of his lungs, made him see stars and loose every bit of orientation. He’d had a headache for days, every bone and muscle in his back aching, despite his healing factor. This felt a lot like that. Breathing was impossible. Something cold gripped his stomach and clawed its way up to his chest.

Tony wasn’t here. He asked Peter to come, to spend the weekend here, with him, and now he wasn’t here. Was this a joke? Did FRIDAY pull a joke on him? Could AIs even do something like that? Or had Tony’s text been a joke? Did someone hack him? Well, he had some of the best fire walls and security in the entire world, but Ned had been able to hack the suit. That meant someone could hack his phone and sent the texts to Peter.

“There is an emergency meeting,” a voice said. Peter actually flinched a little, too distracted by his own depressing thought to have noticed Rhodey approaching him. A small, sympathetic smile was on his face. “The board of directors. Tony’s presence is necessary. He really didn’t want to leave. He and Pepper argued quite a while about it.”

“They fought because of me?” Peter’s stomach dropped. Well, that’s it. He already blew it. Screw the pooch. Mr. Stark and Miss Potts fought. Because of him. Surely, he didn’t want to see him anymore. Who wants the reason you fight with your fiancé near you?

“I wouldn’t call it a fight, more like an argument.” The Colonel stood next to him and put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it gently. “Listen, Tony really didn’t want to go, okay? He was ready to give Stark Industries over to Pepper, just so he could stay here. And he’s coming back as soon as he can. Actually, he took his suit, so he can fly back the second it turns midnight.”

“Why midnight?”

“Said he’s only doing it for today, not a second longer.”
There was a weird mix of disappointment and hope in Peter’s chest. Like his feelings just couldn’t decide what they wanted. Of course, he was kind of gutted that Tony wasn’t here, but it was still his company. And if there was a serious problem, he had to be there to fix it. After all, he was the best at fixing things. Besides, Rhodey said that he didn’t really want to go. That he would rather spend his time with Peter.

His shoulder got another squeeze, prompting to look up again. “I can show you the footage of his temper tantrum, if you want. It’s actually quite funny, isn’t it, FRIDAY?”

“It is very amusing indeed.” FRIDAY contributed and if a computer could sound mischievous, she did.

“I’m okay,” Peter said, sounding much more optimistic than he actually felt. “Things come up. I understand. It’s important.”

Rhodey gave him a weird look, eyebrows pulled together as if he was trying to solve some especially difficult puzzle. Eventually, he said: “He knew you would say that. That’s why he wanted to stay. To make sure you don’t misinterpret this.”

“I don’t. I get it, really, it’s an important meeting and I’m –“

“You’re very important to him. He really wants to clear the situation between you two.”

For a second, Peter could just stare. “You… uh … know about the … uhm …”

“Do I know that you’re his son?” Peter nodded, lump in his throat. “Yes, he told me.” Of course Rhodey knew. He was Tony’s best friend and, after all, Peter had told his best friend as well. Rhodey cocked his head to the side, his mouth pulled into a small smile, his eyes full of warmth. “You want my thoughts on that?”

“No, was Peter’s first reaction, because he was so afraid that the man would disapprove. That he would tell him he wasn’t smart enough, cool enough, brave enough, good enough for Tony. But the teenager swallowed that fear together with the lump that was stuck stubbornly in his throat. “If-If you want to, Sir.”

“I think this is just some kind of formality. You’ve already been father and son for months now, if you noticed it or not. Actually being related is just a bonus. A validation, if you will.” Listening to his words – War Machine’s words, Tony Stark’s best friend’s words – Peter could feel his cheeks heating up. He hadn’t known that someone was watching them this closely to make a statement like that. Well, maybe FRIDAY, but she was always watching.

“Thank you, Colonel Rhodes,” Peter eventually said, because what else was there to say?

“Hey, I think it’s about time you call me Rhodey, don’t you think? After all, I’m your honorary uncle now.” It cracked a smile out of Peter, even though it felt more like moving muscles than an actual smile. “So, you got any homework to do?”

