Room to Breathe

by Bethwriteswords

Summary

It's been a year since Aunt May died and Peter Parker is starting to self-destruct again. He can't quite bring himself to care. Fortunately, Tony is more perceptive than he looks.

Notes

TW:

Graphic injury, SH, cutting, depression, suicide, panic attacks

If you're suffering with any of the issues mentioned above or in the tags I can't stop you reading this - but if you do, check in with yourself before and after! Look after yourself, feel free to reach out to me through here (I promise I care and will do everything in my power to help you), you are so so precious.

Reaching out for help saved my life and gave me hope when I thought there was none - Shout! is a UK based text hotline you can get in touch with to talk anything through. Text: 85258

I don't know of a similar service in the US (if there is one comment below!!) - but the number for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 1-800-273-8255 (TALK)

Be safe <3
Doing just fine

Long sleeves in July. It surprised Peter how easy it was to get away with. Turns out most people were too wrapped up in their own lives to notice one Spiderman’s fashion choices, questionable as they may seem. Plus, Peter was used to hiding an entire secret identity; a few torn-up patches of skin were nothing in comparison. That’s what he told himself: nothing. So what if the cuts were only getting deeper, if even his enhanced healing couldn't fade the scars that littered his arms, if this was a ten year habit that Peter couldn't help but think might kill him someday. It’s nothing compared to what he faced every evening on the grimy, dimly-lit streets of Queens.

Peter had seen things that would make your blood run cool, he knew what sort of things human beings were capable of doing to each other, every goddamn day. Whilst the other avengers raced around foiling glamorous alien plots and super-villains and technology that looked like it came from Ronald Reagan’s wet dream, Peter saw the dirt under the city’s fingernails. It took its toll, rinsing the blood out of his suit and dropping kids off at police stations. Knowing the price of ruining a life was sometimes no more than a slap on the wrist, a month in jail if you were lucky. He wasn't bitter, but sometimes the tension of it all built up until he couldn't breathe, until he needed a release, even if the only relief came from the pen knife he had to sharpen every week.

Peter sat in the middle of the bathroom floor, watching a thin line of blood trace it’s way down his arm and drip off his elbow. It made a tiny splash on the white tiles, joining the cluster of scarlet droplets congealing there. The sight was transfixing, somehow oddly soothing. It felt like resetting a pressure gauge, making his insides feel less hot and jangly. They looked a little like teardrops, but Peter felt so mixed up nowadays that cutting is easier than crying most the time.

The door to the bathroom was shut tight, but there was no danger of anyone walking in on him. Not since May died. It had been a full year since she’d been diagnosed, and approximately eleven months and two weeks since the cancer that had taken root in her brain also took her life. Of all the dangers Spiderman could have saved her from, the universe had picked the one he couldn’t, and now he was on his own.

That wasn’t quite true. He lived alone, unable to let go of the shitty apartment where the two of them had lived for most of Peter’s life, but he only really slept there. Tony had seen to that, fixing Peter an entire suite in the Avenger’s Tower before they’d even had a funeral and insisting he saw the kid as often as both their schedules allowed. He had the rest of the Avengers, who’d collectively decided to adopt him way before May. He even had MJ and Ned in school, who’d somehow managed to be completely unfazed by his extra-curricular activities. It wasn’t like he was actively suffering all the time. It was just sometimes, on evenings like this, after days like this one, he felt like if he didn’t do something to get it all out he might do something worse.

He’d seen a psychologist for a while: a blonde, softly-spoken woman named Anna, who Aunt May had hired when Peter stopped eating that time in 6th grade. She’d been kind, if sometimes uncomfortably perceptive, and when Peter had broken down and told her about Skip she hadn’t looked surprised, only sad, and understanding. She’d probably saved his life, he could admit to himself now, but even she hadn’t been able to break him of the habit. He’d been too convinced he had it under control, that his cutting was just superficial, that he could stop if he really wanted to. Five years on he’d realised it wasn’t as easy as he thought, and he still didn’t want to stop.

Cleaning up the blood was becoming troublingly routine, and he let out a heavy sigh as he pressed the gauze to his arm, holding it tight. The blood soaked through quicker than it used to, and Peter knew anyone else would probably need stitches. With his advanced healing though the bleeding was already slowing, and within minutes he felt comfortable enough to wrap a bandage around it
and call it a day. His blood turned the water pink as he washed his hands, and he watched almost
regretfully as it ran clear again. The urge to cut hadn't disappeared, but he was running out of space
on his brutalised arms and didn’t want to risk scarring another area. Just weeks ago on a mission
he’d had to reset his own dislocated shoulder, hiding the injury from the team for fear of Bruce,
their go-to medic, somehow finding out.

Taking a deep breath, he dried his hands and shut off the tap, casting a last glance over the floor to
make sure he hadn’t missed anything and setting the penknife back in the cabinet. He was
exhausted, yet still paradoxically wired from the Spiderman shift he’d just finished. A glance at the
clock told him it was late late, but when he lay in bed he couldn't sleep. His phone had pinged a
couple of hours ago and now he picked it up, suppressing a yawn and squinting at the screen.
Unsurprisingly it was MJ; that girl kept such nocturnal hours it was miraculous she ever made it to
school on time.

‘What are you doing tomorrow night?’ She knew he kept weird hours with his Spiderman shifts -
when she said night he knew she meant the word very literally.

‘Not a lot’. He liked that they kept their messages short and sweet - they were both so crap with
their phones this was a necessary compromise. He put his phone down again, not expecting even
MJ to be up at this time. It was close to 3.30 and the neighbourhood was as quiet as it ever got. It
dinged again almost as soon as the thought crossed his mind, and a shadow of a smile grazed his
lips.

‘What are you doing still awake?’ He could virtually hear her outrage through the
phone, and the idea made him smile properly. Once he’d worked up the courage to ask her out the
two had settled into an easy, comfortable rhythm that made him wonder why he hadn’t done it
sooner.

‘Can’t sleep’, he answered honestly.

‘Poor baby. Wanna do my AP physics hw instead?’ He didn’t get a chance to answer before his
phone was buzzing and he picked it up immediately, relieved to have the distraction from his own
thoughts. Before he’d had a chance to so much as say hello, MJ started talking. ‘Okay, question 1.
If an object is rolling down a 45 degree hill at a steady velocity…’

Peter was asleep by question 5.

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He managed a pitiful two hours of sleep before jolting awake early the next morning, gasping out
of a nightmare and taking several steadying breaths before rolling out of bed. The heavy dread that
pulled at his shoulders urged him to stay curled up and hide from the world, but today anxiety had
the edge. He called that a win.

Stripping his t-shirt off, Peter headed to the bathroom to inspect yesterday’s damage. Peeling off
the bandage on his arm set a couple of cuts bleeding again, but mostly they were already scabbing
over. They’d scar in a day or two and be fine, he decided methodically, used to this. Checking his
cuts in the morning had become as much a part of his routine as showering and brushing his teeth.
Catching sight of his arms in the mirror, he paused only long enough to rub bio-oil onto older,
itching scars.

School, by this point, was little more than a formality for Peter. His grades were high enough that
he could afford to screw around and still manage to pass everything spectacularly, to the irritation
of both his peers and teachers. The only class he actively skipped was PE - a habit he blamed on
his superpowers that was more down to his reluctance to change in front of anyone. Tony let him
get away with it on the condition that he come and see him for the hour he would have spent
running around a sweaty high school gym.

Gym was third period on Fridays, meaning that, including lunch period immediately afterwards,
today Peter had a full two hours to hang out at Stark tower. MJ and Ned made no effort to hide
their intense jealousy, and Peter stuck his tongue out cheekily at them as he vaulted the fence
behind the main buildings.
‘Tell Mr Adams I said hi!’, he yelled over his shoulder as he jogged away.
‘Fuck you Parker!!’

He was out of breath by the time he let himself into the lab, choosing to put that down to being out of shape rather than the weight that had begun to slip off his already lithe frame in recent weeks. It wasn’t that he was trying to starve, he told himself, just that he didn’t have time to eat properly, what with the hero stuff and everything. It was under control, at any rate. A tiny voice at the back of his head reminded him that maybe under his control wasn't the best state for it to be in, but he shrugged that off.

Tony’s face lit up as he saw him and he dropped the tools he was holding to pull Peter into a tight hug. ‘How’re you doing kid?’ Peter ignored the slight jab of pain that came from Tony’s embrace rubbing the cuts on his arm, grinning back at his mentor.

