

If You Can't Catch A Breath (You Can Take The Oxygen Straight Out Of My Own Chest)

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If You Can't Catch A Breath (You Can Take The Oxygen Straight Out Of My Own Chest)

by [losingmymindtonight](#)

Summary

"And I would hurry. Little Peter is about to be under quite a lot of pressure, and it might get a little hard to breathe."

He wasn't even Spider-Man when they took him.

He was just Peter Parker. Hell, he was walking home from *school*. He'd just shoved in his dollar store earbuds and set his entire playlist on shuffle, fading into the background as hundreds of other people swarmed through the New York streets. Every once in a while, he'd take a bouncier step in time with a song's beat. Otherwise, he was just a teenage kid lost in the crowd.

He should've been paying more attention. He should've been watching.

But, like he said, he was just Peter Parker. Danger didn't register in his universe. No, that kind of stuff belonged to Spider-Man. That belonged to the heroes.

He was passing by a hole-in-the-wall bodega when something snagged the hood of his jacket. He didn't even process what was happening until his back hit the cold brick of the side alley and a wet cloth was pressed over his face.

The first two breaths were instinctual, and they cost him. If he'd been more in the moment, he might have had the awareness to hold his breath. But, because Parker luck is *the worst* luck, he gasped in two lungfuls of the sickly-sweet chemical and instantly felt his head spin. By the time he got his rapidly weakening muscles into fight mode, he was already on his knees.

He was distantly aware of someone catching his unresponsive body as his vision flickered and blipped. As the fear faded along with his consciousness, he tried to imagine that the hands carefully lowering his head to the ground belonged to May, or Mister Stark, and not to some nebulous villain that his vision was too wobbly to even focus on.

The last thing that registered before the darkness claimed him was a brief surge of *it'll be okay, Mister Stark'll find me*.

And then there was nothing.

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He was in a meeting when the first call came in.

He ignored it. And then he ignored the second, and the third, and the fourth.

It was when the fifth set of vibrations started that he politely excused himself into the hall, slamming his thumb down on the receiving button with no small amount of exasperation.

"This is Stark."

A breath chuckled across the line. "I have something that belongs to you."

Tony had to physically force himself not to roll his eyes. Nobody was ever original. He prepared to hang up but decided to humor the caller for another few seconds. The meeting

had been boring as hell, anyway. “Oh?”

“He’s very pretty when he’s sleeping.”

That stilled Tony’s hand. *He*. As in, this person had... another person? *Please let him be bluffing*. “Who is?”

There was a rustle on the line, the sound of creaking wood, and then a chuckle. “Peter Parker, isn’t it? At least, that’s what his student ID says. Midtown School of Science and Technology. Very selective, are they not? He must be an exceptionally clever boy. No wonder you like him.”

Time froze. For a moment, he hovered in denial. *No*. Peter was *home*. Eating dinner, getting ready to go out on patrol so that Tony and May could spend their nights watching his vitals and worrying. The kid was *off limits*. Peter didn’t get hurt, Peter didn’t get kidnapped, Peter didn’t do anything other than just... be Peter.

After the suspension came the fury. Peter was under his protection, and somebody had *touched him*. Somebody had touched him and hurt him and *taken him*.

If there was something that Tony Stark hated more than anything else, it was people taking the things that belonged to him.

And Peter Parker was *his*.

(He’d talk about the broad-sweeping implications of that particular thought with his therapist later.)

“I swear to God,” he hissed, grip tightening around the StarkPhone pressed into his palm, “if even a single one of that kid’s curls are out of place, I will tear you to fucking *pieces*. Are we understood?”

“Oh, I haven’t hurt him.” There was a sick sort of glee shining through the line, as if the man on the other end was having the time of his life. “He’s just taking a little nap. I even gave him a comfortable place to rest. So comfortable that I imagine it could even act as his *final* resting place.”

Final resting place. Final resting place. Final resting place.

No. No, no, no, no, no.

If Peter died, Tony would... Tony would die, too. He knew it. He knew it deep in his bones. “What do you want?”

“A game.”

“A-A *what*?”

“A game, Mister Stark. I quite enjoy games, don’t you?”

He grit his teeth. “Obviously not the same games as you.”

“Oh, but isn’t it all so thrilling?” Tony could practically see the other man rubbing his hands together. He was enjoying this. He knew that he had caught the great Iron Man on a string. “The best games are the ones with the highest stakes. And in this, Mister Stark, the stakes are truly the highest they can ever be. Is there nothing more thrilling than the wager of your child? Tell me,” there was a pause, and another creak of wood, “what will you do to save him?”

Tony had already sent out distress signals to Rhodey, Happy, and Pepper. F.R.I.D.A.Y. was scrambling to track the signal, but it wasn’t going well. Terror, true and vivid, pooled in his gut. His voice came out hoarse with it. “Just tell me what you want me to do.”

