Midtown High PTSD

by MsBrooklyn

Summary

Helicopter parents have nothing on the Avengers' version of Quinjet Parenting. The After-School Avengers are caught in the middle of a 'civil war' unlike anything you've ever seen. Will the NYC public school system survive?

Chapter sneak peaks available on my MsBrooklynfanfic Tumblr site. Feel free to visit me there!
“Let’s go over the plan again.”

Aunt May pats Barnes’ arm and smiles gently up at him. “The plan is simple, Bucky,” she says. “I meet with Tommy’s teachers, you meet with Peter’s and then we discuss everything over coffee before we go home so that we’re in agreement on any changes.”

“Let’s at least synchronize —“

“Our phones are synchronized to the nuclear clock, according to Peter.”

“Atomic clock,” Barnes corrects her but considering what they may learn during this particular parent-teacher conference night, they may indeed be synchronized to the nuclear doomsday clock. “And I was about to suggest synchronizing alarms so we can meet up —“

“No. These meetings are important,” Aunt May says firmly. “They should take however long they need to take for you to get information from Peter’s teachers. The point is to know if he’s devoting enough time to school work instead of… you know.”

“But what if one of us is waiting —?”

“Then we wait and if it’s taking too long, send a text. Honestly, Bucky, it’s just a few meetings, not a military campaign.” She smiles at him again. “You’ll be fine. Stop worrying.”

Barnes supposes he should stop worrying but Aunt May is putting so much faith in him that it’s making him a little nervous. Training Petey, making sure the kid eats properly and does his homework is one thing, this is a whole other level. This is parent level shit, meeting with his teachers and talking to them…with most of them knowing that Petey is Spider-Man and that Barnes is…. Oy. Forget it. He’ll stop being nervous when parent-teacher conference night is over and done with.

“All right, soldier,” Aunt May says teasingly. “March on in there and go conference.”

With a sigh, Barnes leads the way into Midtown High and follows Aunt May to the desk where a woman that Barnes clocks as a low-level threat only because she has a stapler is handing out pages that list each teacher and the room where they’re meeting with parents. Barnes scans the list, memorizes the places he’ll need to be and stuffs it into his pocket.

“You can do this,” Aunt May tells him.
“I can do this,” Barnes repeats dutifully. His confidence lasts a full half second before Dean Reynolds finishes his conversation with another mother and comes striding over. Barnes braces himself.

“Mrs. Parker,” Dean Reynolds says, shaking her hand. “How nice to see you again. Would you mind if I steal Sergeant Reilly for a moment?”

“Of course not.” May pats Barnes’ arm again. “I’ll catch up with you later, sweetheart.”

“But the schedule —,” Barnes attempts, pointing at his watch but she’s already making her escape, leaving Barnes to deal with whatever mess the kids made this time that he doesn’t know about.

“Come into my office.” Reynolds beckons him and Barnes has no choice but to follow. The office has been tidied up for parent-teacher night and the desk in Reynolds’ office is missing its usual stack of files. Reynolds sits and gestures for Barnes to do the same.

Barnes considers the tactical disadvantages, decides he can handle them and sits.

Reynolds leans forward and when he speaks, it’s in a hushed tone. “What I’m about to tell you is highly confidential.”

Barnes waits but it’s obvious Reynolds is dragging out the drama of his big reveal. He resists the urge to roll his eyes and leans forward too.

“Based on outstanding academic performance and our eighty-seven point eight percent rate of graduation, the Department of Education is considering making us a magnet school,” Reynolds says, beaming. He looks expectantly at Barnes.

Barnes stares blankly at him. He has no idea what a magnet school is and he hopes like hell it has nothing to do with Magneto.

Reynolds’ smile falters. “Magnet schools are for high achieving students like Peter and they focus on STEM subjects —“

“Science, technology, engineering and math,” Barnes says. He’s read about those kinds of schools and wondered how to get Petey into one.

“That’s right,” Reynolds says, his smile returning. “The proposed curriculum for Midtown would include those, international baccalaureate programs and more that are designed to get our students into the best colleges.”

There’s a catch coming. He hopes Reynolds isn’t going to ask him to intimidate or kill anybody.

“We’re under a lot of scrutiny, Sergeant Ba —“

“Reilly,” Barnes corrects him. “And I have no control over Petey’s…grandfather.”

“Understood,” Reynolds says, waving him off. “What I’m asking is something completely different. You see, most of the parents work full time and as much as they’d like to be involved with the school, they just aren’t able. You, on the other hand, are very involved. I’d like to you to join the parent-teachers association.”

Barnes’ mouth drops open. “What?”

“In fact, I’d like you to lead it.”
“But —“

“The president resigned last month and nobody’s volunteered to take her place so I’m volunteering you, Sergeant Barnes.” Reynolds reaches into his desk, pulls out a file folder and hands it to Barnes. “These are copies of the minutes from all of the meetings so far this year and the next meeting is scheduled for next Tuesday at seven p.m.”

“But —“

“Welcome to the PTA, Sergeant Barnes.”

“Reilly,” Barnes says weakly.

“Whatever.” Reynolds stands up, brushes past Barnes and opens the door to signal that their meeting is over. “I have absolute faith that you’re going to make sure we have a quorum. Good luck with Peter’s teachers tonight.”

Barnes steps out into the hall. He’s not sure what the hell just happened but he’s pretty sure it has everything to do with the Ol’ Parker Luck.

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Barnes’ first stop is on the fourth floor, the office down the hall from the gym that he put out of commission with a grenade when he first came to Peter’s rescue. There are construction permits taped to the wall outside of the gym, a sign that the HYDRA money that Barnes donated to the school is being spent as intended. Then again, a functioning gym is probably necessary to get that magnet certification, he figures.

Unlike the other classrooms or offices, nobody is waiting to see Mr. Wilson, Petey’s gym teacher. Wilson is taking advantage of the lack of interest, his attention focused on whatever he’s watching on his tablet.

Barnes knocks and Wilson nearly drops the tablet.

“Bathroom’s down the hall to your left,” Wilson says in an attempt to recover his dignity.

“Thanks,” Barnes says, “but I’m here to see you.”

Wilson leans back in his chair, eyeing Barnes with interest now. “Which student?”

“Peter Parker.” Barnes grabs the guest chair, spins it around, drops into it and rests his forearms on the chair’s back. “You gave him a 75. I wanna know how we can get that grade up so it doesn’t kill
“Parker earned that 75 and I was being generous,” Wilson says. “He’s not trying. You want him to get a better grade, he’s gotta try.”

“Give me an example of what you mean by try.”

Wilson blows out a sigh. “The Captain America Fitness Test is coming up in three weeks —“

“The what!”? Barnes stares at him.

“The Captain America Fitness Test,” Wilson repeats. “Been around since the late sixties because kids were getting fat and lazy. Some genius in Congress thought it would get kids interested if they named it after Captain America. Also, he was dead so they could use his name and not have to pay for it. Here.” He opens his desk drawer, rummages around and pulls out a battered pamphlet with Steve’s picture. “This is what they expect kids to do.”

Barnes looks at the list of exercises and the standards for each. “Did these geniuses realize that Stevie wouldn’t have been able to pass this test when he was in high school?”

“Did they realize most of the kids weren’t gonna be able to pass? Or that they’d be humiliated in front of their classmates? Or that it’s a total pain in the ass to do every year?” Wilson screws up his face and makes a disgusted noise. “It was put together by a bunch of bureaucrats who decided ketchup was a vegetable so you tell me if they gave a crap whether Captain America could do any of this stuff.”

“They said what about ketchup?” Barnes asks in disbelief.

“Look,” Wilson says, “if Parker can do two of these, I’ll bump him up to an 80. If he can do four, he gets an 85. Fair enough?”

“Deal,” Barnes agrees and they shake on it. Just as he’s about to get up, Wilson clears his throat and reaches into his desk again and slides what looks like a baseball card across to Barnes.

“Could you get his autograph?”

Barnes picks up the card and cringes inwardly when he sees it’s a Captain America trading card. The picture on the front is a godawful publicity still that must have been taken during Steve’s USO tour and the back has a bunch of half-truths masquerading as his biography.

“I’m a big fan,” Wilson adds, his voice hopeful.

“I get his autograph and Petey does four, he gets a 90.”

“Done.”

Barnes tucks the card carefully into his jacket and hopes he can still forge Steve's signature.
The next three meetings with Petey’s history, English and Spanish teachers are pretty much a carbon copy of each other. Petey’s a good kid, usually prepared, grades are top notch and keep up the good work. If they know who Petey and Barnes really are, they’re too tactful to mention it. It’s enough to lull Barnes into a sense of confidence that the rest of the meetings are going to go smoothly too.

Naturally, it all goes to shit with Peter’s math teacher.

Mr. Harrington is in his early thirties, bearded and appears harmless. That is, until he speaks. “Peter’s really disappointed me.”

“Excuse me?” Barnes has to fight not to glare at the man.

“His grades are excellent, his class work is top notch,” Harrington tells him, “but he simply won’t consider rejoining the Midtown Mathletes.”

“The what?” Barnes repeats dumbly. He thinks he might understand what it is but he’s so thrown by the direction of the conversation that it’s just not making sense.

“Peter’s quit all of the extracurricular activities he was participating in,” Harrington explains. “The Mathletes are an especially important one. With Peter, we stand a very good chance of winning the nationals.”

“Okay.”

Harrington leans forward. “There’s a rumor that we’re being considered as a magnet school. Having a winning team would be a huge feather in our proverbial cap. Besides, Peter could win prizes like scholarship money and colleges look very favorably on academic extracurricular activities.”

“And he doesn’t want to do this?” Barnes says in disbelief, his mind already stuck on the ideas of scholarships and college applications.

“You won’t believe this,” Harrington tells him, “but some of the kids make fun of the Mathletes and it makes kids who’d otherwise join afraid of the social stigma.”

“Everyone already thinks Petey’s a nerd.”

Harrington shrugs and raises up both palms before adding, “There might be financial reasons. Dues is two hundred dollars. We use the money for team jackets, bus rentals —“

Barnes pulls out the roll of emergency cash he carries, peels off two hundred and hands it to Harrington. “Petey’s in.”

“I don’t suppose you could convince Mary Jane Watson’s mother —“

“MJ’s in too.” Barnes tosses another two hundred onto Harrington’s desk.

“Would they by any chance be interested in the Academic Excellence team too?” Harrington asks, eyes gleaming greedily. “Or maybe the Science team?”

Barnes tosses a wad of cash on Harrington’s desk. “They’re in everything.”

“Thank you, Mr. Reilly,” Harrington says, putting the cash into an envelope and arranging his face
into a hopeful expression. “I don’t suppose you’d consider chaperoning the teams during trips. We don’t have much in the way of parental support since most of the kids’ parents work full time —“

Barnes tosses him the rest of his money.

“I’ll e-mail you the schedule,” Harrington promises, reaching out to shake Barnes’ hand. “You’re in the school contact system, aren’t you?”

Barnes nods and starts to get up.

“Wait! Here’s Peter’s team t-shirt.” Harrington holds up a gold t-shirt with the school’s emblem and the words ‘Midtown Mathletes’ in the center. “Thank you again, Mr. Barnes. I’m sure the parents are going to feel a lot better knowing you’ll be there to keep the teams safe during their away competitions.”

Barnes considers telling him his name is Reilly but it’s a moot point.

He’s Bucky Barnes, Midtown High School Soldier now.

And that, he’s certain, is the Ol’ Parker Luck for sure.
“Would you stop pacing?” Tommy complains. “I’m the hyper one, not you. Besides, you’ve got nothing to worry about with your perfect grades. I’m the one who came home with a report card full of comments about not sitting still in class, not paying attention and possibly cheating on tests.”

“Did you cheat?” Peter asks, stopping his pacing to look in the refrigerator again. He still can’t decide if he’s hungry or not so he shuts the door and finds himself looking at an indignant Tommy.

“You know I didn’t! I just finished really fast but Mrs. Perez couldn’t believe I could finish that fast and get a perfect score since I never know what’s going on in class,” Tommy says angrily. “She’s so damn boring it’s no wonder I can’t pay attention for long. And what was I supposed to do, sit there doing nothing for the rest of the period?”

The word ‘yes’ is on the tip of Peter’s tongue but he knows it’s especially hard for Tommy. “Aunt May’ll straighten it all out. She’s good with teachers and you know she’s gonna protect you.”

Tommy’s face goes from indignant to slightly goofy. “Yeah, she’s great like that.”

“Yes, she is,” Peter agrees.

“If I were you I’d worry about Bucky.”

“What?”

“Bucky’s got a reputation over there.”

“No, he doesn’t.”

“Dude, he blew up the fourth floor gym,” Tommy insists. “That totally makes an impression.”

“So does your grandfather showing up in Dean Reynolds’ office!” Peter says hotly.

“He’s your grandfather too, pal,” Tommy says before adding with a smirk. “If I’m stuck with him, so are you. Sides, it could be worse. You could have Deadpool showing up at school and claiming he’s a relative.”

Peter shakes a finger at him. “Don’t even joke like that.”

“I bet Wolverine would do it if I asked him —“

“Shut up, Tommy!”

Naturally, that’s the moment Aunt May and Bucky walk in and Aunt May is quick to scold, “We don’t tell each other to shut up, Peter.”

Peter glares at Tommy.

Tommy smirks at him.
“So here’s how this is gonna go,” Bucky says, draping an arm around Peter’s shoulders. “You and me are gonna have a talk in your room while Aunt May talks to Tommy.”

“A-a talk?” Peter echoes as his mind races, trying to think of what he might have done that could make him the recipient of a talk.

“Uh-huh.”

Tommy doesn’t even have a chance to gloat or make a comment because he’s being steered to his room by Aunt May and he looks absolutely terrified.

“Sit,” Bucky says, as they walk into Peter’s room.

Peter sits on the edge of the bed and clenches his fists nervously while Bucky takes the chair from his desk, turns it around and sits down, facing Peter.

“So…”

Peter swallows.

“I straightened things out with your gym teacher,” Bucky begins.

“What? How?”

“You’re gonna pass four of the tests from the Captain America Fitness Test,” Bucky says, pulling a pamphlet from his jacket pocket and tossing it on the bed next to Peter. “We’re gonna come up with a plausible way for you to do that. Wilson wants you to try harder in gym.”

“I can’t! I have a —“

“Petey, just make it look good. You don’t have to be a star athlete. Just do a few extra pushups or whatever.” Bucky rummages in his pocket again, pulling out a Captain America trading card. “Before I forget, give me a pen.”

Peter stares at him but pulls one out of the notebook on his bed. He watches in disbelief as Bucky forges Steve’s signature on the card and hands it over.

“Give that to Mr. Wilson tomorrow.”

“But —“

“It’s the difference between an 85 and a 90, Petey.”

“You’re giving him a fake autograph as a bribe?!”

“Hey, I signed plenty of stuff for Stevie during the war,” Bucky says indignantly. “Some of which fetched high prices at auction, I might add. So consider that a genuine Steve Rogers signature as signed by Bucky friggin’ Barnes himself and no, it is not a bribe. It’s a favor.”

Peter hesitates. “I don’t know…”

“Which of us is the adult?”

“You are, but —“

“Do what I tell you.”
Peter heaves a sigh and tucks the card into his notebook. He’s almost afraid to hear what else happened tonight.

Bucky takes a deep breath and leans forward. “Okay, so…”

“So?” Peter echoes. Why is Bucky pausing? Pausing is not a good sign. Pausing is scary and makes his heart hammer and his palms sweat. Pausing sucks.

“Make sure you pay attention in class and keep behaving yourself,” Bucky says firmly. “They want you to participate more and stop spacing out. Got me?”

“Yeah…”. Okay, Peter tells himself. That’s not so terrible but it doesn’t seem like Bucky is finished. “I-is there something else?”

Bucky reaches into his jacket and pulls out a folded yellow bundle that he tosses at Peter. “You’re a Mathlete.”

“What?! No!” Peter leaps up and the godawful Mathlete t-shirt falls to the floor. “No way! Mathletes are total dorks.”

“Then you’re a total dork,” Bucky shrugs unsympathetically. “But you’re gonna be a total dork that wins scholarship money and gets noticed by colleges.”

“I can’t believe —“

“I can’t believe you wouldn't wanna do something that’s good for you,” Bucky cuts him off. “Scholarships and college applications, Petey. Web-slinging doesn’t help with those.”

“But what about my job at the Bugle?” Peter protests.

“School comes first,” Bucky says firmly.

“Okay,” Peter relents because there’s no way he’s going to win this. Bucky’s already gotten Aunt May’s approval to ruin Peter’s life. “It’s just an hour on Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

“Monday and Wednesdays are Academic Excellence,” Bucky tells him. “Science club is every other Wednesday.”

“What?!” Peter stares at him, horrified. “What did you do!?”

Bucky is completely serene as he watches Peter have a meltdown. “I’m thinking about your future, Petey. One of us has to.”

“How about my present? The one where I'm a social outcast!” Peter exclaims, flapping his arms in frustration. “How could you ruin my life like that!?”

“Not just your life,” Bucky shrugs. “I’m ruining Mary Jane’s life, too. Her mother agreed the two of you need to start worrying about college.”

“But what about web-slinging?! When do I get to be Spider-Man?!”

“Friday nights and weekends,” Bucky says, shrugging again. “That’s what Matt does with Jessica and it works for her.”

“Oh my God,” Peter moans. “This is a disaster!”
“Mr. Harrington asked me to chaperone all your competitions,” Bucky adds casually.

“H-he what?!” Peter’s mouth drops open. This is a prime example of the Ol’ Parker Luck because just when he thinks it can’t get any worse, it just does.

“And Dean Reynolds wants me to run the PTA.”

Peter flops back onto his bed and pulls his pillow over his face. “Oh dear God…”

“Aunt May thinks it’s great.”

All Peter can manage is another low moan.

Bucky pats his leg. “You finish your homework, champ?”

Peter moans again.

“Good. Lights out at 2200. You’ve got your first Mathlete meeting tomorrow.”

Peter curses the Ol’ Parker Luck and wonders how differently parent-teacher night would have gone with Wolverine instead of Bucky.

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Tommy is bouncing off the walls. Figuratively. He could do it literally. Hell, he could vibrate through the walls. He could —

“Tommy.”

He winces and realizes that he spaced out while Aunt May was talking. “Sorry.”

“That,” she says slowly, “is exactly what all of your teachers talked about with me.”

Forget vibrating through the walls, Tommy wants to sink through the floor.

“I can’t exactly explain to them that you’re a speedster,” Aunt May goes on. “Even with all of the panels Charles Xavier speaks at about accommodating young mutants, they’re just not equipped to understand your special needs. What they can understand is ADHD and finding the right combination of medication. I hate to lie but it’s a lie that protects you.”

Tommy nods miserably.

“The problem we have,” she tells him, “is when you speed through tests in under a minute and get a perfect score but have no idea what’s going on in class at any given time —“
“Because they’re so slow and boring!” Tommy blows out a sigh. “Never mind. You can’t understand.”

“Who says I can’t? I was in high school once and I remember how slow and boring some of my teachers were and I’m not a speedster,” Aunt May says with a smile. “And if you think that’s bad, you should sit through some of the meetings at my job. They’re even worse.”

He loves this woman. Really and truly loves her. “So what do I have to do?”

“Slow down a little when you take your tests, otherwise they’ll keep thinking you’re cheating,” Aunt May says. “Keep doing those exercises so they think you’re paying attention and if they’re still not working, we’ll go see Professor Xavier again. Your homework and term papers are perfect. Don’t change a thing. And above all else, remember this is a process and next year is senior year. We can look at non-traditional college, on-line instead of classroom based so that you can work at your own pace.”

“I’ve been thinking about majoring in broadcasting,” Tommy admits shyly. “Trish and I have been talking about it.” He ducks his head. “I mean, I was thinking about behind the scenes work, like producing a show.”

Aunt May beams at him. “That’s wonderful, Tommy! Did you know there’s a museum in the city that we can go to that’s all about broadcasting and media?”

“No…”

“The Paley Center Museum. I know,” she smiles. “Let’s go this weekend. Just the two of us. We’ll make a day of it.”

“Really?” Tommy can’t believe his ears. He’s not grounded after his teachers told Aunt May he doesn’t sit still and never pays attention!

“Absolutely. Now finish your homework if you haven’t already and get ready for bed. You’ve got school in the morning.”

How is this woman for real? How is Peter okay with sharing her with every fucked up hero and wanna-be hero? How is Bucky okay with….? Actually no, Bucky’s not okay. He’s scary protective over Aunt May. Which is as it should be because the woman is a treasure and should be protected and —

“Good night, Tommy.”

Tommy winces. “Sorry.”

“Do you honestly think Erik mastered his abilities overnight? It’s going to take time and practice.” Aunt May leans over and kisses his forehead. “I’m proud of you. Keep up the good work, sweetheart.”

God, he loves this woman. Really and truly loves her.

It makes putting up with the Ol’ Parker Luck totally worth it.
Matt has faith. He believes in God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost. Lately, though, he’s been starting to think there might be another higher power. An unstoppable power. The Ol’ Parker Luck. What other explanation could there be for Bucky Barnes to track him down on the rooftops of Hell’s Kitchen on a Monday night?

“The answer is no,” Matt greets Barnes.

“You don’t know what I’m here to ask,” Barnes protests.

“You’re here to ask a favor, aren’t you?”

Barnes huffs indignantly. “No. I’m here to ask advice.”

“Make an appointment.”

“Parenting advice.”

That takes Matt off-guard. From his experience, Barnes applies the same level of focus to parenting as he does to his Winter Soldiering. In other words, Barnes’ focus is laser sharp, right down to Peter’s daily calorie count. Still, he can’t resist needling Barnes, especially after the Ultron debacle and being dragged into a pro bono Friends of Humanity quagmire. “I’m sure Peter’s uncle already explained the birds and the bees to him.”

The plates in Barnes’ arm whir softly as Barnes flips him off.

“Unless you need me to explain them to you,” Matt goes on. “I can get you some pamphlets.” The reference to the infamous incident of Peter and the sex ed pamphlets makes Barnes blush furiously and it takes a lot to make the Winter Soldier blush. Matt counts that as a win and, gracious in his victory, he says, “What do you need advice about, Barnes?”

“I did something that I thought was for Petey’s own good but now I’m wondering if I did the right thing,” Barnes says.

“Did you ground him?”

“No.”

“Tell him to quit that godawful job at the Bugle?”

“Not exactly.”

“Tell him he’s too young to be so serious with Mary Jane?”

“No!” Barnes blows out an exasperated sigh. “I signed him up to be a Mathlete and now he’s pissed at me.”

Matt can’t help the snicker that escapes him.

“What?!” Barnes demands peevishly. “What’s so funny?”
“You, second guessing yourself.” Matt takes a deep, calming breath and wipes the smirk from his face. “Why did you think signing him up to be a Mathlete was a good idea in the first place?”

“Scholarships and his college applications,” Barnes answers immediately. “Same reason I signed him up for the Academic Excellence team and the Science team.”

Matt gets it now. “He’s upset because you’re cutting into his time as Spider-Man.”

“Exactly.”

“And you want to know how I got Jessica to accept limitations on her web-slinging.”

Barnes nods. “Yeah.”

“I put those limitations in place immediately,” Matt explains. “She still sneaks off every now and again to stop a crime but it’s not an every day occurrence. You’re going to have a much harder time because he’s used to going out after school. That doesn’t mean you won’t be able to get him to accept it but it does mean you’re going to have to be firm.”

“Okay,” Barnes agrees easily.

Too easily, Matt thinks and then he realizes he’s been had. There’s more to this conversation than putting Peter on a tighter leash for his own good. “What did you do this time, Barnes?”

“I got volunteered to be the president of the PTA and to chaperone all the team trips,” Barnes mutters.

Clint’s guffaw off to the right doesn’t startle either of them. He’s very, very good but to two men with enhanced senses, he’s lost the element of surprise. Not that he’s trying to surprise them. The archer is announcing his presence with laughter that’s leaving him breathless. “Murdock, how jealous are you right now? Nobody asked you to be on the PTA, right?”

“No,” Matt agrees, “I just go. How about you?”

Clint snorts. “I have better things to do.”

“Better things than take care of Gwen?” Barnes demands, an edge to his voice.

“She’s fine, gets straight As, top of her class, eats regularly, and you should see how she can shoot,” Clint says. “The kid doesn’t need me breathing down her neck like the two of you do to your spider-kids.” He turns to Barnes. “I think you’ve just out-dadded Dad Devil if you’re chaperoning Petey. What team is he on? Basketball?”

“Mathletes,” Barnes mutters. “I signed him up for Mathletes.”

Clint snorts another laugh. “Oh man, he’s not gonna speak to you for a month. Maybe longer.”

Matt can’t resist piling on Barnes. Not after Ultron and Friends of Humanity. And also just because. “Barnes also signed him up for the Academic Excellence and Science teams.”

“You think they made fun of Peter before?” Clint asks. “You just wrecked the next twenty years of his life.”

“Scholarships,” Barnes insists indignantly. “And college applications. Plus the Department of Education wants to convert the school to one of those magnet schools.”
The grin slides from Matt’s face. “Really?”

“What’s a magnet school?” Clint wants to know.

“That’d be really good for Petey,” Barnes goes on. “He could have his pick of colleges, I’ll bet.”

“You’re right,” Matt agrees and though he hasn’t heard Jess mention Mathletes, he’s fairly certain St. Edmund’s has a team and he’s even more certain that Jess is about to join. In fact, he’s kicking himself for not thinking of it sooner. “About everything. Mathletes, PTA, all of it. Don’t back down.”

“Oh no,” Clint says. “I see that look on your face, Murdock. You’re signing Jessie up as a Mathlete, aren’t you?”

“Why not? She’s got a genius-level IQ, just like Peter,” Matt says, unable to keep the defensive tone from his voice. “And she needs to start thinking about scholarships and college applications, too.”

“You realize they’re gonna end up competing against each other, right?” Clint groans.

“In that case, may the best spider win,” Matt says.

“Wanna put money down on it, Murdock?” Barnes asks. “Make it interesting?”

“Gambling is a sin,” Matt tells him.

Barnes flips him off again.

“I’m in for a hundred.”

“I’m out of here,” Clint announces. “You two jackasses know this isn’t gonna end well, right? How can it, with two times the amount of Ol’ Parker Luck involved?”

“Make it a thousand,” Matt says.
“Caught all the bad guys already?” Raven greets Clint as he lets himself into his apartment. She’s curled up on his sofa with Lucky, scratching the dog’s ears. Lucky knows when he has it good and doesn’t even bother to so much as look in Clint’s direction. Hell, even Clint knows he has it good because while Raven doesn’t exactly live with him, she doesn’t not-live with him, either. In other words, the blue-skinned shape-shifter has become a presence in his life and he’s not complaining. Not one bit.

“I could say the same to you,” Clint says with a grin. “Wasn’t expecting you back for a while.”

“The leads on those MGH rings dried up,” she shrugs. “Erik decided to pull the plug.”

“He’d better not be planning on heading back to stay with the Parkers.”

“Bucky needs to get over himself. Erik’s part of the family, whether he likes it or not.”

“He might not wanna be.” Clint perches on the arm of the sofa. “Barnes and Murdock got themselves into a parental pissing match tonight.”

Raven smirks because she’s seen Dad Devil and the Winter Father get into more than one dad-off before. “Over what this time?”

“Seems Barnes went to parent-teacher night tonight,” Clint says, savoring the telling of it because the bizarre details only make the story that much better. “He found out there’s such a thing as a Mathlete and decided to sign Peter up for that and every other academic freakshow he could.” Clint pauses to let the horror sink in before he gets to the juiciest part. “And then, the idiot goes and gets himself conscripted as president of the PTA. Not a member. No, not Barnes. He’s gotta be president. That’s the Ol’ Parker Luck in action, right there.”

“Wow —“

“Wait. It gets better. Barnes has to go and throw this in Murdock’s face so of course Murdock decides Jessie needs to be a Mathlete, too.” Clint rolls his eyes. “Murdock’s probably gonna lead a coup against whoever’s running his PTA just to even things up with Barnes. Oh, and get this, they’re putting money down on it. You know that’s not gonna end well.”

Raven isn’t smiling.

“What? You don’t think that’s funny?”

“Their competitive idiocy is amusing,” Raven admits, “but what about Gwen?”

“Gwen wouldn’t be caught dead competing in the Mathletes.”

“Have you asked her? Do you even know which subjects she likes studying?” Raven demands,
getting to her feet and narrowing her eyes at him. “Have you bothered going to parent-teacher night to check on her progress?”

Clint realizes he’s just accidentally poked a bear. “Look —“

“Actually,” Raven smirks at him, “you have gone to parent-teacher night or rather, I went as you.”

“You what?”

“Somebody has to look out for that kid.”

“I train with her.”

“No, I train with her. We went out tonight and I put her through her paces. Her hand-to-hand skills are weak, Clint. You’re teaching her weapons, which is fine but she needs to be able to hold her own in a fight.” Raven blows out a breath. “That’s another argument we’ll have later. This argument is about her academic future and Gwen is just as smart as Peter and Jess.”

Clint’s mouth drops open. The bear he’s poked wants to square off against the super-dads. If he thought things weren’t going to end well before, he’s just realizing how badly they can go. “Are you saying Gwen should become a Mathlete to compete against Peter and Jessie?”

“Are you saying she shouldn’t? That she shouldn't be using all of her gifts?” Raven’s hands are on her hips now and her voice is getting louder. “You’re responsible for raising her, for crying out loud. Why aren’t you doing anything to encourage her with her education?”

“Maybe because I dropped out of school, ran off and joined the carneys?” Clint shrugs. “Hasn’t hurt me any.”

Raven smacks her forehead with the heel of her hand.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you should talk to her.”

“I talk to her.”

“About Mathletes.”

“Nobody needs to talk to me,” Gwen says, blinking sleepily as she emerges from her room. “Bucky and Matt probably heard the two of you arguing about it from here.”


“They’re dorks.”

“See,” he crows. “I told you —“

“I’ll do it,” Gwen cuts him off.

“What?”

“It’s not like I have any friends at school anyway,” she shrugs. “So it’s not like I can be any more of a social outcast. Besides, it’ll be fun to see Peter and Jess and doing something that doesn’t involve people shooting at us.” With that, Gwen turns and goes back into her room.
Clint stares at her door, stunned.

“Go back out there,” Raven hisses as she gets into Clint’s personal space, “and tell Murdock that we see his bet and we’re doubling it.”

The super-dads don’t stand a chance.

Then again, none of them do with three times the Ol’ Parker Luck involved.

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Steve didn’t intend to drive all the way out to Forest Hills. What he intended to do was take a short ride on his bike to clear his head after the fiasco that was the team’s latest mission. One off ramp led to another on ramp and the next thing he knew, he was on the Grand Central Parkway and just minutes away from Forest Hills. And now he’s standing in front of the Parker house, debating whether or not to use his key and let himself in.

“Stand there any longer, somebody’s gonna think you’re up to no good and call the cops,” a voice says from behind him.

It’s a sign of how exhausted he is that Steve actually flinches and whirls, fists ready to start swinging and manages to stop himself in time when he realizes that it was Bucky who got the drop on him.

“You look like hell,” Bucky remarks, draping an arm around Steve’s shoulders and steering him up the front walk. “C’mon. There’s some leftover lasagna in the fridge.”

Steve considers mentioning that he’s not really hungry but it’s Bucky and this is what Bucky does. What he’s always done. And, if Steve is honest with himself, it’s nice to let someone else fret over him for a while instead of the other way around.

“Sit,” Bucky orders once they’re in the kitchen. He rummages in the refrigerator, takes out a plastic container and pops the lid to inhale the aroma. “Nobody makes a lasagna like Aunt May.”

“I can eat it cold,” Steve offers.

“You could but you can have it hot in three minutes.” With that, Bucky puts the container in the microwave and starts setting the table. “Hot comfort food is exactly what you need.”

“The mission went sideways.” It comes out before he can stop himself and once it does, he doesn’t regret it. During the flight back in the Quinjet, he had to put a more positive spin on it to keep the team motivated. The admission feels good. Talking to Bucky about it feels even better, like old times.

The microwave beeps and Bucky puts the steaming container in front of him. “Wanna talk about it?”
“Not really.” Steve takes a forkful of the lasagna and sighs with pleasure. As always, when it comes to food — especially comfort food — Bucky is right. “A bunch of Nigandan pirates hijacked a cruise ship —“

“Saw that on the news. Why were you involved?”

“Because one of the passengers was a bioterrorist they were planning on kidnapping and selling to the highest bidder.” Steve stares down at the lasagna. “The bioterrorist got into a disagreement with his Madripoorian employers, stole whatever he was working on and planned on selling it to someone else.”

Bucky screws up his face. “And he was stupid enough to board a cruise ship under his own name with it?”

“He was that stupid, yes. His reasoning was that it was so stupid, nobody would believe it was him.”

“Wow, that right there is a special kind of stupid.”

Steve downs the last bite of lasagna and leans back in his chair. “It should have been simple, which is why it was just Nat, Vision, Wanda, Pietro and me. We thought it would be good training for them. What we didn’t think of was that Vision would scare that passengers and that the crew would be so anti-mutant. Things got ugly and Wanda accidentally blew a hole in the side of the ship when one of the ship’s crew took a shot at her. She used her powers to keep water from coming in until a rescue ship arrived.”

“And you’re blaming yourself.”

“Who else do I blame?” Steve asks. “I should have trained Wanda harder —“

“All you do is train her and you’ve got Professor X and Erik helping you,” Bucky interrupts him. “What’re you gonna do? Keep her on the sidelines forever? The only way she’s going to learn is practicing and the best practice for anything is real life. Besides, you caught the pirates and freed the passengers. What’s a little property damage in the scheme of things?”

“Is that what you say to Peter?” Steve teases him.

“With Petey, it’s never just a little property damage,” Bucky says with a sigh. “That kid could trash the entire city chasing a purse snatcher.”

“He’s gotten better.”

“Damn right he has.” Bucky draws himself up proudly. “All of the kids have.”

“They’re lucky to have you watching out for them.”

“Yeah? Remind Petey of that in the morning.”

Steve raises an eyebrow. “What happened?”

“Don’t ask.”

“I’m asking.”

“I signed him up for some after-school activities.”

“And he’s unhappy about that?” Steve asks.
Bucky shrugs. “I know, right? Murdock thought it was a great idea. He’s gonna sign Jess up for them, too.”

Steve starts to get a bad feeling. “Are those after-school activities competitive, by any chance?”

“Shouldn’t the kid use his smarts to win scholarship money and get noticed by colleges?” Bucky counters.

“How much did you bet?” Steve asks because he knows Bucky as well as Bucky knows him.

“Just enough to make it interesting. Why? You want a piece of the action?”

“You bet on Peter against Jessica.”

“We’ve done it before,” Bucky shrugs. “Remember when they tried to take down Thor? C’mon. Support our spider-kid, Stevie.”

It’s a bad idea. He knows it’s a bad idea.

Bad ideas have never stopped him before.

I absolutely adore all of you for leaving comments and for embracing this story. Thank you!!!! If I don't write back to your comments right away, it's nothing personal. I'm either busy at work or busy writing/refining the next installment. I promise I'll post replies as soon as I can.

Chapter 4

Jess knows she's in for it when she hears Matt’s first words of the day.

“Academic excellence,” he says, handing her a glass of orange juice.

“Okay…”

“It's important.”

“Okay,” Jess repeats. She doesn't need her spider-sense to tell her something is afoot. Something that's probably going involve even more studying than she does now, which she doesn't actually think is possible.

Matt squares his shoulders and draws himself up in what Jess has come to think of as his ‘so good it can win the case by itself’ opening argument posture. That means he's been rehearsing whatever speech she's about to hear for hours.

Jessica braces herself.

“Doing the best you can is especially important now because college is just around the corner,” Matt says and Jess realizes she was wrong. This isn’t an opening argument. It’s a closing argument and that means his mind is made up about whatever it is he’s about to tell her she needs to do. “Did you know Peter’s joined the Mathletes?”

“No —”

“He did and do you know why? Because there’s scholarship money involved and it beefs up your college application.” Matt smiles in her direction and it’s the smile he uses when he’s about to work his magic on a jury. “Now I know you’re trying to blaze your own path, to do things that feel like they’re uniquely your own, but Jess, you’ve got the same high IQ and you’re just as good, if not better at math than Peter. Why should Peter be the only one to reap the benefits of your common roots?”

“I’m not winning this argument, am I?” Jess asks.

“Nope.”
“I have to join the Mathletes today.”

“Yes,” Matt says and he’s clearly pleased with his victory. “Are there any other academic teams you can compete on?”

Jess stares at him in disbelief. “You want me to join all of them?”

“Peter did.”

“Not willingly, he didn’t!” And she should know. She’s Peter. Sort of. “Peter would never do that to himself.”

“Of course not,” Matt agrees. “Bucky did it to him.”

“And now you’re doing it to me?! Why?!”

“Because good colleges are expensive and getting in is competitive.”