‘Good. Aced that biology exam.’ Stark smiled proudly, ruffling the kid’s hair.

‘Knew you would.’ Peter’s grades were the only things about him Tony didn’t worry about, if he was honest with himself. The kid was bright - too bright for his own good most the time - but since his Aunt had died he hadn’t been quite himself. He supposed that was perfectly natural; the kid had lost every person on the earth who meant a thing to him after all, but a tiny voice at the back of his mind quietly wondered if there wasn't something else as well.

Pushing that aside, he cleared away some of the detritus littering his desktop and opened up his most recent project.

As often happened in Tony’s lab, the two lost track of time completely, and by the time Tony next glanced at his watch the school day was long over. Neither of them felt too bad about it; for Peter, the relief of thinking about nothing but the shapes and numbers unfolding in front of him was easily worth the black mark on his attendance record.

‘Just don’t tell Pepper,’ Tony turned to Peter as they headed back up the stairs, suddenly aware of the disappearing daylight, ‘she’ll kill me if she finds out we did it again. Stay for dinner?’ Peter had to work hard to keep the panic off his face at the casual question, mind already working at 100 miles an hour to churn out excuses not to. The lie slipped off his tongue with a practised smoothness though.

‘Nah, that’s okay, I said I’d meet MJ for a bit.’ They reached the door and Tony raised a suggestive eyebrow at him. Peter flushed. ‘Shut up!’ Tony raised his hands in mock innocence.

‘I didn’t say anything! Look after yourself kid.’ He resisted the urge to tell him to eat something, reminding himself that Peter was a sixteen year old and completely capable of taking care of himself. God knows Tony had been pretty damn self-sufficient by the time he was Peter’s age. Peter waved as he headed down the street, shaking his head as Tony called after him.

‘Don’t do anything I would!’.

Away from Tony’s, the smile slid from Peter’s face like a shadow over the moon. He had no intention of seeing MJ later, hyper-aware of the kind of violence that played out on the streets every night, every moment that Spiderman wasn’t there to stop it. He had no intention of eating anything either, if he was honest with himself. It’s getting bad again. The thought flicked across his mind before he could push it away and he physically shook his head to clear it. The eating hadn’t been bad since… since Skip.

A sudden tidal wave of memory slammed into him, stopping him in his tracks.

Flashes of hands and faces and a dark room and ‘there’s a good boy’-

Peter stumbled to the nearest alleyway, retching violently, shuddering, doubled up with the weight
of everything that happened. It had been a long time since his last flashback and it took him by surprise, tears springing to his eyes as tremors threatened to force him to his knees, breath coming in short, fast gasps. The panic attack was less unexpected, though equally unpleasant, and Peter sank into a crouch to let the thing run its course. Voices in his head screamed at him to get moving, at least put the suit on, doesn't he know there are people dying! But for the moment he couldn't move, paralysed and terrified and missing May more than he ever had.

His heart raced in his chest so fast it scared him, and he squeezed his eyes shut, trying to slow his frantic breathing to a manageable level, the way his therapist had taught him years ago. He felt pathetic - he was supposed to be a hero after all - and here he was in New York’s most disgusting alleyway, barely holding it together.

The fear ebbed gradually, eventually leaving nothing but a fierce headache in its place. Peter sat heavily, leaning against the rough brick behind him and dragging a shaking hand over his tearstained face. It was getting harder to convince himself that this was sustainable, for all his best efforts. Weakly, he pushed himself to his feet, taking a deep breath and throwing a hand against the wall to steady himself as his head spun alarmingly.

He was fine, he’d be fine.

Ducking behind an over-filled dumpster, he pulled the spider-suit out of his rucksack with trembling fingers, shivering in the cool night air as he changed. Relief flooded through him as he slipped the mask over his head and stretched the fatigue out of his aching muscles. Scarred, broken Peter Parker could fade away, and in his place stood a hero.
This is starting to hurt

Chapter Summary

Peter's various hurts are getting harder to hide

Chapter Notes

Thanks for reading so far!!!! Pls do like and comment, it means the whole world <3

He didn’t eat all weekend. It wasn’t necessarily intentional, he told himself, it was just that he hadn’t had time. With the warmer months attracting plane-loads of tourists to the Big Apple, the streets were busier than ever, and crime increased correspondingly. In a single day, Peter returned over 100 stolen wallets, leaving multiple muggers to the more formal justice of the NYPD. On top of that, an especially pissed off gang member had launched a serrated knife at him, barely grazing the top of his thigh but tearing an impressive hole through his suit. The cut had healed in hours, but sewing was not a strength of Peter’s, and the repair had kept him up late.

Coupled with hanging out with MJ - who usually tolerated Spiderman admirably but made the salient point that even Tony Stark made time for Pepper - and he’d just been too busy to buy groceries, and eating out wasn't exactly in his price range.

He knew very well these excuses wouldn't fly with Tony: the billionaire wasn’t exactly frugal, and if he’d had any idea how dire Peter’s financial straits really were the kid would never have wanted for anything ever again. It was only Peter’s still-raw grief for his aunt that stopped the man forcing him to move into Stark tower with the rest of the Avengers.

It was more than mere pride that stopped Peter reaching out though; more than anything he felt he didn’t deserve to ask for help. Things weren’t that bad after all: he had a roof over his head, which was more than so many of the people he encountered every day.

Besides, every time he sat down to try and eat horrors would crowd his head: Aunt May wasting away while he watched, helpless, Uncle Ben bleeding out in a crime that had been all too preventable, the empty faces he saw every day, victims, perpetrators, the whole bloody cycle. The innocent and the guilty and the miles of grey between them. He had to stay in constant motion or it all made him sick.

Hunger made him dull, his brain foggy, took the sting from his thoughts. It just so happened that
what was good for Peter Parker wasn’t so great for his alter ego.

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Peter grimaced as he slipped back into his room, lowering his battered body gingerly through the open window and dumping his rucksack in its customary spot on the floor. Behind him the first cool strands of daylight were just beginning to creep across the sky, casting a wan light across the walls.

He winced as he pulled off his mask, dried blood sticking it to the side of his forehead. A desperate would-be burglar had hurled a hammer in his direction when he’d surprised him breaking into a block of flats. Any other day his senses would have kicked in and warned him with time to spare, but hunger and exhaustion had blunted them, and he’d ducked fractionally too late.

A glance in the mirror told him the wound wasn’t serious, and had stopped bleeding hours ago, but it was large enough to scar, and he pulled a face. Another one for the collection. He headed to the bathroom and stepped into the shower before pulling off the rest of the suit, letting the rush of cold water wash both him and it clean. Spider-ing wasn’t exactly a well-paid gig, and the odd tutoring job barely covered his rent; hot water was a luxury he hadn’t been able to afford for months. Besides, he told himself, cold water was better for bloodstains anyway.

He was still shivering when he made it to school two hours later, hands stuffed deep into his pockets both for warmth and to hide the unhealthy blue tinge at the base of his fingernails. Ned met him at the gate and for the hundredth time Peter thanked whatever deity had made his best friend one of the most comically oblivious people he’d ever met.

“What up Spiderman!”

“Shut up Ned!”

The kid chattered at 100 miles an hour as they walked through the gates, jumping wildly between topics without waiting for a reply, faintly reminding Peter of a chipmunk on speed. He did his best to put on a show of normality, laughing and interjecting at the right places, but couldn’t help but slump in relief when their homeroom teacher called for silence.
There was no gym class today, but Tony had texted telling him to swing by after school anyway (pun fully intended), so he had that to look forward to. In the meantime, with their first set of major exams rapidly approaching, his whole year group buzzed with the kind of manic energy only the sadistic pressures of academia could incite.

Peter represented one of his mediocre school’s only hopes for a shining set of results, the consequence of this being he found himself under unusually intense scrutiny from his teachers, just when he least needed it.

The only exception to this was Peter’s ageing Chemistry professor. MJ and Ned had once made a game of testing the upper limits of his apathy and discovered with some glee that, short of a major fire, virtually nothing could entice him to pull his eyes away from an impressively tattered copy of Gulliver’s Travels.