“I’m going to send you coordinates, Mister Stark, as well as a little clue. Then, it’s all up to you. And I would hurry. Little Peter is about to be under quite a lot of pressure, and it might get a little hard to breathe.” A pause. “Oh, and don’t worry. I’ve left your boy a present as well. Wouldn’t want you to miss the show, after all.”

The line went dead.

A second later, his phone buzzed twice with texts from an unknown number. The first message was a set of coordinates. He offhandedly had F.R.I.D.A.Y. program them into the suit as he scrolled to the picture below.

It was Peter, eyes closed and head tilted to the side. A set of unfamiliar hands were tangled in his hair, and Tony felt a surge of possessiveness curl his fists. Because of that, it took him a few moments to process exactly where his kid was.

He was lying in a casket.

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Tony landed in front of Rhodey with a thump. He felt blurred, hasty, uncoordinated. He was so off kilter that F.R.I.D.A.Y. had been forced to take over the suit midflight, calmly pointing out a series of concerning inconsistencies in his vitals while mechanically steering him towards the preset coordinates. At one point, she’d warned him that his blood pressure indicated that he was dangerously close to passing out. He’d snarled back that he was *Tony Stark*, thank you very much, and that meant that he was above something as childish as *fainting*.

(He really, *really* hoped he was right.)

He didn’t even have time to wonder how his best friend had somehow gotten to the location faster. Instead, he just fell out of the suit and gripped the Colonel’s upper arms with hysterical desperation.

“Rhodey,” every moment felt empty, like the world had been drained of substance, “*where is he?*”

“Breathe, Tones. We think we’ve found him.” Rhodey manhandled the billionaire into a foldout chair and knelt in front of him like he was a small child. Luckily, Tony was too frantic to be indignant. “But you need to breathe.”

“Think?” He bowled right over the man’s other words, focusing on the one part that had to do with Peter. Pepper always said he had a one-track mind when it came to the kid, and he’d never even tried to correct her. “You *think* you’ve found him?”

“I can’t know for sure, because I don’t have the equipment, but I’ve called in the people that do. The people who are experts in this sort of thing. They’ll be here very, very soon. So will Doctor Cho, just in case. Do you hear me, Tony? The expert are coming, they’ll be here in the next hour, and everything is going to be okay.”

“Where is he, Rhodey?”

“Repeat it back to me. Tell me that Peter’s going to be okay.”

Determination filled his mouth. It tasted a little like gravel, thick and full of grit. “*Of course* he’s gonna be okay. He’s got me. He’s not allowed to be anything else.”

Rhodey swallowed and patted Tony’s knee. When he spoke, it sounded like an apology. “He’s right behind me, about twelve or so feet underground.”

As it turns out, Tony Stark *wasn’t* above fainting, after all.

--

Every part of Peter’s body felt heavy and detached. His head pounded painfully, and every thought felt scrambled and twisted. What had happened? Where *was* he?

And, most importantly, why did he feel so *awful*?

“M-Mis’er-” He coughed weakly. When he pulled in his next breath, the air felt stale and damp at the same time. “Mis’er St’k?”

Normally, waking up with a pounding headache and a weird memory gap meant that he’d gotten the short end of the stick while out on patrol. It’d happened more times than he’d like to admit, and he’d grown used to the idea that his mentor would just... be there. Peter would open his eyes, and Tony would be sitting by his bedside, holding his hand and smoothing hair away from his sweaty forehead and gently asking in he was in any pain.

And if Peter said yes, then he’d call for a nurse and he wouldn’t rest until someone made it *stop*.

And right now, Peter just wanted Mister Stark to be there. He wanted his mentor to make it all go away.

He flailed a hand out blindly, hoping that he’d feel it get caught between familiarly calloused fingers. Instead, it bumped against something hard and smooth right above him.

He probed some more, and realized that he was in a... box? He slid his fingertips down the sides and felt soft lining around his body.

Horror slid into his admittedly sluggish awareness.

He remembered this. He remembered how Uncle Ben had looked against the crème satin and the dark-stained wood. He remembered how a bunch of strangers had groomed him carefully and done up every button and latch on his uniform. He remembered how people had said he'd looked nice, that he'd looked peaceful, when all Peter could remember was that he didn't look anything like the man that had raised him.

He'd watched them close the lid, and he'd never once spared a thought to what it might be like underneath it.

Oh, god. Peter wasn't in a box. He was in *a coffin*.

Someone had put him in a coffin, and then they'd *buried him*. And he was *still alive*.

Just as the helplessness threatened to break him, he twitched his fingers, and his hand curled around something smooth and circular.

His watch. Wait, shit, *his watch*. The watch Mister Stark had made for him. The watch that had signal anywhere on the planet. The watch that was designed for *dire emergencies*.