Jess narrows her eyes at him. She loves Matt, respects him but she knows when she’s being snowed and Matt is burying her under an avalanche. “Did you make a bet with Bucky?”

“Just a small one,” Matt shrugs, like it’s no big deal. “Now hurry up and get ready or you’re going to be late for school.”

It isn’t until third period that it hits her just how masterfully Matt crafted his argument. He managed to argue away her need to differentiate herself from Peter, played on her ego that she might actually be superior to Peter and tried to spark a sense of competition. She never stood a chance.

And he’s right. If she ever hopes to win an argument with him, she’s going to need to get into the best schools possible.

Barnes is ready for whatever Peter is willing to dish out this morning. He knows the kid isn’t happy but he also knows Petey is going to get over it. Eventually. So when Peter strolls into the kitchen without even acknowledging him, it doesn’t faze him in the least. The greeting Petey gives Steve? That fazes him. Which, Barnes figures, is the entire point of Petey’s entire performance.

“Oh for crying out loud,” Peter complains. “What’d you do? Invite Steve down here to personally train me for his stupid fitness challenge?”

Steve, to Barnes’ surprise, winces. “I forgot about —“

“The stupid video they make us watch every year?” Peter cuts him off peeviously.
“What video?” Barnes asks because now he has to know.

“It’s nothing,” Steve says. “So, Peter, I —“

“You’re changing the subject,” Barnes interrupts. “Which means it’s not ‘nothing’, Stevie.”

“Wanna see?” Tommy asks, suddenly appearing at the breakfast table, StarkPad in hand. “There’s the whole collection of Captain America student videos on YouTube and some of them are really bad. Like, he did this one on patience that’s just —“

Steve swipes the StarkPad before Bucky can see it and lamely attempts another subject change. “Hey, Tommy! How are you doing?”

Naturally, Barnes pulls out his own StarkPhone and punches in YouTube to see the video for himself. Seconds later, there’s Steve and he’s spouting some nonsense about patience and his cowl does nothing to hide how frustrated and impatient he is about filming the video. “Stevie, this is comic gold!” Barnes snickers. “How did I not know about these? Petey, why didn’t you tell me? God, how many of these did you make?”

“Buck, no!” Steve makes a grab for Barnes’ phone but it doesn’t matter because Peter whips out his phone and starts playing a video where Steve talks about kids and their changing bodies.

Barnes can’t even hear the video over his own hoots of laughter that comes to an abrupt halt the second Mary Jane flings open the back door, eyes blazing with righteous fury as she stalks up to Barnes and sharply pokes her finger into his chest.

“You ruined my life, Bucky Barnes and I do not take that lightly,” Mary Jane announces dramatically.

The kitchen goes dead quiet. It’s that good of a performance.

Barnes straightens and attempts to be authoritative and parental. “How is giving you a shot at scholarships and improving your college applications ruining your life?”

“I have to quit my babysitting job with the Kaminskys.”

“Those kids drive you crazy anyway.”

“Their parents pay me seventy-five dollars a week to be driven crazy!” Mary Jane explodes. “Thanks to you, I’m back down to ten dollars a week allowance. Ten dollars! How am I supposed to survive on that?!?”

Barnes exchanges an unsympathetic look with Stevie before turning back to Mary Jane. “We did.”

“This isn’t the Depression! Ten dollars doesn’t even get you a decent sandwich!”

“Fine,” Barnes says. “I’ll pay you seventy five dollars allowance to go be a Mathlete and whatnot.”

Peter’s mouth drops open. “You didn’t offer to pay my Bugle salary! I need that money for web fluid.”

“You’re not gonna be using as much web fluid, are you?” Barnes counters. “But fine, I’ll give the both of you an allowance.” He turns to Tommy. “What about you?”

“They don’t want me on the Mathletes. I’ve got a ‘learning disability’, ” Tommy says, rolling his eyes and making air quotes.
“Ah, but they should.” And here comes Magneto, making an even more dramatic entrance than Mary Jane. He tosses open the back door with his powers and even though he’s not wearing a cape, it’s almost as if he’s got one anyway, that’s how regal the man is, even in jeans and a sweater. “Why, you think faster than any of those other children, Tommy.”

Barnes looks at Stevie.

Stevie looks back at him.

They smile as the plan comes together.

“How fast can you learn complex math?” Mary Jane asks.

“He learns really fast,” Peter answers for Tommy. “He doesn’t have a genius level IQ but the rate Tommy processes information mimics one almost perfectly. The only thing we have to worry about is him remembering everything.”

Tommy holds up his hands. “Waitasec. I don’t want to join the geek squad —“

“But of course you do, my boy,” Magneto practically purrs, draping his arm around Tommy’s shoulders. “What better publicity for these Mathletes than the boy with the learning disability who can miraculously outperform the best students anywhere.”

“B-but my internship with Trish…”

“Welcome to the Midtown Mathletes,” Petey says, tossing his t-shirt at Tommy. “And before you blame the Ol’ Parker Luck for this turn of events, this one’s totally on Bucky so don’t be surprised if Roxxon sponsors the finals and we end up going against HYDRA High School and there are explosions.”

“And concussions,” Mary Jane adds.

“How could I forget the concussions?” Peter slaps his forehead. “Must be brain damage from all the concussions.”

“Yuk it up now, Petey,” Barnes tells him. “You’re all Mathletes. Deal with it.”

Naturally, that’s the moment Aunt May walks into the kitchen, her hair still damp from the shower. The occupants of the kitchen fall silent as she pours herself a cup of coffee and takes her seat at the kitchen table.

“Well,” she says, “isn’t it nice to see everyone home and getting along so well.”

Nobody says a word. Instead they busy themselves with breakfast and coffee.

Petey may be a genius but Aunt May knows everything.

Barnes wouldn’t be surprised if she knew about the bet with Murdock but he’s positive she doesn’t know that he and Stevie are going to be doubling it.
“Buck, mind if I walk the kids to school?”

Peter is on the verge of reminding everyone in the kitchen that the ‘kids’ are teenagers who’ve been going to school by themselves for a long time when Mary Jane kicks him sharply in the ankle. He gets it immediately. MJ is going to try to reason with Steve so he can reason with Bucky. And Erik. Peter wonders if MJ knows Steve is going to try to reason with them. And who in their right mind says no to Captain America?

They're doomed to be Mathletes.

Tactical silence falls the moment they step outside. Mary Jane has a firm grip on Tommy’s upper arm so he doesn't speed off and abandon them to die on this hill alone. Tommy knows better than to break MJ’s hold.

“It's a selfless thing you're all doing for Bucky,” Steve says, finally breaking the silence and he’s going right for the feels with this speech. “Peter, you especially understand just how much taking care of you has helped with his recovery. And I know that he’s asking you to give up your free time and to take on the burden of competition, but your competitions are what’s getting him back into society, interacting with people.”

Peter’s heart sinks. How can he possibly argue with that?

“What about what Peter does for people?” Mary Jane counters and Peter has never been more grateful for his brilliant, gorgeous girlfriend. “The people of New York depend on Peter to keep them safe while you’re off avenging all sorts of huge, international, intergalactic whoziwatsis.”

“Not to mention all the stress,” Tommy pipes up. “Petey’s already a high-strung mess. The kid needs down time or he’s gonna develop ulcers or have a heart attack or something. Also, he needs time to be a dumb kid and do dumb kid things.”

Peter gapes at Tommy. He wasn’t expecting Tommy, of all people, to come to his rescue.

Steve looks thoughtful. “How many after school activities did Buck sign you up for?”

“Mathletes, Academic Excellence and Science Club,” Peter ticks off. “At least, those are the ones I know about. He was kind of gung-ho about us competing.”

“And Science Club doesn’t even compete as a team. We can compete in all the science competitions on our own,” Mary Jane adds.

“So if I get Buck to see reason on Science Club so you can have some time to yourselves,” Steve
says slowly, “you’ll all be willing to compromise?”

“And twice a week after-school avenging,” Peter puts in.

“Twice a week after-school avenging and dumb kid stuff time,” Steve agrees. He flashes a brilliant Captain America smile at them. “Have I mentioned how proud I am of all of you? That you’re such smart, talented kids?”

It’s like Peter is witnessing his own personal Captain America PSA about the Importance of Doing Your Best in School so Bucky Can Feel Like a Fully Realized Person. He cuts his eyes over to Mary Jane and even she looks awed at Steve’s performance. So does Tommy.

They’re Mathletes.

And they are surely doomed.

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Matt’s taking advantage of the fact that Foggy and Karen are in court this morning to catch up on his own caseload. He’s locked the door and the lights are off to discourage walk-ins and all calls are going directly to the firm’s voicemail. The time has been extraordinarily productive. He’s written demand letters for unpaid wages, written a letter to a soulless corporate landlord that’s threatening to evict not one but three clients and is reviewing a recording contract that a young rapper from the neighborhood brought to him because his mother thought it was a scam. The boy’s mother, unfortunately, is right.

The faintest of scuffs and the sound of a heartbeat outside the office alert Matt to the fact he’s about to have a visitor — one who has no qualms about picking the lock.

Not that Matt has any qualms about Natasha doing it, either. “I see you brought French fries,” Matt greets her. “But I’m not hungover this time.”

“Neither am I,” Natasha shrugs, perching on the edge of his desk and holding out the paper bag full of greasy goodness. “Can’t we just enjoy French fries for their own sake or is it necessary to overanalyze everything?”

“Me overanalyze? Aren’t you the spy who looks for every ulterior motive and angle?”

“They’re just fries, Matt. You can either eat them or not.” With that, Natasha pops another fry into her mouth.

Matt takes a fry and once again marvels how Tony Stark managed to find the absolute best French fries in the entire city. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?”

“God, you’re suspicious. Can’t I just drop by?”

“Sorry,” Matt apologizes. “I’ve gotten used to Bucky Barnes dropping by and it’s never just to say hello. Usually, it ends up getting me involved in things I have no business being involved in.”
takes another fry and sighs. “And now…”

“And now what?” Natasha asks.

“It’s nothing.”

“Not according to that little twitch I just saw.”

Matt’s fairly certain there was no twitch but Natasha reads people even better than he does so who is he to argue? “We seem to be in some sort of competition.”

“Over what?”

“Do you know what a Mathlete is?”

“I know everything.” Natasha takes another French fry. “Is Jess a Mathlete?”

“As of this morning she is,” Matt admits before adding more defensively than he’d like, “she has the same advantages as Peter. It made sense for her to join the competition.”

“How much did you and Barnes bet?”

“It was a thousand.”

There’s more than a hint of throaty laughter in Nat’s voice as she asks, “And how much is it now?”

“Steve’s in and the two of them put up two thousand each. And that was after I told them Gwen was joining her school’s Mathletes and that Clint and Mystique were putting money in.”

“Now that’s interesting.” Natasha pauses to eat another French fry. “Steve is a horrible liar at most things but he’s an excellent card cheat. Never play poker with him.”

“Are you suggesting he and Barnes have found a way to game the Mathlete competitions?” Matt asks.

“Steve never bets unless he thinks he’s got a sure thing.”

“Can you find out what the sure thing he thinks he has is?”

“Are you asking me to spy for you?” Natasha leans forward until their noses are almost touching. “To take the skills that were honed by the Red Room and put to work for the most discerning of employers and use them to find out if Steve Rogers has figured out a way to cheat at Mathletics?”

Matt winces, supposes he should be ashamed of himself but says, “Yes.”

“I’ll get the answer and then we’ll figure out how to counter him.” With that, she closes the gap between them and brushes his lips with hers.

Before Matt can react, Natasha is gone.

The fries are gone with her.

Forget the Ol’ Parker Luck. The sin of pride that Matt just put into motion can’t possibly end well. For anyone.
One of the things Billy Kaplan loves about his school is that students are allowed to leave the building at lunch time. It’s his time to text Teddy, eat quietly and fortify himself for the next two and a half hours of trying to avoid John Kesler and his homophobic jerk friends. Kesler’s seen Teddy up close and it was enough to stop Kesler from putting his hands on Billy again, at least for a few weeks. In that span, Bucky taught him a few self-defense moves and more than a few nasty verbal comebacks. Billy’s been hesitant to try either. His control over his powers is getting better but he nearly killed Kesler once and he doesn’t want it to happen again.

Kesler is nowhere in sight as Billy puts his books in his locker and shrugs into his jacket, his mind already on the sushi he’s going to have for lunch. Eating out is something he can’t afford to do every day, but sushi is the Tuesday special at this little place four blocks down that none of his schoolmates have discovered. Billy’s come to think of the deli as his private oasis.

Thinking about lunch and not paying attention to his surroundings was his first mistake. When he slams his locker shut, there’s Kesler. The kid is huge and not exactly dumb but with a mean streak a mile wide.

He’s smirking at Billy which means he’s got a particularly nasty insult that’s he’s been saving up all day. “Hey, Billie Jean.”

Billy doesn’t even bother answering. He turns and starts walking.

Of course Kesler follows. “Where’re you going, sweetheart? You late for a date with your boyfriend?”

Ignore bullies, his mother always used to say. Now that she knows about Billy’s powers, she tells him, don’t think about sending them anywhere or turning them into anything. Or doing anything else to them.

That’s not what Teddy says. Teddy has all sorts of suggestions about what Billy could do to Kesler. None of those suggestions are very nice.

“I’m talking to you, Billie Jean,” Kesler snarls. He catches up to Billy just at the exit, at the the exact second Billy opens the door. “What the hell…?!”

“Billy,” Erik greets him, “I’ve found a perfectly lovely place for us to have lunch.” Erik’s eyes are hidden behind sunglasses and he’s wearing a homburg that matches his grey raincoat perfectly. Even so, it’s easy to tell that his attention is fully on Kesler when he says, “You must be one of my grandson’s friends.”

Kesler is making incoherent sounds as he stares at Erik.

Erik’s voice is distinctive and even though he’s dressed in civilian clothes, anyone who’s ever seen the news would realize there’s a strong probability that Erik is no ordinary person, that he might be in fact one of the most extraordinary people on the planet. “Are you all right, young man?”

Kesler backs slowly through the door and into the school.
Erik makes a shooing gesture and the door slams shut.

Billy’s mouth is hanging open. “What are you doing here?”

Erik whips off his sunglasses and narrows his eyes at the door he just shut. “Is that young man bothering you, Billy?”

“I-I…. You can’t just show up here!” Billy stammers.

“Why ever not?”

“Because I’m not Peter and nobody knows I’m… Well, they know I’m different but they think it’s because I’m gay. But that’s not the point! You’re you! Everyone knows who you are! And now they’re going to know you and I…. That we’re…Oy.” Billy buries his face in his hand and then slowly peeks to see just what kind of crowd has gathered. Amazingly, the other kids from his school just walk past the most powerful mutant on the planet without a second glance.

Erik pointedly looks to his left and then to his right. “Yes, I can see how frightened of me they are.” He slides his sunglasses back on. “Do you wish to stand here complaining or would you like to say a proper hello and then go have lunch?”

“Hi, Zayde,” Billy greets him. Is this how Peter feels when Bucky or any of the Avengers meet him at school?

“Much better.” Erik reaches out to ruffle Billy’s hair. “I have brunch reservations for us at Sarabeth’s.”

“O-okay.” The idea of Magneto making brunch reservations anywhere boggles his mind but then again, there’s been a lot of pro-Magneto feeling following his recent guest slots on Trish Walker’s morning show. Billy decides that’s a safe enough subject to bring up. “Are you and Ms. Walker friends now?”

“Yes, we are,” Erik says, beaming. “She’s quite a fascinating person. I’ve been making a number of new friends, as you know. And, of course, Tommy has been working as her intern.”

“Of course,” Billy echoes. He follows Erik into Sarabeth’s and watches carefully as they’re seated at a table. Nobody gives Erik a second glance.

“So tell me,” Erik says, picking up his menu, “what do you do after school?”

“Homework,” Billy ticks off. “Spending time with Teddy, training…that kind of stuff.” Is he being compared against Tommy and coming up short because he doesn’t have an internship?

“Some of the other children are taking up after school activities.” Erik peers at Billy over his menu. “Peter, Mary Jane, Tommy, Jess and Gwen have become…” His mouth seems to stumble over the next word. “Mathletes.”

“Tommy’s a Mathlete?! How?”

“He’s not ignorant, just unable to slow down to the plodding speed of the rest of his class,” Erik explains. “Can you imagine that speed in a competition?”

“Sure, sneaking a peek at the right answer over the shoulder of the host without being noticed,” Billy says with a scowl. “Cheating.”
“Sergeant Barnes would never stand for it.” Erik leans forward and confides, “He’s going to be chaperoning their competitions, you know.”

“What?!’

“And, it seems, he’s the new president of the Midtown High School parent-teacher association.”

“What!?“

“Tell me, Billy, how are your math skills?”

“Not good enough to be a Mathlete.” And boy, is he thankful for that. “Neither is Teddy.”

Erik sinks back into his seat, clearly disappointed. “You’re certain?”

“Yup.” He considers mentioning that his best subjects are English, history and Spanish but decides against it. “I’ll be happy to go cheer on Tommy, though.”

“I suppose that will have to do,” Erik says, picking up his menu again.

Billy’s never been so happy to not have a genius IQ in his life.

Chapter End Notes

Zayde is the Yiddish word for grandfather.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

You guys! I have met the most amazing artist on Tumblr -- cainternn. She made art for the infamous Chapter 7 of Have You Met Miss Jones? (Yes, the condom scene!). It's posted as Chapter 22 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/5403791/chapters/26112099) and you need to totally check it out either here or on my tumblr.

Here's the link https://msbrooklynfanfic.tumblr.com/post/163431110363/awesome-art-by-the-fabulous-cainternn-for-have-you

Chapter 6

“It’s good to see you again, old friend.”

Such has been Charles’ greeting to Erik for the past several decades, even when it wasn’t good for either of them. Nevertheless, Erik gives the standard response, “And you, old friend.”

“You’re looking well.” Charles leans back in his wheelchair to steeple his fingers beneath his chin as he regards Erik. The pair are seated in Charles’ personal library, surrounded by shelves of books and with the chess game they began two years prior still unfinished to their right. “You look — dare I say it — content. And no wonder, you’ve become quite the popular public speaker.”

Erik takes a sip of tea and marvels how Charles always has real tea, has never given in to the abomination of the American version. “Persecution of mutants and others with powers is becoming decidedly unpopular.”

“Indeed,” Charles agrees.

“Ms. Walker has proven herself to be quite a valuable ally, Charles. You should consider appearing on her program.”

A hint of a teasing smile appears on Charles’ lips. “Have you made another friend Erik? Goodness, your circle of non-mutant friends is growing by leaps and bounds these days.”

“Indeed I have. No doubt Trish would be your friend as well.” Erik shoots back with a smile of his own. “If only you would quit avoiding her messages.”

“Point taken.”

“Return her calls, Charles. You won’t regret it.”

“I shall,” Charles promises and then he changes the subject. “Tell me, old friend, how is your relationship with your family proceeding?”
“As you can imagine,” Erik answers slowly and, to his own surprise, honestly, “it’s more difficult with Wanda and Pietro, given the distance and their activities with Steven. When they’re not training, they’re off on missions. Pietro is more reticent when it comes to establishing any kind of relationship. Nevertheless, I am not giving up.” He sips his tea. “Such things are easier with my grandchildren. Just today, I met Billy for lunch and began my day with Tommy and Peter.”

“So you count Peter among your grandchildren these days?” Charles asks with a smile.

“You know very well that I do,” Erik counters, “just as you consider him one of your students. A pity he’s not.”

“Yes,” Charles agrees, “a pity indeed.”

“Peter and Tommy will be representing their school in mathematics competitions,” Erik adds. “We’re all quite proud of them.”

Charles’ gaze sharpens. “Peter and Tommy are Mathletes?”

“Indeed they are. It’s a shame your school doesn’t participate in such things.” Erik baits the hook and dangles it.

Naturally, Charles isn’t one to leave the bait alone. “We haven’t, no.”

“A pity.”

“Only five students are required for a team.”

“Have you five such skilled students?”

“I’ve just recently taken in a new student who would bring us to that number.” Charles leans forward with a mischievous glint in his eyes. “His codename is Prodigy.”

“That would be cheating, Charles,” Erik admonishes even as he begins to worry what sort of competition a mutant called Prodigy might present.

Charles smirks at him. “It would be using his gifts, as young Tommy would be using his.” He settles back in his chair again. “You’ve convinced me, Erik. I’ll submit the paperwork this very afternoon and may the best team win.”

“May they indeed,” Erik agrees and then adds, “Would you care to make a small wager, Charles?”

Charles’ answering grin reminds Erik that some things never change, especially when it comes to his own ego getting him in over his head with Charles.
“Let me do the talking,” Steve says confidently.

Having seen Steve's people skills in action, Barnes' strategic mind quickly catalogs all the ways in which this conversation is going to go wrong. The fact of the matter is that Tony Stark and Steve Rogers can work together, be friendly with each other but they have a tendency to get along like squabbling siblings.

Tony, of course, is instantly on guard. He folds his arms defensively over his Iron Maiden t-shirt, exposing an electrical burn on one forearm and grease staining the other as he greets them at the elevator. “I’d say this is a surprise but JARVIS warned me you were coming.” His gaze ticks to Barnes’ cybernetic arm. “Have you finally decided to let me work on that beast?”

“Actually, Tony, we’re here about something else.” Steve flashes one of his winning Captain America grins, the one that sold millions of dollars in war bonds and has absolutely no effect on either Barnes or Stark. “We need your help.”

“Of course you do,” Tony sighs, resigned, as he drops into one of the soft, expensive chairs in the Tower’s common area. “Hit me.”

“The kids joined the Mathletes and —“

“Not willingly they didn’t,” Tony cuts off Steve. “That’s been social suicide ever since the concept of ‘Mathlete’ was invented.” His gaze cuts to Barnes. “Why would you ruin Peter's life like that, Barnes?”

“Scholarships and college applications,” Barnes shoots back. “Not all of us have your money.”

Steve steps between them, expression conciliatory. “Peter, Tommy and Mary Jane were fine with it —“

“Mary Jane?” Tony jumps to his feet, his expression now one of pure indignation. “You roped my Mary Jane into being a Mathlete?”

Steve starts to open his mouth but it’s too late. Tony is on a roll.

“I’m shocked — absolutely shocked — that you didn’t come to me immediately,” Tony scolds. “JARVIS, prepare a file with all the Mathlete questions from every broadcast competition in the past three years and then come up with variations of the top ten percent answered incorrectly every time.” He turns to Barnes. “She’s going to need to prep, Barnes. They all will. And not some underfunded after school prep by a high school math teacher. JARVIS and I are going to put together a program so she’s unbeatable.”

“So all of the kids are unbeatable,” Barnes insists. “Petey’s doing this, too. I know he’s your little science buddy. Don’t you want him to beat Jess and Gwen?”

Tony’s eyes go wide. “Say what?”

“Murdock’s got Jess participating and Mystique decided Gwen needed to be a Mathlete,” Barnes tells him. “The pot is up to two thousand a parent.”

“No,” Tony says with a scowl. “Absolutely not. Two thousand is chump change, Barnes. Make it five. We’ve been raising Peter and Mary Jane a lot longer than those newbies. Granted, Tommy’s new to the mix but he’s part of the family too and our family does not lose. Ever.”

Steve turns to Barnes and flashes a smug look before wiping the expression off of his mug. “Thanks,
Barnes isn’t finished with Moneybags Stark. Not yet. Not by a long shot. “Our kids are winners.”

“Damn right they are,” Stark agrees.

“They should look like winners.”

Stark groans. “Don’t tell me they’ve got god-awful polyester blend team t-shirts.”

Barnes pulls the shirt from his jacket and holds it up. “Sixty percent polyester.”

“Burn that, Barnes. Our kids are getting blazers.” Stark is definitely on a roll now. “They’re not going to competitions on some grungy old yellow bus, are they?”

“That’s all we’ve got in the budg—“

“I’m making a donation,” Tony says. “Hell, I’ll buy the school a bus. One that’s got enough safety features that not even the Ol’ Parker Luck will be able to destroy it. What else do they need?”

“Funny you should ask.” Barnes pulls out the minutes from the last PTA meeting, ignoring the look on Steve’s face. “The school computers are three years old and they’re not Stark tech.”

“I’ll donate new ones,” Tony promises. “After they win their first competition.”

“Are you gonna come cheer the kids on?” Barnes asks, avoiding eye contact with Steve. “It’d mean the world to Mary Jane to have you there and Petey would be over the moon.”

Tony eyes him suspiciously. “Who’re they going up against?”

“Summit High School,” Barnes recites from memory. “That’s over in Jamaica Estates. Their extracurricular budget is twice what Petey’s school gets.” He never thought he’d be grateful for being dragged into the PTA but here he is, citing stats and making sure his kids beat the snot out of every other school.

“Not anymore. I’ll triple it.”

“Come to dinner tonight,” Steve offers. “Mary Jane’ll be there and you know she loves seeing you.”

Tony eyes him. “If I come over, I’m installing JARVIS so the kids can maximize their practice time.”

“You’d better not wreck my paint job,” Barnes growls at him. Not that he gives a damn about the paint job. Painting is easy but he doesn’t want Tony to think he’s giving in easily, even if Tony is giving him exactly what he wants.

“Would I do that, Barnes?”

“Gleefully.”

“So we know each other.” Tony shrugs. “I’ll be there at seven.”

“And bring dessert,” Barnes calls over his shoulder as he grabs Stevie and steers him into the waiting elevator. “It’s rude to show up empty handed.”

The elevator door closes on Tony who’s already asking JARVIS about having dessert delivered to Forest Hills.
Murdock and Mystique don’t stand a chance now.

“You going web-slinging now?” Tommy asks as they step outside, finally free of Midtown High School for the day. He’s looking forward to a couple of laps around the city before dinner.

Peter scowls at him. “No, I’m going home to tutor you in math. I can’t believe how many questions you got wrong.”

“What does it matter?” Tommy shrugs. “First of all, I’m an alternate. Second, you don’t want to be a Mathlete anyway.”

Mary Jane’s eyes flash. “Newflash, Speedy, we’re Mathletes and we’re going to do our best so we don’t look like idiots out there. In fact, we’re going to win.”

“You’re actually taking this seriously?” Tommy gapes at her, unable to believe what he’s hearing.

“We have to take it seriously now,” Mary Jane tells him. “We promised Captain America that we were going to be Mathletes. Do you think losing is an option?”

“Not for me, it’s not,” Peter agrees. “I’ve seen Bucky disappointed before. Trust me, it’s not something I want to see again and neither do you.”

“But —“

“Answering fast is one thing,” Mary Jane says firmly. “But you need to answer right — every time — if you’re going to be our secret weapon.”

Tommy blinks. “Secret weapon? Me?”

“Yes, you,” Mary Jane scolds him. “You made it onto the team by the skin of your teeth and Mr. Harrington doesn’t think you’re going to stick it out. Are you going to let him get away with that?”

“No!”

“You’re going to show Harrington what mutant superiority is all about, aren’t you?”

“Damn right I am!”

“So what are you going to do?” Mary Jane asks.

“Study!” It comes out before Tommy can stop it. God help him, he’s a Mathlete and worse, he’s representing mutant superiority. Losing is not an option.
This is, he’s sure, more than the Ol’ Parker Luck.

This is what comes with being related to Magneto.

In fact, it’s a combination of the two.

He’s doomed.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

You guys! I have met the most amazing artist on Tumblr -- cainternn. She made art for the infamous Chapter 7 of Have You Met Miss Jones? (Yes, the condom scene!). It's posted as Chapter 22 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/5403791/chapters/26112099) and you need to totally check it out either here or on Tumblr: https://msbrooklynfic.tumblr.com/post/16343110363/awesome-art-by-the-fabulous-cainternn-for-have-you

Chapter 7

“We’re Mathletes,” Gwen says.

“Yes, we are,” Jess agrees. They’re perched on the roof of One New York Plaza, an office building at the very southernmost tip of Manhattan, where they’re watching the ships heading west to Staten Island, the Statue of Liberty and beyond. “Every single one of us spider-kids. Do you think that’s weird?”

“Face it, we are weird,” Gwen shrugs. “We were weird before we were spider-kids but being spider-kids just made it worse.”

Jess winces and ducks her head. She’s never been anything but a spider-kid because she’s a clone of Peter Parker.

Gwen grabs her hand, squeezing it. “Sorry, that was a stupid thing to say.”

“It’s okay.” And it is okay to have someone think she’s something other than the lab experiment she is. Jess squeezes Gwen’s hand back. “We’re doing normal kid stuff.”

“Abnormal kid stuff,” Gwen corrects her. “Normal kids go to the mall, hang out and get in trouble. Normal kids don’t wake up and want to be Mathletes.”

“So how come you did?”

“Because nobody’s going to object if we study and practice together.” Gwen winks at her. “We can spend hours studying. Entire weekends, even.”

Jess slants a look at Gwen. “I don’t know about that. There’s some sort of weird competition going on between Bucky and Matt.”
“And Raven. Clint could care less but Raven…” Gwen blows out a breath. “They have no idea who they’re messing with there.”

“Who’d have guessed that?”

“I would have. She’s been sort of living with us,” Gwen says slowly. “And she’s been spending a lot of time with me. Like, a lot of time. But without being, you know…”

“Stifling?” Jess offers.

“Yeah.” Gwen looks out into the East River, following the progress of a tug boat. “Don’t get me wrong. I love Aunt May because, who doesn’t… but it’s a little less… I don’t know… something… with Raven. And it’s cool.” She turns back to Jess. “And she’s right about holding back. I may not be Peter’s clone with his genius IQ but I’m pretty damn smart and I should use it.”

“Just like you should use your powers.”

“I did. I came here from Brooklyn and I didn’t take the subway.” Gwen narrows her eyes at Jess. “And I don’t see you fighting anything other than your curfew. Aren’t you supposed to be home, studying?”

“I don’t always do everything Matt says.”

“You joined the Mathletes even though you’re trying not do things Peter would do.”

Jess leans back and watches a helicopter flying overhead. “After a while, that becomes self-defeating. Just because he would or wouldn’t do something isn’t how I should define myself. It was fine at first when I had pretty much no idea of who I was but the fact is, I’m good at math and science. Why waste that when it can help me get scholarships to the best colleges possible?” She turns back to Gwen. “Also, I kind of want to see if I can kick his ass at Mathletes.”

“And that has nothing to do with the bet?”

“Maybe a little,” Jess shrugs. “Like, a bonus.”

“What if we end up competing against each other?” Gwen wants to know.

“It won’t change a thing, right?” Jess asks. “It’s just some stupid after school activity.”


They fist bump and then seal the deal with a kiss.
“Oh man.” Peter stops short and stares at the gleaming black SUV parked in his driveway with a look of horror on his face. “Tony’s here.”

“Only you would complain about having Tony Stark in your house,” Mary Jane scolds him. “Other kids dream about Iron Man coming over for dinner, right Tommy?”

Tommy makes a face. “Not me. I dream about Black Widow.”

As if on cue, Natasha peels herself out from behind the SUV and does a little finger wave in their direction. She’s dressed casually, in jeans and a leather jacket and she’s holding a bakery box. “Hi, kids.”

Tommy emits a squeak.

Peter goes pale.

Mary Jane rolls her eyes at both of them and goes to give Natasha a hug. “Can you believe these two are big time superheroes?”

“No,” Natasha says flatly. She cuts her eyes to Peter. “What’s for dinner?”

“I-I don’t know. I mean, there was leftover lasagna but I don’t think there’s going to be enough for everyone,” Peter stammers. He sucks in a deep breath and gives Natasha puppy dog eyes. “A lot of people are here.”

Tommy just keeps staring wide-eyed at Natasha.

She raises an eyebrow at him. “We’ve met, remember?”

“Uh-huh.”

“We even talked.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Let me know when you’ve recovered,” Natasha says, taking Mary Jane’s arm and leading her up the front steps. “I don’t know how you put up with them.”

“It’s not easy,” Mary Jane sighs. She opens the front door and the sight that greets all of them is a wonder to behold. “What the heck…?!?”

Tony is standing on a stepladder, a soldering iron in hand. Wires and tech are strewn across the living room floor and over in the corner, Happy is looking anything but as he’s arguing with someone on the other end of a cell phone conversation.

He pauses, looks over at Natasha and then barks into the phone, “Make it dinner for an even dozen. I don’t care. Find a truck. Fine. I’ll send one to you. Just make sure everything is hot and nothing is soggy. Mr. Stark hates soggy.”

Bucky, Steve and Erik are standing off to the side, watching the spectacle of Tony doing whatever he’s doing to Peter’s house.

“Oh hey,” Tony says, sliding the protective goggles up. “Hi kids. How was Mathlete practice?”

Peter moans softly. “They got him, too. We’re doomed.”
“Mathlete practice was fine,” Mary Jane answers. “What are you doing to Aunt May’s house?”

“I’m wiring it with JARVIS and then I’m going to add a relay so you have access, too,” Tony grins. “We’ve been working on a bunch of programs so that you’ll be in peak form for your competitions.”

“Can we make a program for Tommy? He needs to learn some of the math but he learns at a really, really fast pace,” Peter says, coming alive at the mere mention of anything science or tech.

“A special speed learning program?” Tony cocks his head and considers the problem. “Shouldn’t be too hard. You and J can collaborate.”

“Good,” Tommy says, finally recovering the power of speech. “I don’t have to have Petey lecturing me about math.”

“Nope,” Tony agrees. “You’ll have JARVIS spewing information as fast as your speedy little mind can process it.” He flashes a smile at Mary Jane. “You’re going to destroy Summit on Friday.”

“Oh my God.” Aunt May stands in the doorway, mouth hanging open. “What on earth…. Tony, what are you doing?”

“He’s wiring the house with JARVIS so the kids can maximize their study time,” Bucky tells her. “Don’t worry, I’ll repaint and it’ll look as good as new.”

“I ordered dinner,” Happy adds.

“Hi, Aunt May,” Natasha says, doing another little finger wave. “I brought cake. Mind if I stay for dinner?”

Mary Jane knows then and there that all signs point to the Ol’ Parker Luck being fully in motion. Nobody is escaping unscathed.

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Steve knows Natasha.

He doesn’t know everything about her but he knows what counts. For example, Steve knows he can trust Natasha with his life. He also knows when she’s up to something. And she is definitely up to something because she’s keeping the subject of the conversation firmly on the kids.

“We always beat Summit,” Peter is saying.

“Don’t get cocky,” Bucky warns him.

“He’s not,” Mary Jane leaps to Peter’s defense. “The Summit kids are cocky. They come from money and their school’s already a magnet school.”
Naturally, that sets Tony off. “Midtown’s got money now. Whatever the Mathletes need, they’ve got.” He points a breadstick in Bucky’s direction. “You tell JARVIS and JARVIS tells me, understand, Tin Man?”

“That’s very generous of you, Tony,” Aunt May says. “Public schools are so horribly underfunded, especially after school programs.”

Steve keeps his eyes on Natasha. “It’s always been the case. Poor neighborhoods like the one Buck and I grew up in definitely got the short end of the stick. Our classrooms were overcrowded and it was more about maintaining discipline than it was about teaching us anything.”

“We still got a better education than kids today,” Bucky complains. “We knew the multiplication table backwards and forwards, all the important historical dates, could name every single President, capital, country —“

“Rote memorization, preparing you to follow orders and be the cannon fodder they needed you to be,” Erik murmurs, “or to toil in their factories.”

Bucky rolls his eyes. “What the kids have going for them today are all those special programs. Charter schools, magnet schools and yeah, the Mathletes.”

“Everybody’s a Mathlete these days,” Mary Jane jokes.

“I’m surprised Billy’s not a Mathlete,” Nat remarks.

“Alas,” Erik says slowly. “Billy is not mathematically-inclined and neither is Teddy.”

Bucky stares at him. “What’d you do, try to bring in a mutant-superiority contingent?”

“I thought to encourage him,” Erik counters.

“I’m surprised he didn’t bibbity-bobbity-boo himself into a Mathlete,” Tommy smirks. “I mean, that’s what he does, right?”

Peter shakes his head. “I don’t think his powers work like that.”

“And that would be cheating,” Mary Jane adds.

“So how come it’s not cheating using my super speed?” Tommy wants to know.

Mary Jane answers, “Because you’re still doing the math, just… you know, faster.”

“And wrong,” Peter mutters under his breath.

“Cheating,” Erik announces somberly, “would be Charles having a team with a mutant whose abilities allow him to temporarily absorb the knowledge of those around him.”

Bucky narrows his eyes at Erik. “Good thing he doesn’t have a mutant like that or a team.”

Erik sighs and bows his head. “I’m afraid he does.”

“Since when?”

“Today.”

“How much did you bet?” Tony demands.
“Unlike you, I don’t wager anything as pedestrian as money,” Erik scoffs before staring hard at Peter. “In the unlikely event your team loses, I’m to give a series of lectures to his students about peaceful coexistence.”