Today, Peter had taken full advantage of this and, having been unquestioningly granted a key to the ‘dangerous chemicals’ cupboard at the back of the room, set about tinkering with the formula for his web fluid. Specifically, he wanted to make it a little stronger. A troubling number of New York’s most wanted had started carrying specially sharpened blades for the lone purpose of slicing through his webs. While this had yet to cause him any real problems, the way his reflexes were looking at the moment made him all too aware of the possibility of a painful fall.

Ned settled happily into the seat next to him, watching imploringly until Peter sighed and handed him a vial and told him to find a Bunsen burner. As they worked, some of the heaviness lifted from Peter’s shoulders. He found himself joking with Ned like old times, ribbing him about the girl he’d befriended on their last school trip and cracking up over the monstrous solid gloop they managed to synthesise on their first few attempts.

By the end of the lesson Peter had something he was pretty happy with, resolving to take it to Tony later on and test it out, something close to contentment heating his chest.

The unfamiliar feeling was fleeting. By the time the end of the day rolled around the sleepless nights had caught up to him, and he felt almost drunk on exhaustion. Combined with the fact that he’d skipped lunch again on the pretence of needing to revise, drifting between classes felt like wading through treacle. Even Ned had twigged something was up by last period, leaning across to whisper to him when the teacher was facing the board.

“Peter, you okay? You look tired.” Peter blinked a few times before replying, snapped out of his daze. He flashed a smile at his friend, fighting a yawn.

“I’m good man, busy weekend.” He gave Ned a significant look, relying on his friend’s admiration of Spiderman to field any concern; him and MJ knew better than to ask for details on what exactly
he got up to in the suit. It worked - Ned nodded sagely and dropped it, and Peter felt a pang of guilt for lying to him. Not that it hadn't been a busy weekend, but he’d definitely felt better after worse ones. His state was more down to the fact that he hadn’t eaten in almost four days.

With his advanced metabolism, even on a restful day Peter needed to consume close to four times the number of calories a regular kid his age did just to keep functioning. With all the running about he’d been doing, coupled with the lack of sleep, he was running on less than fumes right now.

His head spun worryingly as he stood up, and he took his time packing his books into his rucksack to give the spell time to pass, breathing slowly. Ned was conveniently distracted by their English teacher, stumbling over some excuse for a missed piece of homework, and Peter leant heavily on the desk for a moment. Hearing the conversation finish he straightened, flashing his best friend an amused grin.

“Caught, huh?”

Peter hadn’t done the homework either; he was just a better liar. Ned stuck his tongue out at him and followed him out the door.

Happy was waiting at the bottom of the road, looking unimpressed.

“Parker, why do I have to wait a hundred years for you to get out the damn classroom? Not a babysitter.”

Peter bid Ned a hasty goodbye and jogged to the man’s side, shooting him what he hoped was a winning smile. “Sorry Happy! I had to wait for Ned-“

“Yeah I don’t actually care, get in the car kid.” Happy rolled his eyes, suppressing a smile as Peter skittered past him and swung into the passenger seat, launching into an explanation that mentioned something about an essay he’d forgotten. Stark’s bodyguard was fond of the kid, though you’d have better luck extracting blood from a stone than that confession from him. If anything, Peter was more talkative than usual on the car ride to Stark tower, scarcely pausing for breath as he detailed the minutiae of his day. He did this partially because annoying Happy was one of the genuine great joys of his life, and partially in a wild attempt to distract the man from noticing anything different about him.

The plan was successful; the man practically threw him out the car, making a big show of shaking his head and muttering under his breath as he drove away.
Stretching an old ache out of his shoulder, Peter yawned as he wandered into the stylish lobby of Stark tower. FRIDAY greeted him as he entered.

“Hello, Peter Parker.” As he always did, Peter waved in the skyward direction he always imagined the AI living, though he knew she was far less tangible than that.

“Hey FRIDAY! Where’s Tony?”

“Mister Stark is currently in a meeting. He requests that you make yourself at home, and he will join you shortly.” Part of Peter was relieved that he’d have some time to himself before he had to resume the Peter-is-okay charade.

“Cool, thanks FRIDAY!” He took the elevator to Tony’s suite rather than the more communal Avengers floor, too tired to contemplate seeing the rest of the team right now and knowing FRIDAY would tell his mentor where he was. He needed coffee, he decided, unless he wanted to risk Tony walking in on him fast asleep. Fortunately Tony was equally of the opinion that coffee was slightly more important than oxygen, and jars of the stuff littered the kitchen countertops. Peter picked one at random, checking the label carefully to make sure it wasn’t any of Pepper’s decaf stuff before boiling the kettle and making a pot.

He leant absent-mindedly against the counter as it brewed, gaze unfocused, head aching fiercely. Reaching up to touch the gash on his temple, he frowned and pulled out his phone, flipping it onto the selfie camera. Rather than the pink scar he had expected to see, the wound had barely healed at all, and was ringed by a violent purple bruise. No wonder Ned had seemed concerned.

He usually healed so quickly he barely paid any attention to the accumulated cuts and bruises he always picked up on Spiderman shifts, but now he rolled up his sleeves, inspecting his forearms carefully. Fingerprint bruises from that mugger who’d tried to grab him; long scrapes down his elbows where he’d swung clumsily past a wall; even the straight, clean cuts in the crook of his arm - all were starkly visible against his pale skin. He swallowed hard and shoved his sleeves down, glancing around, suddenly afraid of someone coming in and seeing. The fact that his enhanced healing was compromised scared him far more than he liked to admit, even to himself; his ability to heal in less than half the time it took a regular person was one of the reasons Tony let him keep going out as Spiderman at all.

He briefly considered pulling on an oversized beanie to hide the head injury but dismissed the thought just as quickly - Tony was a busy man but he wasn’t stupid, and Peter didn’t want to give him any indication that he might be hiding something. Instead, he took a deep breath and poured himself a coffee, drinking it scalding hot in an attempt to kickstart his slow brain. He had to think of a more recent excuse for the injury than last night’s patrol. Tony knew exactly how quickly he healed and if he suspected something was wrong with his abilities he’d definitely want to
He barely had time to frame the thought before FRIDAY’s voice echoed above him, making him jump.

“Mister Stark’s meeting has finished, Peter. He should be on his way shortly.”

Peter was glad of the warning, taking a deep breath and topping up the coffee in the pot, hopping up to sit on the countertop and cradling the mug in his lap to warm his unseasonably cold hands. The marble surface felt harder than usual beneath him, and he shifted uncomfortably. The elevator dinged less than five minutes later and Tony’s familiar footsteps strode across the floor, voice echoing from the hallway before Peter could even see him.

“Honey, I’m home!” Peter grinned and jumped off the countertop, setting his mug down carefully to give his spinning head time to clear as Tony entered the room. For all his anxiety about Tony guessing something was wrong, he felt himself relax as the man swept him into a tight hug.

“Hey Tony,” he greeted him happily, “how was your meeting?” His older man pulled a face.

“Typical SHIELD bullshit. They want to play with my stuff, I don’t feel like sharing.” A shadow passed across his face, chased away like a cloud across the sun as he met Peter’s serious gaze. “It’ll be fine, kid, the other Avengers are on my side with this one.”

Peter smiled wryly. “That’s a nice change.”

Tony laughed and poured himself a mug of coffee, refilling Peter’s as he did so. The fierce feud that had broken out between him and Steve Rogers had long since blown over, and it was a relief to be able to laugh about something that at the time had felt apocalyptic. Turning back to Peter, Tony’s smile faltered, brows knitting together as he reached to brush a lock of hair off the boy’s forehead. “That looks like it hurt,” he commented, frown deepening as he shifted to get a closer look, “did you do that today?”

For half a second, Peter froze like a deer in headlights, before the excuse he’d come up with a minute ago came back to him. “Oh! Um, yeah, it’s fine though, I just, um, thought I’d try out a new formula for my webs, you know, to make them stronger, and Ned helped me make it—“

“You let Ned help you??” Tony interrupted, raising an eyebrow.
“Well I needed another pair of hands and my chemistry teacher, see he doesn't really mind what we’re doing so long as we don’t blow stuff up and—“ Peter could tell he was rambling “-anyway, we tried it out at lunch and it was super strong but it wasn't super, uhhh, springy, so I fell and hit a wall.” He finished abruptly, wary of Tony’s suddenly unreadable face.

“I’m sorry, it was an accident, but I think we got the formula almost right, it just needs—“ Tony interrupted again, raising his hands.

“Pete, don’t apologise, I don’t mind you tinkering with the solution, just… try it out somewhere soft next time, maybe?”