He could use it to talk to Tony. He'd let him know where he was, and then his da-, uh, his *mentor*, would come and he'd fix it.

He'd fix Peter, just like he always did.

He pushed the emergency button three times and then held the device up to his face. As the signal worked to connect, he forced himself to take some slow, deep breaths. He had to conserve his oxygen. He'd seen this Mythbusters episode, right? How long had they said someone could last buried in a casket? 3 hours, *max*?

Oh god. How long had he been in here already? He definitely felt lightheaded. Was that panic or the beginnings of CO2 poisoning? What if the casket caved in under the pressure of all the dirt? How deep had they buried him? God, what if-

"Peter?!" Tony's voice was weak and breathless, which was a little funny considering the fact that it was *Peter* who had a limited supply of air, but it jolted him out of his spiraling thoughts. "Peter?! Answer me, buddy!"

"Mister Stark." He hated how small and weak and *childish* his voice sounded, but even the shame couldn't stop the sob that bubbled up after it. "Mister *Stark*."

"Oh, thank *god*. Hey, Pete, listen up, okay? We're right above you. We're coming up with a game plan to dig you out safely. You're gonna be just fine."

"I-I c-can't-" He didn't know what he was trying to say. He didn't know if it would even matter. He just didn't want Mister Stark to stop talking. "I-I-Mister *Stark*."

He could hear his mentor's fear from the waver in his voice. "I know, Pete. I know. I know you're scared, but you need to breathe slow. You'll buy us more time that way."

Buy us more time. God, Peter was going to suffocate down here.

He was going suffocate, and Mister Stark was going to have to listen to it happen.

"I'm gonna get you before you can run out of air, okay?" Was Mister Stark reading his thoughts? "But it might be a little close," the regret was clear in his voice, "so you've gotta keep me updated. Everything you feel, I need to know. It'll help us gauge how much time we have left. Think you can do that, for me?"

"Y-Yeah."

"Good job, kid. Now, take a deep breath. Hold it. Release." Peter struggled to follow his instructions. "Well done, Pete. Okay. Next one. In, hold, out. Nice."

After a minute or two of that, Peter felt a little clearer. His head wasn't spinning as much, which was nice in a way, but his newfound coherency also had the unfortunate effect of making him a lot more aware of the headache pounding behind his eyes and the nausea spilling around in his gut. He swallowed down a mouthful of sticky saliva, eyes squeezed shut in discomfort.

"Talk to me, kiddo. How're you feeling?" There was a rustle as Tony switched the phone to his other ear. "Think you're running low on oxygen yet?"

"Won't be that that kills me." There was a weird calm to his words, as if he was voicing a documentary and not predicting his own imminent fate. "It'll be CO2 poisoning, right? Too much buildup from my own breathing." He let out a breathless laugh, hysteria making his fingers and toes curl. "I'm gonna-I'm gonna kill *myself*. On accident. By breathing."

"You're not going to die." Tony's voice was firm. Unyielding. He was so sure that Peter would swerve the inevitable that it was easy to get swept away in the certainty. "You're going to be fine. And no more laughing, okay? Uses up too much air."

"Sure."

There was no point arguing. They both needed hope, and Peter was in no position to create it on his own. All he could do was let Tony foster it for the both of them. Tony can hold onto the optimism, and Peter will hold onto him. For now, that would have to be enough.

He just wanted to listen to Tony's voice and try to memorize it. Catalog the inflection and the tone. If this was the last time he'd get to hear it, he didn't want to forget.

"Talk?"

The line was silent.

"You want me to talk?"

“Please?”

“Alright.” Tony huffed out a deep breath, and then caught it as if he felt guilty for his own oxygen supply. It occurred to Peter that he probably did. “But pay attention, alright? I’m gonna be quizzing you.”

“O-Okay.”

When Tony spoke next, Peter could hear the shaky smile on his face. “I ever tell you the story of the time all the Avengers tried to lift Thor’s hammer?”

“N-No?”

“Really? It’s a good one.” Peter let his eyes close and focused every bit of his attention on his mentor’s voice. *We’re just watching a Disney movie on the couch. Everything is okay.* “Can you tell me what you know about Mjölnir, Pete? And don’t pretend you aren’t the biggest Thor fanboy of all time. There’s no fooling me, kiddo.”

“Only, uh, only people worthy can lift it.”

“Exactly. I bet you could lift it, bud. Actually, I’d put money on it.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely.”

“Th-thank you, Mister Stark.”

“Of course, kid.”

--

An hour passed in the blink of an eye. Time was moving quickly but everything else was moving slow, and they were running out of time.

Tony could see it in the strained movements of the crew and the hard lines on Rhodey’s face.

He could hear it in the way Peter seems to drift further and further away from him with every labored breath.

“Peter? How’re you feeling?”