“Are you betting on the children?” Aunt May is on her feet, hands on hips and looking absolutely horrified. “It’s one thing to teach them about competition but betting on whether they win and putting pressure on them to perform…” She makes an exasperated noise. “I’m disappointed in all of you.”

“I don’t mind,” Mary Jane says quietly.

Peter gapes at her. “What?! This is getting totally out of control —“

“We’re going to win,” she says, waving him off. “Look at all the support we’re getting. We’ve got JARVIS, thanks to Tony. We’ve got a decent budget so we can get to the competitions, thanks to Bucky —“

“You’ve got an armor plated school bus,” Tony adds. “Also thanks to me.”

“Are you going to come to cheer us on?” Mary Jane asks him.

“Would I let my therapy buddy down?“

They reach across the table and fist bump.

“No more bets,” Aunt May warns. “The children are under enough pressure.”

Steve is almost certain everyone at the table is crossing their fingers as they promise. And he’s absolutely certain that Nat got exactly what she wanted from that conversation.

The question is, what’s she going to do with it?
Chapter 8

The prospect of it being a school night and work week night is all the excuse Natasha needs to take her leave. Tony delays his departure by mumbling something about a few adjustments and stalls convincingly until the kids and Aunt May are in bed. That’s when Steve leads his team out of the house and down the street to the little park, away from prying ears. Erik uses his powers to unlock the chains holding the gate shut and they all file inside to stand, staring at each other.

Bucky is the first to break the silence, jabbing a gleaming finger in Erik’s direction. “What did you think you were doing, rubbing Mathletes in Xavier’s face?”

“No doubt the same thing you were when you did it to Matthew and Clint,” Erik responds dryly. “And achieving the same amount of ‘success’ you did.”

Before Buck can open his mouth to respond, Steve steps between them. “Enough. That’s over and done with. The point of this meeting is how to regain and maintain our strategic advantage. JARVIS isn’t going to be enough. Matt’s apartment is wired with JARVIS and once Nat tells him about Peter having JARVIS now, you know he’ll have Jess using JARVIS to train.”

“She was spying on us for Murdock?!” Tony repeats incredulously. “That’s… wow, that’s so un-Christian of him.”

“He’s as dedicated a parent as Buck is,” Steve says, “which means we put nothing past him and be careful what information we share. No more getting carried away, Buck.”

Bucky silently crosses his heart while rolling his eyes.

“Excuse me.” Happy clears his throat. “Seems to me you guys need a spy of your own.”

Steve turns to him. “I think Nat’s made her loyalties pretty clear.”

“I wasn’t talking about her. I was talking about —“

“Barnes’ girlfriend,” Tony crows triumphantly. “She’s right there in Hell’s Kitchen and she works for Murdock! She’s got access and nobody can dig up information like Jessica Jones.”

They all look at Bucky, who’s shifting uncomfortably because while everyone thinks of Jessica Jones as his girlfriend, the two adamantly refuse to acknowledge they are anything more than friends.

Happy comes to Bucky’s rescue. “If she turns you down, remind her she’s on the Stark payroll and we’ll pay her to do it.”

“Double her fees,” Tony adds. “No, triple because this is a ridiculous use of her time.” He digs in his pocket and hands Bucky a wad of cash. “Go buy her some booze and lay on your special brand of sweet talk, Barnes. We’re counting on you.”

Bucky flips him off with a gleaming metal finger but pockets the cash. After everything Bucky’s
been through, Steve is tickled to see Buck’s still a kid from Brooklyn.

“Next order of business,” Tony says, “is how we handle competition that not only reads minds but reads specific information.” He cuts his eyes to Erik. “Fortunately, we have some tech that’s designed to block telepathy —“

“But Mathletics isn’t a sport where kids can wear helmets,” Steve finishes.

“No, but it’s one where they can wear watches, bracelets or even matching team sneakers.” Tony grins at him. “I haven’t worked out the specifics but I’m thinking if all five kids and maybe an alternate or two are wearing the tech, I might be able to build a jammer of some kind. The only problem is we’re going to need a telepath to work with.”

“Wanda has wanted to spend more time with Tommy and Billy,” Erik suggests. “Both she and Billy have telepathic abilities and should your technology fail, her powers may be formidable enough to even up the odds.”

Bucky smirks. “I have one more idea on that front.”

They all look at him again.

“This kid latches onto knowledge, right? What if the first answer he gets is always wrong?” Bucky eyes them. “Mathletes is about speed as much as it is smarts and we’ve got a kid on our team who thinks faster than anybody.”

“That,” Steve says slowly, “is dirty pool, Buck.”

“They dirtied the pool first by sending Nat to spy on us,” Bucky insists.

“I didn’t say we weren’t going to do it,” Steve tells him. “I just wanted to point out how low we were planning to sink.”

“If Aunt May finds out —“

“She won’t.” Erik narrows his eyes at each of them in turn. “None of us are amateurs, gentlemen. We’ve all worked in the shadows to accomplish a mission and we can do it again. It’s for the good of the children.”

There are murmurs of agreement but Steve is sure that deep down, they’re all thinking the same thing. With the Ol’ Parker Luck involved, it’s not a question of whether things will go off the rails. It’s a question of when and how badly.

He hopes the inevitable can be delayed until after the kids win the Nationals.
whining Harvard and Princeton alumni make an appeal to the arresting officers when Natasha settles beside him on the roof.

“Missing Sokovia right now?”

Matt snorts. “Not in the least.”

“You prefer drunken ex-frat boys to killer robots?”

“Every day of the week, including Sunday.”

Natasha laughs softly before knocking Matt for a loop when she says, “Tony catered dinner at the Parker home tonight.”

“What?”

“That was after he installed JARVIS to tutor and drill the kids in math.”

Matt finds himself with two conflicting thoughts. The first is that she could have warned him before the abrupt subject change and the second is, “They dragged Tony into this?”

“He didn’t need much dragging as far as I could tell,” Nat says wryly. “Once he heard Mary Jane was on the team, Stark donated money, a new armored school bus and computers to Peter’s school. You know him.”

“Faultily generous instead of generous to a fault,” Matt agrees. “I already have JARVIS —“

“And I’ve got him copying whatever programs he’s putting together for Peter for Jess,” Nat tells him. “Tony either didn’t think to safeguard them or he did it on purpose because he knew I’d tell you.”


“Or he felt guilty.” Nat shakes her head as she adds, “The secret weapon isn’t JARVIS. It’s Tommy.”

Matt cocks his head slightly as he processes this revelation. “But Tommy’s not… Well, let’s face it, he’s not in the top of his class.”

“He processes information faster than JARVIS,” Nat points out. “Peter thought they could tutor him.”

This is the point of the conversation where Matt would sigh and pinch the bridge of his nose to stave off a tension headache but he’s wearing his cowl and it’s too late. The headache is starting to blossom. “Jess asked if she and Gwen could study together. I’m going to say yes. JARVIS tutoring all of them should even the playing field a bit.”

“It would have but now the mutants are involved.”

“What?!“

Nat lays a hand on his shoulder and squeezes gently as she tells him, “Erik decided to rub his baby Mathletes in Charles Xavier’s face and now Xavier’s put together a team that’s got a mutant who absorbs knowledge.”

Matt curses softly but creatively.
She squeezes his shoulder again. “We should discuss strategy.”

“Strategy?! How do you beat a mutant who absorbs knowledge?”

“You form an alliance with Clint, for starters.” Nat gets to her feet. “C’mon. My hotel isn’t far. We can discuss strategy there. Among other things.”

“Hotel?” Matt always feels lost in his conversations with Natasha. “But my apartment —“

“Has a sleeping teenager in it. There are no teenagers in my suite.” Her voice takes on a husky timbre as she adds, “There is a bottle of real Russian vodka and a bed with impeccably clean sheets.” Her breath is warm on his cheek as she leans in and says, “I promise I’ll have you home in time to get Jess off to school.”

“I-I —“

“Don’t say a word, Matthew. Just follow me.”

He does because he knows when he’s outmatched.

Jessica Jones is not Barnes’ girlfriend.

Everyone knows that but it doesn’t stop everyone from saying she is. It also doesn’t stop Barnes from spending time with her. He’s gotten her involved in probably too many of his problems but the thing is, Jones is great at solving problems. Well, great at solving problems that aren’t her own.

He picks the lock to her apartment because it’s what he always does and Jones is awake, like she always is, even at this ungodly hour. Jones has been drinking, which isn’t unusual, but tonight, she’s absolutely plastered.

She’s in her underwear, sitting on her sofa with an almost-empty bottle of bourbon in hand. Two more empty bottles are on the floor in front of her and her eyes are glued to the television which is showing NY1, the local all-news channel.

Barnes sets the paper bag with the bottle of bourbon he brought down on the small table by the door. “Jones?”

Jones ignores him and instead finishes the contents of the bottle in one long gulp. She leans forward, nearly falling off the sofa as the news goes to another story and throws the empty bottle across the apartment with a loud string of curses.

When Barnes sees the news footage, he thinks he understands why. “Isn’t that the bartender?”
She leans dangerously to her left as she points at the screen. “Fucking Claire Temple, definitely.”

“That’s enough television, Jones,” Barnes says, reaching for the remote and trying not to think of Jones and the bartender as the couple they obviously were.

She catches his wrist, grabs the remote, and crushes it with a drunken smirk.

“Enough television,” Barnes repeats, “and enough booze.”

“You don’t get to tell me what to do, Barnes.”

Barnes decides to do something to cut through her drunken state. He pulls out his silenced .22 and fires into the television. It explodes in a shower of sparks.

“You asshole!”

“Yup,” he agrees, “but now you can’t watch TV and you’re out of booze, so now you’re gonna sleep it off.” It doesn’t take much effort to grab Jones and haul her to her feet. She’s too drunk to put up any kind of resistance as he steers her towards the bedroom.

“Barnes…”

“Yeah.” He peels back the covers with his right hand and keeps a hold of Jones with his left.

“Tell Petey to leave Luke alone.” Jones twists around to look him in the eye. “He’s too strong and too good a fighter. I mean it. He nearly killed me. Keep the kid the hell out of Harlem and away from Luke.”

The plates in Barnes’ arm whirl wildly as he takes all of that in and tries to control his temper at the idea of Jones being involved with this Cage asshole in any capacity. He also knows she’s right about Petey. The kid’s been too busy with Mathletes to see the news today but Barnes is positive that streak of luck won’t last. He’s also positive that Petey will break every promise to behave and will cut class to take Cage down, which means Barnes is going to have to do it first.

“You stay out of Harlem, too,” Jones adds as he tucks her in, because drunk or not, she knows him too well. “This doesn’t involve you.”


“I mean it, Barnes.”

“I know you do, Jones.”

She reaches up to grab at him and Barnes avoids her hands because he knows what she’s after.

“You —“

“That’s not the kind of comfort you need, Jones.” He leans down and kisses her forehead. “Now go to sleep.”

“Asshole.”

“Uh-huh,” Barnes agrees as he goes into her kitchen, retrieves a couple of bottles of water and the bottle of aspirin and sets them on her bedside table. In the few seconds that took him, Jones passed out and is snoring unattractively.
Not that it matters.

Jones is his friend.

And he’s going to Harlem to take care of her problem for her.
Steve opens the door to Peter’s bedroom just enough to look in and see that Peter and Tommy are sound asleep. Where Peter’s twin bed used to be, there’s now a bunk bed which makes sense given that Erik is sleeping in Tommy’s room and Steve has taken over Bucky’s. The house should feel crowded but it doesn’t. It feels perfect, the way home should.

The bedroom door closes, seemingly of its own accord, but Steve knows that it’s Erik’s doing. He turns to his right and there’s the Master of Magnetism, blinking sleepily at him.

“Even Captain America needs to sleep,” Erik admonishes. “In fact, perhaps he needs a good night’s sleep most of all.”

It’s because Steve is overtired that it takes him a moment to realize that he’s just been on the receiving end of parental concern from Erik Lehnsherr of all people. Living with Aunt May is clearly rubbing off on the man. “I’m fine.”

“You’re physically and emotionally exhausted,” Erik counters. “Why else would you come here?”

“Yes that why you’re here?”

“It’s why we all come here. And why we’re all so reluctant to leave.” Erik flashes a self-deprecating smile. “Despite James’ grumbling, it was he who purchased the bunk bed for the boys. He’s also begun drawing up plans to convert the attic to a bedroom for Peter, to turn the mud room into an extension of the kitchen and add a bedroom above it and possibly add an apartment above the garage for me.”

It’s such a Bucky thing to do that Steve is certain that construction is probably going to happen in the immediate future.

“We’ve already modified the basement so that Peter has a proper, well-lit, well-ventilated laboratory,” Erik goes on. “It’s fully-equipped now, thanks to James’ brilliant idea to appropriate equipment and materials from HYDRA.”

“What?!”

“Peter was lamenting that he was unable to source certain items for a project he was working on and James found a solution —“

“Looting HYDRA bases?!” Steve can’t believe what he’s hearing. Can’t believe that Bucky would willingly go into a HYDRA lab for any reason.

“They’ve apparently found it to be an excellent bonding experience.”

“Bucky takes Peter with him?!”

“Indeed —“

“How in Creation is Aunt May is okay with all of that?”
Erik raises an eyebrow. “You’re tired and so you’re missing the larger picture, Steven. If Peter is here, working in his laboratory, he’s not out there putting himself in harm’s way. Moreover, he’s furthering his scientific education.”

Steve takes a moment to consider what Erik’s just said and it makes sense. Still, he says, “Maybe I should go downstairs and look at the —“

“Looking at Peter’s laboratory will only exacerbate your worry,” Erik cuts him off, “although all you’d really see is an immaculate, brightly-lit workspace. There are no tentacled Hydra monsters lurking about. We’ve inspected every item carefully to make certain nothing dangerous was brought into May’s home.”

It’s the ‘we’ in the sentence that catches Steve’s attention. Erik, unlike Steve, isn’t just a periodic visitor. He’s established himself as a member of the household. As possibly the patriarch of the household.

It would be disturbing if the man didn’t seem so damned domesticated.

So…paternal.

“Go to bed, Steve,” Erik repeats. His expression softens further. “May would tell you the same, were she awake.”

Steve considers his options, realizes that Erik has a point. He came here to be part of the family and that means being on the receiving end of familial concern, whatever the source. He is exhausted and there really isn’t much that could be accomplished at this hour.

He wonders if anyone would believe Magneto is a suburban grandpa living in Queens.

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Barnes knows that going after Luke Cage or Carl Lucas or whatever the bartender is calling himself is a bad idea for a lot of reasons. For example, he’s done absolutely no recon and barely any research beyond whatever JARVIS could pull from news reports. He also isn’t doing the smart thing and bringing in backup, even though he knows Cage either has the world’s best body armor or he really is bulletproof.

Luckily, Barnes is used to bulletproof. Teddy Altman has unbreakable skin and impressive strength, not unlike Cage. The only difference is that Cage is a brawler, at least from the footage Barnes has seen, and Teddy can’t fight his way out of paper bag. Barnes, on the other hand, is a lot more than a brawler. He’s expert in multiple martial arts, including Systema, which gives him the advantage.

He hopes.

His plan is simple and one Petey would agree with. Beat the shit out of Cage and turn him over to
the cops. It’s a lot less than he deserves if what Jones said is true and he nearly killed her.

And Barnes has no reason to doubt Jones.

Finding Luke Cage turns out to be surprisingly easy. All he has to do is follow the sound of automatic gunfire and he finds the guy in the middle of Lenox Avenue, knocking one of six guys unconscious. The other five are already down and Cage’s hoodie looks like Swiss cheese but there’s no blood and the guy doesn’t even look winded.

Hand-to-hand it is then.

Barnes takes full advantage of Cage’s distraction, jumping down four stories from the apartment building where he was watching the show, and body slams the asshole. He brings the full weight of his metal arm down on Cage’s neck.

Cage rolls with the impact and comes up swinging. What he needs is space and that’s exactly what Barnes doesn’t plan to give him. Brawlers need space. Barnes doesn’t. He’s been trained to fight in every kind of condition there is and that gives him the tactical advantage.

At least it does until Cage says, “Sweet Christmas. I’m fighting Bucky friggin’ Barnes. Man, you’re one of the good guys so what did I ever do to piss you off?”

“What even is that?!”

“That’s me, trying not to swear.” Cage manages to free himself and land a sharp kick to Barnes’ ribcage in the process. “Your turn.”

Barnes is on his feet before Cage even finishes speaking, fists swinging. “You tried to kill Jessica Jones, asshole.”

Cage raises his hands, trying to signal that the fight is over. “Look, I —“

Barnes cuts him off with a swift kick to the midsection that sends Cage crashing through the metal gate and plate glass window of a wig shop. Talking during a fight is something Petey does and Barnes rides him about it constantly, not that it’s ever going to do any good. Barnes is a soldier, trained to stay deadly silent during combat, except lately…. Well, Petey’s bad habits have been rubbing off. “There’s no ‘look’. There’s nothing you can say —“

“Killgrave,” Cage grunts, still not fighting back.

There was nothing Cage could say. Except that. Barnes barely manages to stop his fist in time. “What?!”

“You know who that is, right?”

“You were under Killgrave’s control,” Barnes says. As much as he wishes it weren’t the truth, he’s got the feeling it is.

Cage nods. “He made me blow up my own bar. With me in it. Then he sent me to kill Jessica.” He squares his shoulders and narrows his eyes at Barnes. “She knows that, so you understand why I’m having a hard time trying to figure out your involvement in all this.”

“She’s my friend.” It sounds lame, even to Barnes’ ears because of the way the facts are starting to
add up. If Cage really was a bad guy, Jones would have come after him herself instead of getting stinking drunk.

“That’s a long way down from being friends with Captain America,” Cage says. “You want my advice, you can do a lot better.”

“I don’t want your advice,” Barnes growls, the metal plates in his arm snapping into place sharply as his hands curl into fists at his sides.

“You should.” Cage stuffs his hands in the pockets of his ruined hoodie, signaling that the fight is over, despite what Barnes wants. “What happened between her and me is between us. Maybe she’ll tell you the truth if you ask her. It took her too long to tell it to me and it ruined everything. Barnes, she’s going to drag you down with her if you get too close.”

Cage doesn’t want to fight. He doesn’t want to swear. He is, Barnes admits to himself, a decent man who’s probably in over his head, judging from the hired hitters he just took down and the media attention being heaped on him. Barnes sighs and decides to get himself in over his head too. “What’s going on here, Cage?”

“Nothing I can’t handle, but thanks for the offer.” Cage holds out his hand, offering a truce and possibly a friendship.

Barnes shakes the man’s hand. “You change your mind, let me know.”

“You have enough troubles on your plate.”

“Tell me about it,” Barnes sighs. “Between trying to get a quorum for next week’s PTA meeting and everyone trying to one-up the Mathletes —“

“Wait, what?!?”

“What?” Barnes asks defensively. Dammit, what the hell was he thinking, saying that?

“I meant HYDRA and whoever else is coming after you,” Cage grins, clearly tickled at Barnes’ slip, “but it sounds like you have even bigger problems at home with…Spider-Man, is it?”

“Speaking of,” Barnes says, changing the subject, “if the kid comes here looking to play hero, do not engage. You tell him Bucky said no and he’s grounded, okay?”

“You ground Spider-Man?” Cage looks like he’s going to burst into laughter.

“Look, just do it, okay? And that goes for any other kid that comes looking for a piece of you.”

“Are you their den mother, Barnes?”

Barnes bites back a growl of irritation. “You want a bunch of teenage spazzes with powers and dubious skills running around this city without supervision, dumbass?”

“Not even on my best day,” Cage tells him. “You have my word, if they show up in Harlem, I’ll send them on their way.” He laughs softly and shakes his head. “Bucky friggin’ Barnes is a member of the PTA. Sweet Christmas.”

“Yeah,” Barnes agrees and he doesn’t mention that’s he’s the PTA president. “Sweet friggin’ Christmas.”
Negasonic Teenage Warhead knows the day has gone completely to shit the minute she gets the telepathic summons from Professor X. Telepathic summonses at eight in the morning are never a good sign, especially when they involve going to his office instead of gearing up and getting on the Blackbird. A summons to his office means it’s school bullshit instead of evil mutant bullshit, the latter of which is more common and the former of which usually means reading some scholarly ‘why can’t we all just get along’ article. All of this is why she takes her time to apply her eyeliner just right and walks as slowly as possible to his office. Inevitably, she gets there anyway.

“Good morning, Ellie,” Professor X announces as NTW skulks in, meeting her eyes and she knows that he know why it took so long. “Now that everyone is here, I’d like to explain why we’re meeting before class.”

NTW scowls at being called ‘Ellie’ and then scowls harder when she sees who’s in the room with her. There’s Kiss-Ass Pryde, Rogue, and the third member of their Love-Triangle-of-Angst, Bobby Drake. Off to the side is the new kid, whose power is so boring that NTW can’t remember his name.

“I have some thrilling news, children,” Professor X goes on and he’s beaming like he’s about to tell them they don’t have to bother with the mockery of classes and tests anymore, “in the interest of furthering human-mutant relations, I’ve signed the school up to compete in some academic events.”

There’s a collective, stifled groan which conveys that the Professor is the only one who finds the news thrilling.

“What kind of events, Professor?” trills Kiss-Ass, because she’s a total nerd.

“I thought we’d begin with Mathletics,” he tells her, looking at each of them in turn. “You’ve all shown outstanding aptitude in mathematics and the season for competition is just about to begin —“

“Wait a second,” Bobby interjects, jabbing a thumb in the direction of the new kid. “Isn’t his power absorbing knowledge he needs? And wouldn’t that be cheating?”

The new kid rolls his eyes. “I only absorb it temporarily, which means I’ve gotta study just as hard as you will for this thing.”

It’s a bullshit answer, NTW thinks, because if someone else knows the answer, the new kid — whose name is David Alleyne — is just going to pluck it from the person’s head. Apparently Rogue thinks so too, judging by the way she’s narrowing her eyes, but neither she nor NTW are saying a freaking word.

“I expect all of you to study hard,” Professor X intones, neatly avoiding the question of cheating with powers, “and to do your very best.”

Mutant superiority for the win. That’s when NTW remembers who stopped by yesterday and who
happens to be living with Mathlete Extraordinaire, Peter Dorker. And <i>that's</i> when it all comes together. “Dude, did you make a bet or something with Magneto?”

All heads turn in NTW’s direction and then in the Professor’s.

Just then, the bell rings, signaling the start of the school day — seven minutes early.

NTW follows the gang out but shoots a suspicious glare at Professor X, who looks directly at her with a guileless, placid expression. She’s not fooled. Not for a second. The use of telekinesis to ring the bell is a sure sign that there’s more to the Mathlete bullshit than he’s letting on.

Tommy will know.

And Tommy’s going to spill his guts to her.

Not that NTW can’t figure out the root cause for this entire fucking fiasco.

It’s the Ol’ Parker Luck, spreading like a goddamned plague and infecting everyone, including Magneto and Professor X.

Parker is going to pay and if they need the new kid to make him suffer, so be it.

May the Mutant Mathletes win.

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“Fuck!”

That’s my first word of the day and it’s not because I’m hung over. Hangovers rarely happen to me, thanks to whatever gave me my fucking super powers. Getting stupid drunk, on the other hand, happens. Especially when I downed three bottles of bourbon with no water or food.

Stupid drunk covers my night perfectly. Seeing Luke on the news was one thing. Seeing him on the news making googly eyes at Claire Temple while he talked to reporters about putting a stop to drug violence in Harlem…. Well, that was the kind of thing that led to me drinking up all my bourbon and watching the story play in endless repeat every twenty-six minutes.

That would have been bad enough but the two bottles of water and the bottle of aspirin on my bedside table are a sign that I wasn’t hallucinating or having a weird blackout. Bucky goddamn Barnes was here last night, witnessing me in all my drunken glory before shooting my TV and tucking me into bed.

“Fuck!”

I throw the covers back and leap out of bed to stare stupidly at the wreckage of my television while...
the memories of exactly what I said and did come flooding back.

“Fuck!”

I tried to sleep with Barnes.

“Fuck!”

I told him to stay away from Luke.

“Fuck!”

There’s no way in hell Barnes would do that. He probably took one look at drunk, fucked up me and decided Luke was the biggest asshole on the planet and that he was going to pay for whatever he did to me. The overprotective dumbass.

And then I panic all over again because there are two ways that could have played out. The first is Barnes taking down Luke and the second is Luke telling Barnes what really happened between us.

Not having a television delays me for exactly how long it takes to boot up my computer and pull up the morning’s headlines to find that there are no reports of the Winter Soldier and Luke Cage duking it out on the streets of Harlem. What there is, is a report of Luke taking down a squad of contract killers on Lenox Avenue and then getting into a fight with a local gang. Naturally, he won.

There’s no way I could be so lucky that Barnes listened to me and stayed the fuck out of Harlem. That’s because he’s an overprotective dumbass and I’ve been exposed to the Ol’ Parker Luck. It’s the OPL that makes me break out in a cold sweat thinking about Luke telling Barnes the truth, that I’m the piece of shit that killed Luke’s wife and then slept with him before finally telling him moments before he found out for himself.

If that’s the case, Barnes is never coming back.

Not that I blame him.

I want to be relieved at the idea of no more super soldier bullshit. No more Spidey problems. No more Assholes of Magnetism or killer robots or magical trips to Disney. No more Ol’ Parker Luck.

No more Bucky goddamn Barnes.

The thing is, the asshole is my friend and if anyone could possibly understand, it would be him.

But what if Luke didn’t tell Barnes everything?

Luke’s the kind of good guy who wouldn’t share more than he needed to, right?

I need answers and then I’m going to need to talk to Barnes. But first, I need to go to Harlem and talk to Luke. Because that’s going to go so well.

“Fuck.”
The morning begins with the Ol’ Parker Luck running true to form.

There’s no other explanation for Steve standing side-by-side in the kitchen with Magneto, making an ungodly amount of breakfast. Both turn to beam at Peter as he walks in, identical indulgent smiles that tell him he’s got a huge bag of lunch waiting for him, too.

“Good morning, Peter,” Erik says cheerily. “I’ve made blintzes for breakfast. Do you want potato or cheese?”

“You made what!?”

“It’s a Jewish delicacy and best eaten with sour cream.” Erik puts a plate in front of Peter. “I only allowed Steve to assist, not to cook —“

“There’s nothing wrong with my cooking,” Steve protests.

“And he made your lunch,” Erik finishes, pausing to ruffle Peter’s hair.

“Do I smell blintzes?” Aunt May asks.

Erik answers her with a huge plateful and a huge smile while Steve sets a mug of coffee on the table for her. He waits until she tastes the food and then steps back, looking pleased.

There’s a gust of air and then Tommy is in the kitchen, nose wrinkled in confusion. “What the hell are those things?”

“Breakfast,” Peter tells him, mouth full. “The cheese ones are awesome.”

“Your heritage,” Erik says, puffing out his chest, “includes Jewish delicacies as well as customs.”

“You know I wasn’t raised Jewish, right?” Tommy asks him.

“No better time to discover your roots,” Steve says, handing him a plate and shooting him a look that says not to argue. “Go on. Eat, son.”

Everyone stares at Tommy until he takes a bite. “Damn! These cheese blingies are freakin’ great!”

“Blintzes,” Erik corrects him.

“Language,” Steve scolds.

“That’s it,” Bucky announces, flinging the back door open. “I’m starting a swear jar.” His face is bruised and there’s a tear in the knee of his jeans. “The way you kids talk is a disgrace. Hey, who made blintzes?”

“More importantly,” Aunt May says, getting to her feet, “what on earth happened to you?”

“Dispensed a little justice,” Bucky shrugs, grabbing a plate from Erik and stuffing his face while Peter and Steve exchange suspicious looks.
Peter tries to keep the disappointment out of his voice as he asks, “Did you go crime fighting without me?”

“Spur of the moment thing,” Bucky assures him as he grabs the bowl of sour cream. “And besides, it was a school night.”

“But —“

“It turned out to be nothing.”

“It doesn’t look like nothing, Buck,” Steve comments, dabbing at the dried blood on Bucky’s face with a damp paper towel. “In fact, judging by that limp and these bruises, it was —“

“Nothing,” Bucky cuts him off. He narrows his eyes at Peter. “And it’s gonna stay nothing, understand?”

“I-I didn’t do anything! I was in bed!” Peter protests.

“He was,” Tommy agrees and then adds, “and I know because he tossed and turned all night.”

Bucky leans back in his chair and regards Peter coolly. “Stay out of Harlem, Petey.”

“What?!”

“Whatever you hear on the news today, you stay out of there, you got me?”

“But —“

“You go up there and I will ground you, understand?”

Stunned, Peter’s mouth drops open because he has literally no idea what’s going on in Harlem and then a thought occurs to him. “Does that mean no Mathletes?”

“That means nothing but Mathletes,” Bucky corrects him. “Promise me, Petey. No cutting school and going to Harlem.”

Peter blows out a sigh. “Fine. I’ll stay out of Harlem.”

“What about me?” Tommy asks. “Can I go?”

“No!” Bucky barks at him. “Not you, not Billy, none of you kids. It doesn’t concern you and I’ve already checked it out.”

“Bucky,” Aunt May says, “there’s no need to yell.”

“Over that?” Steve puts in, folding his arms over his chest. Because his arms are massive and his chest is massive, the effect brings conversation and breakfast to an immediate halt. “No. About raiding HYDRA bases? That’s a whole other story, isn’t it, Buck?”

“Sweet Christmas,” Bucky complains. “You’re gonna ride me about that now? I just walked in the fu — uh, friggin’ door, Stevie.”

“Sweet what?!” Tommy snorts.

Peter slips out of his chair, snatches his lunch from the refrigerator and prepares to make his escape. There’s no way he wants to be here for this argument. His escape is cut short when Bucky’s
cybernetic arm snakes out and metal fingers curl tightly around Peter’s bicep.

“For your information, Steve,” Bucky says testily, “Petey was making trackers and needed parts. You know he doesn’t like to ask Tony so — “

“So you stole them from HYDRA?!” Steve interrupts.

“I took them from an abandoned HYDRA R&D facility,” Bucky shrugs.

“You brought HYDRA tech into Aunt May’s house!”

“I’m HYDRA tech in Aunt May’s house!”

Erik gestures and Bucky’s fingers are pried loose as he whispers into Peter’s ear while Bucky and Steve continue to trade arguments. “Come, Peter. I’ll walk you to school.”

“We can walk ourselves,” Tommy points out.

“We can,” Peter agrees.

“Someone has to make sure you don’t go to Harlem instead of school,” Erik remarks dryly. “Otherwise, James will spend time verifying your whereabouts and, if you’re not where you’re supposed to be, he will hunt you down and yell. I’m sure we’d all like to avoid that.”

Peter heaves a sigh and notices that Aunt May has slipped out of the kitchen to get ready to go to work rather than play peacemaker between Steve and Bucky. It occurs to him that maybe she’s less happy about having HYDRA tech in the house than she’s let on.

“Let the boys fight,” Erik says, following Peter and Tommy down the front walk. “I’ve a feeling they’ve done it before and it’s been a while coming.” He turns to Peter. “This is less about liberating HYDRA materials than about James putting himself in harm’s way. Think of it as James scolding you when you’ve come home injured.”

“Or from Harlem,” Tommy adds.

“Yes,” Erik agrees. “For the sake of all our sanity, stay in Queens today, Peter.”

What, Peter wonders, is going on in Harlem?

And what harm would it do for him to take a little look-see during lunch period?

After all, the Ol’ Parker Luck has already struck hard this morning.

It should be all downhill from here.
Magneto is waiting in Trish’s office when she gets off the air.

There was a time when that would have thrown her staff into a panic but these days, Erik in Trish’s office is a such a routine occurrence that nobody even bothered to let her know he was there.

“Good morning,” Erik greets her, gesturing to a stack of plastic containers on her desk. “I brought homemade blintzes for you.”

“Did you make them yourself?” Trish asks, setting her steaming cup of tea with lemon on her desk before popping open a plastic container and sniffing. She wonders if anyone would believe that this is the same man who nearly destroyed the Golden Gate Bridge some years back.

“Steve helped.”

“Captain America made blintzes?”

“Captain America helped make blintzes,” Erik corrects her. “Trust me, you do not want to eat the man’s cooking. He’s had little practice and tends to burn everything.”

Trish snaps the lid of the container shut. “Does that make Bucky the better cook?”

“He’s become quite adept at many household chores.” Erik leans back in his chair. “HYDRA’s deadliest assassin is now the president of the PTA.”

Trish chokes on her tea. “What?!”

Erik waves a hand at her confusion. “I’ve exciting news. Charles has agreed to an interview.”

“You’re kidding!” Ratings numbers flash before her eyes.

“And, if you’d like, the two of us can debate a topic.” He clasps his hands and rests them on the edge of her desk. “In fact, I have an extremely timely one that should pique everyone’s interest. Is it ethical for mutants to use their gifts in competition against non-mutants?”

“Well, that’s —“

“You see, Charles has formed a team of…” Erik’s mouth twists. “Mathletes.”

“He’s done what?!”

“Mutant Mathletes.”

“Okay, but —“

“One of the children has the ability to absorb knowledge. Charles doesn’t believe that’s cheating.”
Trish’s eyes narrow because the ratings she imagined earlier just doubled. “Really?”

“Really,” Erik says dryly. “Tell me, do you think your listeners might find the topic of interest?”

“Let me get this straight,” Trish says. “Charles is in favor of using mutant powers and you’re not? Weren’t you the one who advocated mutant superiority all these years?”

“Superiority is one thing,” Erik sniffs disdainfully. “Cheating is quite another. The children competing in these events study quite hard for the opportunity to earn money for scholarships and be recognized by college recruiters. What Charles proposes to do is an affront to those children and the parents who encourage them.”

This, Trish realizes, is ratings gold. The rivalry between Charles Xavier and Erik is legendary and she knows that like Erik, Charles won’t be content with appearing on her show just once. The two of them will debate topic after topic and they won’t restrict their debates to just mutant-related issues. Erik certainly hasn’t. He’s had a lot to say about affordable housing, education, politics and so much more. Whatever listeners he alienated are dwarfed by the new listeners he’s brought in both locally and via satellite. Podcast downloads are up over seventy percent. There’s talk of Emmy and other award nominations. More importantly, her contract is up for renegotiation and this is the win she needed to get the salary she wants.

“Let’s get Charles on the phone to confirm,” Trish says.

It takes a little over three hours and most of my patience questioning people before I find Luke in the last place I’d expect, a barber shop called Pop’s. The place is being renovated from damage that looks like the result of a combination of World War III and the shootout scene from Scarface. Bullet holes and the remnants of yellow police tape tell me someone else besides Barnes came looking for Luke. I ignore all of it and the ‘closed’ sign on the door as I let myself in.

A cool cat with a pork pie hat greets me. “We’re closed, miss.”

“She’s not here for a haircut,” Luke says, coming out from the back, carrying a bucket of plaster in one hand and a sheet of drywall in the other. “Would you excuse us for a bit, Bobby?”

Bobby looks me up and down and scratches at his goatee. “Guess I’ll get some lunch then.”

There’s a long uncomfortable silence before and after Bobby leaves during which Luke and I eye each other. Luke looks a lot better than the last time I saw him, which was right after I nearly killed him with a shotgun blast to the head. “Luke, I—“

“You’re sorry you said something that made your boyfriend, Bucky Barnes, think he had to come all the way up to Harlem to teach me a lesson,” Luke interrupts, shaking his head. “I figured that much. What you’re really here for isn’t to apologize but to ask what I told him.”
Damn. I’d forgotten how well he could see right through me. “He’s not my boyfriend!”

“The man came all the way here from Queens to kick my ass,” Luke counters. “The only one who thinks he’s not your boyfriend is you.”

“At least I’m not screwing a cape chaser.”


“Didn’t she tell you? She used to date Daredevil.” Words are coming out of my mouth. Angry, jealous words that are embarrassing the shit out of me but I can’t stop myself. Serves his self-righteous ass right for calling Barnes my boyfriend.

“And how do you know that?”

“Daredevil told me.” I plaster a fake smile on my face. “She also went out a couple of times with Hawkeye but he’s shackled up with Mystique now.”

“Do you walk Spider-Man to school?” Luke shoots back. “What with Barnes being his daddy and on the PTA and all.”

“Barnes is what?!” I don’t even really want to know. What I want to focus on is Luke’s fixation with Barnes being my boyfriend because maybe he doesn’t hate me that much after all. Maybe he’s… jealous? Is that even possible?

“Did your boyfriend forget to tell you that?”

“I guess he felt more comfortable telling you. Maybe he’s your boyfriend now.”

“If he was, I wouldn’t send him to Harlem to get his behind kicked.”

“I didn’t send him —“

“Then why did he come here, all full of righteous metal-armed fury, spouting off about me trying to kill you and you not mentioning I was Killgraved?” Luke compounds his victory by crossing his arms over his chest as he raises an eyebrow at me.

Like hell I’m going to admit I was drunk because Luke is going to know the reason why, if he doesn’t already. And like hell I’m going to try to apologize again. There’s only one thing left to do. I flip him off.