Something inside Peter’s chest loosened and he broke into a sheepish grin. “Yeah, okay, that’s a good idea, I’ll do that.” He rambled in relief this time and Tony looped an arm around his shoulder, shaking his head, lips twitching upwards.

“What am I gonna do with you kid?”

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Free Falling

Chapter Summary

Things have definitely gotten bad again - the other avengers aren't as oblivious as Peter wants them to be

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There had been some truth behind Peter’s excuse; the web fluid Ned had helped him make really had been too rigid, and Peter’s high school chemistry classroom hadn’t exactly had the wealth of material Tony’s lab did to help him fix it. The two spent much of the evening experimenting with the formula until they had something Peter was pleased with. He was keen to try it out straight away, but Tony insisted they wait until tomorrow in a fit of uncharacteristic responsibility. The kid looked like he was ready to drop, and he was acutely aware neither of them had eaten anything in over 5 hours.

“Stick around for dinner kiddo, Bruce is making mac n cheese.” It wasn’t phrased like a request this time, and Peter cast a sideways glance at his mentor, panic stirring in his chest. Had Tony figured something out? His mentor’s expression stayed casual though, and after a half-second’s pause he feigned enthusiasm.

“Sounds great! I haven't seen Bruce in ages.” He berated himself internally for not trying harder to get out of the dinner, already nauseous at the thought of breaking his fast. Accidental fast, he told himself. He couldn't use the MJ excuse again though - he’d already told Tony she’d been home sick from school today. If Tony noticed his hesitation he didn’t say anything, and Peter busied himself helping clean the lab to give himself time to calm down. Actual fear flooded his body at the thought of eating in front of the two men.

It scared him a little bit, how fast the disordered thoughts had taken root in his head. It had barely been two months since they first started up again, slow and insidious at first. The odd critical comment, absently choosing low-calorie foods, virtually meaningless behaviour had turned into full blown restriction in a matter of weeks, and now even an eighth of the food he should be eating in a day was way too much. His mind raced to come up with a way of getting out of the meal before eventually conceding there was none; at least not one that wouldn't make his fellow Avengers suspicious. Cons of hanging out with literal geniuses, Peter thought wryly.

Tony watched Peter carefully as they made their way upstairs from the lab. The kid had gone quiet when he’d mentioned dinner with Bruce, and he really did look exhausted. The bags under his eyes almost looked like bruises, and he was holding himself stiffly, like it hurt to move too quickly. He wondered if he’d done himself more damage than he let on when he hit that building earlier, and made a mental note to get KAREN to check out any injuries when he next put the suit on.
The elevator doors sliding smoothly open caught his attention though, and Tony grinned broadly as Bruce strode out of them, shoulders slightly hunched as he glanced around, habitually scoping the place out. It had been months since they’d last needed to break out the Other Guy, but Bruce still peered around every corner like he was afraid something would make him lose control. He smiled when he saw Tony and Peter cross the hallway towards him though, greeting them both with careful hugs.

Peter stiffened a little at his touch, suddenly paranoid about the amount of weight he’d dropped since they’d last met, knowing it would be more noticeable to Bruce than to those who saw him every day.

“Long time no see, kiddo!” The man had been in Oslo for the past month on some kind of science-y mission than no-one quite knew the details of. He looked pale, but otherwise more content than Peter remembered seeing him in a long time. Pulling away, Bruce cocked his head a little at Peter, opening his mouth as if he was going to say something. Automatically the kid launched into distraction mode.

“Dr Banner!! We really missed you, I’m okay at biology but I could totally use your help with some of the biomechanics of my suit - did you know we figured out I’m like 3% spider now?? - anyway we gotta find a way to make the fingers more sensitive - you know for climbing up walls and stuff - but every time we do that it gets like, way harder to stop it tearing…” Bruce shot a slightly bemused look at Tony over the kid’s head, who shrugged back. Peter chattered on as they walked to the kitchen and Bruce started pulling out various pots and pans.

In spite of himself, he’d never been able to resist a challenge, so Bruce shelved the slightly weird energy he’d gotten from the spiderling, reminding himself to speak to Tony later as he focused on what Peter was saying. Gradually, Peter relaxed as well, genuinely enjoying batting ideas back and forth with the two scientists, almost forgetting about the imminent prospect of dinner.

Still, he swallowed hard when the oven timer dinged, voice faltering as Bruce stooped to pull the dish out and set it on the table.

Glancing at the kid’s face as Bruce bustled around the table, Tony paused. The kid had gone white as a sheet, staring blankly. He swayed a little, and Tony reached out an arm to steady him in alarm. Peter flinched away from the touch and something cold twisted in Tony’s stomach. He let go immediately, and it took a moment for him to be able to speak around the tightening in his throat.

“Kid? You with us?” Bruce glanced up at the same second as Peter seemed to snap back into himself, physically shaking his head as if to clear it and dialling his smile back up to 100.
“Huh? Yeah, sorry, just.. tired, I guess.” Internally his heart was racing, and he was briefly thankful he was the only one around with enhanced hearing. Bruce and Tony shared another look. This time Peter caught it and forced himself to take a deep breath, grabbing a plate with forced gusto and scooping pasta onto his plate.

“This looks awesome, thanks Bruce!”

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Peter had disappeared as soon as they’d finished clearing up, practically running out the door, hurling promises about getting an early night over his shoulder. As soon as he was out of earshot, Bruce turned to Tony, expression a question mark.

“Is something going on with him? He seemed… off.” Tony’s gaze stayed fixed on where the kid had disappeared around the corner for a moment before he turned to face his friend, rubbing his lower lip, deep in thought. It wasn’t at all like Peter to hold things back, but it was very like him to hide whatever he perceived as a weakness, and for a moment back there he’d thought the kid was going to collapse. Blowing out a long breath, he shrugged again.

“He hasn't told me anything, but you're right, something’s up. Maybe school? I know he has exams this year.” Bruce raised his eyebrows, unconvinced. Peter was practically family, and they both knew he had far too good a head on his shoulders to stress himself out over a few tests.

“He’s a bright kid, he’ll walk those exams. He looks sick.” Tony nodded, massaging the back of his next. He could feel a tension headache coming on. A pang of guilt shot through him. He’d been busy lately and tonight was the first time in a while he’d done something with the kid that wasn’t hunch over some project in the lab. Not that Peter would have dreamed of objecting, but still. What kind of example was he setting, spending every waking moment on work?

“I know. I’ll get KAREN to run some tests next time he’s Spider-ing. He hasn’t been himself since…” Bruce was already nodding, forehead creased. Peter had put on a brave face, but the truth was that May’s death had destroyed him - he was better than he had been, but there was a seriousness about him that hadn’t been there before.

“Anniversary’s coming up, isn’t it? That can be a rough period.” Tony’s lips pulled down at the corners, and he nodded wordlessly again, sighing.
“He’ll be okay Tony. He’s lucky to have you in his corner.” The inventor gave him a grateful smile, leaning back tiredly.

“Who’d have kids, huh?”

****

Peter barely held it together for the time it took him to flee Stark tower, all too aware that if he so much as broke down in the elevator FRIDAY would be sure to feed it back to Tony. Instead, he pushed open the glass doors and hurtled down the pavement, breath heaving in his chest. Only his superhuman reflexes saved him from being squished flat in the heavy New York traffic as he made his way back to his apartment, gasps turning to sobs as he collapsed through the front door.

He virtually crawled to the bathroom, grasping his penknife with still-shaking fingers and forcing up the sleeve of his shirt. Panic made him clumsy, and he carved thick lines across his wrist, one after another until the blood spilt like wine across the floor. Only when he ran out of space on his left forearm did he stop, sitting heavily against the wall and hunching forwards, careless of the scarlet that soaked into his clothes. He pulled his legs to his chest and leant his forehead on his knees, crying so hard he couldn't breathe.

Some rational part of his brain watched from a distance, horrified that things had gotten to this stage without him taking more conscious note of it. The fact that things had gotten bad again - might even have gotten as bad as they'd ever been - was undeniable. He barely registered this though, desperately trying to draw in enough oxygen, hyperventilating so fast he felt sick.