“No, everything’s finished.”

“Perfect. How about we head down to the gym? You can show me how those punches I taught you come along, and I could use a bit of exercise.” Never one to say no to a training session with Rhodey – it was War Machine! – he nodded eagerly. Maybe a bit of distraction and physical exhaustion would help him relax. He went to drop his back off in his room, before heading down to the gym. On the way there, Peter checked his phone, more out of habit than anything else. His heart jumped when he saw that he got a couple of texts from Tony.
Tony Stark: *I’m so sorry. I really didn’t want to leave, but, apparently, it’s the adult and responsible thing to do. Don’t grow up, it’s not fun.*

Tony Stark: *I’ll be back as soon as I can. I promise.*

Tony Stark: *Just wait until I’m back.*

Tony Stark: *Please.*

Tony Stark: *Pepper is about to take my phone, claiming I’m not paying attention. Preposterous.*

This time, his smile actually felt like a real smile, and he typed a quick response, feeling relieved how easy it was to fall back into their usual kind of banter.

Peter Parker: *I’ll wait. Also, if I have to pay attention in calculus, you have to pay attention in important meetings.*

The rest of the day had a strange feel of ease to it. Like Peter was let off the hook for something he had to do. Which was actually true. He spent what was left of the afternoon with Rhodey in the gym, working on his punches, and learning how to not get punched in the face. That was very helpful for his nightly patrols. He was getting tired of his bloody noses. After a well-deserved shower, they made a ridiculous amount of lasagna, of which Peter had three servings because he was a growing boy with a super metabolism, and settled down to watch Back to the Future. Peter had been absolutely delighted when he found out that War Machine was a movie fan, especially all movies that were somehow involved with time travel.

However, with every minute that passed, with every moment that moved them closer to midnight, Peter got more and more nervous. All his positivity melted away. How could he just come here and expect everything to be okay after a quick talk? Just because everything was okay when they texted, didn’t mean it would be okay when they talked face to face? Texting was like wearing a mask. Also, who said that whatever Tony wanted to talk to him about was *good*? He’d never said that. He just said he wanted to talk. Maybe he decided that it would be better if they would stop seeing each other, because Peter was obviously not got enough to be Tony’s son.

Peter couldn’t stay up. His plan had been to wait for Tony, but that seemed impossible right now. He couldn’t face him. He needed more time. Time to think about what he wanted, what he would do if Tony rejected him. So, with a pounding heart and a not-really-great excuse, Peter jumped off the couch as the second movie was about to start and went off to his room. Rhodey said something, but he wasn’t listening anymore. The need to get away, to hide until everything was over, was too overwhelming.

Only he didn’t find any peace in his bedroom either. His brain just wouldn’t shut up. Was that the curse of smart people? To not be able to shut their brain off for just a second? In his need for a break, Peter initiated the Lullaby Protocol; a protocol that would self-activate if he hadn’t fallen asleep after ninety minutes. It played some scientifically chosen songs with soundwaves that would one to relax. Peter had laughed the first time he heard about it, but it had never failed him to fall asleep.
But, of course, it wasn’t a restful sleep. Because that would have been too much to ask, right?

The dream started out like most of his dreams. It was a normal setting, this particular one started out in the lab. Tony was with him, dressed casual in faded jeans and an old AC/DC shirt, rock music playing softly in the background while they both worked on their individual projects. Peter was chatting away about his day, told him every little detail, and Tony would make a witty comment from time to time. It was normal, it was comforting, it was what Peter wanted.

And then everything changed. The music abruptly stopped, causing him to halt and look up. Tony wasn’t sitting at his workbench anymore. Instead, he was standing, suddenly in a fancy suit, his back turned to him, and walking towards the doors. Peter called out for him – or wanted to call out, but no sound left his mouth, no matter how much he tried. A feeling familiar to his spidey sense gripped him, and he jumped out of his chair, ready to chase after Tony. But he couldn’t get any closer. He ran and ran and ran, but Tony was just getting further away. Peter longed for his web slingers, to swing after him, but his wrists were bare.