He opens his mouth to add fuel to the fire.

Before he can say a word, the Ol’ Parker Luck comes crashing down on both of us.
Peter finds out what’s going on in Harlem during first period history class. While his teacher is going on about the Stamp Tax, he’s on Google learning about Luke Cage. The former Carl Lucas is a wanted criminal and he’s also some kind of vigilante. And he’s super strong, according to all the videos up on YouTube. Cage trashed a police car a couple of days ago, which doesn’t exactly make him a good guy in Peter’s book.

By third period, Peter is itching to slip into his costume and web-sling his way up to Harlem.

Fourth period Spanish is when Fate hands Peter a gift in the form of a substitute teacher. He takes one look into the classroom at the nervous recent college graduate and knows nobody is going to notice he’s gone.

Nobody except Mary Jane. She’s right behind him and giving him a look that says she knows exactly where he’s going and what he’s planning to do, even though he hasn’t told her about what Bucky said.

“No,” she says.

“I-I was just going to the bathroom,” Peter lies.

Mary Jane folds her arms across her chest and stares hard at him, “No, you weren’t. You were going to…you know.”

“I was.”

“Bucky will know.”

“Not if you sign my name on the attendance sheet.” Peter gives her puppy dog eyes. “I’ll be back before fifth period. Please, MJ?”

“You’d better be back early,” she warns.

“You’re the best,” Peter tells her earnestly. He leans in, kisses her cheek and takes off at a run down the hallway, using his Spidey sense to dodge Flash Thompson and his speed to duck past Dean Reynolds and out the building’s side door without being noticed.

A few minutes later, he’s web-slinging his way uptown.

Getting to Harlem isn’t a problem.

It turns out that finding Luke Cage isn’t that hard either.

The way Peter figures it, he’s probably the person Deadpool is about to shoot at with that giant machine gun.
Once Jessica showed up, Luke knew it was only a matter of time before Spider-Boy disobeyed his
daddy and came looking for him. He was expecting it. What Luke wasn’t expecting was for the kid
to come crashing through his brand-new, expensive plate glass window, snagging him and Jessica by
the ankle with those webs of his and yanking them to the floor.

“Get down!” Spider-Boy screams unnecessarily because Luke and Jessica are already down.

Then again, a split-second later, gunfire erupts, putting bullet holes back into every available surface,
shattering the mirrors and destroying the classy new barber chairs Luke bought with Cottonmouth’s
drug money. In short, everything that Luke just rebuilt or replaced is shot completely to hell.

Luke doesn’t really have time to get upset about all of that though. He’s busy being a human shield
and throwing himself over the tiny Spider-Kid, just in case the kid’s not bulletproof. It’s pretty easy
to see why Bucky Barnes is so protective of the kid. He’s the size of a scrawny twelve-year old and
no matter how strong he is, the idea of the kid getting hurt while wearing that silly costume is enough
to give anyone decent a heart attack.

“What did you do, Petey?!” Jessica shouts over the sound of gunfire.

“Ixnay!” comes the kid’s muffled, indignant response. He squirms under Luke. “Dude, let me up, I
can —“


“But that’s Deadpool,” the kid protests. “I can —“

Jessica cuts him off angrily. “That’s Deadpool?! Why the hell is Deadpool here? Did you bring him
with you when you decided to cut school, Petey?!”

“Ixnay!” A scrawny arm pokes out from beneath Luke to shake a finger in Jessica’s direction before
Luke slams it down. “I’m trying to have a secret identity here, for crying out loud!”

It would be funny if the gunfire would let up already but this Deadpool person doesn’t seem to have
any interest in stopping. “How many bullets does this guy have?”

“Dude, it’s Deadpool,” Spider-Petey says, like that’s supposed to explain everything.

“Well, why didn’t you take him out before he started shooting?” Jessica demands.

“Deadpool,” Petey says again.

And then the gunfire stops.

Just as Luke starts to get up, a pair of grenades come flying into the remains of Pop’s.

Everything goes white.
Peter doesn’t even have to open his eyes to know he has a concussion. The way his ears are ringing and the throbbing in his head tell him everything he needs to know. Luckily, that suffocating feeling is just enormous Luke Cage lying unconscious on top of him and Peter is finally able to squirm free.

Even though he knows it’s a bad idea, he pulls off his mask to gulp down some air and then he opens his eyes.

Deadpool is standing right over him, giving him a friendly wave. “Hey, Pe —“

“Ixnay!”

“Ixnay’s a cool superhero name,” Deadpool tells him, “but you’re going to have to get a snazzier superhero suit. Anyway, since you’re awake, wanna help me off Luke Cage? I’ll cut you in —“

“No! No killing!” Peter leaps to his feet and puts himself between Cage and Deadpool. “He might be a good guy.”

“I don’t care if he’s Mother Theresa,” Deadpool shrugs. “I’m being paid a lot of money to kill him. I mean, a lot of money, Pe — uh, Ixnay. Lukie here pissed off some pretty powerful peeps.”

Peter stares at him. “Mother Theresa is dead.”

“Then Luke can be just like her, can’t he?”

“But —“

“You,” Luke grunts, pushing himself up on one knee and glaring at Deadpool, “are gonna be really sorry about all this property damage you just caused.”

Deadpool gasps and points. “Oh my God! Look at your shirt! You really are bulletproof.”

“I really am,” Luke agrees, standing up straight. Behind him, Jones is starting to come awake.

“And you must have super healing like Ixnay over here because that stun grenade should have had you out for an hour.”

“Must be.”

“No wonder they’re paying me so much,” Deadpool sighs. “Killing you is going to be a real pain in the ass.”
“Hey!” Luke jabs a finger in Deadpool’s direction. “We don’t use language like that around here. Especially in front of the kid. Go on home, Petey, before you get hurt.”

“It’s Spider-Man!” Peter exclaims, flapping his arms in frustration. "And nobody’s killing anybody!”

“If I don’t kill him, I can’t pay this month’s rent and then I’m going to have to move in with you,” Deadpool tells him. “And I’ll probably sleep in your bed and use your toothbrush.”

Jones coughs as she elbows Peter aside. “How about you tell us who hired you and we take him down and you get to keep the money?”

Deadpool cocks his head to the side and plants his fists on his hips. “That’s unethical! I’d never do something like that. We mercs have a code —“

“Dude, you’ve totally done that,” Peter interrupts him. “Like, a bunch of times. You told us all about it during Passover dinner.”

“Wait a second,” Luke says, laying one massive hand on Peter’s shoulder and the other on Jones’. “Are you friends with this guy?”

“Forget that,” Deadpool counters, hooking an arm around Peter and pulling him to his side. “Ixnay and I are besties. I would have been one of his daddies if he asked me but now he’s got too many of them and Grandpa Magneto, too. That’s way too much family, if you know what I mean.”

Luke’s hand clamps down on Peter’s shoulder again and he’s wrested away from Deadpool. “This young man needs to go back to school and Mathlete practice, don’t you, Petey?”

“Oh my God,” Peter moans, slapping the heel of his hand against his forehead, “why do you know that?! It’s bad enough you know my secret identity but —“

“But now he knows you’re a math nerd and a total social outcast, too.” Deadpool clucks sympathetically. “I’d tell you to put your mask back on but it’s not going to help now that the truth is out.”

“You can trust Luke,” Jones says. “He’s one of the most decent people I’ve ever met, Petey. He’s not going to blow your identity, unlike Dead-dope over there.” She gets into Deadpool’s space. “Now, I know you’ve got an off-the charts healing factor, but between Luke and me, we can put that healing factor to the test and make you tell us who hired you. Or you could just save yourself the pain and tell us now.”

Before Deadpool can say a word, Peter’s Spidey-sense goes bananas. He throws himself at Jones, tackling her as he shouts, “Everybody down!”

There’s a whistling sound and just as the barber shop erupts in a fireball around them, he can hear Deadpool say, “Damn it. They double-booked the job.”

Of course they did.

The Ol’ Parker Luck is in full swing.
The second the news reports that there are massive explosions in Harlem, Barnes knows two things are true. Luke Cage is involved and Petey is probably there. He’s grabbing his gear and heading for the garage where he keeps the motorcycle that he swiped from a HYDRA base when a blue shield-carrying blur zips past him and jumps onto his own motorcycle.

They roar out of the garage and head for the Grand Central Parkway.

Barnes has no idea what he’s going to find in Harlem when he gets there but he knows one thing for damn sure. Whoever blew up Petey is going to regret it.
Getting blown up *sucks* but ever since I met Bucky goddamn Barnes, it’s become a routine occurrence. As in, fucking weekly and sometimes even twice a week. Being firebombed is new, so I have to give props to the new guy for originality as I grab Luke with one hand, Petey with the other and fly them out of the inferno.

Deadpool can heal from anything, so I figure he’ll be fine without my help.

We land in a heap halfway up the block from the smoldering shop and I hastily tug Petey’s mask back down over his face. It’s crooked and I know he’s going to complain because he’s a little pain in my ass but at least nobody else will find out who he is today. I hope.

Luke groans, reaches over and rubs a massive hand over Petey’s back. “C’mon, kid, wake up.”

Petey wakes up abruptly, eyes going wide before snagging us each with a web and leaping upwards, yanking us out of the way of a wrecking ball that comes hurtling in our direction. “Holy shi—!”


“Really?” We’re dangling on webs, six stories above the street while Petey pulls us onto a rooftop. “You sure that’s what you want to make your priority right now over those four guys down there?”

“Any idea who they are?” Luke asks, pointing down at the four guys coming our way. One’s carrying a crowbar, another a wrecking ball and each of them is enormous and muscled. They’re all wearing matching construction-type outfits, although one’s outfit is some kind of crazy armor.

“Why are you looking at me?!” Petey demands peevishly. “I don’t know every weirdo in a costume!”

Luke raises an eyebrow at him. “Out of the three of us, only one body here fought someone with octopus arms and a killer goblin guy.”

“I fought killer robots in Disney and Sokovia,” I point out.

“She did,” Petey agrees.

“And that’s why I stay in Harlem.”

“They call themselves the Wrecking Crew,” Deadpool says from behind us as we all leap out of our skins. He’s covered in burns that are rapidly healing and his costume is in shreds. “Rumor has it they’re enhanced somehow —”

“You think?” I roll my eyes at him. “Any idea how we take them down?”

“I’ve got this,” Deadpool says and he leaps down from the building. I think maybe he breaks his ankles when he lands but if he does, he doesn’t seem to be in any pain as he staggers right into the
path of the four assholes. “Hey, guys, I think we’ve been double — yowwww!”

One of the men hits him with an oversized fist, sending Deadpool flying. Oversized is actually an understatement.

“Is that what a genetically enhanced fist looks like?” Luke asks, wincing as Deadpool goes crashing into the facade of a nearby apartment building, cracking it.

Petey leaps into action before we can stop him, dodging swinging crowbars and wrecking balls to web up the damaged facade, preventing bricks from falling on the panicked screaming pedestrians below.

Luke leaps down, putting himself between the people, Petey and the Wrecking Crew.

Since we’re all being stupid and making ourselves targets, I fly off the roof, pick the biggest asshole out of the bunch — the one with the fucking armor, of course — and crash into him, full-force. As I read the name ‘Bulldozer’ on his costume, I know that he’s not going to go down easy.

Why would he?

The Ol’ Parker Luck is in complete control now.

Although Luke would rather take the offensive, he’s on defense and putting himself between the Wrecking Crew and Spider-Boy, keeping the kid safe while the kid protects the people of Harlem. Luke has to give the kid credit. He’s creating makeshift barricades with his webbing and pulling people out of the windows of the damaged building, while shouting orders to evacuate.

The only problem is that little Spidey is also making himself a target.

Lucky for him, Luke has his back. It sounds nice but the truth is, watching the kid’s back is damned hard work. If Petey stayed on the ground or moved like a normal person, it would be easier for Luke to run defense. Instead, the kid moves like nothing Luke has ever seen. He’s ridiculously fast and freakishly agile, moving in ways Luke is pretty sure the human body isn’t supposed to unless your name is Mr. Fantastic.

The only good news is that Deadpool appears to have Jessica’s back, which is a good thing because these Wrecking Crew guys are absolutely not amateurs and they are, to Luke’s consternation, incredibly strong. Stronger than average. Definitely enhanced. And they all have gimmicks, like a crowbar, a wrecking ball, oversized hands, and body armor in keeping with the name ‘Bulldozer’.

Worse, they’re trained fighters, which means they quickly figure out his strategy and work on separating him from the kid.
And because the kid is a kid, he eagerly throws himself into the fray in the worst way possible — by going straight for the maniac with the wrecking ball and running his mouth. Fortunately, the kid’s body is faster than his mouth, which Luke actually didn’t think was possible. If the kid’s strategy is pissing off Thunderball and making him sloppy, it seems to be working. Somehow, though, Luke doubts the kid has an actual strategy.

Thunderball just keeps flinging the wrecking ball and Petey keeps dodging it.

And then Luke realizes what the kid’s strategy is. He’s luring Thunderball away from the apartment buildings and the people.

“You guys all seem like you’re overcompensating,” the kid remarks, swinging just out of the wrecking ball’s arc. “Especially you, dude. But I think you weren’t paying attention in biology because just one big ball isn’t all that — “

“Hold still, you little bastard!”

Luke is busy trading blows with the lunatic with the big hands — Piledriver — so all he can do is watch it happen.

Petey actually stops moving.

He shoots a jet of webbing into Thunderball’s face.

Thunderball sends his wrecking ball flying.

It crashes into the upper floors of an apartment building, raining bricks and concrete down on the sidewalk below.

Petey throws himself directly under the debris to shove an elderly woman, who just poked her head out the building’s front door, out of harm’s way.

In the span of a heartbeat, the kid is buried under the rubble.

And then, impossibly, a motorcycle comes flying through the air, smashing into Thunderball and taking him down.

Simultaneously, the iconic red, white and blue shield soars majestically overhead until it smashes into Bulldozer’s armored head. He staggers and goes down.

Captain America and the Winter Soldier have officially joined the fight.

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Barnes doesn’t even hesitate. He pulls out a Tec-9 and opens fire on the asshole with the crowbar, driving him back from where Cage is already at work pulling rubble off of Petey. Meanwhile, Stevie rushes over to help Jones.
The pile of debris shifts and, to Barnes’ relief, Petey drags himself out.

Before Barnes can get to him, Cage is already checking Petey for injuries. Their eyes meet over Petey’s masked head and a lifelong friendship is confirmed, then and there.

The asshole with the gigantic hands suddenly pivots, slams a fist through the sidewalk and punches straight through a gas main. There’s no doubt it’s a gas main because there’s an immediate explosion that sends Jones flying backwards into Stevie.

Deadpool, meanwhile, walks straight through the fire. Calmly, like he’s out for a stroll. He taps the guy with the hands on the shoulder, and hands him a pair of grenades. They explode instantly.

Barnes hits the ground, sees Stevie cover himself and Jones with his shield, and sighs with relief as Cage throws himself over Petey.

The explosions shatter glass and send even more debris raining down.

A water main breaks, putting out the gas fire.

Barnes has a feeling nobody will be talking about how much damage the Hulk did to Harlem after this.

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“They call themselves the Wrecking Crew,” Jones tells Steve as she dusts herself off.

“That explains the construction theme.” Steve has to fight the urge to roll his eyes. He can do that later. Right now, he’s busy using his shield to block the crowbar being swung at his head. There’s a satisfying clang and the Wrecker learns a lesson in physics as the shockwave sends him pirouetting backwards, right into Peter’s fist.

Jones grabs the crowbar and whacks Piledriver across the back of the head with it before tossing it to Bucky, who uses it to slice through the chain of Thunderball’s wrecking ball.

“Aww, look at that,” Peter clucks, webbing the metal ball and snatching it away from Thunderball’s grasp. “You’ve been neutered.”

“When I get my hands on you —” Thunderball starts. He doesn’t get a chance to finish because Steve hits him full force with the shield and Deadpool hits him over the head with the wrecking ball.

Cage deals the fight’s final blow — a piledriver — to Piledriver.

“I think I’m gonna keep this,” Deadpool announces, holding up the wrecking ball.

“I think that’s evidence,” Jones tells him.
“Can I keep the crowbar?”

“Also evidence.”

“Can I keep —?”

“You’re lucky you’re keeping your head on your shoulders,” Cage tells him, eyes narrowed. “You shot up my shop and threw grenades —”

“Where was Pe — uh, Spidey during all this?” Bucky interrupts. He’s poking and prodding at Peter, checking for injuries.

Cage makes a face. “Where do you think?”

“You have no idea how grounded you are, Pe —“

“Ixnay!” Peter cuts off Bucky.

“Don’t you ixnay me,” Bucky barks. “You cut school. You went to Harlem —“

“He got blown up,” Jones adds.

“I don’t know how you even let him out of the house to go swinging around town in his costume,” Cage comments. “If I had hair, it’d be gray just from babysitting him today.”

“Dude —“ Peter starts to protest.

“Grounded,” Bucky says again.

Steve nods solemnly and repeats, “Grounded.”

Jones just rolls her eyes and flips them all off.
“The police sure do love Captain America.”

Peter nods his agreement with Luke. They’re all up on a rooftop a few blocks away, watching as Steve deals with the police. Everyone agreed it would be easier if he handled it, especially because SHIELD would show up, claim jurisdiction and the Wrecking Crew and this latest disaster would die a quiet death. At least until the press got hold of it. “If that was me, they’d have me in handcuffs and tell me I had to clean up the mess.”

“That lady cop doesn’t seem to love Stevie so much,” Bucky remarks. “Look at her giving him a hard time.”

“That’s Misty Knight,” Luke tells him. “She’s not wowed by the cape and tights set.”

“Put on your Spidey tights, Barnes, and see if you can wow her,” Jones says.

Bucky flips her off. “Maybe you oughtta put yours on first, Jewel.”

“Maybe she’d like to see my tights,” Deadpool offers.

“NO!” they all shout in unison.

Luke turns towards Deadpool, expression serene but there’s more than a hint of a threat in his voice when he says, “Maybe what you should be doing is telling me who hired you to kill me instead of making a nuisance of yourself.”

“The first rule of being a merc is nobody talks about being a merc,” Deadpool says. “No. Wait. That’s the first rule of Fight Club.” He reaches up and rubs his masked chin, feigning deep thought and then apparently has an ‘aha moment’ because he exclaims, “Oh, I remember. The first rule of being a mercenary is never giving our your client’s name because when word gets out that you’re a snitch, nobody is going to hire you and then how are you going to pay for new costumes and chimichangas?”

“What happens when word gets out that you got your ass kicked by a girl?” Jones asks him sweetly, cracking her knuckles for emphasis.

“Would that be a naked ass-kicking and would there be Jello involved?”

Bucky emits a low growl and, in less than a blink of an eye, he has Deadpool dangling by his throat in the air.

Luke raises an eyebrow at Jessica. “You sure you two are just friends?”

“Positive.” She cocks her head at Deadpool. “Hey asshole! The client you’re protecting screwed you over by double-booking the job, remember?”

“It’s the principle,” Deadpool sniffs. He doesn’t seem to care that his toes are brushing the rooftop or
that Bucky’s grip isn’t loosening. “And I’m not protecting him. I’m going after him first.”

“So it’s a him.”

“Maybe it is or maybe I’m just using binary pronouns to throw you off.” Deadpool jerks his head in Bucky’s direction. “I figured grandpa over there might not be able to follow if I used ‘ze’ and ‘zir’.”

Bucky growls again and tosses Deadpool across the roof, advancing menacingly as he pulls a really big gun from under his jacket. “This won’t kill you, dumbass, but it’ll hurt —”

“Whoa!” Peter leaps between them, arms raised. He’s got this, unfortunately. Out of everyone, he seems to be the only one who can ever communicate with Deadpool without losing his temper. And judging from the look Bucky just threw at him, Bucky knows that and is counting on Peter to wrangle Deadpool. Again. “D, can I help? I mean, look at this concussion I’ve got thanks to zir.”

“Ze,” Deadpool corrects him. “I’ve got real doubts about your academic prowess if you can’t keep your pronouns straight — uh, so to speak.” He props himself up on an elbow. “You want to help?”

Peter nods earnestly.

“Okay.” Deadpool gets to his feet and makes a show of brushing himself off. “You can hold my ammo or something.”

“Cool, so who is, uh, ze?”

Deadpool smacks his forehead with the heel of his hand. “Unh! Really? You think I’m not going to see right through that little ploy of yours, Petey-boy? God, that was so obvious! You’re a lousy liar, kiddo.”

Watching Deadpool hit himself is like getting his own forehead slapped because Peter suddenly realizes, “You don’t know, do you?”

“Nope.” Deadpool looks around at all of them and shrugs. “That’s what Weasel’s for. He sets up the jobs and I handle them. Well, he sets up the jobs and gets the weapons. Sometimes he orders the pizzas. He does a lot of stuff that’s too annoying for me to do.”

Jones blows out a sigh. “Fine. We’ll go kick this Weasel guy’s ass until he tells us who the client is.”

“Or you could just, you know, ask him, Grungy Angry Barbie.” Deadpool pulls a cell phone from one of the pouches of his belt. He makes a show of holding it up and punching a number on speed-dial.

A sleepy voice answers, “Wade —”


“There’s a code —”

“There’s also a rule about not double-booking the job and hiring the freaking Wrecking Crew.”

Weasel sucks in air. “That’s harsh.”

“So? Who’s the client?” Deadpool asks.

“Silvermane.” Weasel coughs softly. “You might wanna think carefully about the, um, ramifications of letting him know how you feel about being double-booked. Anything else?”
“I need a new costume.”

“On it.” There’s a click and the call ends.

It’s Jones who breaks the silence that follows. “Who the hell is Silvermane?”

“Maggia,” Deadpool explains. “A real up and comer, now that Fisk is in jail and that Punisher guy is whacking the rest of the competition.”

“The Maggia doesn’t have a foothold in Harlem,” Luke says.

“With Cottonmouth and Diamondback out of the way,” Deadpool tells him, “they probably see an opening, figuring that some hack politician doesn’t have the stones to step into their shoes. And not just because Mariah Dillard’s a chick. Taking you out is the Maggia’s way of letting her know they’ve got their sights set on her territory.”


“How can we help?” Bucky asks.

“You any good with construction?” Luke eyes him. “First things first, we need to get that barbershop rebuilt. Again.”

“Barnes is a whiz with spackle,” Jones says. “As for Silvermane, we need to —“

“There’s no ‘we’,” Luke cuts her off. “Harlem is my —“

“This isn’t just Harlem. It’s the whole city.” She shoves her hands in the pockets of her jacket and squares her shoulders. “Daredevil is the guy who took Fisk down and I know he’s got eyes on the Punisher. You’re going to want to coordinate with him.”

“Since when do you know every cape in the city?” Luke wants to know, cutting his eyes at Peter and then at Bucky.

Jones jerks a thumb in Bucky’s direction. “His fault. Everything else is the Ol’ Parker Luck.”

“Hey!” Peter protests, not that his secret identity seems to matter to anyone.

“I guess that makes him Parker,” Luke says, patting Peter on the head. “Don’t be too hard on him, Barnes, the kid was trying to help and he did a good job protecting the people. I wouldn’t have been able to do that by myself if I was dealing with Deadpool and the Wrecking Crew.”


Because of course he can’t meet anyone with powers without them adopting him in some fashion or another. He wonders how long it’ll be before Luke comes over for dinner or, heaven forbid, comes to cheer him on at a Mathlete competition.

It’s going to happen.

The Ol’ Parker Luck is on a roll.
Tommy knows that Trish is a victim of the Ol’ Parker Luck the second he walks into the office and she greets him with the question, “Is it ethical for mutants to use their powers to compete against humans?”

“Who told you about the Mathletes?” Tommy counters. “Because I didn’t really wanna join the stupid Mathletes but Erik insisted and —”

“Wait. You’re on the team?” Trish leans back in her chair and looks at him. “Erik didn’t mention that. He just told me that Professor Xavier put a team together.” Her expression turns thoughtful. “Do you think any of the other schools have mutants on their teams?”

“How would I know? It’s not like we have a secret website where we coordinate this stuff!” He scowls at her. “And you can’t expose me!”

“I wouldn’t —“

“Then why are you asking?”

“Erik and Professor Xavier are going to debate the topic on Friday’s show.”

Tommy groans. “Erik specifically chose Friday, didn’t he?”

“He suggested it, yes,” Trish tells him.

“Midtown High is competing against Summit on Friday afternoon.”

Trish’s eyes light up.

“No!” Tommy throws up his hands in warning. “You can’t come. I mean —“

“I’ve never been to a Mathlete competition. It would be good background.”

“But the competition is after your show,” Tommy protests.

Trish leans forward again, with the grin of the cat who swallowed the canary. “Tommy, do you really think, with their history, that Erik and Charles are only going to debate the topic just once?”

That’s when the awful truth hits Tommy. As long as Erik and Charles have kids competing, the topic will never die. What’s worse is that everyone will be paying attention to the Mathletes, wondering which kids on any given team are mutants. “Oh my God! The matches are going to be freakin’ free-for-alls what with all the anti-mutant protestors that are gonna show up. And why? Because this is Magneto and Professor X’s freaky idea of foreplay!”

“What?!” Trish’s mouth drops open in a perfect ‘O’ of astonishment when he says it.

“Dude, I totally think they’re gay. Or, at least, into each other, kinda.”

“Tell me everything you know, Tommy,” Trish orders.
“About Erik and the Professor?”

“Erik, the Professor, the Mathletes and leave absolutely nothing out. I think we’re sitting on ratings gold and your name is going to be on the list of staff when we get nominated for all those awards,” Trish tells him. “Just think of how that’ll look on your college applications!”

As if it’s going to be that easy when the Ol’ Parker Luck and the Magneto Family Curse is involved.

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Just when Gwen didn’t expect her life to get any weirder, her Mathlete cram sessions with Jess completely redefined ‘weird’. What other word could possibly describe the intensity with which both Mystique and the Black Widow are coaching them. After the first hour, the scariest women on Earth have agreed to a study strategy where JARVIS fires off a series of questions and then tutors Gwen and Jess in every concept they missed.

Gwen, not having a genius-level IQ, misses a few more than Jess.

“That’s enough for today,” Raven announces. “Suit up.”

Natasha raises an eyebrow. “Isn’t Spidering restricted to Friday nights and weekends?”

“It is for me,” Jess announces and then seems to shrink in on herself when Raven’s stern gaze snaps in her direction. She adds a meek, “Matt said.”

“All that adrenaline from an afternoon of practice needs to get worked out,” Raven declares. “And the two of you don’t train nearly enough. Nat and I are going to make sure you train body and mind.”

“And we’ll have you home in time for dinner with Matt,” Natasha promises Jess.

Raven scowls. “Clint needs to learn about setting curfews.”

Gwen thinks Clint has the right idea. He keeps a roof over her head, teaches her spy stuff and doesn’t stifle her like Dad-Devil does to Jess. At least, it was working for her until Raven came along and started taking charge. She knows better than to ask if Raven was always like this. Besides, she didn’t need to. Billy asked Magneto, and Magneto spilled the beans about how Raven raised Rogue before sending her to live with Professor X.

So long story short, Raven might be an even scarier parental figure than Bucky friggin’ Barnes.

But what nobody is counting on is the Ol’ Parker Luck.

That’s the scariest thing of all and Gwen has no doubt it’s in full swing.
Chapter 15

It’s one of those movie-perfect ‘all’s well that ends well’ moments as Stevie vigorously pumps Luke’s hand while Barnes flashes his pearly whites in approval, his arm draped around Petey’s shoulders. Of course it’s one of those moments. How could Luke resist being asked to join the Avengers — not full-time — but only if the shit really hits the fan, which is just about every other week. Not that I’m going to ruin that surprise.

No, I just watch as the bromance blossoms and plans are made to help Luke rebuild when the police take their crime scene tape down. Behind me, Deadpool pulls out some sort of metal disc and vanishes. I consider mentioning it but by the time I open my mouth, he’s gone. Besides, if keeping him here was a big concern, they’d have been paying attention. Now, they can pay me to find him. Or just wait for him to pop up again.

And just as everyone is about to call it a day, Barnes opens his big, fat, stupid mouth. “Do you need a place to stay, Luke? We’ve got room.”

Visions of Luke living in Petey’s house flash through my head and I can feel my stomach start to churn.

“If I appreciate that,” Luke says, a warm smile directed at Barnes, “but I’ve got a friend I can stay with.”

Barnes actually snaps his fucking fingers as he puts it together. “Claire.”

“You know Claire?” Luke asks, surprised because he hasn’t spent enough time with these fucking assholes to know they all know each other, thanks to Petey.

“She’s patched Petey up a few times,” Barnes explains, thus incorporating a reference to the ‘six degrees of Spider-ation’ for Luke to pick up on. Or not.

“And she’s helped the team out a few others, when Dr. Cho wasn’t available,” Stevie adds before launching into an explanation of who Dr. Cho is and how amazing Claire is.

As Stevie is singing Claire’s praises, Barnes’ eyes cut to me and I remember with sudden, horrifying clarity exactly when, during last night’s bender, he happened to stop by.

I brace myself for whatever is about to come out of his mouth even as I consider being rude as fuck and getting myself the hell out of there.

“Stevie, Petey’s gotta get back to school,” Barnes says, pulling a folded note from his jacket and thrusting it into Steve’s hand. “He’s got a sprained wrist, so you oughtta drive him back, let him catch his last couple of classes. Jones, you mind giving me a lift? My bike is kinda out of commission.”

We all look over the side of the building at the crumpled remains of the motorcycle, even Petey who doesn’t even waste the breath to argue about whether his wrist is sprained or not.
“That’s right,” Luke says to Barnes, “you’ve got a PTA meeting to arrange, don’t you?”

What the fuck?!!

“You’d think parents would actually return a phone call about their kids’ education,” Barnes gripes. “I’m never gonna get a quorum at this rate.”

“Jessica can help you with that,” Luke tells him. “She’s great at getting people to call back.”

I’m in hell.

And I can’t even blame the Ol’ Parker Luck.

I can only blame myself.

So I do the only thing there is to do. “Come on, Barnes. We’ve got the rest of the afternoon to work on getting your quorum.”

I don’t even wait for him to answer. Instead, I grab him like he’s the bride I’m carrying over the threshold and get us the fuck out of there before any more conversation can take place.

Go figure my luck is the worst of everybody’s.

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The minute Steve sees Peter dressed in his school clothes, heading to their rendezvous point, he starts reconsidering the decision to send the boy back to class. Peter had a building facade fall on him and he looks like it. Somehow, civilian clothes always make Peter look much more vulnerable than he actually is, not that he looks particularly formidable in his Spidey suit. The fact is, Peter makes Steve feel protective no matter how he’s dressed and he knows that goes double for Bucky. He’s fairly certain Bucky would be reconsidering sending Peter to school now too.

Peter stands in front of him, backpack slung over one shoulder, and heaves a weary breath. “Can I have Bucky’s note?”

Just as Steve’s fingers curl around the folded slip of paper in his pocket, a voice rings out.

“Parker!”

Peter flinches hard and then turns around. “Hi, Coach Wilson —“

“Where were you —?” Wilson starts and then stops abruptly when he sees Steve. “Oh... Oh!”

“I-I have a note,” Peter begins.

“He does.” Steve pulls the note out of his pocket but Wilson ignores it, along with Steve’s outstretched hand.
Instead, the man turns to Peter and stares hard at him before holding up a finger in front of Peter’s face. “Follow my finger, Parker.”

With a stunned expression, Peter’s eyes follow Coach Wilson’s finger.

“You’ve got a concussion,” Wilson concludes. He looks up at Steve, winks and says, “Shame you didn’t see who threw you into the lockers, Parker, but it was a good thing your...” He looks at Steve expectantly to fill in the blank.

“Cousin’s best friend,” Steve supplies.

“Cousin’s best friend was around to take you to the emergency room,” Wilson finishes. “I’ll write up the incident report and let Dean Reynolds know you’ll be out the rest of the day and maybe tomorrow.”

Peter’s mouth drops open. “B-but...”

“Feel better, Parker.” With that, Wilson taps his nose with his finger, winks at Steve again and turns to go back into the school. He stops and calls over his shoulder, “I’m expecting you to pass the Captain America Fitness Challenge for sure now, Parker.”

“What just happened?” Peter asks.

“You got out of school for the rest of the day,” Steve explains, draping his arm around Peter’s shoulders and giving the boy an affectionate hug, “and I’ve got someone to catch me up on what’s good on Netflix.”

“B-but Mathletes. Bucky —”

“I’ll handle Bucky,” Steve promises.

“I’m grounded.”

“You have a concussion.” Steve hugs him again. “Concussions and Netflix take precedence over being grounded.”

Peter opens his mouth and then closes it. “Okay.”

Bucky will get over it.

Eventually.

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Barnes finds himself unceremoniously dumped on his ass the second Jones lands on the roof of her
building. She wrenches open the fire door and stomps down the stairs to her floor without bothering to see if he’s following.

Of course he follows.

Jones stomps down three flights of stairs, into the hallway, pausing long enough to fish out her keys, open her door and call over her shoulder, “Hurry up, asshole. I don’t have all day.”

Sure she doesn’t. That bottle he left behind last night isn’t going to drink itself.

In the three strides it takes him to follow her inside, she’s got the bottle open and is drinking straight from it. Jones lowers it and narrows her eyes at him, daring him to say something.

Instead, Barnes snatches it from her grasp and takes a good, long pull as he mulls over the last nine hours, his two trips to Harlem and the wreckage of Jones’ television. The smart thing to do, he decides, is to avoid the subject altogether. He’s not a master tactician like Stevie but he doesn’t have to be to know what’ll happen if he makes a stink over the fallout from Jones’ drunken jealous hissy fit over Luke Cage.

Jones will make a stink over Barnes’ completely sober jealous hissy fit and trip to Harlem to kick Cage’s ass.

And that would take both of them into territory that it’s safer just to avoid.

Evidently, Jones comes to the same conclusion because she breaks the silence by asking, “How the hell did you end up on the PTA, Barnes?”

Barnes groans and helps himself to some more bourbon. “Not just on it, Jones. In charge of it. And if you need to ask how, you ain’t been paying attention. Any ideas on how I can get a quorum for next Tuesday’s meeting?”

Jones flops down onto her couch. “What’ve you been doing so far?”

“I’ve been leaving voicemails and sending e-mails —“

“Obviously, dumbass. Give me the spiel.”

He feels like an idiot but he recites his pitch anyway. “Hi Mr. or Mrs. Whatever the fuck your name is, my name is James Reilly and I’m the new president of the PTA. We’re having our monthly meeting next week and —“

“No wonder nobody’s calling you back.” Jones holds out her hand.

Barnes passes her the bottle.

“Thanks but I’m asking for the list of numbers and names.”

He pulls up the file on his Starkphone and hands it to her.

Jones sits up, plasters on a fake smile and dials the first one. “Hi, is this Mrs. Anselmo? I’m calling from Midtown High about your daughter’s future, Mrs. Anselmo.”

Barnes watches in disbelief as Jones makes the PTA meeting seem like a life and death occurrence.

“Yes, it starts at seven. Great. We’ll see you there.” Jones ends the call and raises an eyebrow at him. “That’s how it’s done, Barnes.”
“Which is great for this first meeting but —“

“Wear a tight pair of jeans and a tight T-shirt and all the single mothers and gay dads will be at every
meeting.”

“What?!”

“Work with what you’ve got, Barnes,” Jones shrugs. “God knows, it’s not your sparkling
personality.”

There’s only one thing to do and Barnes does it. He flips her off.

She returns the gesture.

And then they get busy making calls.

They’re almost done when Trish lets herself into Jones’ apartment, out of breath and glowing with
excitement. “Make sure you tune in on Friday, Jessica! Erik and Professor X are debating about kids
using their powers during competitions —“

“Wait,” Barnes interrupts. “Friday?”

“You’ve got your match against Summit on Friday,” Trish says. “I know. Tommy told me. Think
what kind of a turnout you’ll have —”

“Oh, I’m thinking about it,” Barnes groans. “Every anti-mutant asshole in the world is going to show
up to protest. It’s gonna be a zoo. How the hell am I supposed to keep the kids safe?”

Jones pulls a face. “You didn’t —“

“Not on purpose,” Barnes complains. “Mr. Harrington asked if I’d chaperone. What was I gonna
say?”

“How about ‘no’?”

Rather than go into the number HYDRA did on his head when it comes to saying ‘no’, Barnes
changes the subject. “Stark is giving us some kind of armored bus —“

“Why the hell is Stark involved?” Jones asks.

Trish’s head is whipping back and forth as she listens to them like she’s at a tennis match.

“Jones, everybody is involved,” Barnes tells her. “Why do you think I came to see you last night?”
Before she can say another word, he launches into an explanation of who’s who and who’s doing
what with the various Mathletes. When he’s finished, both women are staring at him like he’s from
another planet.