The nausea crept up his throat so suddenly he almost didn’t have time to twist sideways and bend over the toilet bowl before he was retching violently, bile burning up the back of his throat. He coughed weakly, spitting and choking on tears before sinking forwards on his knees and letting out a whining breath. Shocked out of his hysteria, Peter gasped for air, resting his forehead on his arm and closing his eyes. He tried and failed not to be relieved that he’d thrown up the only square meal he’d had that day. Gradually, his breathing steadied and his taught muscles relaxed, the world fading away around him.

He woke with a cry, jerking backwards and wincing as his legs cramped. Stretching them out in front of him, he ran a hand through his hair. He didn’t remember falling asleep but supposed he must have, given that the bathroom had darkened around him. Oddly shaped stains marred the floor, and Peter reluctantly pushed himself to his feet, stifling a yawn and flipping the light on.

“Shit.” The entire bathroom looked like the scene of a murder, and a quick glance down at the
clothes he was wearing gave away the would-be victim. Blood was smeared across the toilet bowl, pooled in the sink and on the floor. Even the walls hadn’t gotten away clean, a rusty brown handprint speaking volumes.

Stretching his arm gingerly out in front of him, Peter cringed. He wasn't naturally squeamish, but even to his untrained eye the cuts he’d made looked bad: deep and jagged and still oozing trickles of blood. He bit his lip, tears springing to his eyes again. He was suddenly, desperately lonely, longing to call someone to come and help him, hold him and fix him. Dashing away the pointless tears he took a deep breath and squared his jaw. He was Spiderman. He could deal with a little blood.

Stripping off his saturated t-shirt, he threw it in the sink and turned the cold water on, carefully rinsing out the bloodstains. It was remarkably effective, so he gave his trousers the same treatment before pulling a cloth and spray out the cupboard and scrubbing hard at the stains littering almost every surface. It was a full 20 minutes before the room looked vaguely useable again, clean but for a few stubborn spots where smudges of brown were still just visible.

The vigorous activity had reopened the cuts on his arm and the blood flowed more enthusiastically now. He held it close to his chest to avoid dripping more on the floor, padding wearily to the kitchen to find May’s old first aid kit. He kept it well stocked - because, Spiderman - and grabbed a bandage. Leaving that on the side of the sink he jumped in the cold shower, half smiling as the water ran pink below him. It wasn’t that he was proud of the cuts - it was just a refreshing change to have how he felt on the inside reflected on his brutalised arms.

Once he’d dried off and bandaged his arm, he shrugged carefully into his suit, glancing at the clock by his bed. Only 1am; he could fit in a few hours of patrol and still snatch a few hours of sleep before school.

KAREN greeted him with all the warmth an AI could muster as he pulled on the mask and swung out his window.

“Hello Peter.”

“Hey KAREN.” Peter glanced over his should before scaling the side of the building, perching lightly on the top and gazing out across the city, trying to put the evening out of his mind.

“Mister Stark has asked me for a report on your vitals. I can also see you have a number of injuries that require medical attention. Would you like me to contact-“ Peter’s eyes widened and he almost overbalanced, flailing wildly trying to cut the AI off.
“No!” he yelped, “don’t contact anyone! I’m fine, it was just… an accident… I don’t want to bother Mister uh Tony, it’s all good.” The AI was silent for a moment and Peter got the uncanny feeling that she knew more than he was telling her, ridiculous as the thought seemed.

“Okay Peter. Would you like me to send the report on your vitals excluding your injuries?” Peter pulled a face.

“I don’t suppose you can just… not send a report?”

“In accordance with the Baby Monitor protocol, I am afraid I cannot disobey a direct request from Mister Stark.”

Peter swore under his breath.

“Fine, okay, go ahead.”

****

The cuts were still raw the next day, and Peter wrapped a hasty new bandage around them before he left, intentionally wearing a bulky jumper to hide the shape beneath his sleeves. The school day dragged, especially with MJ still sick at home, and by the time he trudged out the school gates Peter’s head was spinning in earnest. His injuries throbbed, and even the ugly scab across his forehead was little better than it had been yesterday.

He’d eaten a granola bar at lunch to keep Ned happy, but it had done little to satiate the gnawing emptiness in the pit of his concave stomach. On top of that, a large part of him was dreading seeing Tony after KAREN’s report yesterday. She might have kept the worst of it from him, but Peter knew his vitals wouldn't exactly be normal right now. She might even have been programmed with a means of weighing him, and that really would be disastrous. Peter cursed himself for not asking for a copy of the report so he could at least walk in prepared. As it was, potential excuses flittered anxiously around his brain, desperately trying to cover every potential eventuality.

He was so distracted he almost forgot to greet Happy at all, barely managing a half-hearted ‘hello’ before lapsing into a troubled silence for the rest of the journey, fidgeting with the fraying edges of his sleeves. Tony’s bodyguard shot him a sidelong look as they pulled up to the tower.
“Hang on a minute kid,” he started as Peter went to open the car door, waiting for the boy to turn to face him before continuing, “you know you can text me, right? If there’s ever something wrong, or you need anything. Just text me.”

Peter looked genuinely surprised at the offer, a smile breaking through the tiredness etched into his face. “Thanks Happy.”

FRIDAY greeted him as usual as he entered.

“Mister Stark is currently in a meeting. He says to wait for him in the training room.” Peter raised an eyebrow. When was Tony not in a meeting? He was confused about the training room part too before he remembered Tony’s promise that they could try out his new webs today. A glimmer of excitement stirred in his stomach. He’d used the old ones last night without incident, but it would be ace if he could surprise the next bad guy who tried to slice through one.

“Cool, thanks FRIDAY!” He answered brightly as he hopped into the elevator. He strapped the new web shooters to his wrists without bothering to change into the full suit; there was no one who had access to this room who didn’t already know his identity anyway.

The training room was roughly the size of a large sports hall; there were more impressive ones in the Avengers compound upstate, but the Avengers liked to use this one for lighter training when they had the time. Large metal beams laced across the roof, designed with Clint’s rafter-dwelling habits in mind, and with the press of a button huge rectangular structures emerged from the floor, simulating rooftops.

Peter hit this button now, taking a brief run up before launching himself at the closest block, clinging to it with his bare fingertips and racing upwards. Shooting a web at one of the ceiling rafters he winged a quick prayer to the formula gods before throwing himself from his perch, 50 feet off the ground. Thankfully, the web caught him easily, just the right amount of give in the rope to swing him easily to the next block.

Laughing aloud, he hurled himself up and sideways again, webs catching him and swinging him around the room; the formula served his basics purpose, though he wouldn’t know how effective it really was before Tony could help him try and cut it. Out of breath more quickly than usual, Peter swung himself to the top of the tallest block and leapt for the rafters, catching hold and pulling himself up with more effort than he expected.

He started so hard he almost lost his balance to see Clint lazing casually across a beam, watching him with some amusement.
“New toy?” Peter grinned, holding out the web shooters for better inspection.

“New formula, so they can’t cut my webs.” Clint feigned an outraged gasp.

“They cut your webs? Wow, dick move. That feels like cheating.”

“Totally cheating!!” Peter clambered to his feet, intending to head over to where Clint was, but as he did so, his smile faltered. The dizziness he’d just about kept at bay all day intensified nauseatingly, blackness suddenly creeping into the corners of his vision. He stumbled a step, grabbing for another horizontal beam and leaning heavily on it.

Clint sprang to his feet, face tightening.

“Pete? You okay buddy?” He couldn't keep the urgency out of his voice as the kid swayed where he stood, gaze suddenly unfocused. He stayed on his feet for the beat it took Clint to start running towards him, skipping over beams like they weren't 50 feet off the ground, before pitching forwards and tumbling towards the ground.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you're liking the story - thank you for reading this far!! I'm trying to update every day at the moment (neglecting my responsibilities to write fic as a coping mechanism has gotten me this far). Please do comment and lmk what I can do better/what you liked/what you hated, love me, curse me, roast me and know I adore you for it all the same <3

Hopefully things will start getting better for Peter soon.... but probably not in the next chapter...
Collateral Damage

Chapter Summary

Peter isn't ready to accept that he needs help

For some reason I was really feeling the song 'Runaway Train' by Soul Asylum while I was writing this

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Oh shit.”

Clint’s heart skipped a beat as the kid fell, making no effort to save himself. There was no way he would reach him in time to grab him from here. Without thinking about it, Clint strung a grappler arrow to his bow and dived forwards, twisting around to fire upwards as he fell. For an agonising second he thought he was going to be too late, but the tips of his fingers just managed to catch hold of the back of the kid’s hoodie, and he pulled him close to his chest.