A shot rang through the air. They weren’t in the lab anymore. They were in a dark alley, rain pouring down on them. At Peter’s feet lay Tony, face pale, eyes wide open and dull. There was a dark red spot on his white dress shirt that grew bigger by the second. Peter fell to his knees, pressed his hands against the spot, but the blood kept flowing. He knew he was wailing, sobbing, and crying, but again, no sound actually came out. Or maybe he just didn’t hear them over the rain that kept crashing down on them. Peter barely registered the rising water, too focused on Tony’s lifeless face and empty eyes, and then, suddenly, he wasn’t in the alley, but underwater. Something was pulling him down, deep, deep into the darkness, and he just couldn’t fight it. He tried, he really tried, but no matter what he did, the mysterious force kept him down. His lungs burned, screamed at him to give them some air, but he couldn’t, there was no air here, he would drown, he would drown and nobody would ever know and –

“Peter!”

At once, his eyes flew open, his lungs finally drew in air, and hot tears rolled down his cheek. It took him a heartbeat to realize that he wasn’t underwater. He wasn’t drowning. He wasn’t in an ally or the lab either, instead in his spacious and very comfortable bed at the compound. There was a hand on his shoulder, another one running through his hair.

“Easy, okay, just breath. In and out.” He drew some ragged breath, his hands instinctively clutching the arms next to him. They grounded him, and the hand in his hair seemed to brush all the panic from his nightmare away. “That’s good. You’re doing great, buddy.”

Finally, when Peter could breath without any hiccups, he looked to his right, to the person attached to the hands and arms. “Mr. Stark?” he asked, still a little short of breath. The man to his right, sitting on the edge of his bed, nodded. In the sparely light, Peter could make out his worried expression. He was still in a business suit, though his jacket lay near the door.

Tony smiled a little. “The one and only,” he joked, before turning serious again. “You good?”

“Y-Yeah, I think”, he said. However, he couldn’t help but let his eyes flicker down to Tony’s chest. His shirt wasn’t stained in red, there was no blood running out of a bullet hole.

“Do you want to talk about it?” His voice was soft, comforting, and his hand fell out of his hair. It quickly swiped over his cheek, brushing the tears away. Peter just shook his head. “Sometimes it helps to talk about it. Which, I know, is incredibly hypocritical coming from me, but just use me as a bad example, alright?”
“It doesn’t matter anymore,” Peter said, because it truly didn’t. “You’re here.” The words had slipped out before he could even realize it. Had he said too much? Could Tony actually figure out what his dream had been about with just these few words?

If he did figure it out, he didn’t show it. Instead, he smirked. “I told you, didn’t I? That I would come back as quick as I can?”

“How was the meeting?” It’s not like he was really interested in the meeting, but he just needed to forget the sight of Tony dying in front of him before he could think about anything else.

“Boring. Unbelievable boring. They were all talking, claiming they knew best, knew what to do, and every single one of them was so incredibly indecisive. I was this close to just fire them all.”

“I’m pretty sure you can’t do that.”

“I’m Tony Stark. I can do anything.” Peter snorted, and the corners of Tony’s mouth lifted.

“Anyway, you should try to go back to sleep. It’s late. Or early. Enough time to rest until the sun comes up.”

And there was Peter’s nervousness again. He recognized what Tony did. He was giving him a way out. A way to not talk about it, to push it back for a couple of hours. A few hours ago, Peter would’ve taken that offer. But that was before his nightmare. Before seeing his father bleed out on the street.

Peter licked his lips, and ignored his racing heart in his chest. “I’m … not really tired anymore.”

Normally, Tony would say something along the lines that kids had to sleep and that May was going to have his head if she found out. However, he stayed silenced now and just hold his gaze for a second. “You sure?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper. Peter nodded. “Well, I guess that’s fine. What’d you wanna do? Watch a movie? Or some TV?”