“Let me get this straight,” Jones says slowly. “Stark wants to pay me triple my fee to try to out-spy
the Black Widow?!”

Barnes shrugs. “His idea. I was just comin’ by to pass it on in case you needed rent money.”

“What you really should do is hire Jessica to help with security,” Trish suggests.

Jones shoots her a murderous look. “No!”
“C’mon, Jones. What could possibly happen?” Barnes cajoles even though he knows full and goddamn well what could happen and also that whatever he’s imagining probably can’t hold a candle to what will happen. “Triple your fee and a bus that’s got StarkArmor or some kind of shit.”

“I’ll need you there, Jessica,” Trish says, “I’m going to get some background for the next Erik-Xavier debate.”

“I don’t want you anywhere near there!” Jones explodes.

“It’s my job,” Trish counters. She smirks and raises an eyebrow at Jones. “It could be your job, too. Triple your hourly rate is good money. Besides, like Bucky says, what’s the worst that could happen?”

Jones glares at Barnes.

He shrugs.

“I’m going to regret this,” Jones says finally.

Barnes shrugs again. “We’re all gonna regret it but if Petey’s school wins the Nationals, it’ll be worth it.”

“And you wonder why they made you head of the PTA.”
Matt Murdock’s morning begins with mutants.

Three of them show up in his office without an appointment and since Foggy and Karen are in court, Matt is the one who has to deal with them. He doesn’t know who they are, not at first, since there are no obvious differences that his enhanced senses can detect. Unlike super soldiers and their strong, powerful heartbeats, mutants are almost undetectable — with a few notable exceptions in his limited experience. The only hint that these potential clients are anything out of the ordinary is the unusual, almost silent wheelchair that conveys one of his visitors over his threshold.

“My deepest apologies for showing up without an appointment, Mr. Murdock, but there is an urgent matter that requires the kind of assistance only you can provide,” the man in the wheelchair says in a rich, British accented voice. “I’m Charles Xavier and my companions are Scott Summers and Jean Grey. You were highly recommended by a... mutual friend.”

The statement about the kind of help only he can provide would have raised his hackles enough on its own but the pause before the phrase ‘mutual friend’ puts Matt even more on guard. Someone has done more than recommend him, that person has violated the sanctity of his secret identity. Thanks to Matt’s relationship with Steve and the Avengers, the list of people who know the secret is uncomfortably large and growing, which makes situations like this horrifyingly more frequent.

“Please come in,” Matt says, stepping aside to let the wheelchair glide past, “and we’ll see if I can live up to your expectations.” He flashes a self-deprecating smile. “To whom should I send the ‘thank you’ card?”

Summers slides a chair out of the way and Xavier’s wheelchair settles into the vacated space at the conference room table. Grey takes the seat to Xavier’s left while Summers remains standing.

Matt takes his place across from Xavier and waits for the answer to his question.

Xavier doesn’t disappoint. “It was Erik Lehnsherr.”

“I see,” is all Matt can manage because he’s barely exchanged more than pleasantries with Magneto. Even after fighting side by side with him in Sokovia and Disney, Matt can’t imagine what would possess the man to recommend him for anything, let alone reveal the identity Matt never disclosed to him.

Straightening in his seat, Xavier’s tone is at once conciliatory and hopeful. “You have my assurance that your secret is quite safe with us, Mister Murdock. I serve as the headmaster and my companions are instructors of a school for uniquely gifted children. You might well imagine that confidentiality and discretion are required of us at all times to keep our young charges safe. Our other mutual friend, Peter Parker, will attest to this.”

“Magneto never has a good word to say about anybody,” Summers puts in. “You must have really made an impression on him.”
“Scott!” Despite the admonishment, Grey’s voice holds more than a hint of amusement. “What Scott means to say, Mister Murdock —“

“Matthew,” he corrects her because it looks like he’s involved in whatever this is and whatever comes after so they may as well be on a first name basis.

“Matthew,” Grey repeats obediently. “What Scott is trying to say is that Erik isn’t typically given to recommending solutions within the law and the fact that he did so and named you specifically, well, that was something we took quite seriously. Particularly given the circumstances.”

“And what are the circumstances?” Matt asks.

“My school submitted an application to allow our students to participate in mathematical aptitude competitions,” Xavier starts to explain.

“Mathletes.” Matt is immediately certain that if he asks enough questions, he will find that Bucky Barnes and his competitive streak will be the cause of whatever Xavier’s problem is.

“Indeed,” Xavier confirms. “Erik mentioned that Peter and Tommy will also be competing.”

And there it is. The Barnes Effect.

“As you know,” Xavier goes on, “I firmly believe in and espouse peaceful coexistence between mutants and humans and what better way to demonstrate such coexistence than friendly academic competition between our children?”

Summers barely muffs a snort and Grey whirls in her chair to kick him in the shin.

Matt interprets that as meaning there’s a bet between Magneto and Xavier.

“We were served with notice of a hearing for an injunction this morning.” Xavier slides the notice across the conference room table to Matt. “A group of concerned parents want to block us from competing in Westchester County, which would in turn prevent us from competing at the state and national competitions, should we prove successful at the county level.”

“When is the hearing?” Matt asks.

“Today at two.”

Jess’ Mathlete competition is at four.

“We have a Blackbird and can get you back in time for Jess’ competition,” Grey assures.

Matt focuses on her but he can’t detect a single thing out of the ordinary. “Did you just read my mind?”

Xavier makes an irritated noise as he scolds, “We’ve discussed this, Jean.” He raises both hands in a plaintive gesture. “Nevertheless, we can have you back in time, Matthew.”

“Shouldn’t you tell him about Trish Talk?” Summers asks. He turns to Matt. “The professor and Magneto are going to be debating whether mutants should use their powers during competitions on tomorrow’s Trish Talk.”

Matt’s mind is already racing with possible legal arguments and now he has to consider the publicity factor, not just for the court case but for the circus that Xavier’s debate is going to create at every Mathlete competition in the tri-state area. Matt has no doubt that opposing counsel will make that the
cornerstone of its argument for excluding mutants in the interest of public safety.

“It’s probably going to be an ongoing series,” Summers remarks.

“I’d like to retain your firm for my school’s future legal needs,” Xavier concludes. “No doubt this will be the first of many times we’ll need your expertise.”

Foggy is going to be thrilled.

Maybe.

But deep down, Matt knows he will come to regret this and it won’t be because of the Ol’ Parker Luck.

It will be because of Bucky Barnes.

And there will be explosions.

Lots of them.

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The saddest words in the English language are not, contrary to popular belief, ‘what might have been.’ Sure, they’re pretty sad but this afternoon, as Clint sits in the auditorium of Brooklyn Tech High School, he’s positive that the saddest words are, ‘I told you so.’

‘I told you so’ couldn’t be any plainer on Raven’s face if she morphed a tattoo of it there, which she hasn’t, but there’s a good chance she might later when they’re alone together. He wouldn’t put it past her.

Not that he doesn’t have it coming.

Gwen is up there on that stage, owning this damn Mathlete competition. Just like when the kid uses a bow and arrow or a firearm, she doesn’t miss. And the kid’s got a hell of a competitive streak because when someone on the other team misses a question, Gwen pounces and shows them how it’s done.

“This,” Raven hisses in his ear, “is why you need to be more involved. Look at her up there.”

“I’m looking,” Clint assures her. He’s also looking around the auditorium for potential threats because even though Magneto and Professor X’s radio pissing match or foreplay or whatever-the-hell-it-is isn’t supposed to happen until tomorrow morning, he wouldn’t put it past the anti-mutant assholes to cause trouble beforehand.

Apparently, Steve and Natasha feel the same way. They’re sitting side by side off to the far end of the auditorium, wearing hoodies and fake eyeglasses. At least, Clint hopes they’re here for security and not to scope out the competition. He wonders if Barnes and Jones are doing the honors at Jessie’s match in the city.

On the other side of the auditorium is Katie-Kate and Clint knows she’s not here to spy but to lend
some actual damn moral support. He’s also sure she’s here to provide backup in case anything happens. She’s been successful in avoiding the Mathlete madness by claiming lack of ability, just like Teddy and Billy. No doubt Teddy and Billy are also staying on their side of the East River and cheering on Jessie this afternoon.

Good luck with staying out of the competitions, Clint thinks. Barnes is sure to come up with some other competition that he’ll rope all the kids into. If they survive Mathletes, that is.

Just as Gwen scores the winning point, Raven turns to him.

And there it is. On her eyelids, in hot pink letters.

I told you so.

So goddamned sad.
All of Barnes’ careful planning has gone completely to hell.
The plans were solid. Beautiful, even.
But now, they’re useless.
And it’s all Matt Murdock’s fault.
It might even be Professor X’s fault.
Or Magneto’s.
Barnes knows for damn sure it isn’t his fault.
The Ol’ Parker Luck? Well, that might be playing a part in things. Why else would Barnes be standing on the stage in the Midtown High School auditorium next to Principal Morita, Dean Reynolds and Mr. Harrington while they call an emergency meeting of the PTA to order.

Out in the audience are all the parents who refused to return Barnes’ phone calls or said they were too busy to attend meetings. All it took to get them here now was Matt Murdock and Professor X giving a press conference after today’s victory in court. Every news outlet was there to cover Murdock’s victory and get sound bites of him vowing to continue fighting for the rights of mutant kids even as the concerned parents of Westchester County vowed to appeal the court’s decision. Murdock fought the good fight and he won, which was nice for him and even better for the kids.

It’s not working out so nicely for Barnes.

Those parents look angry.

And they all seem to be angry with him.

“It’s your show,” Dean Reynolds whispers, attempting to nudge Barnes forward towards the podium.

Barnes looks out at the parents and then back at Reynolds. He’s faced friendlier-looking HYDRA agents. “What? Me?”

“You’re the PTA president.”

It’s the unspoken ‘you deal with them’ that gives Barnes the urge to flip off Reynolds. Flipping him off is probably a bad idea, though it’s not as bad as some of the other ideas Barnes quickly has and dismisses as he takes the five steps over to the podium. He reaches for the microphone and winces when it emits an ear splitting screech of feedback.

Everybody shuts up.

Barnes glances back uncertainly at Reynolds, who gives him a little ‘go on’ gesture.
“Uh, hi, I’m, uh....Bu — uh, James B— uh... James Reilly,” Barnes stammers. He shouldn’t be nervous. It’s not like any of the people out there are armed or like he doesn’t know all the escape routes that will get him out of there before any of them get anywhere near the stage. The thing is, Steve is the one who gives the inspirational speeches. Barnes? He’s the one who shoots people. Not that he can shoot anyone here. Shooting parents at a parent-teacher conference would be bad. And oh dear lord, he’s rambling in his head like Petey. Barnes sucks in a breath, squares his shoulders and reminds himself these people are unarmed. And he’s not. “I’m the, uh, new president of the PTA.”

So far, so good. Nobody is shouting him down or interrupting.

Barnes clears his throat. “So, uh, Principal Morita asked me to call this meeting because a lot of you called him about the mutant kids up in Westchester —“

“No mutants at Midtown!” One shout by a pissed off parent is all it takes for the entire auditorium to erupt. There are people shouting anti-mutant slogans, pro-mutant slogans and some of them are next to each other, glaring angrily as they attempt to drown each other out.

Reynolds comes up beside Barnes and hisses, “Do something.”

“Me?”

“It’s your meeting.”

Barnes narrows his eyes at Reynolds as he realizes the awful truth. This is his meeting. And it’s his meeting because Morita, Reynolds and Harrington are too afraid to take a position that might upset the parents. Upset parents will complain to the district, the district will complain to the school board and the city and they’ll all end up out of jobs. If parents are upset with Barnes, all that’ll happen to him is he gets voted off the PTA that he never wanted to be on in the first place.

So it makes sense that Reynolds and those assholes are using him to do their dirty work. Just like HYDRA.

That just pisses him off. It’s not like he asked to be on the PTA, let alone made head of the fucking thing. But now that he is, he’s not going to let the kids down. The whole goddamn point of the PTA is to make the school a place where the kids have every opportunity to live up to their potential, mutants or not.

Barnes turns to the men on the stage with him and gives them his meanest Winter Soldier glare. The three men visibly pale and Reynolds even takes a step back. Satisfied, Barnes keeps the glare on his face and makes the microphone screech again. He doesn’t let up until all the parents have shut the hell up and are staring at him.

“Anyone who doesn’t have a kid on the Mathletes —out!” Barnes orders. He waits a beat and then barks, “Dismissed!”

There’s a moment of stunned silence and then a couple of parents start tentatively protesting.

“Everybody shut up!” Barnes barks. He can’t believe this is working and he knows if he looks over at Reynolds, Morita or Harrington, the spell will be broken and these parents will destroy him. “You! Pink sweater! What is it you think I need to hear?”

“My son is on the basketball team —“

“This meeting is about tomorrow’s Mathlete competition,” Barnes tells her. “You want to talk about
basketball, baseball, or the fu — uh, freakin’ chess team, you show up at next week’s scheduled PTA meeting.” He directs his glare out into the audience. “That goes for all of you. Every single one of you demonstrated that you know how to call and e-mail and that you know where this school is. You all showed you can make your kids a priority for a night. So I don’t wanna hear any damn excuses about how next week’s PTA meeting is inconvenient, got me?! You got items for the agenda, you can e-mail me.”

Someone is going to call his bluff.

Someone is going to shoot at him.

Maybe one of these parents is a HYDRA agent.

And then, unbelievably, they start leaving until just a handful of people are left.

Barnes hops down off the stage and beckons them over.

None of them are armed.

One of them is a friendly face, Mary Jane’s mother.

He can handle this.

He can run the goddamned PTA like a pro.

“Harrington!” Barnes barks. “Front and center!”

Harrington startles, draws himself to a sloppy attention and gets his ass off the stage.

Yeah, he’s got this.

For now.

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Peter can’t sleep.

It’s not that he’s nervous about tomorrow’s competition. Well, okay, maybe a he’s little nervous and that’s because Bucky is nervous and it’s making Peter nervous. But the main reason Peter can’t sleep is because Bucky came home from his impromptu PTA meeting completely freaked out that his precious plans to secure the Mathlete meet needed to be redone from scratch and immediately sent him to bed to get a ‘good night’s sleep’. Immediately was just a little before nine and no amount of protesting was going to work so Peter just gave up. Tommy managed to avoid the entire ‘getting sent to bed early’ debacle by already being in his room, texting Negasonic Teenage Weirdo.

So here Peter is, tossing and turning because it’s way too early to sleep and also because he knows
that out of the ten Mathlete competitions scheduled to take place tomorrow, his is going to be the one where all hell will break loose. And not just because everyone thinks Spidey is a student at Midtown High.

The Ol’ Parker Luck is going to run true to form.

No doubt about it.

But just in case it doesn’t, Bucky and Steve are making contingency plans with Clint, Mystique, Matt and the ASAs to cover all of the other competitions taking place.

None of those plans involve Peter or Tommy because they’re competing.

And since they’re competing, they need a good night’s sleep, per Bucky.

Except it’s not even nine thirty and Peter can’t sleep. He’s restless and the only cure for this kind of restlessness is some good old fashioned web-slinging and maybe stopping a mugger or two.

Bucky will ground him until the next millennium if he sneaks out.

Bucky won’t know if Peter disables the silent alarms on his window and the trackers in his costume.

And if he stays local, he’ll be back in plenty of time to get the good night’s sleep Bucky wants him to get.

Just a little web-slinging...

Someone out there needs his help.

He’s sure of it.

Besides, he can be back before anyone even realizes he’s gone.

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Bucky stops mid-sentence and cocks his head, eyes narrowing. He leaps out of his chair and races from the kitchen up the stairs to Peter’s room, flinging the door open.

Steve is at his heels and Erik follows leisurely, as if he knows exactly what they’ll find and doesn’t need to rush to see it.

Erik, of course, is right.

There’s no rush to see Peter’s empty bed.

There’s a low growl as Bucky inspects the window and then checks his phone. “He disabled the
alarms and his trackers —“

“Let me handle this,” Erik offers.

Bucky’s head whips up and the plates in his arm click and whir. “I can —“

“You have security measures to plan,” Erik says soothingly. “And you cannot fly. I can, which means I can find Peter much more quickly than you could from the ground.”

“He has a point, Buck,” Steve offers. “By the time either of us find him, you know what kind of trouble he could find himself in. Erik can have him back here in a matter of minutes.”

Before Bucky can protest or agree, Erik’s clothes shift from jeans and a sweater into a gunmetal grey version of his costume and he’s gone.

Bucky leans out the window and curses creatively in multiple languages.

“Relax, Buck,” Steve attempts to calm him. “Erik can handle this.”

“Are you out of your mind?!” Bucky whirls and glares at Steve. “That guy’s got even worse luck than Petey! We need to —“

“Give him a chance.”

“But —“

“You can ground Peter again later. Right now, we have to finish making sure all the students are safe tomorrow.” It sounds reasonable but Steve knows Bucky is right.

Between the Ol’ Parker Luck and the Magneto Curse, whatever happens out there tonight is not going to end well.

For anyone.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 18

In the matter of minutes it takes Erik to find Peter at the Forest Hills train station, Peter has already gotten himself involved in an altercation in the middle of the parking lot. Standing behind Peter is a furious young woman, clearly on her way home after a late night at work. In front of Peter is a young man who’s clearly had a few too many drinks. It’s not hard to guess why Peter is involved. All in all, Erik decides, it’s a simple enough situation that he can settle back and watch Peter handle matters before bringing the child back home to face yet another lecture and probable grounding from Sergeant Barnes.

“Dude,” Peter says sternly, shaking a finger at the man, “what you did is not okay.”

“I told him to leave me alone,” the woman adds.

“She told you to leave her alone,” Peter repeats. “Instead you followed her off the train and —“

“And he said —“

“I heard him,” Peter interrupts the woman. “It was gross and I really don’t need to hear it again. Like, ever. On behalf of every man, everywhere, I apologize.” He puts his hands on his hips and cocks his head up at the man. “I’m not the only one who should apologize, buddy. You need to apologize.”

The man opens his mouth but what comes out isn’t an apology and it’s followed by a fist that Peter dodges easily.

“Get him, Spidey!” the young woman shouts.

Peter just grabs the man’s wrist and tugs him back across the parking lot until they reach the stairs leading up to the platform. A jet of webbing secures the drunken lout to the bannister.

“That’ll dissolve in a couple of hours,” Peter tells him, “which should give you plenty of time to sober up and think about why saying nasty things to women and following them off of trains is a bad idea. Also why getting drunk on your commute home isn’t so smart either. A-and just being a jerk in general. Face it, you’ve got a lot to think about. When that webbing dissolves, there’s an AA meeting in the neighborhood. Do you have a pen?”

“I do,” the woman pipes up, pulling one from her purse and handing Peter a note pad.

Peter scrawls something, tears the sheet off and webs it to the man’s forehead. He turns to the woman. “Do you want me to walk with you, ma’am?”

Of course she does. Though Forest Hills is a relatively nice neighborhood, the poor woman has been harassed enough for one night.
Erik smiles as he watches them leave and then comes down to read Peter’s note. The boy is fond of leaving notes and Erik wryly recalls the one the boy webbed to him, not too long ago. He ignores the drunken lout’s plea to ‘get him out this stuff’ and instead, reads the note aloud. “Dear Police, make sure this guy goes to the AA meeting on Metropolitan Avenue where he can learn not to drink and harass women. Your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man.”

“That little son of a —“

“Shhh,” Erik interrupts him. He can control the steel bannister without lifting a finger but sometimes, such as now, he relishes the theatrics. With a gesture, the railing shifts and groans dangerously. “The webbing you’re in will dissolve in a couple of hours and then you’ll be off to learn to be a better person. Or you can find out how long it will take the various city agencies to free you from that bannister if you persist in insulting my young friend. Which shall it be?”

A dark stain appears on the front of the fool’s trousers. “Y-you’re M-magneto! Ohmigod! Don’t hurt me! I didn’t mean anything —“

“Shhh,” Erik warns him again.

The man falls immediately and obediently silent.

Erik smiles coldly as he senses the reinforced frame of a police patrol car approaching. “Spider-Man gave you some sound advice. I’d follow it if I were you because if you don’t, and it’s me that catches you misbehaving next time... Well, I’ll leave those consequences to your imagination.”

The squad car comes to a full stop at what Erik supposes they presume to be a safe distance from him and there’s a heated debate as the two officers try to decide what to do next.

Erik decides to save them the trouble. “Spider-Man caught this drunkard harassing a young woman. Please see to it that appropriate measures are taken.”

With that, he rises into the air and he can’t resist giving them a sarcastic little wave before speeding off in the direction he saw Peter heading.

It takes him almost a full loop around Forest Hills before he spots Peter again. The boy is swinging purposefully across Queens and it takes a moment for Erik to realize that Peter is heading towards Jamaica Estates and Summit High School, where tomorrow’s Mathlete match is to take place. Peter slows his pace and perches atop a small apartment building as he surveys the school, looking for signs of trouble. What he finds instead is all of the surveillance equipment that James left there earlier in the day.

“Perhaps you should smile for the camera,” Erik suggests, landing next to Peter, “and say hello to Sergeant Barnes.”

Peter yelps in surprise. “Wh-what are you doing here?”

“The question that Sergeant Barnes has is, what are you doing here,” Erik counters, “instead of being home in bed, as he told you to do.”

“I can’t possibly be any more grounded,” Peter shrugs. “Besides, it’s a nice night for web-slinging and there was a lady who was —“

“I saw.”

“Y-you saw that?!” Peter manages to look indignant, despite the mask concealing his face. “How
long have you been following me?”

“Is that the question you should truly be asking?” Erik counters.

“The question I’m asking is, what have we forgotten?” Peter tells him. “Summit is secure and there’s contingency plans for all the other schools but I feel like we forgot something. Something important. Something...oh, man. Whoa. How the heck did we forget about that!?”

“Vas —?” Erik starts to ask but Peter is already in motion and he’s swinging faster on his webs than Erik would have thought possible.

He’s heading towards Manhattan.

It’s curiosity more than anything else, Erik tells himself, as he follows behind and gives Peter the space to chase after what’s clearly got him so concerned. After all, it’s unlikely that Steve Rogers would neglect to include something vitally important in his oh-so-thorough plans.

Except, Erik discovers, he has.

Steve has forgotten all about 422 Madison Avenue, the building from which WNEX broadcasts.

The building where Trish will be hosting Erik and Charles in just a few hours.

Peter is clinging to the face of the building and as Erik hovers beside him, he can tell by Peter’s sudden tense posture that the boy’s danger sense has just warned him of something.

Something like the fiery blast that misses Erik by a whisker and explodes a hole in the side of the building just above where Peter is clinging.

Erik doesn’t know what they’ve stumbled upon this time but he knows one thing for certain.

Sergeant Barnes is going to ground the both of them when this is over.

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“How long,” Barnes wonders aloud, “should it take to find Petey and bring him back home?”

“Seven minutes,” JARVIS responds instantly, like it’s some calculation he’s been working on and is excited to show off. Knowing Stark, it probably is. “It has been thirty-two minutes since Mr. Lehnsherr left the premises.”

“That was a rhetorical question, JARVIS,” Steve says quietly.

Barnes knows what Steve is going to say next.

“Erik has this under control.”

“Thirty-two minutes,” Barnes counters.

“Erik —“
“JARVIS, have there been any explosions in the five boroughs during those thirty-two minutes?” Barnes asks, even though he’s sure he already knows the answer.

“An explosion has just been reported in the Murray Hill district of Manhattan,” JARVIS responds dutifully. “Peter and Mr. Lehnsherr are also reported to be there.”

Barnes doesn’t say a word. He folds his arms across his chest and raises an eyebrow at Steve. “Still think he’s got it under control or do you think maybe the Ol’ Parker Luck’s kicking in?”

“I’ll get my shield.”

“That’s what I thought,” Barnes says. “I’ll save the ‘I told you so’ for when we see just how badly Erik botched this.”

“Are you going to ground him, too?” Steve asks, slinging the shield onto his back and brandishing the keys to his motorcycle.

“I’m grounding everybody.”

If they survive, that is.

Glass explodes everywhere and the force of the explosion knocks Peter from the building facade. As he falls, he shoots a web and finds himself moving backwards. It takes a fraction of a second too long for him to realize that Erik’s caught him by his webshooters in what’s obviously intended as an attempt to help but in reality makes them both sitting ducks for the next attack.

“I have you —” Erik starts to say when another fireball comes hurtling in his direction and breaks his concentration, freeing Peter.

That gives Peter the opportunity to help by snagging Erik with a web and firing another, ripping him out of harm’s way to deposit him on a nearby rooftop before facing the jackass with the plasma gun.

Except it’s not a jackass.

There are two of them.

And it’s not a plasma gun.

It’s them.

“Mutants,” Erik announces unnecessarily from beside him before adding, “And thank you for your assistance but I’m quite capable of handling these children.”

Before Peter can let the sarcasm roll, the ‘children’ fire another plasma bomb at them. This one is huge and he completely ignores Erik’s claim of self-sufficiency to grab him around the waist and shove him out of the way before the guy gets incinerated.

In return, Erik throws up a magnetic bubble that protects them from glass and debris when the
flaming plasma blows out a huge chunk of the building behind them.

“There’s a park a few blocks from here,” Peter says, firing a web and heading for it. The park is on East 35th Street and First Avenue, away from the tightly packed buildings where they are now, and it has a playground that he’s sure Magneto will use as an arsenal of his own. “Any idea who they are?”

“None,” Erik says, ripping up the jungle gym and tearing it into pieces of shrapnel that he hurls in the direction of their attackers.

The pair — a guy and a girl — can fly. Of course they can. And they let Peter know they’re not happy about the chase by sending a massive fireball in his direction. He dodges and it blows a hole right in the middle of the park, obliterating the dog run.

“We are Fenris,” the woman announces.

“No, you’re not,” Peter argues. “Fenris is a wolf. From Asgard.”

In response, there’s a concussive blast hurled in Peter’s direction that topples trees and blows out the windows of the nearby apartment buildings.

Even though his ears are ringing, Peter turns to Magneto. “Did you know they could do that?”

“What?” Erik asks because he doesn’t have a healing factor and there’s blood trickling from his nose to prove it. Despite that, he manages to rip up the merry-go-round and send it flying like a frisbee towards the fake Fenris folks.

A concussive blast sends the merry-go-round flying across First Avenue towards an apartment building.

Peter doesn’t even wait to see if Erik is going to stop it. He fires twin jets of webs, snags the merry-go-round and pulls with all his might, stopping it short to land in the middle of the street.

Fenris, or whoever they are, use the opportunity to go after Erik.

The park is taking a beating, between the fires, the force blasts and Erik, tearing up every metal object he can find to use as a weapon.

Peter is sure the entire fight is being recorded and live-streamed and that the morning’s Bugle headline is going to be something along the lines of how Magneto and Spidey are declaring war on the city’s children. Speaking of declaring war, Bucky and Steve keep insisting that he’s too reactive, that he needs to think more strategically in a fight.

He’d love to see Bucky and Steve show off their strategic skills with the Fenris Twins.

And that’s when he realizes it.

They are twins.

And they’re holding hands, which is both creepy and kind of gross.

Speaking of creepy and kind of gross, their outfits have HYDRA emblems on the shoulder, which, well, that just figures, Peter thinks.

Thinking strategically, it occurs to Peter they’ve forgotten about him as they focus on Erik, which gives him a chance to catch his breath and actually think about a next move.
Erik can handle himself, right?

Maybe.

In the meantime, Peter thinks fast.

Twins.

HYDRA.

Von Strucker.

“Hey, are you two creepy Baron von Strucker HYDRA experiments?” Peter asks, throwing up a web net before the flaming remains of a swing set can escape the confines of the park and crash into a passing Overnight Express truck.

“We are Andrea and Andreas von Strucker,” the guy announces. “And Magneto will pay for what he did to our father. All of you will!”

“Your father is rotting in the Raft,” Magneto responds icily, “which is a far kinder fate than he deserved for what he did to my children. As for what he’s done to his own —“

Magneto’s speech is cut short by a concussive blast, followed by a fireball that knocks over a large oak tree and immediately sets it on fire.

“Our father made us powerful!” Fenris-chick shouts at Erik, lobbing another fireball at him.

Peter can’t figure out why she doesn’t use both hands, which would be a lot more effective than holding her brother’s hand.

Unless...

He doesn’t even have to tell Magneto to distract Fenris because they’re going after each other with a vengeance. That gives Peter all the opening he needs to swing overhead, web them right in their stupid twin von Strucker faces and kick them apart.

Erik takes advantage of the situation and rips up the geodesic dome, slamming it over Fenris-ette, caging her while Peter cocoons Fenris-boy and tosses him into the sandbox.

Naturally, that’s when Bucky and Steve show up, followed by all the police and the entire fire department.

“Yeah,” Peter says to himself, “that Bugle headline is going to be a beaut.”
For those of you watching The Gifted, I had planned to use Fenris in this story waaaaay before that little bomb dropped on the series. I’m sticking to comics canon/characterization here, just in case you’re wondering. Thanks!

If you’re feeling adventurous, visit my Tumblr for this random snippet: https://msbrooklynfanfic.tumblr.com/post/167774437198/the-internship-peter-parker-danny-rand-this
“This,” I tell Trish, pointing to the scenes of chaos playing on her television screen, “is why I stayed here tonight instead of meeting you at your office tomorrow.”

“Uh-huh,” Trish responds absently. She’s tapping furiously on her StarkPhone, not even bothering to look at the live feed of flames shooting out of her office building or the reporters interviewing freaked out residents who live near the park that just got blown to hell. Finally, she looks up and informs me of the obvious, “My building’s a crime scene and with all the damage, it might be days before they let us back in.”

I try to look sympathetic instead of thrilled when I say, “I guess that means they’ll be airing a repeat of your show tomorrow.”

“Are you kidding? Everyone is going to be tuning in now. Besides, that’s why we have a contingency site in New Jersey,” Trish tells me, eyes gleaming with the excitement of knowing she’s just killed the ratings for the other morning radio shows. “I just have to let Charles and Erik know there’s a change of location —”

“Are you kidding?” I shoot back, jabbing a finger in the direction of the television. “Look at that —!”

Trish raises an eyebrow at me. “I am.”

“But are you seeing it? That’s what could happen tomorrow!”

“It happened tonight,” she counters. “After that, anyone else with delusions of grandeur will be thinking twice. Besides, hardly anyone knows about our other office.”

“Like that matters to a telepath!”

Trish arches an eyebrow at me.

“Mutants, Trish,” I explain.

“Yes, they were.”

“HYDRA mutants.”

“And?”

“You don’t think that’s weird?”

Trish stares at me. “Not after reading the reports about the experiments HYDRA was doing in Sokovia, no. What’s your point, Jess?”

“My point is that we’ve just seen what happens when you cross Erik’s bullshit luck with Barnes’ HYDRA-magnetism and mix it together with a giant helping of the Ol’ Parker Luck,” I explain. “The result is chaos, mayhem and complete destruction.”
“That’s your point?”

“Yes.”

“Fine.” Trish picks up her cellphone again and just as I’m about to celebrate common sense winning the day, she says, “Hi Charles. Yes, I see it. Do you mind coming to our backup studio in Chatham tomorrow instead?”

Chaos, mayhem and complete destruction.

This, I’m positive, is all Barnes’ fault.

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“I don’t like this.”

“You don’t like it?” Barnes fights the urge to roll his eyes at Dean Reynolds, despite all of Steve and Aunt May’s admonitions to be nicer to the man. Reynolds, Barnes recalls belatedly, also served, and understands all too well why it’s a bad idea to get comfortable when things quiet down. “It could be that any threats were neutralized.”

“Threats to the radio station were neutralized,” Reynolds counters. “The district superintendent is concerned about protests at the schools, thanks to this morning’s broadcast.”

Neither of them mention any of the other kinds of threats, especially the kind Petey tends to attract.

Barnes peers back at the exit where Petey, MJ and the team are waiting, along with Mr. Harrington. “The new bus should be here soon.”

“Two and a half more hours and it’ll be over,” Reynolds agrees.

“This match. We still have the rest of the season.”

“If they win.”

Now Barnes does let loose with a glare. “You sayin’ they won’t?”

Reynolds blow out a sigh. “If they win, we have to get through the Division A competitions, the semi-finals against Division B, the state championships and, if we should be so lucky, the nationals.” He runs a hand through his hair, making it stand up. “Are you prepared to do this for every competition?”

“You’ve got no idea what I’m prepared to do,” Barnes assures him.

Reynolds’ eyes go wide.

“I’m not gonna kill anybody!”
“I never said you would.”

“Just so we’re clear.”

“We’re clear.”

Barnes allows himself the eye roll. “Hey, you’re the one who asked me to chaperone, remember?”

Before Reynolds can stick his foot further into his mouth, a gleaming gold and red mini-bus pulls up in front of them. The doors open with a gentle ‘whoosh’ and Happy Hogan comes stomping down the steps, carrying a large cardboard box that he drops unceremoniously to the ground. “Where are the kids?”

“There —“

“Get ‘em over here,” Happy interrupts irritably. “Do you have any idea what traffic is like this time of day? We’re on a schedule!”

“You’re driving the bus?” The stupid question comes out before Barnes can stop it and the pissed-off look Happy shoots him is the reason Barnes adds, “What’d you do to piss off Stark?”

“That,” Happy snaps, “is none of your business. Well? Get the kids.”

Barnes takes one last look for potential snipers and then gestures for Harrington to lead the kids to the bus. Petey is at the end of the line and Barnes keeps a close eye on him, just in case there’s any sign of the kid’s Spidey sense tingling.

Happy eyes the kids and screws up his face. “What the hell are they wearing?”

“Wh-what do you mean?” Harrington stammers.

“Those shirts.” Happy jabs a finger into Petey’s chest. “Mr. Stark was very clear. No polyester for the team. I’ve got blazers for all of them.” He shoots a dirty look at Harrington’s tweed blazer. “And for you.”

“M-me?”

“You’re not representing Midtown wearing faux leather elbow patches,” Happy informs him. He picks up the box and shoves it at Harrington. “Hand those out. They’re labeled so you know whose is whose.”

“H-how do you know they’re the right size?” Harrington asks.

“Look who I work for,” Happy says. “They’re the right size. Now quit tempting fate and get the hell on the bus.”

Harrington practically runs onto the bus.

The kids follow without a word.

Reynolds blows out a deep breath. “Am I going to regret this?”

“Probably,” Barnes tells him, figuring that the ‘this’ in that sentence covers just about everything that’s just happened and whatever’s about to happen next.

“Good to know.”
“Where are all the protestors?”

Tommy rolls his eyes at Peter. “Why are you complaining? Do you want trouble?”

“Well, no,” Peter says, glancing over at Bucky as he stalks from the bus to sweep the area for snipers and other threats before he lets the team off. “It’s just that trouble kind of, y’know, finds us.”

Mary Jane narrows her eyes at both of them. “Could you both focus? We’re going to be on that stage, in that auditorium, where everyone is going to be rooting for the other team. That’s all the trouble we should be concerned about.”

“That,” Peter agrees, throwing a loaded look in Tommy’s direction, “and getting the answer right.”

Tommy flips him off too quickly for ordinary eyes to see but Peter catches it, thanks to his enhanced senses.

So, apparently, does Bucky, who shoots a look in Tommy’s direction before declaring it safe to get off the bus. He takes point just outside the bus door, eyes in motion as each kid exits. Peter is the last to go and when he steps outside, he gets a surprise.


Peter’s mouth drops open as the realization that his secret identity is about to become common knowledge at yet another school in Queens. “W-what’re you doing here!?”

“Jessica asked me to help out with security.”

Now it’s Bucky’s turn to be shocked. “She what?!”

“She’s inside with Trish,” Luke goes on, flashing a smile at Bucky. “She was concerned after what happened at the station last night and after all the calls Trish got during this morning’s show. Looks like the protestors are sticking to Westchester, though. Misty and I did a sweep inside. The auditorium is clear.”

“You brought the cop?” Bucky asks.

“I’m sorry,” Mr. Harrington interrupts. “Are you Luke Cage?”

“Yes, sir, I am.”

“And you’re bulletproof?” Mr. Harrington goes on.
“I am.”

Mr. Harrington turns to Dean Reynolds. “Do I want to ask more questions?”

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” Dean Reynolds tells him. “Besides, we need to check in now. Sergeant Reilly, are you coming?”

“Sure,” Bucky says, cutting his eyes to Peter. He reaches out and straightens the lapel of the ridiculously expensive team blazer. “You look good.”

Peter hopes he’s not about to get yet another lecture. He’s nervous enough as it is, what with the possibility of any number of disasters happening, not the least of which is losing to Summit.

“I’m proud of you, Petey.” Bucky ruffles Peter’s hair and then pulls him in for a hug. “You’re gonna do great in there.”

“What about me?” Tommy complains.

Bucky reaches out and pulls Tommy to him as well. A fraction of a second later, he grabs MJ and pulls her in for a group hug. “I’m proud of all of you.”

A throat clears behind them. “Uh, Mr. Barnes, how about us?”