The rope holding them both pulled taught with a teeth-jarring jerk, and Clint wrapped his arms tight around Peter and squeezed his eyes shut as it swung them towards one of the giant metal blocks. The impact knocked the wind out of him, and he was glad of the shock-absorbers he’d reluctantly let Stark build into his vest. Groaning, he opened his eyes to see that they were suspended a mere two feet off the ground. Reaching awkwardly around Peter he slashed the rope holding them up, landing on two feet with a grunt and lowering them both to the ground.

He blanched a little as he got a closer look at the kid. His face was so pale it was almost grey, and his cheekbones stood out sharply above sunken cheeks. A gnarly bruise complemented a scabbing cut on his forehead, standing out starkly against his skin. He was thin, as well, and Clint could feel the outlines of Peter’s ribs even through the bulky sweater he had on. Pushing up the kid’s sleeve to get to the pulse in his wrist, Clint hesitated as his fingers brushed gauze, eyes flicking worriedly back to his face.

“Pete, you with me?” The unconscious boy made no response, and Clint was suddenly, painfully reminded how achingly young he was. He tapped the side of his face, relieved to find his pulse steady under his other hand, if a little slow.

“Come on Spider boy, nap time’s over.” As if he’d heard him, Peter’s eyes blinked open, squinting in the sudden brightness. Clint breathed out a heavy sigh, unable to keep his relief from his face.
“Jesus kid. Next time you feel like taking a rooftop swan dive, you gotta give a guy some warning, okay?” Peter’s wide eyes found his face, before taking in their new surroundings.

“What happened? Did I fall?” Clint raised an eyebrow.

“Spectacularly. It looked like you fainted.” Clint didn’t miss the recognition that flashed across the kid’s face, for all that Peter quickly schooled it away, feigning surprise.

“Oh crap, I’m sorry! How did you….” He spotted the grapple still dangling from the ceiling and trailed off, taking in how much worse could have been with a thrill of shock. He opened his mouth to speak again, but Clint interrupted.

“Has this happened before?” Peter started a little, shifting uncomfortably and biting his lip. He hadn’t collapsed quite so amazingly in a long time, but the dizziness had made him stumble more than once in the last few weeks.

“I’m fine.” He muttered, studiously avoiding the archer’s gaze as he tried to sit up. Clint put a hand on his back, helping him lean against the block behind them and sitting cross-legged opposite, keeping his eyes on the kid’s face.

“Yeah, I’m getting that.” Peter stayed stubbornly silent and Clint sighed again, running a hand through his hair.

“Kid, if something’s wrong-“ Peter cut him off, suddenly defensive.

“It’s nothing! I just forgot to eat today, that’s all.” Clint watched him, wordlessly, for a moment before nodding in resignation and leaning back a little.

“Okay. I believe you.” It didn’t take Peter’s spidey senses to guess that the man was lying, and he cursed internally. Of all the Avengers, Clint and Natasha were easily the hardest to shake when they were looking for information, and he didn’t really want to be courting their attention right now.

At that moment, FRIDAY’s voice sounded from above them.
“Mister Stark’s meeting has finished. He will be here shortly.”

Peter’s eyes widened in alarm and he was on his feet so fast Clint almost got whiplash, glancing around wildly for anything that would give away what had just happened. He turned back to the archer, who climbed to his feet with a groan, rubbing the spot where his side had slammed into the wall.

“You don’t want me to tell him.” Clint guessed before Peter had the chance to open his mouth.

“I don’t want to stress him out, he’s so busy right now, please Clint.” The request sat ill with Hawkeye, who eyed Peter reluctantly. He was 99% sure something was up, and if anyone was equipped to throw resources at a problem until it went away, Tony was. Then again, the man did have the tendency to freak out when it came to Peter.

“You promise me you're going to look after yourself and not make me regret it?”

“I promise! For sure, I promise.” Peter was practically vibrating with nerves and Clint pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Okay. So long as you eat something right now, before you do any more training.” He didn’t miss the flicker of apprehension that crossed the kid’s face at the request, before Peter flashed him a billion watt grin.

“Sure, FRIDAY could you-” Before he could even finish the sentence, a small panel in the wall swung open, revealing a secret cupboard full of energy bars, drinks and even tiny gummy sweets. Peter pursed his lips for a moment, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. He made a mental note to pick a fight with Tony about whether or not there was such a thing as ‘too convenient’.

Clint made no pretence at keeping the smirk off his face, reaching into the cupboard and tossing Peter a bar, trying to hide how closely he was watching as the kid unwrapped it and took a hesitant bite. He pulled a face, chewing carefully as if Clint had asked him to test the thing for poison. A hint of dread knotted itself in Clint’s stomach as he watched the kid eat, so slowly and painfully he might as well have been swallowing broken glass.

“Better?” He asked casually once he was done. The kid, if anything, was even paler than before, swallowing hard before he answered.
“Oh, yeah, much, thanks Clint.” Even the faked enthusiasm was pitiful, and Clint was already wishing he hadn’t promised not to tell Tony about the fainting episode. He resolved to give it a week; if the kid looked worse, or if Clint found proof of his suspicions, he’d go to Nat. She’d know what to do.

“No problem. And kid - if there’s anything you need,” he pointed to the rafters, “you know where to find me.” Peter nodded and smiled back at him, though there was something sad in the expression. He didn’t get a chance to press him though, as Tony strode through the doors to the gym.

“Legolas! I see SHIELD is still recruiting teenagers.” Clint bit back a retort, knowing better than to point out that Tony himself had been the one to recruit Peter in the first place; now that the billionaire had grown a little more of a conscience it was a sore spot of his.

“Nice to see you too Stark.” He replied as Tony wrapped a protective arm around Peter. The billionaire was a little wary of Clint Barton, especially given his ties to Coulson and SHIELD, all too aware that if ever they were forced again to pick sides, Clint wouldn't necessarily pick his.

Tony was carrying an impressive, ceremonial-looking sword, and Clint exaggeratedly edged around it as he headed to the door.

“Play nicely!” He called over his shoulder.

****

Once he’d started Peter off on some basic drills, designed to test the both the strength and elasticity of the new web formula, Tony slipped on a pair of enhanced sunglasses to get a better look at the kid. The report KAREN had sent him yesterday had been on his mind all night. According to his suit’s AI, Peter’s heart rate, blood pressure and body temperature were all lower than usual, and he was quietly desperate to get a full analysis of his blood to start ruling things out.

He was trying to contrive a reason to get the kid to step on a scale though; FRIDAY’s estimate of Peter’s body weight based on KAREN’s data had been impossibly low, and there was no way Peter could have lost that much weight so quickly. Especially given that the kid hadn’t so much as had a cold in months.

It troubled him that KAREN hadn’t sent over the injury report he’d suggested as well - the only
reason she would have omitted it would be if she’d been asked to. He knew, rationally, that Peter was entitled to some privacy, but he didn’t like the idea that he could be hiding something serious. Hence the sunglasses. FRIDAY’s voice greeted him quietly as he adjusted them, letting the miniature cameras in them lock onto Peter.

“Okay, FRI, let’s just do a quick movement scan for injuries.” He murmured under his breath, all too aware that the kid’s enhanced hearing would tip him off to what was going on if he spoke any louder. It took a full nail-biting minute before the AI returned the analysis, and Tony was unpleasantly reminded of the sensation of awaiting test results in school. To the untrained eye, Peter’s deft motions appeared perfectly normal. FRIDAY returned a different verdict.

“Peter Parker appears to be favouring his right arm heavily. Movement range is restricted across his left side. This may indicate moderate injuries to the ribs and forearm. Overall muscle strength is at 60%.”

Tony drew in a sharp breath and pulled off the glasses, brow furrowing. If FRIDAY’s readings were accurate, which they were, Peter was hiding more than just a few injuries. The kid glanced his way, attention drawn by his gasp, and Tony noted that the cut on his forehead still hadn’t even begun to heal. He felt his own heart pick up. Something was seriously wrong.

“Come over here for a second, kid.” He kept his tone as nonchalant as he could, shoving his hands in his pockets and leaning against the wall, taking a deep breath to steady himself. Peter was at his side in an instant, barely out of breath, though his eyes flicked nervously over Tony’s face for a moment, all too aware that he would have read KAREN’s report by now. The look on Tony’s face confirmed his fears, and he fought the urge to run again.