“Huh? Oh ‘m, uh, ‘m good, Mister Stark.” After a minute of only ragged gasps, Peter’s weak voice slurred back through. ““S, uh, ‘s dark.”

“I bet, kiddo. Hang in there.” He muted his end of the call and shot Doctor Cho a frantic glance. “It’s getting harder and harder to figure out how he’s doing down there.”

“Ask him to perform basic number operations.” She brushed a lock of stray hair behind her ear, and Tony instantly identified it as a nervous tick.

She knows we're cutting it close, too.

“Basic *math*?”

“Yes, actually. Addition, subtraction, multiplication. It'll help me gauge the speed and accuracy of his brain processes, which will indicate the level of CO₂ in his bloodstream.”

Also known as: it would help her gauge how long his kid had until permanent brain damage or until... until...

No.

He swallowed down his uncertainty and focused on the fact that he could see Rhodey and the crew piling mounds of dirt up beside the grave. The kid was going to be fine. Tony just had to keep him going.

He could do that.

“Hey, Pete?” He got a grunt of acknowledgement and called it a win. “What’s six times six?”

“Huh?”

“Six times six, kiddo.”

“Th-thirty six.”

“Got it in one, Pete. Good job.” He noticed Doctor Cho make a note and hoped it was a good one. “Talk to me. How do you feel?”

“Kinda-kinda weird. Uh, dizzy. Like ‘m about to pass out.”

“Let’s skip that last bit. You’ve gotta stay awake and keep me company, alright? No passing out is allowed here. I’ve just banned it.”

“G-Got it.”

“Good. At least you’re listening to me for once.” He paced, feet moving of their own accord.

“Hey, buddy? Ten minus fifteen.”

“S, uh,” Peter trailed off, breath rasping, “huh? S-sorry. What’d you, uh, what’d you ask me?”

“Ten minus fifteen.”

“Negative five?”

That big brain of his is still working. That’s got to count for something, right?

“Look at you. You’re acing all my quizzes.”

“Quizzes?”

“Yeah, Pete,” he pinched the bridge of his nose, “remember when I said I’d be quizzing you?”

“N-No?”

He swung around to stare at Doctor Cho. She just shot him a sympathetic smile. “Short-term memory loss is one of the initial symptoms of CO2 poisoning.”

“Right.” *Deep breath, regret that Peter can’t take one too, repeat.* “That’s okay, Peter. It’s all gonna be okay.”

“Promise?”

“Yeah, kiddo, I do.”

--

Peter was aware of exactly two things.

One: his chest hurt. A lot.

Two: Mister Stark was talking to him in soft, soothing tones, and he really liked it. If Peter lived through this, he was going to ask him to use that voice more often. He’d like that. He’d like that a lot, actually.

It was getting harder and harder to pay attention. He was trying, he really was, but everything was starting to buzz and blur around him. Complex thoughts just... didn’t happen. Every time he tried to build on a concept or a memory, he’d find himself lost.

He couldn’t help but think about all the times in his life that he’d taken oxygen for granted. If he survived this, he was never going to do that again.

There was a lot of things he took for granted, actually. A lot of things he’d wanted to do but he just hadn’t gotten around to yet.

He started a list.

Things I’m Going To Do If I Survive Being Buried Alive:

1. Ask Mister Stark to talk to me like that more
2. Never take oxygen for granted ever again
3. Tell Ned how I actually feel about him
4. If #3 goes well, take Ned on a date
5. Watch Lilo and Stitch: The Movie with Mister Stark
6. Buy May flowers
7. Visit Uncle Ben more

He tried to add more, but even simple thoughts started slipping out of his grasp like a mass of melting Jell-O on a hot car. He blinked slowly, sinking somewhere deep inside himself and finding it a lot more comfortable than the constant ache and throb of his dying body. He was floating pleasantly when Tony’s frantic voice caught his fading attention.

“Pete? C’mon, kiddo. You still with me?”

“M-Mis’er Stark. H-Hi.”

“Stay awake, squirt, okay? Stay awake. If you fall asleep, you might not wake up again. And what would I do then, huh? Can’t work in the lab without my little shadow. It’d be so dull. And you know how much I *hate* dull.”

Peter didn’t know if his mentor’s words were running together because he was panicked or because Peter’s brain was malfunctioning. He guessed that it didn’t really matter, in the end. “M’kay.”

“I got another math problem for you, Pete.” He couldn’t tell if Tony paused for a second or an hour. Time was broken. Or, at least, he thought that *he* might be. “What’s seven minus four?”

“‘S four.”

His mentor choked on a breath. *Was he running out of air, too?* “T-Try again, Pete.”

He couldn’t even remember what he was supposed to be retrying. “Try?”

It sounded like Tony started having a hasty conversation with someone while muffling the receiver. It all slipped right over Peter’s head, and he didn’t really mind. He just let himself drift peacefully, content to let the jumbled mutter of Tony’s voice blanket him in the sound of home.