Bucky lets go immediately and his head whips in the direction of the rest of the team. Vibha, Anil, Tranh, Wan and Aaron are looking at him expectantly. Bucky opens his arms and all the kids pile in as Peter steps aside to give them room.

“Looks like you’re going to have to share Bucky with more than the ASAs, tiger,” Mary Jane says.

“As long as I don’t have to share him with Summit.”


“Did what?” Peter asks.

And then it hits him.

He just invoked the Ol’ Parker Luck.

Bucky’s going to be the Queens Public School Soldier by the end of the competition.
“Why is she here?” Barnes asks.

Luke follows the direction of Barnes’ glare and bites back a sigh. He expected this. “Misty’s here because I asked her to come and before you ask, I’m here because Jessica asked me to come. We’re all here so you can relax and watch Peter’s competition while we handle security.”

“How am I supposed to relax when you’ve as good as told that cop Petey’s...” Barnes trails off. “You know.”

Before Luke can think of a diplomatic reply, Misty is beside them and answering for herself.

“Do you think everybody is blind, Mr. Barnes?” she asks. “All of these people saw you hugging Peter in the parking lot. They’ll probably notice Captain America over there, Jessica Jones, Trish Walker, the man with her who I’m fairly certain is Magneto and, of course, Luke. As for me —“

“As for you,” Barnes cuts her off, “you’re the one who can arrest him.”

“Or you.”

“Or me.”

“But I’m not here for that.”

“No,” Jessica says, coming up to them with a smirk that says she means to cause trouble, “but you’d arrest me.”

“That’s because you’re a pain in my ass, Jones,” Misty shoots back. She’s about to add something else but stops short, her mouth dropping open. “Why is Wolverine here?”

Jessica’s smirk expands. “He’s chaperoning Tommy’s girlfriend, Negasonic Teenage Warhead.”


“Magneto is here,” Misty points out, cutting her eyes from Wolverine to Magneto and back while her hand drops down to rest reflexively atop the gun holstered at her waist. Jessica waves the point away. “They got along fine at Passover dinner. Now, Barnes and Logan, that’s a whole other story —”

“You had Passover dinner with Magneto and Wolverine?” Luke feels like he left Harlem and ended up on another planet. One populated with crazy super people. And Jessica, well, she seems to be fitting right in.
Now it’s Barnes’ turn to smirk. “Maybe you can come next year, Luke. I’m sure they’d be happy to break matzo with you.”

Sweet Christmas. What the heck has he gotten himself into?

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Peter takes advantage of the last bathroom break before the competition begins to get away from the growing crowd of people who are ruining his secret identity. He should have warned Bucky that parents usually don’t show up at Mathlete competitions. That nobody goes except teachers.

Now it’s too late.

“Hey!” The door to one of the stalls flies open and one of the Summit Mathletes steps out. “I think Spider-Man not only goes to Midtown but he’s a Mathlete.”

Peter’s mouth drops open. “Um...uh...”

“Listen, that guy that showed up with you looks exactly like Bucky Barnes,” the kid goes on, to Peter’s growing horror. “And I think I saw Captain America talking to him. And I definitely saw Luke Cage. You go to Midtown. Do you know who Spider-Man is?”

“Uh...no?”


Peter stares down, not sure whether he should point out that Ned hasn’t washed his hands yet or just shake or —

“Sorry,” Ned says, turning on the faucet and scrubbing his hands. “This is actually my last match for Summit.”

“Oh —“

“Our building’s going condo,” Ned chatters on cheerfully, “and we can’t afford to buy our apartment so my dad found us a new one in Forest Hills, which means I’m going to go to Midtown with you. We’re moving this weekend.”

“Okay...”

“The principal told my dad Midtown’s going to be a magnet school.”

“Yeah...”

“You think they’d let me join the Mathletes?”
“I guess...”

“Hey, you’re my first friend at Midtown,” Ned realizes. “Dude, I don’t even know your name!”

Peter hesitates but Ned doesn’t talk over him this time. “Peter Parker.”

They shake hands.

Ned beams at him as they walk back into the auditorium. “We’re going to figure out who Spider-Man is. I bet he’s that white-haired kid.”

“Um —“

“That red-haired girl is hot!”

“That’s my girlfriend,” Peter says flatly, eyes narrowing. “Mary Jane.”

Ned blinks and digests that bit of information before going on excitedly. “Whoa! Really? Does she have a friend she can introduce me to?”

“Probably. Maybe. I-I’m not sure...”

“Dude,” Ned says, slinging an arm around Peter’s shoulders. “We’re going to be best friends. I can tell. Two nerds like us? It’s inevitable.”

Peter knows what else is inevitable.

Ned is going to know he’s Spider-Man by the end of the day.

If not sooner.

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Relax and enjoy the competition.

It’s easier said than done.

Barnes can feel Wolverine staring at the back of his head but he knows Stevie is keeping his eyes on Wolverine. Wolverine should be staring at Magneto but Magneto is intently paying attention to the competition and doesn’t seem to give a shit about the X-Man.

Jones drops into the seat beside Barnes just as it’s Petey’s turn. “Stark just showed up.”

“What is the product,” the examiner asks Petey, “of the greatest common factor of 4 and 10 and the least common multiple of 4 and 10?”
Barnes turns around, sees Stark sitting with Happy way off in the back of the auditorium. He’s sure Stark thinks he’s being subtle but the man is Tony goddamn Stark. Nothing about him is subtle. The kids on the stage are all looking at him while trying to pay attention to the match.

Barnes turns back just as Petey’s hand shoots up.

“Midtown.”

“Forty,” Peter says confidently.

There’s a pause during which Barnes thinks he could have killed everyone in the audience with his bare hands and had enough time to eat a hot dog.

“Correct.”

Jones blows out a sigh. “Showboating asshole. Petey looked like he was going to have a panic attack waiting up there.”

Barnes nods in agreement and shoots a glare at the asshole who’s directing his next question to Mary Jane and some other Summit student.

The examiner turns to his next question card and reads, “If p is prime and n is even such that p plus n equals 47 and p times n equals 210, what is the value of n?”

“I’ve never felt so stupid in my entire life,” Jones mutters.

“Give it time,” Barnes tells her.

“Do you know the answer, asshole?”

Mary Jane’s hand shoots up a fraction of a second before the Summit kid’s.

“Midtown?”

“Forty two,” Mary Jane answers.

“That’s right,” Barnes whispers just as the examiner tells Mary Jane she’s correct.

Jones rolls her eyes at him.

“This is the easy round, Jones.”

“Better take off your boots now so you can count on your toes, dumbass.”

“Shhh,” Logan hisses at them. “I’m try’na listen here, bub.”

Jones starts to flip him off but Barnes catches her wrist.

“You want us to get thrown out of here?”

“Barnes, do you really think we’re going to get to the end of this match without something happening?” Jones asks.

“Shhhh,” Logan hisses again.

Jones rolls her eyes at him. “Like you know the answer to any of this shit.”
There’s the thump of a hand tapping on the microphone and the examiner is staring directly at them. *Everyone* is staring at them. “Parents, we need quiet so that our Mathletes may concentrate.”

Barnes slumps in his seat.

He doesn’t remember a lot about his high school days.

Getting in trouble because of someone else’s big mouth?

He sure as shit remembers that.
“I can’t believe you made me drive the bus,” Happy grumbles under his breath. Again.

Tony doesn’t take his eyes off the stage as he shushes Happy.

After being subjected to nearly twenty minutes of this routine, Steve turns around in his seat to give both of them a piece of his mind and ends up catching Tony beaming like a proud father as Mary Jane gets another question right. It’s enough of a redeeming moment that Steve decides he can let the bickering go, as long as they don’t start in again.

The moment of redemption lasts exactly as long as it takes for Tony to notice Steve catching him in a rare display of humanity and, naturally, he has to ruin it. “This is the sprint,” he says. “Questions even you could answer, Rogers. The real test is how Mary Jane handles the target questions in the next round.”

Steve bites back the obvious retort about his own mathematical prowess and instead finds himself defending Mary Jane. “She’ll be fine.”

“She’d better be,” Tony retorts.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re all a bunch of distractions with your explosions in Harlem and HYDRA mutants.”

Just as Steve is about to let Stark have it, there’s a loud crash from the back of the auditorium.

One of the doors is crumpled and hanging off its hinges. Thor is standing in the doorway with a sheepish expression despite guns being pointed at him by Misty and Bucky, Tony’s gauntlet being brandished at him, Wolverine’s bared claws and the glowing energy crackling around Erik’s fists. “My apologies for interrupting. The door was stuck.”

“I-it was locked,” one of the Summit teachers calls from the stage.

“Please, do go on.” Thor flashes one of his charming smiles, one that Steve’s seen him use when he wants people to think he’s an ignorant muscle-head instead of an alien with knowledge of things that even Tony probably struggles to understand. He flops into the seat beside Steve and winks as the action on the stage resumes.

Steve takes in the Asgardian’s clothes — a hoodie, board shorts and a pair of sneakers — and wonders if Mary Jane should have a word with him about dressing for the weather.

“Wanda told me you were all here with the children,” Thor whispers. “Are they performing a play?”

“It’s a Mathlete match,” Tony tells him.
“Mathlete,” Thor repeats, puzzling out the unfamiliar term. “Ah! A battle of wits! Are they winning?”

“If you define winning as making sure the kid’s secret identity is well and truly blown,” Happy tells him, “yeah, they’re winning. Big time.”

“Midtown is in the lead,” Tony says, shooting a sour look at Happy. “Do you want to end up driving the bus to all their meets?”

“Wasn’t that your plan all along?”

“Would I do that to you?”

“Quiet!” Steve scolds before Happy can continue adding fuel to the fire. The word comes out a lot louder than he intended and it echoes embarrassingly loudly.

All heads are now turned in his direction as the examiner taps his microphone again. “Parents and guests, I really have to urge you to remain quiet during the competition,” the examiner says and he’s staring directly at Steve who can feel his cheeks grow hot. “If you need to speak, please leave the auditorium quietly and have your conversations outside.”

Tony, on the other hand, doesn’t even look embarrassed. He just leans back in his chair and mimes zipping his lips.

Thor flashes another angelic smile.

Steve slumps in his seat as he’s reminded of his high school days.

Bucky always said he should stay out of other people’s fights.

Maybe he had a point.

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Peter makes the mistake of looking across the stage at Ned, who jerks his head towards the audience and excitedly mouths ‘Thor’ at him. All Peter can manage is a weak smile back at him as the examiner announces the end of the sprint.

Midtown is in the lead.

Mary Jane reaches over and squeezes Peter’s hand as another examiner takes her position at the podium. The examiner announces that they are about to begin target questions and, with a pointed look in Tony’s direction, reminds the audience that they need to be quiet.

She should only know that talking is the least of their problems.
Summit High School is now ground zero for a disaster of historical proportions, considering who’s in
the audience and his own rotten luck. It’s just a matter of time before Loki invades, HYDRA bombs
the school or the Green Goblin makes an appearance. Or maybe all of them will show up at once...

There’s a sharp pain to Peter’s ankle as Mary Jane gives him a swift kick. She points at the examiner,
who’s reading the first sprint question.

“How many ways are there to choose positive integers a, b, and c, not necessarily distinct, so that a +
b < c and c ≤ 5?”

Peter raises his hand to answer ‘ten’ when his spider-sense doesn’t just tingle.

It goes off with a burst of pain that makes his head feel like it’s about to explode.

And then the floor opens up.

Impossibly bright light flares from the hole.

A man wearing a bright red cape and a weird necklace floats up from the hole and looks at Peter.
“Are you Spider-Man?”

“Uh —“

“You are,” the man says confidently and there are fiery symbols floating around his hands. “I need
your help.”

Peter decides not to debate the question of his secret identity with a guy who can make probably-
Satanic symbols with his hands. The bigger question is, how does he beat a guy who can do that?
“Wh-who are you?”

“My name is Strange.”

“It can’t be any weirder than Mysterio or Otto Octavius.”

“What?!”

“Seriously, dude, who are you?” His spider-sense is blaring now and that’s probably because
everyone else in the room is frozen in place.

The man blows out a frustrated sigh. “I told you, my name is Stephen Strange. Doctor Stephen
Strange —“

“What kind of a doctor dresses like that?!!”

“I’m a neurosurgeon,” Strange says before snapping, “You run around in tights and you’re criticizing
my clothes?” He catches himself and scowls at Peter. “We can discuss this later, after we’ve stopped
Asmodeus from rising.”

“Ass-what-eus?”

Strange scrubs a hand over his face. “An auditorium full of Avengers and the prophecy sticks me
with a mouthy little kid.”

Who are you?”
The glowy symbols around Strange’s hands flare and become huge discs that he hurls into the chasm, just as dozens of enormous tentacles shoot out, slicing them to ribbons. “I told you. I’m Doctor Strange. I’m the Sorcerer Supreme and you, Spider-boy, are about to help me save the world.”

With that, Strange dives into the chasm.

“I don’t have my costume,” Peter calls after him.

There’s no answer.

Not that he expected one.

“I guess I’m going to help a strange dude save the world,” Peter sighs, kicking off his shoes and yanking off his tie. “If I don’t, at least I won’t have to worry about being grounded.”
Peter has discovered a new definition for ‘stranger danger’. That definition involves following a man actually named Strange who pops out of a hole in the floor, goes back into the hole, through bright light and into —

“Midtown?!”

“Not exactly,” Dr. Strange tells him. “This is the Mirror Universe —“

Peter interrupts him with an unabashedly and justifiably freaked-out yelp as he realizes that Fifth Avenue is on top of Avenue of the Americas. Literally. Like two hundred feet above. Which is four hundred feet above what looks like Broadway.

And then he makes the mistake of looking up.

Buildings that should be standing up straight are twisting and turning like something out of MC Escher’s worst nightmares viewed through a kaleidoscope by someone high on every illegal narcotic ever. “Holy sh —!”

“Language!” Strange scolds. “You’ll get used to it —“

“Used to it? The rules of physics —“

“Don’t apply. This is a universe of magic.”

Maybe so, but Peter’s spider-sense tingles just the same and he fires a web at what he hopes is going to stay a solid surface and yanks Strange out of the way of a poison-green bolt of energy. He’s never been happier about disobeying Bucky because hiding his webshooters in his pockets was clearly the smartest thing he’s done all day. Diving into the hole after Strange is the dumbest. So far. “Does that mean we can’t get hurt?”

“It means that nothing we...“ Strange gestures and a shield of orange-red symbol appears, “...or they do will affect the real world. We can still be hurt. Or killed.”

“That figures,” Peter complains before asking his next question. “Who are they exactly?”

“Acolytes of Asmodeus.” A flick of Strange’s wrist sends the energy shield towards a pair of guys in robes. It expands and wraps around them like a net.

“And Asmodeus is?”

Strange is completely serious as he says, “Asmodeus is an extra-dimensional being who’s an agent of Mephisto.”

“Mephisto?!“ Peter echoes, well aware that his voice just rose to the stratosphere and cracked. It would embarrass him but he’s not sure there even is a stratosphere in the Mirror Universe, that there
is such a thing as a Mirror Universe and more importantly, that they’re having a conversation about…
“As in the Devil?”

“That’s a very long discussion that neither you nor I have time for, Peter.” With that, Strange makes a weird gesture with his hand and opens another portal, grabs Peter and yanks him through it, taking them to what looks like a museum.

“How did you know my name and where are we?”

“I know everything,” Strange says and from the annoyed tone of his voice, Peter knows he’s asked at least one question too many and that’s probably not the truth. Or at least the whole truth. “And we’re in my Sanctum Sanctorum.” He claps a hand over Peter’s mouth. “No more questions. This is where you listen, little Mathlete, because we don’t have much time and I’m counting on the fact that you are a Mathlete to mean you’re very smart as well as very annoying.”

“Hey!”

Strange raises a finger in warning and red-orange light sparks from it.

Peter shuts up.

“You could call Asmodeus a demon, if it helps for me to put this into ‘Buffy the Vampire Slayer’ terms for you,” Strange says. With a flick of his wrist, a book floats from the desk behind him and floats in front of Peter, its pages turning on their own. “The previous Sorcerer Supreme had seven wards in place that prevented Asmodeus from coming here but she died and those wards have been weakened. I need to restore them and while I do that, I need to you keep the acolytes away from me. They’re drawing power from Asmodeus so each ward I restore will weaken them and make it easier for you to deal with them. There’s one acolyte for each ward —“

“But there were just two of them!” Peter flinches reflexively before narrowing his eyes at Strange. “That wasn’t a question.”

“There’s one acolyte assigned to breach each ward.” Strange goes on. “They call for reinforcements when they see me and if I’m fighting them, I can’t fix the damage.” He points to the book, which has an illustration of a kid whose silhouette looks a lot like Peter. “And before you ask why you and not Captain America, the answer is because the prophecy refers to a child warrior with the strength of an army, the speed of the wind and the cunning of… Well, two out of three isn’t bad, I suppose.”

Bucky or Jones would flip the man off at this point.

Aunt May raised him better than that.

But she didn’t raise him well enough not to blow a big, fat raspberry at the guy.

It does the job.

Strange scowls at Peter as sparks flare from his fingertips. “I can’t imagine how the Avengers put up with you.”

“They don’t talk to me like I’m an idiot, for starters,” Peter snaps, hands on hips. “And since I’m not an idiot, don’t think it hasn’t occurred to me that you could have brought us here to your Sanctum Sanctimonious instead of having a skirmish in Midtown first.”

“It was easier to show you what we’d be up against rather than try to explain it.” It’s not exactly an apology but the tone is slightly less condescending, which is at least sort of an improvement.
Peter eyes him suspiciously and voices his next question. “Exactly how am I supposed to go up against people who can zap me with magical weapons and send me to other dimensions and whatnot?”

“By not getting into a direct confrontation.” With a snap of his fingers, Strange sends the floating book back to his desk and summons a necklace that’s even tackier than the one he’s wearing. He holds it out to Peter. “But if you find yourself in a confrontation, this amulet will protect you as much as possible. Just think the word ‘protect’ and it’ll activate.”

“It doesn’t go with my outfit.”

Another snap of Strange’s fingers and the amulet vanishes and reappears, hanging around Peter’s neck.

“I’m starting to think that prophecy was a curse,” Strange mutters.

Peter considers mentioning the Ol’ Parker Luck but the way he figures it, the Sorehead Supreme will find out about that all on his lonesome.

It’s just a matter of time.

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Up until he became an Avenger and After School Avenger, the furthest from home Peter ever went as Spider-Man was Brazil and that was because Doc Ock is a maniac. Since then, he’s been to Disney, Sokovia and Genosha, places which, if Peter’s being honest, he’d be happy to never visit again. His trips to California and the Grand Canyon don’t count, Peter decides, because while he ended up wearing his Spidey suit, the purpose of those trips was to spend quality time with Bucky and Steve.

His trips with Doctor Strange are definitely not quality time.

Frankly, they suck.

As much as Peter always wanted to see London, his dream vacation never involved having to avoid spells cast by people who could make architecture defy physics and make weapons out of energy.

Spells.

Energy.

Whatever.

Peter’s first look at Big Ben is when it tilts at a ninety degree angle and he nearly crashes into it while trying to avoid death-bolts, moving buildings and things that Harry Potter never had to deal with.

Just when he’s about to swing past Buckingham Palace, Strange appears and opens a portal. “Time to go.”
“Wha—” is all Peter can say before finding himself in a whole new city. “Where are we?”

“Cairo,” Strange says and then vanishes.

Before Peter can count to three, he’s got all seven Acolytes on his tail again and Cairo is taking on a whole new shape.

“Swell,” Peter mutters, dodging a barrage of glowing spheres. It doesn’t make sense. They should be dogging Strange, not him. And even though he keeps giving them the slip because they’re on foot and he’s web-slinging, they keep finding him.

Something isn’t adding up.

Something is as out of place as the necklace he’s wearing.

On a hunch, Peter yanks the necklace — amulet — whatever — off and flings it onto the roof of a building as he swings past and then hides to see if his theory pans out.

Of course it does.

The Seven Jerks apparate on the rooftop and immediately grab for the amulet.

Peter snags it with a web and the game of keepaway begins all over again, giving him a tour of Cairo that he’s probably going to have nightmares about. Especially the Sphinx.

This time, when Strange shows up again, Peter is ready. He follows the jackass through the next portal and then webs his hands together.

“What—?”

“Oh—uh,” Peter interrupts him, holding up the amulet. “What is this? And you’d better tell me the truth this time.”

“I did tell you the truth,” Strange says slowly. “Just not all of it.”

“No kidding,” Peter snaps. “When I took it off, those Acolyte guys went right for it—”

“You took it off?! I told you—”

“You didn’t tell me it was a freakin’ beacon for evil!”

“It’s not.” Strange raises his hands and the webbing vanishes. “Not exactly. It’s a key.”

Peter decides to show this jerk exactly what a genius IQ looks like in action. “Which means the seven wards are a lock.”

“Yes.”

“And the key wasn’t made by the other Sorcerer person.”

“No,” Strange admits. “It was made by Mephisto as a gift to Asmodeus.”

Peter makes a face and holds the amulet up between thumb and forefinger. “So it’s evil.”

“It depends who wields it and before you decide to try it, don’t,” Strange warns him. “It’s powerful and you could do a lot of damage. On the other hand, it’s powerful protection against Asmodeus.”
“Which is why you told me to think ‘protect’.”

“Exactly.”

Peter watches as Strange opens up another portal. “Anything else I need to know?”

“Don’t let go of that amulet again and try not to use it.” He starts to step into the portal, stops and looks at Peter over his shoulder. “I’m counting on you to keep watching my back. We have five more wards to seal.”

With a sigh, Peter drops the amulet around his neck again, steps through the portal and into Moscow. His spider-sense immediately goes crazy.

Strange vanishes.

The Acolytes appear.

“Time to protect the Doctor and the Devil amulet,” Peter mutters as the city starts twisting and turning around him. “Again. And again. And again after that.”

He used to like the idea of magic.

Harry Potter is never going to be the same again.
The tide starts to turn in Athens and Peter notices because he remembers to keep count.

Counting, as Bucky has drilled into him during every training session, is the key to handling any situation. Counting, Peter now knows, tells you how far away an enemy is, how many bullets they’ve used, how long it takes for them to reload, and so much more. The truth is, Peter still forgets to keep count during battle. It’s not second nature to him like it is to Bucky and Steve but he’s working on it which is how he notices that it takes longer for the Acolytes to show up in Athens. He probably doesn’t realize as quickly as Bucky would have but he did notice, so that’s something.

And once he notices that, Peter also notices that the energy balls the Acolytes are throwing at him don’t seem to have the same ‘zing’, if the size of the holes they’re blowing into things when they miss him are anything to go by.

The other thing Peter notices, now that he has a little time to catch his breath, is that energy balls seem to be all they can throw at him. He’s seen the Acolytes make energy weapons but he’s too fast for them to be of any use. As for the two times the Acolytes tried to catch him in a magical net, Peter’s spider-sense warned him before they even threw one in his direction.

Who knew his spidey-sense could predict that?

He sure didn’t and now he’s going to have to ask Billy to help him test just what his spidey-sense can do when it comes to magic.

But first he’s got to finish stopping the end of the world with Dr. Strange.

Just as Peter thinks the man’s name, he appears, looking a bit ragged and tired.

“Ready for the last ward?” Strange asks.

Peter’s Spidey-sense tingles a warning so he snags a Dumpster and snaps it in the direction of the energy balls coming their way. The Dumpster explodes in mid-air, sending flaming shrapnel in the Acolytes’ direction and blowing the windows out of buildings. “You’re sure none of that affects the real world, right?”

“Positive. Besides,” Strange shrugs, “I saw the damage you and Magneto did to that park last night. Think of this as practice for the next time you two go out on a play date and end up wrecking Manhattan.”

“That was —”

“Nothing compared to what you did in Sokovia. Or Disney.” With that Strange opens the portal to their final destination. “After you.”

Peter steps through and his mouth drops open. “Summit High School? B-but I thought —”
“Magic,” Strange says. Like that explains everything.

“Not Manhattan?!)

“Magic.” Strange shrugs. “I have no explanation of why Jamaica, Queens instead of —“

“I do!” Peter cuts him off, arms flapping in frustration. “I’m cursed! That’s the explanation! It’s the Ol’ Parker Luck running true to form! Mathletes? Not without some world-ending demon being involved! A simple night out web-slinging? Nope! Here’s a pair of evil HYDRA mutants blowing up Manhattan trying to kill Magneto! A date with my girlfriend? Not without every bad guy trying to kill me! A secret identity? Oh man, do not even get me started —“

With a gesture, Strange silences him. The weird eye necklace around his neck actually opens and glows brightly before closing again. “No, you’re not cursed, Peter. You’re just a teenager.”

“Dude —“

“A super powered teenager,” Strange amends, “and that’s the baggage that comes with it, I suppose.”

Peter’s not sure he believes the guy. “It sure feels like I’m cursed.”

“Summit High School is on cursed ground, if that makes you feel any better,” Strange offers.

“Really?”

“It’s the focal point for the wards.”

“You’re not making that up, are you?” Peter asks suspiciously.

“You saw the demon, didn’t you? The thing with the tentacles?” Strange makes a gesture that Peter realizes has nothing to do with magic and everything to do with mimicking tentacles. The guy even makes a weird face to go with the tentacle gesture. It makes him actually seem like of less of a dick.

“I thought the Acolytes summoned it.”

“It summoned the Acolytes.”

“It can do that?”

“It’s Asmodeus’ guardian, here to prevent me from sealing the final ward.”

“So it can do magic too?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Ugh!”

“The Acolytes are a distraction now, Peter,” Strange tells him. “Take them out quickly so you can focus on the demon.”

“Me take them out? I-I thought you were going to take them out!” Peter protests. “And what do you mean, I have to focus on the demon. Aren’t magic demons your thing?”

“Ordinarily, yes, but there’s a prophecy —“
“I really need to see this prophecy,” Peter cuts him off, “because I’m starting to think you’re feeding me a bunch of hoo-ha, Doc.”

Strange slants him a look. “Can you read Sumerian?”

“No, but —“

“Then there’s no point in you seeing the prophecy. Just take care of the Acolytes —”

“I’m not killing the Acolytes!”

“You’re not supposed to,” Strange tells him. “Just take them out of the equation so you can focus on the demon.”

“Does the demon have a name?” The question pops out of his mouth before he has time to think and after it does, Peter realizes just how relevant that question is. “Up until now, everything’s had a name. Asmodeus, Acolytes. How come this thing doesn’t have a name?”

Strange pulls a face and Peter knows he’s just asked the million-dollar question. “It has a name, Peter. It’s just not one that our mouths or minds can process.”

“Let’s call it ‘Sid’,” Peter suggests. “Does Sid have any weaknesses, like fire or water or blueberries or something?”

“Just you, according to the prophecy,” Strange tells him. “Sid — and really, Peter, your choice of name is ridiculous — is immortal, which means you can only drive him back to his own dimension —“

“Oh that’s just swell,” Peter complains. “And what are you going to be doing while I try to scare Sid into going back home?”

“I’m going to be fighting Asmodeus on the astral plane, which means I also need you to watch over my body.” Strange rests a yellow-gloved hand on Peter’s shoulder. “My body is going to be in our dimension, not the Mirror Dimension, so try to keep the fighting away from it, okay?”

“You and I are going to have a seriously long talk when this is over,” Peter says but he ends up saying it to empty air even as his mind catches up to what Strange just said. Keep the fighting away from his body.

In their dimension.

Not the Mirror Dimension.

Which means Peter is going to be fighting Sid across multiple dimensions. However that works.

The only thing Peter is sure of is that the Ol’ Parker Luck is definitely in action and it is way more powerful than anything Sid can dish out.
Up until now, Peter’s kept his distance from the Acolytes. Of course, up until now, they weren’t in Queens. Or the Mirror Dimension version of Queens. Or whatever. Peter is sure that when he actually has time to think about the day’s events, he still won’t completely understand them. And that Strange won’t give him any kind of meaningful explanation.

Whether it’s the real Summit High School or not, Peter’s not going to let the Acolytes anywhere near it. He goes in fast and close, throwing the Acolytes for a loop as they scramble to get out of his way. Whatever magic energy balls they were conjuring vanish as they scatter frantically.

“Looks like you guys don’t have the balls anymore,” Peter says as he webs three Acolytes together and kicks two more down the street. The impact knocks them out leaving him with...

Five.

The two he missed melt his webbing off of the three he caught.

All five of them conjure scary looking energy weapons. There are blades, batons and one of them has a shield. Peter nets them in a web and the weapons slice through it like it’s made of butter.

“I could use some magic webs right about now,” Peter yelps as he dodges the assault of the Acolytes.

The amulet around his neck glows.

The Acolytes’ eyes grow wide.

Peter has a sinking suspicion he knows why.

He wished for magic webs with an evil amulet around his neck.

“Might as well use ‘em as long as I’ve got ‘em,” Peter decides, wincing as he hits the button on his web shooters. The webs that come out glow bright red. Evil-looking bright red. And they disintegrate the Acolytes’ weapons on contact.

The Acolytes start to scatter.

Peter fires more magic webs at them, cocooning them together.

They struggle for a second and then, for no reason Peter can discern, pass out.

“Huh,” Peter says, lifting the amulet on his chest for a better look at the thing, “maybe this stupid prophecy doesn’t suck that much after all.”

Of course, that’s when Sid shows up.

The thing is, Peter’s not even sure *what* Sid looks like.

One second, he could swear Sid was the dark grey of a sky that’s threatening to unleash a nasty thunderstorm. A second later, Sid is a pale pinkish grey or a bluish grey. Sid seems to have tentacles but they might be fingers or just a lot of teeth. The only thing Peter is certain of is that Sid is freaking huge. Like the size of a skyscraper. Or maybe just a mid-sized office building.

Crap.

That’s when Peter understands exactly what he’s dealing with. Strange said that human minds couldn’t process Sid’s name. He never mentioned that human minds couldn’t process Sid’s freaking appearance.

How the heck is he supposed to fight — and beat — something his own mind can’t comprehend?

Sid, Peter realizes, is like Crocs. He’ll never understand those either. Unfortunately, he can’t simply pretend Sid doesn’t exist.

“I don’t suppose you feel like going back where you came from?” Peter asks hopefully.

Sid’s response seems to come from every direction and it’s a combination of every awful sound Peter can think of. Nails on a chalkboard. Yowling cats. Screaming toddlers. Explosions. Garbage trucks making their rounds before the sun is up.

“I guess that’s a no.”

There’s a ripple in the air and Peter’s spider-sense starts to tingle as the ripple grows into a —

“Shockwave!”

It’s the mother of all shockwaves and it sends Peter flying backwards until he manages to grab onto a tree, where he clings for dear life. There’s a godawful shattering sound, like the world is ending. When it finally stops, Peter looks around and realizes with horror exactly what Sid just did.

“Dude, you broke the Mirror Universe!”

Assuming the Mirror Universe could actually break, that is.

He has no idea.

What Peter does know for sure is that they’re in the athletic field behind the very real Summit High
School. Somewhere in there, Strange’s body is vulnerable while he fights in his astral form on the astral plane or whatever the heck he’s doing that he never bothered to fully explain. Not that Peter would understand it anyway. Science, yes. Things that defy scientific explanation? Not a chance!

On the other hand, Peter’s got Bucky and a bunch of Avengers to back him up along with a couple of X-Men and whatever Jones and Magneto are.

“Your friends cannot save you, boy. Time is frozen.”

“You can talk?”

“I deign to communicate through primitive means so that you understand who it is that destroys you and defies the prophecy,” Sid tells Peter but he’s not using a voice. He’s communicating telepathically. “Give me the amulet and your death will be quick and painless.”

“I would gladly give it to you, Sid,” Peter tells him, “and not only because it clashes with my outfit. The thing is, Doc said not to and all of you bad guys seem to want it really badly, which makes me think me hanging onto it is probably a good idea.”

There’s another ripple in the air and this time, it seems like all the light is being sucked out of the world.

“Uh-oh.”

Peter’s Spidey-sense and a healthy dose of common sense identify the target just as Sid lets loose with a barrage of energy that is the blackest black Peter has ever seen. The darkness is aimed straight at Summit High School and the school starts coming apart brick by brick, each one being sucked into the ever-growing void. Windows shatter and get sucked into the blackness, too.

Peter is halfway to a panic attack because webs are no match for whatever the heck Sid is doing when he remembers the amulet.

Everyone wants it.

Which probably means it’s the only thing that can stop Sid.

“Protect!” Peter shouts, since he has no idea how to work the stupid thing. He’s only thinking of one thing — protecting his friends and the kids from Summit that are still inside the auditorium. The amulet glows red and energy shoots from it to form a giant glowing red bubble, protecting the remaining chunk of Summit High School. He can only hope Strange is in that part of the school and not the part that got sucked into Hell or wherever the black vortex went.

“Impressive,” Sid comments and the black vortex vanishes. “I’m going to enjoy watching Morlun feast on you when I turn your broken body over to him.”

“I’m sure you’re gonna have a lot of ‘splaining to do to whoever Moron is when you show up empty-handed with your tail or tentacles or whatever you’ve got between your legs,” Peter shoots back. He wipes a trickle of blood from his nose and narrows his eyes at Sid. “You’re powerful but I’m guessing that since the friggin’ Devil or Mephisto or whatever he is made this amulet, it’s a lot more powerful than you are, Sid. Last chance. Get lost before I send you back to the Bad Place.”

Tentacles or fingers or whatever Sid has wave in the air and black hex symbols appear. “What good is power if you don’t know how to wield it, child?”

“Dude,” Peter says, shaking his head, “it’s magic not science. It doesn’t have to make sense. Like, if
I want my webshooters to shoot spiders instead of webs, like this...” He points at Sid and fires. Glowing red energy bursts from his webshooters and forms about a hundred tiny red spiders that devour the black symbols and start to grow. “Holy crap, that actually worked! Get him, guys!”

The energy-spiders don’t need to be told twice.

Sid emits a sound or mental scream that makes Peter’s head feel like it’s about to explode and then starts to create another shockwave.

“Not this time,” Peter grunts. He picks up the fancy school bus Tony made and hurls it into the epicenter of the shockwave. The energy-spiders launch themselves in after it and there’s an enormous explosion.

Correction.

It’s an implosion and Sid is being sucked into it while the energy-spiders Peter conjured wrap him in a glowing red web-cocoon as they keep growing.

Sid, like all bad guys, tries to have the last word as he’s sucked into the portal. “Morlun knows about you, boy. He’s coming for you.”

“Yeah, yeah. Have fun in Hell, jackass.” Peter gives a little finger wave as the portal closes and the energy-spiders vanish. The bus crashes down in the middle of the street, a melted blob that resembles something out of a Salvador Dali painting. He blows out a sigh. “I can’t believe that worked.”

“Neither can I.”

Peter whirls, web-shooters at the ready but it’s only Strange and he looks like Peter feels. “Oh, thank God you’re okay!”

Strange produces a handkerchief from thin air and hands it to Peter. “Your nose is bleeding. Believe it or not, you put yourself under quite a strain casting those spells.”

“I did what now?” Peter asks.

“You used Mephisto’s amulet to cast spells,” Strange explains. “It’s a very powerful relic, which is why you could do it, even without training. Your superpowers are what made it safe for you to wield. An ordinary person would have had a stroke.” He holds out his hand. “I’ll take it back for safekeeping now.”

Peter plucks the amulet off and hands it to Strange. “Let me guess, only Mephisto’s power could defeat Sid.”

“It had to be wielded by an innocent,” Strange explains. “That’s where you came in, though I still don’t understand why you insist on calling the demon ‘Sid’.”

“It’s kind of a dad joke my uncle used to tell me to teach me about manners when I was a kid,” Peter shrugs. “If a guy sneezed without covering his mouth, my uncle would say, don’t be like Sid. Sid is short for ‘inconsiderate’ and I can’t think of anyone more inconsiderate than a demon interfering in my Mathlete competition, can you?”

Strange shakes his head and smiles. “No, Peter, I can’t.”

“Doc,” Peter asks slowly, “do you know who Moribund is?”
“Moribund?”

“Sid said Moribund was coming for me,” Peter explains. “I’d kinda like to know if I’ve gotta fight another demon or magical bad guy.”

The smile fades from Strange’s face. “Don’t worry about Morlun, Peter. I’m going to keep him far from you.”

“But —“ Peter blinks as he finds himself back onstage in what’s left of the Summit High auditorium. “Hoo boy. Summit High School is trashed and everyone here knows my secret identity and —“

“I stopped time before I came through the portal,” Strange cuts him off. “See how they’re all frozen in place? They never saw me and they never saw you come after me. As far as they’re concerned, this guy just asked you a math question and you’re about to answer it. Do you remember the answer?”

“Ten,” Peter says just as everyone unfreezes around him.

“Correct! Congratulations, Midtown! You’re the champions — what?!” The examiner’s mouth drops open as he looks upward.