“Did I do that right? Do you want me to try something else? I think the webs are working pretty well so far, and it’s good that the sword couldn't cut them earlier-“

“Peter,” Tony interrupted him suddenly, looking as serious as the kid had ever seen him, “what’s going on with you? Your vitals are all over the place, and now FRIDAY tells me you're hurt and you're not healing… what’s happening, kid?” Lines of worry creased around the man’s eyes and marred his forehead, and he pressed a hand to his chest, as if doing so could ease the tightness in it.

For a second Peter stood stock still, what little colour there was in his face draining from it. He couldn't stand to see the pain on Tony’s face, the malicious voice in his head screaming full tilt at him. This is what you do to people! You make them care and you break them! You're no better than Skip. His head ached fiercely, and he still wasn’t completely convinced he wasn’t about to throw up. A part of him wished Clint had just let him go splat.
Peter shrugged helplessly, suddenly fighting tears. How could he explain to Tony what was happening in his head? He could barely even explain it to himself. It only felt like somehow, years ago, one evil man had carved a self-destruct code into his head. In doing what he had done to Peter, Skip had made him into a ticking time bomb. Uncle Ben, Aunt May, everything he saw on the streets every night - all of it had only accelerated the countdown and now he was set to implode.

Tony’s face creased, and he stepped closer to Peter, touching his arm gently. The kid flinched like Tony had kicked him, enhanced senses making his entire body feel like a raw nerve at even the thought of Skip. As he stepped away, raising his hands as if talking to a startled animal, Tony remembered he’d had the same reaction at dinner yesterday. It was a symptom he’d recognised in himself for months after Afghanistan.

“It’s okay, you're okay,” he held Peter’s frantic gaze with a calm he didn’t feel, “you’re totally safe here.”

Peter could feel the panic constricting his chest already, suddenly desperate to get out of that room, out the building, out of the whole fucking city. Spiderman had saved his life, but it had also damned him; there could be no breaks, no doing things by halves, when every night lives were at stake. He couldn't stop and he couldn't rest and now Tony would make him stop doing the only things that made the guilt bearable.

“I can’t do this.” His voice cracked, and his lungs ached sharply at the lack of oxygen as he fought to draw in air that suddenly felt thicker than usual, like inhaling soup. Tony fought the urge to step closer.

“Breathe, Peter, breathe with me.” He did his best to keep the urgency from his voice, half-afraid the kid was about to pass out on him. How had he not known the kid was getting panic attacks?

Peter was shaking his head, backing away.

“You don’t understand, I can’t-“ a sob choked out his throat, and he pressed his face into his hands, doubling up. Tony watched in dismay, stepping closer again, desperate to comfort the kid, lost as to how.

“Peter-”

“Leave me alone, Tony!” The shout echoed off the walls, the silence shattered only by Peter’s
ragged breathing. Straightening, he backed away again, trembling violently. When he spoke again, he looked Tony dead in the eye, his voice hoarse.

“Don’t follow me.”

For the second time in as many days Peter fled Stark tower.

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Chapter End Notes

Pretty sure Peter might be about to hit rock bottom, poor baby
Nothing bad is going to happen

Chapter Summary

Peter is on his own - the question is, how long can he sustain that?

Anyone else feel like he's about 2,000 words away from hitting rock bottom?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Peter didn’t remember how he got back to his apartment, or how he ended up sitting on the kitchen floor covered in blood again. He could piece it together - the discarded kitchen knife, the cuts on his arms - but as far as memory itself went, he drew a blank. It wasn’t the first time something like that had happened. The psychiatrist he’d seen in 6th grade had called it dissociation - that process of disappearing from himself completely, losing time, coming back to a different place than he'd left. It had gotten less terrifying, but it sure as hell hadn’t gotten easier.

His legs were stiff as he unfolded them, and a glance at his phone told him why; it was four full hours since he’d left Tony standing there, shell shocked in the gym hall. He closed his eyes against the memory, guilt like a stone in his stomach. He’d loved being a part of the Avengers, loved the team, loved Tony, and that was exactly why he had to give them up.

It had come down to them or Spiderman, and the people of Queens needed him a hell of a lot more than the Avengers did. New York needed Spiderman, and Spiderman needed a way to cope, and if the Avengers took that away the whole thing would come crumbling down. The way Peter saw it, with his abilities, the people he didn’t save he was still responsible for. If Peter Parker had to die so that Spiderman could keep saving people a little longer, so be it.

Pushing himself shakily to his feet, he started to get ready for another patrol.

****

Peter could feel the chill of the night even through his suit as he crouched atop the Brooklyn bridge, watching the rush of the traffic below. He didn’t know what he weighed - May had never kept scales in the apartment - but he knew that even in the summery August air, he was freezing cold. That and the fact that he’d almost had his ass handed to him by a run-of-the-mill bank robber tipped him off that what he was doing probably wasn't going to be sustainable for all too much longer.
There was a kind of peace in that though, the idea that this would kill him sooner or later. The end in sight made it easier to get through nights like this one.

The energy bar Clint had forced him to choke down had long since burned out of his system, and his supercharged metabolism had all but run out of fuel. He could virtually feel it breaking down his muscles, desperate to keep the rest of him running at expense of less vital tissues. It made him weak, and his arms spasmed excruciatingly with every swing.

He was always busier in summer anyway, the long daylight hours meaning people stayed out longer, got drunker and stupider. Earlier, he’d narrowly avoided getting bottled as he was breaking up a particularly nasty fight outside one of the area’s more notorious bars.

His ears pricked up at the sound of whispered voices far below him in the nearby docks, and he dropped silently from his perch, leaping lightly from rooftop to rooftop, pausing as he reached one that overlooked a dark alleyway. A cluster of four men surrounded the back of a van, the contents of which were obscured from Peter’s view. His spider-senses warned him that whatever it was, he had reason to suspect it wasn’t exactly above-board.

Taking care to keep to the shadows, Peter crept down the side of the building, edging around to position himself behind the men before straightening and looking over their shoulders. Sleek, grey metal glinted from the back of the van; a range of weapons the Tony Stark of old would have been proud of.

“I don’t think you guys are supposed to have those.” Peter was ducking before the men had even turned around, sweeping the feet out from under the man who had swung a fist towards him. He crashed onto his back, swearing, and Peter webbed his still-outstretched hand to the van before jumping backwards. His buddies had been slower to react, but now Peter had lost the element of surprise, and they advanced menacingly on him. Two held wicked serrated knives, and Peter raised his eyebrows, cocking his head to one side.

“Wow those are, like, really illegal, you guys are totally going to jail.”

The man on his left lunged towards him and Peter leapt backwards again, the knife that would have opened his stomach slicing through thin air. Peter launched a kick at the man’s ribs, sending him crashing to the floor off balance as the unarmed man jumped at him, landing a stinging hit to his jaw that snapped his head around.

His vision darkened for a moment, and he relied on sheer reflex to hurl the man over his shoulder, where he landed gasping on his back. A single well-aimed kick to the temple had the man fall
limp; dirty fighting, but it had been four on one, and technically they’d started it.

The man he’d shoved over had scrambled back to his feet, and now the two with knives charged simultaneously, fury making them fierce. One man slashed at his face, and Peter blocked the blow with ease, deflecting the blade and parrying with a sharp jab to his stomach that had him double up. He was less fortunate with the other man, who landed a lucky hit that tore a vicious cut along his shoulder; not where he’d been aiming, but painful enough that Peter yelped aloud. Pissed off, he spun around and grabbed the man’s wrist with both hands, yanking in downwards so it snapped cleanly over his knee. The man screamed and dropped his weapon, staggering backwards into the van. Peter shot a web at his uninjured arm, sticking him where he was.

“Oh man I’m really sorry, that should heal fine though, just don’t move it.” His buddy had straightened up and now ran at Peter a third time, making such an event of aiming a kick at his ribs that Peter figured he could probably have run a lap of Brooklyn before the blow actually landed. Sidestepping easily, he grabbed the man’s foot and yanked it upwards, sending him crashing to the ground again and kicking the blade from his hand with just a smudge more force than necessary, resisting the urge to stamp on the man’s hand for good measure.