For a while, he’d been scared. Terrified, even. But now, he couldn’t seem to focus on anything, including the concept of fear. His brain just couldn’t process it. For some reason, he felt like it was important for Mister Stark to know that. It was important that he knew that Peter wasn’t afraid.

“‘M not scared.”

The muted conversation halted suddenly, and Mister Stark’s voice became clearer. “Of course you aren’t, kiddo. You don’t have to be. I’m gonna save you.”

No. That... that didn’t make any sense. There was a dark spot in his consciousness, and it was growing too fast. *Too fast*. It was going to swallow him up before Tony could get to him. *Didn’t Mister Stark see it too?* “N-no. ‘S... ‘S okay.” Each word felt heavy, unruly, but he pushed them out. One after another. One syllable at a time until he was through. “‘S okay, Mis’er Stark. ‘S okay.”

Tony shushed him and he let his mouth fall slack, mind wandering again as the darkness grew. “Shh, Pete. You’re right. It’s okay. It’s all okay. Just breathe.”

And Peter did. No matter how much it ached, he took one breath after another and he tried to make his hero proud.

And then he tried for another gasp, and his lungs just stalled.

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Everything was okay. Well, alright, everything actually *wasn't* okay. Peter was trapped in a *coffin* underground and the kid couldn't even manage basic subtraction anymore because he didn't have enough oxygen to power his fucking *brain*, but he was still breathing and he was still awake and that was the only kind of okay Tony could really expect from their situation.

But then the kid went for a breath, and all that came out was a choke and a whine, and truce made of tenuous *okay* went straight out the window.

"Rhodey!" Tony shouted, spinning to find his best friend among the mass of workers scrambling to uncover the grave. "Get him out! Get him out *now*!"

"We've almost got him!" The Colonel yelled back, gesturing for the crew to hurry. "Tell him to hang on."

"He can't hang on! He can't fucking *breathe*!" He snapped his attention back to the phone. "Pete? Pete, you there?"

He got another strangled gasp in return. "C-Can't b-b-"

"Shh, shh. It's alright. They're almost to you, okay? Hang on. Stay awake." He rushed towards the grave. He needed to be there when they got him out. He needed to hold him. He needed to help him *breathe*. "I'm here, Peter. I'm here. I'm waiting for you."

All he heard was a wheeze.

"How much longer, Rhodey?"

His best friend winced. "Five minutes?"

"He doesn't have five minutes."

"I'm sorry. We'll try, Tones, I swear. But if..." The Colonel shook his head. "I'm just sorry, okay?"

Rhodey's eyes were radiating regret and Tony wanted to tear it out of him. *He's still alive, damn it.* His kid was still alive and he was still awake and he was going to be fucking *fine* because *he had to be*. Tony couldn't imagine anything different. Couldn't see the point of a world that didn't light up in Peter Parker's eyes.

He sunk to the ground as his friend moved away and pushed the phone so close to his lips that they brushed the receiver when he spoke, like it would somehow let him be closer to Peter. He listened to every breath that rasped across the line and prayed that another one followed it. He could tell that the kid was terrified just from the rapid, choppy rhythm.

And, no, that wouldn't do. A scared Peter was never okay in Tony's books.

"I'm here, Peter. I'm right here. Everything's going to be okay. I'm gonna take care of you, alright?" He talked over the breathless wheezes until they settled into something less

panicked, into something calmer. “You’re the best kid ever, you know that? Wouldn’t want another one.”

It hit him suddenly, as Peter’s breaths started to spread apart, that he might have to listen to his child take his very last breath.

And he’ll do it, too, even though he knows that it will end him. He’ll do it because Peter Parker was too good to die in silence. Too good to go out of this world unheard.

A hysterical laugh nearly bubbled out of his throat, because the whole scenario was just so *ridiculous* that he could barely process it. The idea of Peter dying, of Tony touching his cheek and the kid not nestling into the touch, was so alien that it felt like a distant dream. Death was something that happened to other people, not to bright-eyed kids. Not to Peter Parker.

“M-Mis’er-”

Tony knew that tone. He knew what Peter was trying to say. Something settled in his gut, somehow gentle and heavy all at once. It was a little like acceptance. Acceptance that this might be inevitable. Acceptance that Peter might die. That Peter might die, and Tony’s voice might be the last thing he ever hears.

“I know, Pete.” He clenched his fist and tried to pour every ounce of his affection for the kid into the words. It almost felt like they reverberated with some kind of instinctual resonance. He hoped Peter could hear it, too. “I know. Me too, okay? Me too.”

Peter choked again, and Tony realized that the poor kid was crying.

“Shh, buddy, shh. It’s okay. They’re almost to you, and when they pop that box open, I’ll be right there, okay? I’ll be the first thing you see. Just hang on for that. Hang on for me.”