Peter follows his gaze and realizes half the ceiling is gone and the sky is visible where three stories of school used to be. Also, Strange is gone.

Because of course he is.

That’s the Ol’ Parker Luck running true to form, leaving him to deal with the consequences of this fiasco.

And then he faints.

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Barnes’ mouth drops open.

There’s a fraction of a second where Peter’s brand new blazer looks like it’s been through a war and then it’s clean again. Another glance and Barnes realizes that Tommy is in shirtsleeves and that Petey’s blazer is balled up in Barnes’ lap. It’s torn, burned and covered in some kind of goo.

Before he can wonder what the hell happened in the fraction of a second between when the examiner asked the question and Petey raised his hand, Petey answers and then he passes out.

Also, a lot of the auditorium and most of the school seems to be missing.

Barnes bolts to his feet to dash up onstage to Petey’s side just as Jones says, “I told you so, Barnes.”

“Our team won,” Erik crows.

Trish is staring open-mouthed at the remains of the auditorium. “What happened to the school?”
“Isn’t it obvious?” Jones says. “It’s the Ol’ Parker Luck, Barnes’ HYDRA-magnetism and Magneto’s fuckered up luck joining together to destroy everything in its path. We’re lucky we survived.”

For once, Barnes thinks she might be right about that.

Chapter End Notes

Folks, I’d like to recommend the amazing fic written by frequent commenter AsterRoc. I know I’m hooked.
Ever since Bucky Barnes came into my life, I’ve encountered a lot of shit that doesn’t make sense. That will never make sense. As I take in the unbelievable, catastrophic damage to Summit High School, I know that whatever the explanation for this is, it too will never make sense and yet, as with all things Bucky Barnes, I will just roll with it until the next unbelievable disaster he brings into my life.

I must be fucking crazy.

Still, I find myself rolling with it when Misty Knight flashes her badge and shouts over Captain America himself to take charge of the situation. “NYPD! Everyone, listen up. Students, I want you to line up along that wall. Teachers, I want you next in line. Luke, I need you up here to help me lead them out the emergency exit backstage. Jessica Jones, take care of the parents and guests until I give you the word to bring them through.”

The loaded look Knight shoots me as I make my way towards the ‘parents and guests’ is completely unnecessary. I know exactly what she’s trying to avoid, unlike Stevie who’s on his feet and looking like he wants to jump in and take charge of the situation.

“Shut up,” I tell him as he starts to open his mouth. “Between the emergency personnel and the media that’s about to swarm this place, you need to ask yourself how many people do you want knowing the kid’s identity?”

Stevie’s mouth shuts with a snap.

“Barnes has Petey.” I add. We all look towards the stage where Barnes is cradling the unconscious teenager to his chest. “You need to focus on protecting him too.”

Magneto comes up beside me with Wolverine and that Warhead girl at his heels and announces, “The structure will hold until we’re all outside. We can go out the door that Thor so graciously removed for us.”

Warhead rolls her eyes.

Wolverine smirks at Magneto. “Everyone thought the mutants up in Westchester were gonna be the first problem competition. Pay up, Erik.”

Magneto blows out a sigh, fishes a wad of cash from his pocket and hands it over.

Happy Hogan’s disgusted expression is probably ten times better than mine as he grabs Stark’s arm. “Come on, before someone notices you.”

“I can be here,” Stark protests. “One of my foundations is sponsoring —“

Thor’s attention is elsewhere. He’s standing stock still, arms at his sides and hands balled into fists. The increasing whiteness of his knuckles are the only sign that he’s not having some kind of seizure.

“Thor?” Stevie asks quietly. “What is it?”

“Magic,” Thor spits, suddenly coming back to life. Without waiting for the rest of us, he beelines for the doorway at the back of the auditorium and goes through.

We make it outside just in time to see him raise his hammer skyward and fly up a rainbow-colored beam of light before vanishing altogether.

“I never get tired of seeing that,” Stark says.

“How about that?” Stevie asks pointing forward to where the rest of the school used to stand. Some of the floor is still intact and other parts are missing, giving us a good look at the remains of the boiler room.

“I could get tired of that,” Stark admits. “Thor said it was magic. You think Loki had something to do with this?”

“I hope not,” Stevie sighs.

“Could be Wanda or Billy,” Wolverine suggests. “Neither of them can —“

“Do not,” Magneto cuts him off coldly. “Neither of them would do this, even accidentally.”

Wolverine snorts. “Tommy did it to his own schoo —“

The hairy, annoying asshole doesn’t get to finish his thought before Magneto sends him flying through the air. He turns to Warhead and hands her some cash. “Have a pleasant trip back to Westchester, young lady. Your escort, unfortunately, is already there.”

Warhead, to our collective amazement, breaks into a huge-ass smile before snatching the money from Magneto. “Later, losers,” she calls over her shoulder as she clambers over the rubble and out into the street like she’s used to doing it.

From what I know about the X-Men, she probably is.

“We should probably get going too,” Stevie says, gesturing for us to follow him. We make it just a few more feet to where the parking lot once stood before he stops short, mouth dropping open.

The sound that comes out of Stark is half gurgle-half squeak until it bursts out into a coherent, “My bus!!”

“Are you sure that’s it?” I ask. As if the melted gold and red, singed glob could be anything else.

Stark runs his hands through his hair, making it stand up on end. “Do you have any idea how much heat is needed to —“

“A thousand bucks if you take him to Stark Tower right now,” Hogan whispers in my ear. “As in fly him the fuck out of here. I’ll handle the rest of these bozos.”

I’ve never met Happy Hogan before today but I think he’s probably my new favorite Stark employee as I grab Stark and launch us into the air.

Stark is still babbling about the bus, even as we get a better look at the damaged school and the
circus that’s just starting to arrive. Finally, he snaps out of it. “I need to get a medical suite ready for Peter. JARVIS, make sure Barnes knows to bring the kid directly to the Tower for treatment and not to some ill-equipped emergency room.”

By the time he’s done shitting all over the healthcare system, we’re landing next to the Quinjet. Or one of the Quinjets.

“I don’t know about you, Jones, but I need a drink or six,” Stark says. “By the way, your landings are horrible.”

I flip him off.

But I don’t say no to the drink.

Or six.

Peter groans and cracks open an eye.

Bucky’s concerned face swims into view. “How do you feel?”

“Tired?” Peter ventures. It takes a second until he realizes that he’s in a bed in the Stark Tower medical wing and there’s an IV drip in his arm. The last thing he remembers is seeing the sky through the ceiling of the Summit High auditorium. “Where’s Aunt May?”

“Stuck in traffic but she’s on her way,” Bucky explains. He reaches over and brushes Peter’s hair out of his eyes. “Know what was wrong with you?”

“Uh —“

“Dehydration, low blood sugar and exhaustion,” Bucky ticks off, his expression darkening. “Your levels were down so low it was like you hadn’t eaten for six hours or more which is impossible because I fed you an afternoon snack on the bus and you should have been fine. And yet, in one second you raised your hand and then you passed out. Then again, what happened to the fuc — uh, fudging — uh... fucking school happened in one second too so you can see why I might be having a lot of trouble understanding exactly what the hell went on today and why I might be very fucking concerned.”

“I think you owe a few dollars to the swear jar,” Peter ventures.

Bucky narrows his eyes at Peter. “You want to keep cracking jokes?”

“Yes?”
Bucky winces and slaps his forehead with the heel of his hand.

“JARVIS said Peter was awake,” Steve says, bursting into the room and taking his place at Bucky’s side. “He doesn’t look so bad.”

Bucky makes a strangled, frustrated noise and jerks his thumb in the direction of the IV drip.

“Oh. Right.”

“Bucky said bad words,” Peter announces. “He owes the swear jar about three dollars.”

Steve settles on the side of Peter’s bed. “I imagine Bucky is going to say a lot more bad words after you explain what happened today, Peter. In fact, I might say a few.”

“I’m not sure I can explain it,” Peter says. Heck, he doesn’t want to even try. In fact, the less he thinks about it, the better so he gives into the giant yawn that’s been threatening and closes his eyes.

“Fuck,” he hears Bucky say as he drifts back to sleep.

Peter agrees.

“What did I do now?” Loki asks impatiently.

They’re in a public garden on Vanaheim or at least, Thor is. He suspects Loki is an illusion unless somehow, Heimdall was able to send his miscreant brother here. The garden is fully in bloom but there are no other visitors, giving Thor the privacy he needs to confront his brother, whether he’s really here or not.

Thor folds his arms across his chest and glares. “So you admit you did something.”

“I admit nothing,” Loki shoots back. “I’m asking you what you think I did because clearly you think I did something to have me dragged here by Heimdall.”

“You’re actually here?” Thor snorts a laugh. “Heimdall brought you here?”

“I just said that,” Loki sighs with exasperation. “And I plan on going back to where I was the moment this inane conversation concludes, which it seems to have, so —“

“We’re far from finished,” Thor cuts him off, grabbing Loki by the arm, steering him towards a bench and shoving him down onto it. “What did you do to the boy?”

Loki blinks up at him but if being manhandled affects him at all, it doesn’t show. “You’re going to have to be more specific. What boy?”
“The Midgardian. Peter Parker.”

“It was harmless fun for his harvest celebration,” Loki groans. “The children enjoyed themselves —“

“No, that,” Thor snaps. “I’m talking about what you did to his Mathlete competition.”

“His what?!”

Holding his temper with his brother is becoming more of a challenge as Loki evolves from mere trickster to the agent of chaos he’s turning into. Still, Thor gives it his best attempt. “The boy’s contest of academic ability, Loki. The one you interrupted to destroy the school —“

“I did no such thing,” Loki protests hotly, “nor would I. He’s a child!”

Thor blinks.

Loki rises to his feet. “Take me there.”

“What?”

“Take. Me. There. If someone with no scruples is using magic to harm children, I’d like to know about it,” Loki says. He sniffs indignantly at Thor’s expression. “Don’t look so surprised. I find their antics amusing, especially the Parker boy. He’s quite clever, actually.”

“Stay away from him,” Thor warns as he raises Mjolnir skyward. A moment later, they’re at the wreckage of the school. Midgardian workers have cordoned off the area while a group of Midgardian law enforcement takes photographs of Tony’s formerly fancy school bus that’s now a melted puddle.

Loki’s mouth drops open. “Someone tapped into multiple universes, brother, and caused damage to one of them.” He moves carefully towards the wreckage of the bus and holds his hand over it. “Whoever did this was far more powerful than I. Let me speak to the child.”

“Absolutely not.”

“If he’s attracting enemies with this kind of power, Thor, it’s in your best interest to know it now.”

It sounds reasonable, like it’s the right thing to do, but Thor is almost certain there’s a catch or hidden agenda that he’s missing. “Very well, but if you do anything to make him even a bit nervous, I will snap your lying neck.”

Loki rolls his eyes. “Just bring me to him.”

Thor raises Mjolnir again.

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Peter’s not sure what it is that wakes him up this time but he’s grateful to find himself back in his own bed. Tommy is back in his room, which means Magneto is sleeping elsewhere and Peter has
sweet privacy to try to sort out the craziness of his day so that he can decide on an explanation that won’t result in Bucky putting a child leash on him. He’s about to roll over when he realizes he’s not alone.

“Wha—?”

“Shhhh.” Thor leans over him. “It’s only me.”

“Where on Midgard are we?”

Peter’s mouth drops open as he clicks on the light to see Loki lifting his trig textbook and flipping through it. “I—is that Loki?!”

Like it could be anyone else.

“You’re in Queens,” Peter tells him, just to see his reaction.

“How utterly dreadful.” The would-be conqueror of Earth elbows his brother aside and narrows his eyes at Peter. “Tell us everything that happened today.”

Peter’s mouth drops open again and he looks at Thor for confirmation.

“Loki won’t harm you, little warrior. You have my word.”

“And we have privacy,” Loki adds, snatching the chair from Peter’s desk and sinking down onto it. “I imagine you haven’t even told your guardians of this yet, have you?”

“Well, no, but—”

“No doubt you think they wouldn’t believe you if you did.”

“Dude, I don’t even believe it,” Peter says, sitting up. “And I also can’t believe you’re here expecting me to tell you about it like we’re old friends or something.”

“Wouldn’t you like a friend who can explain magic to you?” Loki asks, leaning forward.

Peter scowls at him. “Yesterday, yeah, I would have jumped at it. After Sid, Asmodeus and his hell-amulet and the freaking Mirror Universe and astral plane or whatever the heck that was, I’ll be happy to never even hear the words Harry Potter again. And frankly, being friends with a guy who tried to kill my real friends and take over my planet... Buddy, that’s universe-class chutzpah!”

“I can help you explain everything to Bucky,” Loki offers. “And in a way that will let you resume your normal life after you’ve explained it.”

“He can,” Thor agrees.

“I don’t know...” Peter says skeptically. “You’re not exactly trustworthy.”

“He’s much smarter than you,” Loki tells Thor. “He barely knows me and already he distrusts me.”

Peter almost falls out of his bed when Thor flips Loki off.

“I learned that from Jessica Jones,” Thor says proudly. “It comes in quite handy.”

Peter buries his face in his hands and curses the Ol’ Parker Luck because really, there’s no other explanation for how his day could include Asmodeus, a multiverse, Sid and now Loki.
And then he starts telling his guests about it. “There was this Strange guy...”
“I don’t remember anything?”

Loki makes a disgusted noise, squinches his eyes shut and pinches the bridge of his nose. “Again and less like a question this time.”

“I don’t remember anything,” Peter repeats dutifully.

“You,” Loki pronounces with a theatrically deeply disappointed sigh, “are the worst liar I’ve ever encountered and believe me, child, I’ve encountered a fair number.”

Peter flaps his arms in frustration. “Then maybe I shouldn’t lie —“

“By all means, tell the adults the truth about the existence of multiverses and demons and see how far you get,” Loki shoots back. “No doubt you’ll never be allowed to leave this room unsupervised again and perhaps you’ll not even be unsupervised in here.” He turns to Thor, who emits a scoffing sound. “Do you disagree?”

“With you? Always.” Thor rolls his eyes heavenward. “Of course, it isn’t surprising that your first reaction to any given situation is to lie about it but that’s no reason to lead Peter down your twisted path —“

“I’m trying to help him —“

“By teaching him to avoid problems by lying,” Thor interrupts. “Tell me, brother, how well has that worked out for you thus far?”

Loki scowls, thrusts his finger towards Thor’s chest and opens his mouth to speak.

And then he vanishes.

Peter’s mouth drops open for what feels like the umpteenth time in the past twenty four hours. “Where’d he go?”

“I don’t know,” Thor says with a shrug. “Normally, there’s a flash of light when he teleports. Loki does so love to show off.”

“He can teleport?” Peter echoes.

“Yes, but it expends a great deal of energy.”

“Can you teleport?”

“I prefer not to,” Thor tells Peter. “It upsets my stomach.”

Peter stares at him because he’s having trouble reconciling this — for lack of a better word — dude in his bedroom with the regal, invincible warrior-god that Peter and the ASAs tried to take
down just a couple of months back. He wonders if the other Avengers have ever seen this side of Thor and, if not, whether they would even believe it exists. “Should we look for him?”

Thor pulls a face, as if the idea of looking for his brother is a complete waste of time. “Why not? Where would you suggest we start on this great, big planet?”

Just as Peter starts to answer, the world goes topsy-turvy just like it did so many times earlier today and he finds himself standing between the two Asgardians in Dr. Strange’s Sanctum Sanctorum. Again.

“I can’t leave you alone for a minute, can I?” Strange complains to Peter. He’s still wearing his outfit, including the cape, but it looks like it’s been cleaned. Or maybe he just cleaned it with magic, which Peter would prefer not to think about. Because, well, magic. Ugh.

“This is so not my fault,” Peter protests, fists on hips. “I was sleeping and they just showed up!”

Strange arches an eyebrow. “Both of them?”

Peter shrugs. “The Ol’ Parker Luck in action. Tell me again how it’s just part of being a super-powered teenager, Doc.”

“And yet you’re not cursed,” Strange muses, stroking his beard. “I would have noticed. By the way, I love the Captain America pajamas.”

Loki steps in front of Peter with a scowl, snaps his fingers and the next thing Peter knows, he’s wearing an exact copy of Loki’s outfit. “Would you have noticed that the boy was cursed before or after you sent him to slay a demon with absolutely no training whatsoever?”

Thor’s eyes go wide as he looks at Peter’s new clothes and quickly claps a hand over his mouth. It’s pretty obvious he’s trying not to snort with laughter. It’s also pretty obvious that he’s failing miserably as his shoulders shake.

Peter decides then and there that Asgardian gods are in the same category as magic, in his opinion and he can do without them for a long, long time.

“Oh that’s rich,” Strange tells Loki with a derisive snort. “A lecture on morals and responsibility from the would-be conqueror of Earth.”

Loki’s eyes narrow. “I don’t have to justify my actions to you —“

“I doubt you could justify them to yourself,” Strange cuts him off, “what with you being the God of Lies. Then again, why don’t you give it a shot while I talk to your brother?” With that, he gestures and Loki vanishes again. He turns his attention to Thor. “What were you thinking, bringing him here?”

Thor draws himself up. “I was thinking that he was exactly what I needed to flush out the mage who put my young friend in so much peril today.”

“Fair enough.” Strange gestures again and suddenly, they’re in another room, seated across from each other in big, comfy wing chairs. “And to clarify, I’m Earth’s Sorcerer Supreme.”

“Midgard has sorcerers now?”

“We’ve always had them. Just because you didn’t know about them doesn’t mean they didn’t exist.”
Thor places a large hand protectively on Peter’s shoulder. “That may be so, but I find it concerning that you used the boy for your own ends and then abandoned him to the damage done by your mystical battle.”

Strange winces and directs his next words at Peter. “That wasn’t personal. I had to fix the damage to the Mirror Universe, otherwise we’d have had universes bleeding into each other and causing even worse problems. Also, I couldn’t fix the damage to the high school without turning back time and us having to fight all of those Acolytes and Sid again.”

“You can turn back time?” Peter gapes before giving himself a mental head slap. “Never mind. Of course you can. If it’s good enough for Hermione Granger, it’s good enough for you, right?”

“You have got to stop using Harry Potter as your frame of reference for anything magical, Peter,” Strange tells him. “I thought you learned that when you shouted ‘expelliarmus’ at the Acolytes and it didn’t work.” He snaps his fingers and Loki reappears, seated in a fluffy green wing chair. “Although given this one’s resemblance to Snape, I can see why you’d think that.”

“You and I —“ Loki begins.

But it’s too late.

They’re back in Peter’s bedroom.

Thor pats Peter on the head. “I don’t think your Doctor Strange is malevolent, Peter. Just lacking in social graces. The Sorcerers Supreme are well known as guardians of the natural order. If he’s taken an interest in you, which he clearly has, you’re quite safe under his protection.”

“And mine,” Loki says.

Peter looks at him. “Why do I not find that reassuring?”

“You should.”

“Prove it.”

“And how,” Loki asks slowly, “am I to do that?”

Peter thinks for a minute. “Tell me everything you know about Morlun.”

“That parasite? Why would you want to know about — oh.” Loki blinks and exchanges looks with Thor before turning back to Peter. “Has Morlun threatened you?”

“Apparently he knows about me or something,” Peter shrugs, while filing away the word ‘parasite’ for future reference. He has a feeling the choice of word was deliberate. “Should I be worried?”

“Not in the least,” Thor assures Peter.

“Morlun consumes the power of others,” Loki explains. “Since you’ve reproduced, you’ve caught his attention, no doubt.”

“I what?!”

“The girl, Jessica and the other girl, Gwen both gained their powers through you. To Morlun, that’s the creation of a new, powerful species for him to consume.” Loki slides a ring off of his finger and holds it out to Peter. “Wear this and use it summon me if he somehow slips past me. I’ll deal with him.”
Reluctantly, Peter takes the ring. “Aren’t you supposed to be evil?”

“I’m chaotic neutral,” Loki says, reaching out to ruffle Peter’s hair. “And why are you complaining about being under the protection of a god?”

Before Peter can think of an answer, Loki and Thor vanish again, this time in a flash of light which he now knows means Loki teleported the two of them somewhere else.

Nothing about his day makes any sense whatsoever.

He turns to crawl back into bed and his eyes land on his bookshelves.

There, neatly lined up, are all of his Harry Potter books and movies.

There’s no way he wants to sleep in the same room as those.

Never again.

Barnes never sleeps deeply. He hasn’t since World War II and maybe even before that, if some of his memories of his life in Brooklyn are true. He’s completely awake by the time Peter finishes trudging from his bedroom to Barnes’ room and he’s sitting up alert when Peter lets himself in.

With a weary sigh, Peter flops face-down on the bed next to Barnes. His voice is muffled by the pillow when he asks, “Mind if I sleep here?”

“‘Course not,” Barnes says. It’s only because Petey sounds so damn tired that Barnes doesn’t ask what the hell happened to the Captain America pajamas Barnes put on him not two hours ago and where that strange body armor came from.

“Good,” Petey murmurs. “If anyone else shows up lookin’ for me, you’ve got my permission to shoot ‘em. Night, Bucky.”

“What?!”

But it’s too late.

Petey is dead to the world and snoring lightly.

There’s only one thing to do.

Barnes accepts his mission parameters and starts guarding the sleeping kid.

Whatever the explanation is, he’s sure, it’s gonna be a doozy because all evidence points to the Ol’ Parker Luck running rampant today.
In fact, it might be getting worse.

God help them all.
Mary Jane has learned the hard way that being a superhero’s girlfriend is not as awesome as it looks on paper. She’s compared notes with Pepper Potts herself and the experience is universal. There is, however, a vast difference between being the girlfriend of Tony Stark and being the girlfriend of Peter Parker.

That difference is the Ol’ Parker Luck.

For example, Mary Jane is almost one hundred percent sure that Pepper has never been woken up by a frantic Tony pounding on her window while dressed in a Loki costume.

“Can you help get me out of this thing?” Peter asks, scrambling inside Mary Jane’s bedroom. “Steve and Bucky are waiting for me to wake up and explain yesterday and if they see this, they’re going to go nuclear —”

“Why are you even wearing it then?” Mary Jane asks.

“It’s not like I had a choice!” Peter flaps his arms in frustration. “Loki did it when Doctor Strange made fun of my Captain America pajamas and — uh, never mind. It’s a long story and the short answer is ‘magic’.”

Mary Jane takes a step back and stares in disbelief as she looks Peter up and down. “You mean this is an actual Loki costume? As in Asgardian?”

“Yeah,” Peter says, with a sour expression, “and it turns out Asgardians don’t use zippers. I think they magic themselves into their clothes which means I’m going to have to cut my way out of this stupid —”

“There are fastenings under your left arm,” Mary Jane interrupts. She runs a fingertip over them and they open. “Pull it off.”

“What kind of weird design is that? What kind of deranged mind puts an armhole under the actual arm?”

“Every dress designer ever.” Mary Jane reaches into her closet and shows him a dress with a side zip. “See?”

“How do you even get in or out of that!?”

“Practice.” With that, she lays the dress down on her bed, grabs the ends of the leather top and tugs. It takes some work, but the top comes off. “Take off your boots and let’s see how to get the bottoms off.”

Peter eyes her and makes no move to take off his boots. “There was nothing under the top.”

“I know.”
He makes a face. “I don’t think there’s anything under the bottoms because they’re chafing something fierce.”

Pepper Potts, Mary Jane is sure, never had a discussion like this with Tony Stark. Then again, with Tony involved, Mary is sure there’ve been equally weird conversations where Tony wasn’t wearing underwear either. “On or off, Peter. Your choice.”

With a pained expression, Peter wrenches off the boots.

Just as Mary Jane kneels down to look for the hidden fastenings, there’s a loud growl from her window.

“You,” Bucky hisses as he climbs inside, “are beyond grounded, Petey.”

No, Mary Jane thinks, as amazing as Pepper is, she’d never manage a day of the Ol’ Parker Luck.

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“Is there anything you can do?”

This is a question that Matt encounters all the time from his clients. They ask it when circumstances have piled up and become utterly unbearable to the point of being almost too late for Matt to be of any real legal help. Matt loves these kinds of cases because they force him to be creative, to find a way and even if the solution he gets isn’t perfect, the clients are left in a better position than before they came to him.

Foggy calls these his ‘Hail Mary’ cases.

Charles Xavier is going to need a huge Hail Mary.

“The Mathlete competition rules are clear,” Matt says slowly. “Failure to appear at a match is counted as a forfeit. Excuses for failure to appear include weather, acts of God —”

“The equivalent of a school shooting,” Foggy chimes in. “Charles’ school was attacked by... I’m sorry, what did they call themselves again?”

“The Alliance of Evil,” Charles responds and Matt doesn’t need enhanced senses to hear the disdain in his voice. “Mutant mercenaries.”

“Half the school was destroyed,” Foggy adds. Ordinarily, Foggy just rolls his eyes when it comes to Matt’s Hail Mary cases but it seems he’s taken a real liking to Xavier and his students. “Were any of the kids hurt?”

“Some bruises and broken bones,” Xavier tells him.

“Lawsuit against the Alliance of Evil, Matt?”
“Sure, if the parents are willing.”

“I’m the children’s legal guardian,” Xavier says. “I’m willing.”

“Yes,” Magneto purrs, “of course you are. You’ve always been passionate about using human notions of justice.”

“Aren’t you?” Xavier counters. “Or have you switched viewpoints again? It’s hard for me to keep track.”

Magneto sniffs indignantly. “Returning to our original dilemma, Matthew, is there at least a chance that you can successfully appeal the forfeit?”

“Even if we could,” Matt says, “we’re also reopening arguments from the concerned parents who are worried about the safety of their children in matches with mutants. This incident at your school gives them all the ammunition they need to make a public safety argument.”

“There were no mutants at Summit High School yesterday.” Foggy scribbles some notes on his legal pad. “At least, none that the media or the rest of the world knows about.”

“This is New York,” Karen adds. “Asgardian gods and alien invasions happen here now.” She drops into the seat beside Foggy. “Sorry I’m late. I was trying to get more information about Summit from Betty Brant at the Bugle. Nobody knows what happened.”

Matt knows what happened, even if Steve and Bucky haven’t shared that information yet.

The Ol’ Parker Luck struck hard.

As long as these Mathlete matches continue, it will continue to strike.

And with Xavier’s school involved, there’s an entirely new force involved. Matt doesn’t have a name for it yet but he’s sure Foggy will come up with one. After all, what are the odds of an ‘evil mutant’ attack on the school on the day of the school’s first Mathlete match?

It should have been slim to none.

There are forces at work here and Matt is going to have to consult Father Lantom after this meeting.

He has a feeling Foggy and Karen will be joining him.

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Maybe it’s the fact Peter is wearing Asgardian armor.

Maybe it’s the fact that he’s been grounded one time too many.
Maybe it’s because he fought demons, traveled across dimensions and wielded a Hell-amulet.

Maybe it’s just that he’s fed up.

Peter plants his hands on his hips and glares at Bucky. “Dude, it’s Saturday. You can’t ground me for sneaking out a window on a Saturday.”

Just like that, Bucky seems to deflate. He sighs heavily and scrubs a hand over his face before looking at Peter with an utterly weary expression. “You think I don’t know that?”

“Then why did you say it?”

“Reflex,” Bucky shrugs.

“Why is grounding Peter a reflex?” Mary Jane demands.

“Is there anyone in this room who doesn’t know that grounding Petey doesn’t actually do anything?” Bucky asks. “I say it and he just does whatever and gets himself into situations where I can’t keep him safe. I’m supposed to keep him safe. How the hell do I keep you safe, Petey? You were right in front of me and just like that —” He snaps his fingers. “The fuckin’ school got trashed. You were safe in your bed.” Bucky snaps his fingers again. “And then suddenly you’re wearing whatever the fuck that is.”

“It’s —”

“Pointless,” Bucky goes on miserably. “I’ve got one mission and I’m blowing it. I could handcuff you to me and you’d still end up getting into shit I can’t prevent, wouldn’t you?”

“I —”

“Of course you would.”

Oy.

Peter feels like he should apologize but it wasn’t even his fault. None of this is his fault. It just keeps happening. He looks over at Mary Jane who’s looking back at him expectantly. Like he’s supposed to do something. Like he should...

Oh.

Right.

Peter gives Bucky what he hopes is a reassuring and maybe even a little apologetic hug.

Bucky hugs him back.

“You two are such dorks,” Mary Jane tells them. “I know you still haven’t learned your lesson about talking things out but try and remember how well this worked.”

Bucky breaks the hug and looks down at Peter. “Be honest with me, Petey. Do I wanna be completely sober when you explain what happened?”

“Probably not,” Peter says. “And you’re probably also going to want to get rid of the swear jar in advance.”

“Good to know.”
“Dorks,” Mary Jane mutters.

Tommy has been waiting *hours* to hear Peter’s explanation of what the hell happened and when Bucky hauls Peter back into the house half dressed in some kind of tacky cosplay outfit, Tommy’s impatience increases. The kid’s told him a bunch of weird stories about goblin guys and octopus armed men but Tommy is sure whatever happened yesterday is going to take the cake.

After all, it happened fast.

Faster than Tommy could have seen it.

That shit *has* to be amazing.

Aunt May, on the other hand, is worried enough to be making a gigantic pile of breakfast in the kitchen as if food might make hearing about what happened easier. Then again, Aunt May usually knows best. Besides, her cooking is the bomb.

Peter looks pale and tired as he greets Aunt May and takes a seat next to Steve.

Bucky sits on Peter’s other side.

Apparently, that’s not far enough away from Steve because he narrows his eyes at Bucky. “Were you drinking, Buck?”

Bucky just flips him off with a gleaming finger and a sour look.

Yeah, Tommy thinks, this is going to be *good*.

And just when it looks like Steve and Bucky might be getting into it, the back door opens and Mary Jane comes in, followed by Tony Stark. Behind *them* is a completely pissed off Happy Hogan and he’s carrying a stack of bakery boxes.

“I brought breakfast,” Tony announces. “I didn’t miss anything, did I?”

“You missed Bucky day drinking,” Steve tells him.

“And Petey doing Loki cosplay,” Bucky adds.

“Oh my god,” Peter groans. “It wasn’t cosplay.”

Aunt May just keeps flipping pancakes.

Tommy can’t wait to hear the kid’s explanation.
It’s gonna be Petey’s best yet.
Today is a brand new day and Clint plans on savoring every moment of it.

Today is the day he’s going to be the one to say ‘I told you so’.

He’s been telling Raven since this entire Mathlete mess began that the Ol’ Parker Luck was going to strike and boy, did it ever. It took out nearly an entire school. And even though nobody’s clued him in on exactly what happened, there’s no doubt in Clint’s mind that Peter was the reason for yesterday’s disaster at Summit High.

Not that he has anything against the kid.

It’s just that shit seems to happen wherever the kid is — and that gets multiplied exponentially if Barnes and Jones are in the vicinity.

Gwen, whose spider-powers come directly from Peter’s blood, has so far managed to avoid the Ol’ Parker Luck but Clint is sure that it’s only a matter of time until both she and Jessie find themselves on the wrong of their spider-ness.

Clint strolls into the kitchen and the words ‘I told you so’ die on his lips when he sees Raven scowling at her laptop as she types furiously. “Another MGH ring?”

Raven shakes her head and finally looks up at him. “Placement ratios.”

“Placement for what?”

“College.”

“You wanna go to college?”

“Not me. Gwen.” Raven reaches for her mug of coffee, takes a sip and it must be cold because she thrusts it aside.

Clint takes the mug, dumps the contents and refills it from the fresh pot that’s been brewing. He adds milk but no sugar, just the way she likes it, and sets it in front of her. “Gwen’s got another year —“

“Gwen needs to think about this now,” Raven cuts him off. She drinks the coffee and gives him an approving look. “Brooklyn Tech invited her to matriculate.”

“Didn’t she kick their Mathletes’ asses?”

“That’s why,” Raven says. “Her school goes up against Stuyvesant next week and I have a feeling they’ll be asking her too, which is why Brooklyn Tech is pushing us for an answer on Monday.”

Clint considers pointing out that there’s not really an ‘us’, that he’s Gwen’s legal guardian, but Raven’s never really cared much for the constraints of the law and frankly, her parental tendencies
sort of scare the crap out of him. “What does Gwen say?”

“She wanted to talk to Matt Murdock about it and she’s on her way over there now.”

“That’s smart. Out of all of us, he’s probably the best one to ask,” Clint tells her. “I never went to high school and neither did you and it’s not like I trust Professor X since his school got blown up yesterday, too. Besides, you’d better believe Murdock’s researched the hell out of every high school in the area.”

Raven eyes him coolly. “He’s definitely a good person to speak to but the one to ask is Aunt May.”

“You realize you’ve never actually spoken to her, right?”

“In person.”

“Excuse me?”

“We speak on the phone at least once a week.”

Clint gives himself a mental head slap. “Of course you do. And you call her Aunt May.”

“Everyone calls her Aunt May,” Raven shrugs. “Except Erik. He’s the one who introduced us.”

It figures.

“Anyway,” Raven goes on, “I’m waiting to call her until after Peter explains what happened at Summit — “

“Waitasec! How do you know —?”

“JARVIS and also your phone isn’t blowing up with messages from Tony yet.” She reaches for her mug of coffee. “Yesterday’s events change the odds, especially with Charles’ team being disqualified. Still, he might be able to get reinstated.”

“How? His team never showed up.” Once upon a time, he was a spy. Then he was an Avenger. Now he’s a guy gambling on Mathlete matches with mutants and exploding schools. And his girlfriend is a former terrorist or something. Clint knows his life is weird and it just keeps getting weirder.

“Murdock is Charles’ lawyer and he’s a damned good one.”

“We’re gonna need JARVIS to calculate the odds.”

“And we’re going to have to watch Gwen closely in case she’s susceptible to the Ol’ Parker Luck,” Raven says. “I haven’t seen any signs yet but if it happens, it’s going to happen during the Stuyvesant match. And before you ask, that’s because it’s the best public high school in New York City and Gwen should go there.”

“What does Gwen think about that?” It comes out before he can stop it, even though Clint knows the answer. What Gwen thinks doesn’t matter. Mama Mystique will get her way. Not that Gwen seems to mind. The two of them get each other and are actually good for each other.

Just like he and Raven seem to be good for each other.

His life just keeps getting weirder.
There’s a giant pile of food on the plate in front of him but Peter isn’t hungry. Okay, well, he’s hungry but it’s not like he’s going to be able to eat until he finishes explaining yesterday. As if it’s actually possible to explain yesterday.

Still, that’s what everyone is waiting for which means he has to at least try.

Even if nobody believes him.

And even if he barely believes it himself.

“Okay,” Peter says, taking a deep breath. “So.”

Everyone is watching him expectantly, except for Aunt May. She’s scrambling eggs.

“So,” Peter begins again, “what happened yesterday was magic.”

“We knew that,” Bucky interrupts. “Thor said Loki —“

“It wasn’t Loki.”

“You were dressed like Loki.”

“When?” Tony asks. “He wasn’t dressed like that at the school!”

“Last night,” Bucky tells him. “Came wandering into my room dressed like Loki and asked me to shoot anybody that tried to wake him up.”

Tony blinks. “No wonder you’re day drinking. I’d be hooked up to an IV drip of scotch —“

“It wasn’t Loki,” Peter cuts Tony off. “Loki showed up later and we’ll get to that.” Never, he hopes, but he knows he won’t be that lucky. There’s going to be an explanation in detail, heaven help them all. “Okay, so magic. But not like what Wanda and Billy can do. I mean, magic. As in, alternate universes and —“

“Wait.” Bucky stands up, strolls over to the kitchen cabinet above the refrigerator and pulls out a bottle of clear liquid. He pours a liberal amount into his coffee and smacks Steve’s hand aside when Steve tries to stop him from doing the same to Steve’s coffee.

Tony nods approvingly, pulls a flask from his blazer and spikes his own coffee.

“Okay,” Bucky says, setting the bottle down on the kitchen table. “Go on, Petey.”
Peter looks over at Mary Jane but her attention is focused on the stack of pancakes in front of her. It’s a good strategy and he’s momentarily jealous. “You know how it seemed like everything happened in a split second?” Peter snaps his fingers for emphasis. “It didn’t happen that way for me —“

“I knew it,” Bucky interrupts again. “There’s no way you could’ve been that run down otherwise.”

“I’m glad you knew it,” Steve says, taking the bottle of booze and moving it out of Bucky’s reach. “But I’d like to hear Peter tell the story, if that’s all right with you, Buck.”

“Hearing it sober is a mistake, Spangles,” Tony tells him.

Steve flips him off. “Go on, Peter.”

Peter takes a deep breath. “The examiner asked that question and then time kind of, uh, stopped.” He pauses but nobody interrupts him for a change. Taking it as a good sign, Peter moves on to the next mind-blowing fact. “The floor opened up and bright light came out of it —“

“Like an alien invasion?” Mary Jane asks. She claps a hand over her mouth and nods at Peter to continue.