Picking him up by the collar, he pinned him against the side of the van, carefully webbing him to it, so tight he couldn't move, let alone breath. As he was doing so, his spider-senses suddenly exploded into life, practically making his hair stand on end. He dropped to the ground as a shot whistled over his head; the first man he’d webbed to the van had grabbed and loaded one of the illicit weapons whilst he was preoccupied. Peter cursed himself for missing him, rolling hastily under the van as he fired again, the bullet missing him by inches.

“I thought this was a knife fight? You brought a gun?” Pushing himself onto all fours, Peter lifted the entire weight of the van onto his back, the men he’d stuck to it yelling in alarm as he shifted it onto his shoulder and tipped it to one side, throwing the shooter off balance. His last shot went wide, scraping along the bottom of the van and showering Peter with shrapnel, before the van landed heavily on its side, sending the gun skittering from his fingers.

Peter pursed his lips as he webbed all four men thoroughly to the van, firing the gun four times into the air to call the police before discarding it in distaste. The men stared after him, swearing, as he disappeared back into the shadows.

Peter held it together for long enough to be out of sight, crawling his way up to the rooftop of a dusty warehouse before sitting heavily, exhaustedly pulling the mask away from his face. Serrated blades were illegal for a reason, and blood drenched the side of his suit from the jagged wound on his left shoulder. It wasn’t bad enough to need Bruce to take a look at it, he decided, gingerly stretching his arm out in front of him. He would need to sew up the suit though.
Of greater concern was the way his head was spinning, making the world lurch around him like a rollercoaster. A few months ago, he’d have been able to toss that van 100 yards without breaking a sweat. Tonight though, even barely lifting it off the ground had him shaking like a chihuahua. He groaned as the pitching of the floor below started to make him nauseous. He tolerated it for approximately ten seconds before rolling sideways and throwing up the contents of his stomach – mostly coffee and bile, he realised with some disgust.

A sharp pain lanced through his chest and he gasped aloud, pressing a hand to the pain, eyes widening. He was a smart kid; he knew what the consequences of prolonged starvation could be, he just thought he’d have more time. It had only been a couple of months since he’d properly started restricting, though he knew his metabolism made that the equivalent of an awful lot longer to a normal person.

The pain ebbed slowly and he lay on his back, breathing steadily, eyes shut, too tired to keep patrolling, or even to make it home to his apartment.

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Tony decided to give him a week, wary of pushing the kid further than he could handle. He’d looked close to breaking point that day in the gym room, and it didn’t take a genius to figure out that he needed a little breathing space, at least for a while. That didn’t mean he wasn’t going to keep an eye on him though. The kid was sick, or hurting, or something, and until Tony figured out what was going on, he had no plans whatsoever to leave the kid on his own.

The kid had done an annoyingly good job of dismantling the Baby Monitor protocol in his suit, so the best Tony had access to was his location, heart rate, and whether he was in imminent danger: in-built statuses he’d made it impossible to dismantle. The latter turned out to be a less helpful indicator than Tony had initially thought, as the thing sent him notifications practically every ten minutes when the kid was on patrol, sending his own heart rate skyrocketing every time his phone beeped.

Now, 5 days after he’d resolved to give the kid some space, he was beginning to realise what a deeply horrible idea that had been. The screen in front of him gave a live readout of Peter’s location, currently roaming around Manhattan, not far from the tower. He regretfully wished he’d added better encryption to the circuits containing the cameras he’d installed in the eyes of the suit; those had been one of the first to go when Peter had doctored his outfit almost a week ago.

The door to his lab suddenly swung open, making him jump so hard he almost fell out of his chair. Bruce raised both hands, approaching the inventor with some caution.
“I come in peace.” He pulled up a chair, studying the screen in front of them and shooting Tony a sideways glance.

“You know it’s 3am, right?” Tony nodded distractedly, fidgeting with some kind of robotic contraption he was half-heartedly fixing.

“Kid never fucking sleeps.” He muttered, draining a mug still half-full of a substance that looked more like mud than coffee. Bruce raised an eyebrow, deciding against pointedly speculating whether there was anyone around here he might have learnt that from.

“That doesn’t mean you can’t get some rest, Tony,” he kept his voice as soothing as he could make it, “you look like shit.” He added frankly. Tony was ignoring him, tapping at the screen. Peter’s heart rate had spiked a few minutes ago, and it was rapidly climbing to troubling levels.

“FRIDAY scan all social media and news footage, keyword: Spiderman.” He sat back, not really expecting much; he’d asked Friday to repeat the search at least a hundred times in the last week, and all he’d gotten for his trouble was the realisation that 99% of the super-kid’s work happened in the background. This time however, a grainy phone video, streaming live, filled the screen.

The two men leant forwards in unison. Spiderman - Peter - swung at a dizzying speed from one of New York’s hundreds of skyscrapers, letting go and flying through the air before landing on top of a stationary taxi and taking off, leaping from car to car. He was chasing a man almost three times his size who was holding what looked like a rocket launcher, sporadically turning to fire the thing at Peter.

Peter was more than holding his own though; what concerned the two men was the kid himself. The suit was designed to alter itself to fit snugly around Peter’s body, making him as streamlined as possible. Now though, it had the added effect of letting Tony and Bruce see for the first time just how much weight the kid had lost. The usually tight material was nearly baggy on his skeletal frame, stretched taught over his concave stomach, and Tony could practically count his ribs from where he sat.

“Jesus,” Bruce whispered, unable to tear his eyes away from the footage, “there’s nothing of him.” As they watched, Peter shot a web at the man he was pursuing, tripping him up for just long enough for the kid to slam into him at full speed, knocking them both flying. The person taping them jogged to get a closer look and for a second the footage was just of grubby pavement. When it refocused, Peter was back on his feet, crouched in a tight defensive position. The weapon was webbed far out of reach, attached to a nearby building, and the tall guy was sprawled on the pavement, feet neatly webbed together, staring up at the scrawny superhero in disbelief.
“Where did you even get a rocket launcher?” Peter was visibly out of breath as he stood over the man, and the right side of his suit was marred by scorch marks. The picture wasn’t good enough for Tony to be able to tell if he was bleeding or not, and a moment later, the sound of sirens drowned out whatever the man had responded. Peter glanced up, flashing a grin to the cameraman, who whooped appreciatively as he turned and fled, flinging himself up the nearest building before disappearing out of shot.

The footage cut out shortly after, and the silent that replaced suddenly made the lab feel claustrophobic. Tony pressed the palm of his hand flat against his chest and stood, pacing around the lab, trying and failing to get his rapid breathing under control.

“FRIDAY, where is he?” The man’s voice was short and strangled, and Bruce stood with him, face creasing in concern as he recognised the beginnings of a panic attack.

“5 blocks west of here boss.” Tony nodded, crossing his arms over his chest as if trying to physically hold himself together.

“Is he okay?” His voice cracked as he asked the question, and he pressed a trembling hand to his lips.

“I’m afraid my access to KAREN has been revoked beyond the basics; I am unable to produce an injury report. However, based on the damage to his suit, it is likely that Mr Parker sustained moderate to severe burns.”

Tony went so white that Bruce grabbed his arm, lowering him carefully to a chair as his legs gave out and crouching in front of him.

“Tony, listen to me. I’m going to get one of the others to go and find him, okay? They can go, see if he’s okay, and bring him back here if he’s not.”

Tony shook his head numbly, leaning forwards to put his head in his hands, fighting to slow his breathing.

“He doesn’t- doesn’t want to come here.” Bruce glanced away briefly, running a hand through his hair and wetting his lips, a pained smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.
“He might be Spiderman, but you think he can out-fight Clint and Natasha on a mission, in his state? They’ll get him back.” Tony didn’t reply, and Bruce leant forwards to get a better look at his face, brows pulling together as he realised the man was on the verge of tears. He couldn’t remember every seeing him cry before - was pretty sure he’d have had his tear ducts surgically removed if he could - and the sight was jarring.

“Tony? Deep breaths pal. We’ll keep him safe. I promise you. I swear to you, no-one on this team will let anything bad happen to Peter.”

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Chapter End Notes

Another little cliffhanger for you!! Sorry this update was a little later than usual - I'm sort of trying to write my dissertation at the same time and my supervisor wouldn't let me hand in an extract of this instead...

To give a cryptic warning - I have a feeling everyone in this chapter may have misjudged their own limitations....

Normal service should resume shortly! I'm gonna be updating as often as humanly possible, the obsession is real.
Thank you so so much for all your love and comments, keep them coming! I adore hearing from you <3333

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!