“I-I-” Peter’s exhale came out as a cough. “I-”

He said it before he could think. “I love you too, Pete.”

And then Rhodey’s shovel hit wood.

The suit was closing around Tony’s body before he could even realize that he’d called for it. The workers scrambled up their ladders and away from the casket like a bunch of frightened ants. It was a smart decision, really. Tony certainly wasn’t about to wait for them to move.

He lunged into the grave and tore the lid off the casket in one swift yank. The hinges splintered and the sides buckled and cracked, but he barely even noticed the squeal of breaking wood.

How could he, when his kid was *right there*?

Peter’s head was tilted to the side, blue lips parted and eyelids shut. He looked small and young and *very much* in need of the protection that Tony was so desperate to provide.

He fell into the casket, using one arm to pull the kid against his chest and the other to cradle the back of his head. He saw a few loose curls slip in between the joints of the gauntlet's fingers and gunned the repulsers. He needed to be out of the suit and holding his kid *yesterday*.

He landed heavily just beside the grave and the suit melted away. His knees hit the dirt all at once, fingers scrabbling for a pulse on the kid's cold neck. It drummed back against his fingertips, thready and weak but undeniably present and undeniably alive.

He was going to make Peter's heartbeat his ringtone, or his alarm, or just play it in the background of the lab for the rest of time. It was, without a doubt, the best damn beat he'd ever heard.

But... something was missing. The pulse was there, his heart was working, but his lungs... *weren't*. The kid's chest was still and there was no air passing between his lips.

Peter wasn't breathing.

Suddenly, Doctor Cho was kneeling beside him. "Tony, he needs rescue breaths. Either you need to do it, or you need to *let go*."

Letting go... letting go wasn't an option.

He pinched the kid's nose shut and tilted his head back, thankful for the emergency first aid and CPR training Rhodey had given him after Afghanistan, and pushed the first breath into Peter's unresponsive lungs. He did a second and pulled back to wait.

And then Peter twitched, and followed Tony's breaths with one of his own.

It was a strained, painful wheeze, but it was still a breath and Tony could've cried with relief. As the euphoria settled, someone shoved an oxygen mask into his hand. He pushed it over the kid's mouth and watched each exhale puff back against the plastic like it was the most riveting sight in the world. He was distantly aware of the chaos surrounding him, of workers rushing and medics shouting, but he just focused on the steady rise and fall of his kid's chest.

Nothing else mattered.

After a minute or so, Peter's eyelids flickered and a pair of dazed pupils settled on his face. Tony did his best to give the kid a reassuring smile.

"Hi there, Pete. Nice of you to pop in." The teenager tilted his head in a show of sluggish confusion, and Tony gave his chest a gentle pat. "No worries. Just breathe for me, okay? Nice and deep." He brushed his fingers through the kid's curls and almost sobbed as he got lost in another wave of relief. "That's it. I've got you."

He could see Peter's mouth open and close underneath the mask as his half-lidded eyes slid blearily over his face. Tony shook his head.

"No, buddy. No talking. Just breathe for a second. Remember how to work those lungs of yours." *God, please remember how to work them. Please never forget something like that*

ever, ever again. “You’ll be talking my ear off again in no time.”

It seemed like once Peter recognized that he could finally breathe again, he couldn’t make himself stop. His breaths sped up until he was choking on them. Tony ignored Doctor Cho’s concerned advice and caught the kid’s gaze.

“Easy there, Pete. No rush. Nobody’s taking the air away, okay?” He smoothed the pad of his thumb over the teenager’s temple and watched the teenager’s eyes flutter shut in response. “Take your time. Slow it down.”

Doctor Cho pulled one of Peter’s hands aside and clipped an oximeter onto his finger. Tony could see her hover a hand over his shoulder before dropping it back down, the gesture of comfort aborted. *Good choice.* “We’ll let him stabilize a bit and then move him, alright?”

Tony just nodded, and she drifted back to give them some space

He knew there was a reason he’d always liked her.

Some instinct must have told Peter that the oxygen mask was feeding him something his body desperately needed, because as Doctor Cho moved away, he fumbled one of his hands up to his face and wrapped his fingers around Tony’s, trying to press the plastic down more firmly.

“I’ve got it for you, kid.” He wiggled the fingers underneath Peter’s in demonstration. “It’s not going anywhere.”

The kid’s hand loosened, and then tentatively migrated away from the mask and up to the edge of Tony’s cuff. Eventually, the teenager relaxed against the ground and let his eyes slowly close. Tony kept up a string of hushed encouragement. His voice was definitely running away with him, but he just didn’t have the determination to rein it back in.

He heard Doctor Cho call for a stretcher, and he made the brief decision that he’d crawl up there with the kid, protocol be damned. As he waited, he dropped his forehead against Peter’s and tangled his fingers more firmly in his hair.