“Can –” He paused, and swallowed his insecurities. He could do this. He was Spider-Man. He shouldn’t be afraid of this. He could be brave. “Can we talk? About – About … us?” The change was instantaneous. Tony’s face went completely blank, and he didn’t move. Suddenly, Peter was very aware of the bags under his eyes, his rumpled clothes, and the fact that he’d spent the better half of the day arguing with his colleagues – if you could call them that. At once, he felt absolutely terrible. “But you’re probably tired. I’m so sorry, I didn’t think about it. You should go to bed, I’m fine, honestly. I’ll just go back to sleep or read a book or watch a movie or –“

“Pete,” Tony interrupted him, “I’ve been waiting to talk to you for two weeks. I’m not tired.”

“You look tired, though,” he commented.

“The perks of getting old, nothing else.” That got another snort out of Peter, which was kind of unbelievable for the both of them.

A pregnant silence stretched between them. Nobody really knew how to start this. Peter had this strange feeling that he should start, because Tony started the last one. So, he did start. In the most Peter Parker-way there was. By apologizing. “I’m sorry.”

“Pete, no, don’t. You have nothing to apologize for.”

“Yes, I do. I just … left. You wanted to talk about it, and I just left like the immature child that I am and –“
“You don’t need to feel bad about leaving, okay? It wasn’t an easy conversation and you probably needed some time to think about it –“

“But I shouldn’t have left!”

Tony just continued as if he hadn’t heard him. “And I was doing a terrible job, anyway. Seriously, I had a way better plan, a Pepper-approved plan, that’s the best kind of plan there is, and I just didn’t use it. So, it’s mostly on me that you ran away. Should’ve reached out to you sooner as well, but I was just … too damn much of a coward.”

“You’re not a coward, you’re Iron Man,” Peter said almost automatically. A sad smile appeared on Tony’s face.

“Well, the truth is I’m arguably more of a mess than I am Iron Man. And I can totally understand if the thought of being my son is embarrassing or disappointing –“

“No!” Before Peter knew what he was doing, he was sitting up, causing Tony to flinch in surprise. His hand, however, stayed on his shoulder. With new determination, he looked at his mentor – his father – and hold his gaze. “I’m not embarrassed or disappointed. You’re not a mess.” Tony raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Well, maybe a little bit, but everyone is allowed to be a mess, even genius billionaires who are also superheroes.”

“I’ll never understand your faith in me, kid,” he said, and Peter wasn’t really sure if he was even suppose to hear those words.

Right now, it was important that he understood what Peter was feeling. “The reason I ran,” he explained, drawing a deep breath, and looking anywhere but at Tony, “was because I … well, I thought that that was reason why you were keeping me around. Because I’m your s-son, and you needed me for some SI thing or something. Not because you liked me for who I am.”

“I didn’t know about it when I first met you.”

“That’s what you said, but I guess my brain just –“ Peter shrugged once. “Just thought it wasn’t true? Because you literally have the best labs on this side of the world and you didn’t do a DNA test? I don’t know, it sounded like a lie or an excuse or something.”

“I did run a DNA test when I got your blood, but I never even thought about running it against my own DNA. I haven’t lied to you, Pete. I really did just find out when Happy came to talk to me. And the reason I started to hang out with you? Because you’re simply one of the most amazing persons I’ve ever met.”

“Yeah, right.”

“No, I mean it.” Tony put his hand on his cheek and turned his head around, so he had to look at him. “You are, Peter. You’re so incredible that I’m constantly in awe of what you do. You’re so, so smart, and you’re good and kind-hearted and brave and selfless and so … everything that I’m not. Everything that I’m trying to be, but the difference is that I am failing.” His eyes held some kind of magnetic power, making it impossible for Peter to look away. For a moment, Tony searched his face, but Peter couldn’t tell if he found what he was looking for.