His kid was alive.

He’d fix him. He’d put him back together and he’d find the person who did this and he’d tear him limb from limb.

But that was all ahead of him. Right now, he was just going to listen to Peter breathe.

Right now, that was enough.

--

Peter woke up in an ambulance.

And, okay, he wouldn’t really qualify it was waking up if he was being totally honest. It felt more like he faded back in. As if he’d actually been conscious the whole time, but his

awareness had shifted out into space at some point and now something had pulled him back down.

Which... probably only made sense to him.

He could feel an oxygen mask pressed over his face. The plastic was making the bridge of his nose ache, and the amount of pressure made him think someone must have been holding it down. He managed, with a lot more effort than he'd like to admit, to blink his eyes half-open, and found his suspicion confirmed.

He was sprawled out across Tony's lap, and it was his mentor's white-knuckled grip that was wrapped around the mask. They both seemed to be resting on a gurney that was pressed against the ambulance's wall. Peter tried to smile up him, hands fumbling clumsily at the older man's shirt.

Tony's face lit up as he noticed Peter's awareness. "Pete? You with me, kiddo?"

He opened and closed his mouth underneath the plastic mask, irrationally pissed at his tongue for abandoning him in his hour of need. "Mm."

"Think you can get those eyes all the way open, for me?"

Uh, maybe?

He pushed his gaze towards the top of his head, forcing his eyelids up, and was rewarded by a beam of pride on Tony's face.

"Look at you, Spider-Man. You're doing great." His gaze flickered to a monitor that Peter couldn't really see. "Your blood oxygen levels are getting back up there, too."

Peter didn't even try to process the complicated words. Instead, he just stared up at Tony's slightly blurry face and focused on how sweet the oxygen tasted on his tongue.

God, being able to breathe was *awesome*.

His mentor was still talking. Peter thought he might be saying something about a doctor checking his neurological functions, but he wasn't really paying attention.

"M-Mis'er St'rk?"

All of Tony's attention zeroed on in Peter. It made him feel important, which he liked quite a lot. "Yeah, kiddie?"

"C'n we watch Lilo 'n Stitch?"

Tony choked down a laugh, and Peter thought he might have seen a few stray tears in his eyes. "Sure, Petey. Anything you want, okay? Anything you want."

--

May met them in the Tower's medical facility, and Peter decided that watching her comfort a nearly hysterical Tony Stark was definitely going to be filed alongside some of his favorite memories.

As soon as they'd both thought he'd fallen asleep, May had hauled Tony out into the hallway. Peter could see their silhouettes through the thin shade on his room's window, and his advanced hearing made picking up their voices a piece of cake

"Easy, Tony. You need to calm down."

"I *am* calm, May."

"You most certainly are *not*." She snapped. "And don't you dare try to lie to me again, Stark. Open communication, remember?" Peter could see her set a gentle hand on his mentor's arm. It said a lot that the man didn't flinch away. "I know you have to be strong for him. Believe me, I do. But he's okay, he's asleep, and you saved him." She paused. "Parenting is hard enough when your kid *doesn't* do the kind of stuff that Peter does. But with Spider-Man, and all those added dangers... we need support. And I-I don't have Ben to lean on, not anymore. But I *do* have you."

Tony was quick to respond. "Of course you do."

"And *you* have *me*." May had put on her special, cajoling voice. Peter didn't know she used it on anyone outside of him. "So talk to me, Tony. Please."

They stood facing each other for a minute. Then, Tony slumped against the window and dropped his face into his hands, the picture of defeat. "He... *god*, May... he wasn't breathing."

"But he is now."

"Yes, but... but Cho said-" Peter was focusing so hard on Tony that he could actually hear the spike in his heartbeat. "She said there might be damage. He-He didn't have oxygen for... for a *long* time. What if he-what if he's-"

"Then we'll do whatever needs to be done for him." May was smiling. Peter could tell. "And something tells me he'll have the best doctors in the world."

"Just in the world?" Tony scoffed. "I have intergalactic connections. I'll take him to fucking Asgard if that's what it takes."

"And that's why he's going to be just fine." She touched the side of his face, and Peter was struck rather suddenly by how close they'd become in the past year. He didn't know how he'd missed them becoming best friends, but it felt obvious now. "He's got Iron Man on his side. What else could he need?"

"He needs you."

"Well," May looked down, "I'm not sure about that but... he has me, for what that's worth."

“Ask him, sometime.” Tony murmured. “Something tells me that it’s worth everything.”

They’re silent then, and it occurred to Peter that this was probably the first time both of them could just... exist since he was taken.

Eventually, May sighed. “Cho’s taking him back for some brain scans in a bit. We should sit with him until then, let him know we’re there.”

“Yeah, right. Yes. Peter.”