“I was terrified when the tests kept coming back positive,” Tony confessed, the hand on his face now gentle, and there was so much raw emotion in his eyes, that Peter could actually feel his pain. “Because in my head, I was never cut out to be a father. Howard, my dad, hadn’t really been the best example, and I’m not a good role model. Besides all the partying and the alcoholism, I built weapons
for most of my life. Blissfully believing that I was making the world a safer place. They called me the Merchant of Death for a reason. How could I be a father like that? How could I be a father to someone like you, when all my hands to is destroy?” Even in the low light, Peter could see tears forming in Tony’s eyes. “I was absolutely petrified because of that thought. So, I wanted to push it away. To just ignore it, hoping that the problem would just disappear into thin air. But this wasn’t – isn’t just about me. It’s about you, too. And you deserve a father. A good father. I know I’m far from perfect, and that I’m not Richard or Ben, and that I’m about sixteen years too late, but … Peter, I promise I’ll do anything I can to make up for this. Because the thought of having you not in my life is way more horrific than the thought of being a father.”

At some point – maybe around the time Tony had mentioned his father – Peter’s eyes had started to well up again. How could he have doubted him? Tony was a good man, despite of what he thought of himself. How could he have thought that he was just using him? That he was lying to him? Had his own worry and self-doubt warped his mind so much that he had completely forgotten that?

The memory of his dream was still fresh on his mind. But instead of scaring him, it drove him forward. “I was afraid, too,” Peter admitted, his voice breaking and he was pretty sure that, based on his blurry vision, he was crying again, “and I still am.” Tony lifted his hand to wipe his face again, but he caught his hand, forcing him to still and listen to him. “Because all my parents died. And I can’t lose you, too.” Peter wasn’t even sure if he’d understood his last words, because he was openly sobbing now.

And then, suddenly, he was in a tight embrace. Like his life depended on it, he clung to Tony’s shoulders while he cried. Tony’s arms around him were so tight, had Peter been anyone else, he might have had trouble breathing. He could feel something wet against his face, and he was somewhat sure that that weren’t his tears. “That’s not going to happen,” he whispered in his ear, over and over again. “You won’t lose me, I promise. I’m Iron Man, remember? I’m not that easy to kill.”

“I dreamt about it,” he sobbed. “I dreamt you died.”

“I didn’t. It was just a dream, you hear me? Many people have tried to kill me, and they all failed.”

“But –“

“No buts. The only way I die is when I’m hundred and fifty, and you’re begging me to finally kick the bucket, so you can have your inheritance.” Peter couldn’t help but giggle, even though tears were still running down his face. “Yeah, you’re laughing now, but just wait. It’s still a good hundred and something years before that happens. And guess who’s to take care of this old man.”

“I’m sure DUM-E and U will be happy to help.”

“Oh, they will help alright. They will probably kill me while trying to help.” This time, Peter’s laugh actually sounded more like a laugh than weird wheezing. Tony’s hand on his back ran up and down his back, soothing his tears and worries away. “So … we’re good? No more running away and not talking to each other?”

“Not from my side. We’re good.” Peter thought about pulling away from the embrace. But he didn’t really want to. He felt save in Tony’s arm. In his father’s arms. Besides, his grip was so tight, Peter wasn’t even sure if he could get out without hurting him.

Tension left Tony’s body, and even without his super hearing, Peter would’ve been able to hear his father’s heartbeat slowing. “Perfect,” he breathed, and sounded more relieved than he would probably like to admit, “because I honestly thought I had to find someone else to watch Star Wars with.”
“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure you won’t forget a single detail, Mr. Stark.”

Tony groaned and dropped his forehead on his shoulder. His voice was a bit muffled when he said: “Kid, do me favor, okay? Now that we have officially established our father-son-relationship, stop calling me Mr. Stark. Please.”

“Okay.” And because he was so happy right now, and a little shit, he added: “Dr Stark.”

“You’re grounded,” Tony deadpanned, and Peter just laughed. Because, for the first time since Tony’s impromptu Star Wars reference, he truly believed that everything would be just fine.

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