He heard footsteps shuffle back towards his room, and quickly closed his eyes and tried to relax. It wasn’t hard to do. He was *exhausted*. In fact, he was already drifting off by the time he felt May slip her fingers between his and Tony set a calloused hand against his forehead.

He was awake enough to notice, though. He was awake enough to feel loved.

--

Apparently, Peter had to be constantly monitored for *a week* after Tony rescued him.

If he was being honest, he wasn’t entirely sure how necessary the whole thing was. Doctor Cho *did* admit to being concerned about lasting neurological effects from the oxygen deprivation, but Tony’s level of hyper-vigilance was, frankly, a little over the top.

Then again, his mentor *had* pulled his unresponsive body out of the ground while he wasn’t breathing, so Peter decided that it was probably fair to offer the older man a little bit of leeway when it came to cautiousness.

Cho, May, and Tony had all decided that it made the most sense for him to stay at the Tower, where an experienced medical crew was on hand at all times, just in case. May popped in and out in between her shifts at the hospital, usually bringing takeout and a fresh change of clothes. Pepper and Rhodey were both regular guests, but Peter guessed they were more there for Tony’s sake than for his own.

And Tony? Tony was *always there*.

Not that Peter really minded. It was nice, actually. They spent most of their time curled up on the couch, like they were right now, watching anything from the worst pre-teen dramas they could dig up to marathoning murder documentaries.

Peter shivered a little and shifted closer into the Tony’s side. Before he could even realize he was cold, Tony had grabbed one of his old Stark Industries sweatshirts from the coffee table and was pressing it against the teenager’s chest.

“Here. Wrap up.”

Peter rolled his eyes but wiggled into the garment. It was soft, and it smelled like Tony. He smiled a little and pulled the sleeves over his hands. “I’m so *cold*.”

“Doctor Cho said that could be a temporary side effect of the oxygen deprivation.” Tony carefully gripped his chin and studied his pupils intensely. “You’re still breathing okay, right? None of the stuff she told us to look out for?”

“No, Mister Stark. I’m fine. Just cold.” His mentor settled back against the couch and tightened the arm that was wrapped around Peter’s shoulders. The teenager couldn’t help following up the reassurance with snark. “Don’t you have, like, a company to run?”

Tony rolled his eyes and kept flipping through the TV channels. “Pepper runs the company.”

“Don’t you have, like, things to invent?”

“They’ll wait.”

“Don’t you have-”

“Getting tired of me already, kid?”

“Not tired of you.” Peter gave his mentor’s chest a half-hearted swat, then yawned. Tony picked up on it instantly.

“Just tired, huh?” He checked his watch. “It *is* almost naptime.”

“I cannot *believe* you’ve actually scheduled me naptimes.”

“We need to keep track of it.” Tony pulled a throw blanket down from the back of the couch and started wrapping it around his shoulders. “You can nap here. I’ll put on a super boring documentary in the background to help you nod off.”

Peter grinned. “Good luck finding one I find boring.”

“Nature documentary.”

“What’re you talking about? You can actually see the Fibonacci sequence in the petals of flowers. Nature is awesome.”

“How It’s Made.”

“Have you seen the episode where they show you how they make horse saddles? It’s a lot more complicated than you’d think. There’s different sizes and everything, Mister Stark. Wild.”

“Say Yes to The Dress.”

“I watch that with May all the time. The different styles of dresses are really cool.”

“You’re killing me, Parker.”

“Didn’t know that was a show.”

“Oh, it is.” Tony kicked at Peter’s feet until the teenager popped them onto the couch. “It’s staring this really cool and dashing handsome guy called Tony Stark.”

“I hear he isn’t actually all that cool in person.”

“You must’ve heard wrong.”

“Mm,” he smiled lazily as Tony tugged him into his lap and started carding his fingers through his hair, “don’t think so. I’ve met him, and he’s a big nerd.”

Tony just looked down at him fondly, eyes trailing up to where Peter’s bangs were splayed messily across his forehead. “You need a haircut.”

Another yawn. “May says that, too.”

“That’s because May is a very smart woman.” Tony worked at a knot, and Peter nearly laughed at how ridiculous it was that *Tony Stark* was untangling his hair. “Who also happens to have eyes.”

“Does she?” He moved his hand until his fingers tangled in the hem of his mentor’s t-shirt. “Didn’t notice.”

He snorted. “Close your eyes and get some sleep, Parker. We’ll work on the haircut and your appalling observational skills later.”

“Hey, ‘m good at observational... stuff. Good at *lots* of stuff.” Tony laughed, and it jostled Peter uncomfortably. He pushed against his stomach with a sleepy frown until his mentor got the message and choked it off. “I *am*.”

“That you are, kid. Good at lots of stuff.”

“See? ‘M the best.”

Tony’s hand paused in his hair. “Yeah, Pete. You are.”

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