“Kind of. This guy comes floating out and he’s fighting something with a lot of tentacles and he’s using these light-symbol things to do it.” Peter braces himself as he drops the next fact. “His said his name was Strange.”

“How fuckin’ strange could it be?” Bucky asks and there’s a slight slur to his words. “I mean, you’re talking about tentacles comin’ up out of the auditorium floor and time stopping.”

Steve starts to say something but Bucky cuts him off.

“No more swear jar, Stevie.”

Steve sighs and drinks his spiked coffee.

Peter drinks his milk, which is not spiked, not even with chocolate syrup. “His name is Stephen Strange. Doctor Stephen Strange. He’s a neurosurgeon.”

“And he fights tentacle monsters with magic symbols on the side?” Bucky demands.

“Yes! He’s the Sorcerer Supreme!” Peter explodes. “He fights tentacle monsters with magic symbols and he stops time and he does all kinds of crazy stuff which I’d tell you about if you stop interrupting me already!”

That’s when Aunt May slams the skillet down on the stove. “Not one word from anybody other than Peter!” she scolds, snatching the bottle of alcohol from the table. She takes Bucky’s mug and dumps the contents into the sink. “No more drinking. We’re going to behave like civilized, intelligent adults and we’re going to let Peter tell us what happened. After that, if you want to drink yourself into a stupor, you can do it outside of my house. Are we clear?”

There’s a stunned silence during which everyone in the room realizes just how upset by yesterday’s events Aunt May is. One by one, Earth’s mightiest heroes, including Mary Jane, look chastened. Happy just rolls his eyes at them.

“Go on, Peter,” she says finally.

Peter goes on.
He explains about Asmodeus, Mephisto, the Acolytes, the amulet, the Mirror Universe, his tour of the world and by the time he gets to Sid, he’s not even sure anyone is breathing. “And then Doctor Strange turned time on again and I answered the question.”

Steve is the first to speak. “What about Loki? I thought he was involved somehow.”

“He showed up after,” Peter shrugs. “He didn’t like that Strange dragged me into the whole Asmodeus prophecy thing.” Mentioning Morlun, Peter decides, is probably a bad idea. That can wait. Maybe forever, if he’s lucky, not that he ever gets lucky.

“What do you mean, he didn’t like it?”

“He gave Strange a piece of his mind is all, but Thor was okay with it,” Peter explains. “Thor seemed to know about these Sorcerer Supreme guys and I guess they’re more powerful than Loki because Loki didn’t really do much other than complain.”

Steve and Tony exchange looks.

“He gave me this ring,” Peter says, setting the ring on the kitchen table.

“Strange?” Tony asks.

“Loki.”

Tony’s eyes go wide and then he smirks. “Loki put a ring on it?”

Peter makes a face and Tony makes a pained sound because Mary Jane probably kicked him in the shin. “To call him if I need his help.”

“Loki wants to help you,” Steve says slowly, exchanging looks with Bucky. “Loki. Who was going to take over the planet.”

Peter shrugs helplessly. “I swear I don’t understand it either.”

Aunt May snatches up the ring before Peter can stop her and, with a burst of green light that Peter is sure is meant more to show off than for transportation, Loki appears.

“Well, that was fast —” he begins and then stops, looking Aunt May up and down before turning and noticing who else is in the room. “You betrayed me in less than a day. Well done, Peter. There’s hope for you yet.”

“He didn’t summon you,” Aunt May says and Loki’s attention snaps to her. “I did. Do you know who I am?”

Loki’s eyes narrow. “Do you know who I —?”

“I’m Peter’s Aunt May,” she cuts him off and there’s steel in her voice as she faces down the Asgardian god without batting an eye. “Peter has been my responsibility since he was five years old.”

Something shifts in Loki’s expression, just for a fraction of a second, but Peter sees it and he’s positive Aunt May does too.

“My husband and I raised Peter. We looked out for him. Protected him,” Aunt May goes on. “Ben was killed by a burglar just a few feet from where you’re standing. It wasn’t long after that when Peter told me he was Spider-Man. He helps people and he puts himself in danger that I can’t protect
him from but I’m lucky because there are people who look out for Peter when I can’t and they’ve become my family too.” She takes a deep breath and holds out the ring to Loki. “I know who you are, Loki, and I know what you are so when you offer to protect Peter, when you offer to become part of this family, it’s not something you can do on a whim. That you can forget about. Or lie about. When you look me in the eye and tell me you meant it and that you’ll stand by your word, I’ll believe you.”

Nobody is saying anything as Aunt May faces down the god who slaughtered eighty-five people in a single day, followed by destroying a lot of Manhattan the day after that.

Even Loki seems stunned. Finally, he takes the ring from Aunt May’s outstretched hand and closes it in his fist. There’s another flash of green light and when he opens his hand again, the ring is now a necklace. “I think I’d rather you wear this and summon me if you think Peter is in trouble. You seem to have much more sense. For a Midgardian.”

Aunt May takes the necklace. “We’re having breakfast. Take a plate and help yourself.”

“I —“

“You look like you haven’t had a good meal in ages so I expect you to have seconds.”

Loki looks at Peter.

Peter shrugs helplessly.

Loki sits, takes a plate and begins piling it with food while everyone else stares at him.

Tony eases the flask from his pocket and hands it to Bucky.

Happy pulls another flask from his pocket and hands it to Tony.

Peter buries his face in his hand and hopes this is as weird as his day is going to get.
“Is Matt here?” Gwen asks the second Jess opens the door to the apartment.

“Uh, n-no,” Jess stammers because stammering is what she does around Gwen sometimes. It’s not just because Gwen is ridiculously gorgeous and brilliant. It’s because she does what she wants, including showing up at Jess’ door unannounced, looking like she’s on the warpath. “He had to go meet with a client. I-is everything okay?”

Gwen cocks her head slightly to the side. “I got invited to transfer to Brooklyn Tech and I came to talk to him about it.”

“W-well —“

“Since he’s not here, I can’t so let’s go out and enjoy the day.”

“Uh —“

“As in, a real date.”

Jess blinks at her, trying to track how the conversation went from attending one of the most prestigious public schools in New York City to a date. “What?”

Gwen bends down so that they’re eye level. “We’ve never had a real date,” she says. “We’ve had study dates, chaperoned dinner dates in this apartment, web-slinging dates and dates with disaster thanks to the Ol’ Parker Luck but we have never actually gone out and done the date-date thing.”

It’s true, Jess realizes. “But what about studying for —“

“I am mathed out,” Gwen declares. “And yes, I know that’s not a word. Know what else I know?”

“Uh —“

“It’s a beautiful day and we’re not wasting it inside.”

Jess thinks fast. Her homework is done, Matt’s busy with his case and isn’t she entitled to a little personal time once in a while? “Okay. Let me get —“

“No costume,” Gwen interrupts. “This is a date. No studying, no web-slinging, no math,” Gwen ticks off. “And absolutely no After School Avengers.”

It’s not just a date, Jess realizes. This is a full-on teenage rebellion and she’s starting to really like the idea. “No money either.”

“Well, duh,” Gwen agrees. “We’re teenagers. Of course we have no money.”

“We have a little,” Jess corrects her. “Matt always leaves me lunch money.”

“I stand corrected.” She winks at Jess. “I’m also standing here waiting. Get a move on!”
It’s a mistake to leave without her costume, Jess knows, as she goes to get ready. Then again, she’s a Murdock now. Surely the Ol’ Parker Luck will pass her by to head east, out to Queens where it belongs. Surely she can enjoy one lousy date with her girlfriend.

Surely Jess knows she’s kidding herself.

She can dream, right?

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Tommy has experienced a lot of weird shit since finding out he was a mutant, especially since he became a member of the Parker household, but seeing Loki at their kitchen table eating a stack of pancakes has to be the weirdest fucking thing ever. And he’s seen Magneto having coffee in his pajamas at this very table, which is pretty fucking weird itself.

The thing is, Tommy is clearly not alone in thinking it’s weird because everyone is watching Loki eat those fucking pancakes. Everyone except Peter, Mary Jane and Aunt May, that is. The three of them are eating their own breakfasts without a care in the world. Okay, maybe not Peter. Peter is panic-eating, shoveling food into his mouth as fast as Bucky keeps dumping it on his plate.

Not that Tommy blames the kid after the shit he went through yesterday.

And not that Tommy believes what Peter said is even close to being the full story.

He’s pretty sure Bucky doesn’t believe it’s the full story either and even though Bucky usually calls Peter on his bullshit, he’s not calling Peter on this. Instead, Bucky is staring at Loki, watching Loki eat.

Tony, Steve and that Happy guy are also staring at Loki.

Every now and again, Loki looks back and catches them staring but Tommy has to hand it to Loki because all that staring doesn’t seem to bug him at all. He just keeps eating, like his being here is the most normal thing in the world. Then again, isn’t he supposed to be immortal? And evil?

So maybe he’s used to being stared at.

And just when Tommy is sure breakfast can’t get any more awkwardly fucked up, Magneto comes home.

“May, I brought you scones from...” He trails off and just stands there at the back door, eyes wide, taking in the entire scene.

Shit, Tommy is sure, is about to get real.

Peter starts shoveling food into his mouth at super-spider-speed.

Mary Jane’s fork freezes halfway to her mouth.
The first one to break the extremely freaky silence is Captain America himself. Tommy doesn’t know him well but he’s learned that the good Captain is not all truth, justice and apple pie. The man has a sarcastic streak a mile wide and a stubborn streak even wider than that.

“Erik,” Captain America says and he looks so damn sincere, “allow me to introduce Loki of Asgard. I believe you were in the Triskelion when he tried to conquer the planet and laid waste to a good chunk of midtown Manhattan. Loki, this is Erik Lehnsherr, also known as Magneto, Master of Magnetism. He can tell you about all the things he’s done to this planet in the name of mutant superiority over coffee sometime. He’s Tommy’s grandfather and Peter’s...well, he’s also part of the family that protects Peter. Erik, Loki joined the family today.”

Peter chokes on his mouthful of pancakes.

Magneto and Loki exchange looks that can only be described as ‘gobsmacked’.

“The Captain and Bucky have been ‘day-drinking’,” Loki tells Magneto and he makes air-quotes on the last word.

Magneto looks over at Aunt May for confirmation.

Aunt May hands Magneto a plate, like having two of the most dangerous people on the planet eating breakfast and about to get into a pissing match over protecting Petey-boy happens every day. Which it kind of does. The kid attracts protectors as much as he attracts disaster, so maybe it all evens out, Tommy thinks.

And of course Magneto takes the plate because he’s Magneto and he’s been doing stupid shit for decades. He holds out the paper bag to Loki. “Would you like a scone?”

“Thank you.” Loki takes a fucking scone.

Tony and Bucky dump some more booze into their coffee. Steve snatches Bucky’s flask and drinks it straight.

Aunt May shoots them all a death glare.

This, Tommy thinks, is the best breakfast ever.
he’s supposed to be grounded forever, but that Mary Jane is even better at strategy than Captain America himself because she’s figured out an escape from breakfast for both of them.

Peter leaps to his feet and tosses his napkin down. “I did —“

“Dude, you’re grounded until next year,” Tommy smirks. “Right, Bucky?”

Bucky just throws up his hands in defeat and groans.

“Peter needs his allowance,” Mary Jane says quickly, sensing an opportunity and pouncing. “You promised, Bucky.”

Unfortunately, Mary Jane has just made a terrible miscalculation because Peter doesn’t need his genius-level IQ to know that she’s just triggered the adults at the table into yet another competitive pissing match.

Bucky rummages in his pocket and shoves a wad of cash in Peter’s direction. “Here.”

Tony intercepts it and quickly counts the bills, “Really? Thirty-four dollars? What kind of time can Peter show Mary Jane for thirty-four dollars?”

Peter knows he can actually show MJ a great time since thirty-four dollars is more than he usually has to take her out with but Tony, like Bucky, is not exactly sober and feeling less than in control of the situation in Peter’s kitchen.

“My Mary Jane isn’t going to be eating some questionable dollar-a-slice pizza today,” Tony announces. “Give her the card, Hap.”

Happy looks vaguely alarmed. “Pepper said —“

“Pepper wouldn’t want her protege to suffer because Barnes is a tightwad,” Tony insists. “Give it to her.”

Mary Jane attempts to defuse the situation. “Tony, I’m fine —“ She stops mid-protest when Happy hands her an onyx American Express card. “Oh my gosh...”

“Is it always like this?” Loki asks Erik.

“Worse,” Erik tells him gravely. “And the day has barely begun.”

“Well,” Loki shrugs, going back to his pancakes, “I am the God of Chaos.”

“Then you shall be quite at home here.”

Mary Jane grabs Peter by the arm and tugs him out the back door. “Let’s get out of here before Loki conjures you more armor or a royal procession or something.”

“Where are we going?” Peter asks.

“As far away as thirty-four dollars and the subway can take us.”

“Anywhere but Harlem.”

“Sounds like a plan worthy of Captain America,” Mary Jane agrees.

Peter looks back over his shoulder at the house. “Should we be worried?”
“Aunt May can handle them,” Mary Jane declares. “And I can handle you. Today is going to be perfect.”

Those, Peter has a feeling, are famous last words.

At least they won’t be eating dollar pizza.
“Know what today is?” Teddy asks, dropping down onto Billy’s bed. Whether it’s because he’s a shapeshifter or just really good at hiding his expressions, Teddy’s face doesn’t give Billy a single clue because of course Billy doesn’t know what today is.

Billy thinks fast. He knows it’s not the anniversary of anything like a first kiss or a first date but he’s drawing a blank on anything else that it could possibly be which means his options are to lie, tell the truth or try to use his telepathic abilities. Yeah. Right. Truth, it is. “Uhhh, no.”

“Today,” Teddy says solemnly, “is the Pillow Fight in the Park.”

“The what?!?”

“Once a year, people gather in Washington Square Park for a massive pillow fight.” Teddy’s face lights up into a radiant smile. “Tell me that doesn’t sound like fun.”

“Isn’t that kind of wasteful?” Billy blurts because ruining romantic moments by blurting stupid comments is one of his special talents.

Teddy puts his finger over Billy’s mouth, silencing him because Teddy knows all about Billy’s blurtung problem. “Yes, it’s wasteful. It’s also the one time you and I can be in a huge battle that’s about fun and not the end of the world. And we deserve to have fun, Billy. Know why?”

Billy knows better than to ruin this moment so he just shrugs.

“We,” Teddy intones, “are not Mathletes.”

It’s true, Billy has to admit. They’re not. So he nods.

“We weren’t at Summit with Peter when whatever craziness that was happened or with the mutants up at their school in Westchester with whatever craziness happened there.”

Also true.

“We’re not grounded, either and have I mentioned how much I’ve been looking forward to spending the day with you?”

That, right there, is the winning argument. Spending time with Teddy is Billy’s Favorite Thing in the World. Spending time with Teddy when they’re not caught up in some insane battle with the ASAs? That’s usually more than Billy can hope for. So even though destroying a pillow or two in a pillow fight is kind of wasteful, it really is harmless fun. With his boyfriend. Who he loves.

“We can stop at the Housing Works thrift shop and get some really grungy pillows that nobody would buy in a million years,” Teddy adds. “And the money goes to fight AIDS and homelessness so we can be wasteful and socially conscious.”

There’s only one thing to say and Billy says it without hesitation because it absolutely, positively will not ruin the moment. “I love you, Teddy Altman.”
Teddy beams. “Of course you do. I’m awesome.”

Naturally, Billy whacks him with a pillow.

“Jessica Jones, the Avengers need your help!”

“Alcoholics Anonymous has a meeting over on Forty-Second Street at Holland House,” I tell a clearly drunk-off-his-ass Captain America. “Or so I’ve been told by a lot of well-meaning assholes.”

Stevie flips me off and staggers into my apartment, followed by a drunken procession of Bucky goddamn Barnes and Tony fucking Stark. The last to enter is Happy Hogan, who gently closes my door, winces at the lock Stevie just broke and nods at me to silently confirm Stark will pay to fix it.

“It’s not even noon,” I say, closing my laptop and stashing the bottle I was nipping from in my desk drawer so I can maintain the moral high ground before I throw them all the fuck out. They’re all too drunk to notice anyway.

“It’s Bucky’s fault,” Stevie slurs. “He spiked my coffee.”

“Like you complained after you heard about Mephisto and the hell-amulet,” Barnes shoots back. “Besides, now you know how I felt when I saw the fuckin’ Red Skull’s face.”

I turn to Hogan. “What the hell were they drinking?”

“Barnes had a bottle of the stuff Thor brings them from Asgard,” Stark says and while he’s definitely been drinking, he’s not as plastered as the two super soldiers. “I brought them some stuff I’ve been cooking up in my lab.”

Barnes pulls out a flask from his jacket and waves it under my nose. “Want some, Jones?”

As if I’d turn down anything that would do the job of four bottles of the cheap stuff. I start to reach for it but he tosses the flask to Stevie in a fucked-up game of keepaway that I’m not even going to waste my time playing.

“You can have the rest of what’s in that flask but we need you to help us find somebody,” Barnes tells me.

“Barnes, I taught you — “

“And we have JARVIS,” Stark adds, “but we still came up empty, which is why we came to you with a full bottle of Stark Super Booze.” He turns to Hogan. “You brought the bottle, right?”

“I did not,” Hogan counters.

“You left it in the car?”

“We need her sober.”
“Jones is never sober,” Barnes interjects.

“That’s it,” I decide. “Get out. All of you. I don’t need whatever problem you’re about to drag me into.” This is way beyond what Barnes normally suckers me into and having seen what happened to the school yesterday, it seems to me like not getting any deeper involved is the smartest move.

As if that’s going to happen.

Especially when Stark starts throwing his money around.

“Ten thousand dollars, Jones,” Stark says. “We need you to find Doctor Strange.”

“He’s in the kitchen with Colonel Mustard.” It’s the only normal response to that kind of a crazy statement. “Who the hell is Doctor Strange?”

Barnes flips open my laptop. “He’s an award winning neurosurgeon that’s gone off the grid and is now some kind of wizard or something that dragged Petey into a fight with a demon yesterday. We wanna have a few words with him, except we can’t find him. But we’re sure you can.”

Ten thousand dollars is a really good offer. As always, I can use the money.

But is ten thousand enough to deal with whatever I’m about to get suckered into dealing with?

“Make it twenty-five, Stark,” I say, knowing I’m going to regret it either way but at least I’ll have some money in the bank. “And I get paid regardless of whether I find the guy.”

“Twenty-five regardless,” Stark agrees, “and a success fee of another twenty-five when you find him. And we’ll celebrate with a bottle of Stark’s finest super soldier swill.”

“Done.” I’m getting paid fifty grand to find a wizard who made Petey fight a demon.

The sad part is that I’d probably just have done it for a lousy bottle of that booze.

I know I’m going to regret getting involved.

At least I’ll be able to get properly drunk afterwards.

Gwen loves the story of how New York City’s High Line Park came into being. It used to be a spur of the New York Central Railroad, overlooking the Meatpacking District. Long-abandoned, it was a rusted reminder of days past until someone had the bright idea to turn it into a park. And now, Gwen is holding hands with her girlfriend and strolling along the length of the High Line, enjoying the green oasis over the city.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Jess says.

“Do you even have a penny?”

“I’ve got a dime,” Jess admits with smile. “So I guess you’ll owe me a few thoughts for later.”
“I used to come here with my dad,” Gwen says, looking out over Chelsea. “This was his beat when he first started out. The neighborhood was still in the process of being ‘gentrified’ so you had expensive lofts and boutiques alongside hookers and drug dealers. He wasn’t a fan of gentrification but he loved the idea that the city is always being reborn and reimagined.”

Jess runs a fingertip along the railing. “We should ask Steve and Bucky if they ever rode the trains along this line. I’ll bet they did and they have stories about it.”

“Just don’t ask Bucky about the Hugo Boss boutique down there,” Gwen says. “Bucky’s got a list of Nazi- and HYDRA-collaborators and won’t let Peter have anything made by them.”

“The man has his quirks,” Jess shrugs.

“But he knows his weapons.”

“You wouldn’t need weapons if you practiced using your powers more.”

“I’m still recovering from the last time.”

Whatever Jess is about to say is interrupted by the ringing of her cell phone. She looks contrite but answers anyway. “Hey, Kate. What’s —? Oh...”

One of the supposed perks of being a spider-person is enhanced senses, including hearing, which means Gwen can hear both sides and every word of the conversation. Kate is undercover. She needs help. Something big is about to go down. Washington Square Park. Gotta go.

Ugh.

Jess eyes Gwen, knowing full well she heard the entire conversation. “We have to go. She needs us.”

“We’re in plainclothes,” Gwen counters.

“Kate asked for help,” Jess points out. “She never asks for help.”

It is, Gwen concedes, the winning argument. Still, she’s not going down against Jess Murdock without trying to score a few points. “Since when does she work undercover without the rest of us?”

“Since we’ve been busy Mathleting and she hasn’t.”

Gwen pulls a face. “Do you think HYDRA’s involved?”

“Probably not. That only happens with Bucky and Peter,” Jess says.

“You think that’s what happened yesterday?”

“I do not know.” Jess raises her hands as if to ward off the very idea. “And I’m not sure I want to. All I know is that it was the Ol’ Parker Luck and I’m glad I avoided that curse by becoming a Murdock.”

“I’m going to repeat those words to you later, you know,” Gwen warns. “And it’s going to be ironic when I say them because —”

Jess shuts her up with a kiss.

But she doesn’t convince Gwen that either of them have completely managed to dodge the Ol’
Parker Luck now that they’re both spider-people.

It’s going to catch up to them eventually.

And it ain’t gonna be pretty.

“Thanks for getting me out of there,” Peter says for the umpteenth time. They’re on line at Laduree in SoHo, where Peter is going to treat Mary Jane to at least a couple of macarons. Thirty four dollars might actually pay for a few of the fancy pastries and he knows she loves them because Tony gave her some once and she went on about it for days.

“I’d worry about everyone getting into a big, drunken brawl,” Mary Jane grins, “but Aunt May is there to manage them.”

A group of kids in NYU shirts go past, laughing and carrying pillows.

Peter frowns in their direction. “That’s the third group of people with pillows. Is there a nap-in or something going on?” He yawns for emphasis. “I’ve gotta tell you, MJ, I’m still beat after yesterday’s wacky world tour.”

“At least you got to see those places.”

He leans in close so that nobody without enhanced senses can overhear him whisper. “I got to see them go all twisty and evil and I even got chased by the Sphinx. It wasn’t exactly fun. And I think I saw Hell, which definitely wasn’t fun.”

“Then you need a macaron too,” Mary Jane declares just as another gaggle of kids with pillows passes. She frowns and then, mind made up, chases after them. “Excuse me.”

Peter watches her engage in a brief, animated discussion and when she comes back, she looks excited.

“There’s a massive pillow fight in Washington Square Park.”

“Okay —“

“A pillow fight,” she repeats.

“Right...”

“HYDRA is not invited. Neither is Sid or anybody else,” Mary Jane declares, “It’s just people with pillows —“

“Beating each other up with pillows,” Peter corrects her and he can only imagine how his Spidey sense would handle a massive pillow fight. And then he realizes, that’s Mary Jane’s point. He can use his powers for fun for a change. “We need pillows.”
“I have Tony’s credit card. We can buy some.”

“That’s —“

“Exactly what Tony would do. The man would buy new clothes because he doesn’t have old clothes to ruin.”

And again, Mary Jane has a good point.

“Know what else Tony would do?” Mary Jane asks.

Peter is almost afraid to ask. “Uh, what?”

“He’d buy us a lot of macarons and a couple of iced cappuccinos so that we’d be properly fueled up on sugar and caffeine for the pillow fight.”

The sad thing, Peter thinks, is that Tony would absolutely do that. And he’d encourage Peter and Mary Jane to do it too.

“You’ve been responsible all week, except for when you disobeyed Bucky about Harlem,” Mary Jane says. “Give him a break and don’t do that again. Look how stressed out he is.”

“I didn’t realize —“

“Of course you didn’t. You were too busy complaining how unfair he was being,” she points out. “I’ll bet you didn’t see the big, proud smile on his face when you were up there, answering questions.”

Peter bites back a sigh. “Most of yesterday is a blur —“

“He looked so proud. Just like Uncle Ben used to.”

“What happened wasn’t my fault,” Peter starts to protest.

“But there were a few things last week that were,” Mary Jane counters. “I’m not saying to do everything he says without question but maybe you want to go easier on him. He really cares about you and he’s trying so hard to give you a normal life.” She smiles slyly up at him. “And a normal life includes a pillow fight in the park.”

“With macarons and iced cappuccino.”

“He can be taught!”

Yes, Peter thinks, he can. But nobody has to teach him that he’s got the most awesome girlfriend on the planet. Heck, in the universe. Or all of the universes, even. “I love you.”

“And?”

“There’s an ‘and’? He’s just teasing. He knows what the ‘and’ is. “And I’ll go easier on Bucky.”

Mary Jane beams at him. “He’s going to be so sorry he missed this.”

“Probably, but can you imagine him in a pillow fight?”

“I can imagine all of those big dopes in a pillow fight.”
So can Peter but his imagination includes HYDRA and hell-demons now.

He can only hope that today will be different than all other days and that the Ol’ Parker Luck will give him a break.

As if he’d be that lucky.
“Standing over me isn’t going to make me find this guy any faster.” I twist around in my chair to glare at Barnes, Stevie and Stark. Happy’s keeping his distance and that just makes me like him even more. “It’s going to take me a lot longer than ten minutes to come up with something so maybe you should all go home and sober the fuck up.”

“We can’t go there. Loki an’ Magneto are there, eatin’ Aunt May’s pancakes and Magneto’s fuckin’ scones,” Barnes says with an angry scowl.

I look over at Happy and he gives me the briefest of nods to confirm that what Barnes just said is true and not a drunken hallucination brought on by whatever could get Barnes this wasted. This revelation is quickly followed by a moment where I try to imagine the guy who tried to lead an alien invasion of Earth sitting in May Parker’s kitchen, eating breakfast with the Asshole of Magnetism.

The scariest thing about it is that it makes perfect sense.

I really hate my fucking life sometimes.

I especially hate my life because I actually really want to know why the fuck Loki is in Queens. What I already know without asking is that he didn’t have anything to do with what happened to Summit High School yesterday because if he did, there’d be a massive fight going on in Forest Hills instead of three drunk assholes sulking in my office.

What I also know without asking is that Loki is there because he knows at least something about what happened. Since he’s in May Parker’s house, eating pancakes and fucking scones, it’s obvious — not to mention more than a little frightening — that Loki has joined the roster of people who, despite their exposure to the Ol’ Parker Luck and all common sense, want to protect Petey.

Asking questions about anything beyond that right now is only going to be a distraction from the job I’m being paid to do. Besides, I have no doubt it’s all going to come together when I find Doctor Stephen Strange.

Speaking of coming together, Strange’s backstory comes together quickly. He was a neurosurgeon and a very good one judging by the number of papers he published and the awards he won. He was also in a car accident that left him unable to practice, which I conclude by the fact his medical license lapsed a little over a year later. After that, he began liquidating all of his assets, including a very expensive Manhattan apartment. Plane tickets were booked to various Eastern countries, including China and Tibet. What he did when he got to those places remains to be seen because that’s where the trail goes cold.

Except it didn’t, otherwise I wouldn’t have these assholes in my office asking me to find the guy.

The trail is probably going to come full circle back to New York City, with a detour in Queens.

I order a copy of the accident report to delay the inevitable, just for a minute.
But it is inevitable.

I have to ask.

I really don’t want to.

Unfortunately for me, my life consists of a fuckload of things I don’t want to do. “What does an ex-neurosurgeon have to do with what happened in Queens yesterday?”

And then, they tell me.

It ends up being worse than I could ever have imagined.

Billy sees them first and freezes in his tracks, a panicked expression on his face.

It takes Teddy a fraction of a second longer to spot Peter and Mary Jane and by the time he starts thinking about whether they noticed him and he can slip away with Billy unnoticed, it’s too late. Mary Jane is waving a greeting. Now they have to go over and say hello.

But maybe it’s not a lost cause.

Maybe they can just say hello and go on with their alone time.

Maybe they can avoid being in the blast radius of the Ol’ Parker Luck.

Maybe Teddy is just fooling himself.

“Oh my God,” Billy is groaning after they all exchange greetings. “You bought new pillows for this?”

“Tony gave me his onyx Amex,” Mary Jane tells him, “and I asked myself what would Tony do if there was a massive pillow fight and he didn’t have pillows.”

Peter is ducking his head, embarrassed probably by both the onyx card and the truth of MJ’s statement. “He’d have bought the fancy twelve hundred dollar pillows. Our were six dollars each.”

“Our were fifty cents,” Billy says proudly.

“They make twelve hundred dollar pillows?” Teddy is aghast. “What kind of pillow costs twelve hundred dollars?”

“The kind Tony buys for the Tower,” Peter says.

“Sferra,” Billy chimes in. “They’re a fancy Italian brand.”
Teddy stares at him. “What’d you do, look at the label?”

Billy shrugs. “It was a really nice pillow.”

“For that much, it’d better be.” Teddy can feel it. There’s no way this isn’t going to end up as a double date. There’s also no way this is going to end quietly.

Something is going to happen.

As if to prove his point, Mary Jane announces, “Look! There’s Jess and Gwen!”

Teddy sneakily sets the timer on his smart watch. Later, when he complains to Billy about how their perfect date went completely to hell, he wants to be able to specifically tell him how long it took.

Because Teddy knows it won’t be very long at all.

Not with *three* spider people in one location.

It’s probably just a matter of minutes.

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I click my laptop shut and lean back in my chair. Even though I’m still digesting everything I just heard, there’s something I need to know before I get myself involved any further. “You want to find this guy...why?”

“To recruit him,” Stevie says.

“Or at least just make sure he’s on our side,” Stark agrees. “And open communications, if we can.”

“To give him a piece of my mind,” Barnes growls.

Stark gives Barnes the stink eye. “You do that, murderbot. I’m sure he’ll be all contrite about it.”

Barnes flips him off.

“You’re not going to start a war with him,” I say, just to make sure.

Stark snorts. “The guy fights demons and travels across alternate universes. Even with Wanda on our side, I’m not sure we could take him. And since he wasn’t trying to let Sid loose, I’m thinking a friendly conversation is the way to go. Spangles agrees.”

It’s a remarkably sober line of thought from someone who I thought was drunk off his ass. A second look tells me that maybe Stark was a little buzzed but right now, he’s as sober as me.

More than me.
“You can take a nip from that bottle you hid in your desk, Jones,” Stark adds. “None of us have any room to judge you. Especially Boozehound Barnes.”

Barnes flips him off again, this time with both hands.

Stevie just rolls his eyes. He’s also sobering up quickly.

The door to my office opens and Malcolm walks in, carrying shopping bags filled with something that smells greasy yet delicious. “I have the food you ordered, Mr. Hogan.”

I whirl in Happy’s direction and start to open my mouth to let him have it but before I can, he takes out a large wad of cash and hands it to Malcolm. “Thanks, kid. Tony, the cure is here.”

“Good work, Mr. Ducasse,” Stark says, nodding appreciatively towards Malcolm as he pulls out a giant sized container of fries and thrusts them in Barnes’ direction. “You got some for yourself, I hope.”

Malcolm ducks his head apologetically. “I’m, uh, a vegan.”

“You sent my apprentice for French fries?” I narrow my eyes at Happy and then shoot a look in Stark’s direction. “He’s not a gofer —“

“He may not be a gofer but he also wasn’t invited to this meeting,” Stark says. “How’s he going to learn anything if you don’t include him?”

“They paid me a thousand dollars and sent me in an Uber,” Malcolm adds. “I really didn’t mind doing a burgers and fries run. I do mind being excluded from this case because —“

“Because it’s safer for you,” I tell him. “We’re looking for a... What is he, Barnes? A wizard?”

Barnes throws up his hands, mouth full of fries.

“But I can help,” Malcom protests.

“Do you have super powers?”

“No, but —“

“Then you can’t help unless I tell you that you can help.” With that, I gently but firmly shove Malcolm out the door. He hasn’t been exposed to the Ol’ Parker Luck yet and I plan on keeping it that way.

“I thought I was your apprentice,” Barnes complains.

“If you bothered learning anything, you’d have made a lot more progress finding the guy.”

“You found him?”

“I found someone who can find him.” With that I hold up a finger in warning. “Everybody shut up now.” I pick up my phone and dial New York Hospital. After a few transfers and one hang up that sent me right back where I started, I end up not quite at my goal but close enough. I switch to my cheerful assistant voice and start speaking at the beep. “Hi Doctor Palmer, this is Kerry from the finance office at Premiere Properties. We’re the management company for Stephen Strange’s former building. It seems we made an accounting error when settling up and we have a check for him. We’ve been unable to reach him but he listed you as an emergency contact. Gosh, I hope you can find him. It’s a pretty big check.” I leave my number and end the call.
Stark, Stevie and Barnes are all staring at me.

“What?” I ask defensively. “The fastest way to get somebody to call you back is if they think they’ve got money coming to them. In this case, it’s going to be a few hours. Palmer is in surgery.”

“So what do we do while we wait?” Stevie asks.

“I don’t know what you’re going to do, but I’m having a cheeseburger.” I reach into my desk for my bottle of bourbon. “And I’m going to see if I can find other threads to pull. You assholes can go home—”

“And miss the action?” Barnes flops down on my couch. “Hell, no.”

The action is exactly what I’m worried about.

No matter what their intentions are, I have enough experience with Barnes and the Ol’ Parker Luck to know how things are probably going to turn out.

It’s not going to be pretty.

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“My you-know-what isn’t tingling,” Jess says as they walk past the Arch into Washington Square Park. “Is yours?”

“No, but I’m thinking it should be.” Gwen frowns as they pass yet another group of pillow bearing NYU students. “What’s the deal with the pillows?”

“Pillow Fight in the Park,” one of the students calls over his shoulder as they go past.

Jess is about to say she likes the idea of a massive pillow fight when she notices the creepy clown juggling bowling pins over by the statue of Giuseppe Garibaldi. Everyone seems to be ignoring him. Probably because they find clowns creepy too. As she turns to mention the clown to Gwen, she notices a pair of what are probably acrobats doing a balancing act by standing on top of each other and flipping.

“Is the circus in town or something?” Gwen asks, pointing towards Alexander Lyman Holley monument where another performer is eating fire. “And I’m pretty sure public fire eating is a misdemeanor.”

Jess raises an eyebrow at her.

“Public safety hazard,” Gwen shrugs.

“Psssst.”
Jess looks up. Kate waves down at her from the tree she’s perched in. “Kate, what are you weari —?!”

“Shhh! Get ready. The Circus of Crime is about to abduct Tara Salehi. Gotta go!” And with that, Kate vanishes back into the branches.

“Who’s Tara Salehi?” Gwen asks.

Jess throws up her hands and counters, “What’s the Circus of Crime?”

“Why is Kate with them?”

“What are Peter, Mary Jane, Teddy and Billy doing here?”

Gwen has an answer for this one and it’s an answer that Jess should have realized at the outset. “It’s the Ol’ Parker Luck in action, Jess. It’s unavoidable.”

“And I liked this park. Maybe it’ll be nicer when they rebuild it,” Jess teases, just to lighten the mood.

But Gwen isn’t listening.

Jess immediately knows why.

Her Spidey-sense is tingling too.

The Ol’ Parker Luck is in motion.
Chapter 32

Tommy was wrong.

Breakfast was not as weird as his day was going to get.

Of course it wasn’t. How could it be, now that he’s officially a member of the Parker family? Weird shit just keeps happening. And it keeps getting weirder.

Case in point, his current situation.

It wasn’t supposed to be a situation. It was supposed to be a treat.

A lifetime ago, also known as Monday, Aunt May promised to spend the day with him at the Paley Center Museum. It was going to be their day and Tommy was looking forward to it because his own goddamn parents never wanted to spend a whole day with him. And besides, it’s Aunt May.

Tommy should have known that nothing in the life of a Parker goes as planned. Ever.

“Ready to go, Tommy?” Aunt May asks from the doorway. She has her jacket on and is holding her purse.

Magneto’s head whips in Tommy’s direction. The announcement of Tommy’s impending departure, it seems, is the only thing that can tear him away from his conversation with friggin’ Loki. “Go? Where?”

“I promised Tommy a day at the Paley Center,” Aunt May explains. “He’s interested in a career in broadcast production and there’s a lecture today about documentaries.”

“A career in broadcasting,” Magneto repeats, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully at Tommy. “I had no idea.”

Tommy swallows and attempts to stave off what he knows is coming next. “Well, I —“

“It’s not as though we converse about such things,” Magneto goes on, turning back to Loki. “Or at all, I suppose.”

“But you live here,” Loki says in exactly the confused tone Magneto obviously wants and he does it with a knowing smirk while Aunt May’s back is turned. The second she looks in his direction, the Jackass of Mischief arranges his face into a shocked expression. “Are you not taught to revere your elders, young man?”

Tommy is screwed. He could argue that it’s freaking Magneto but he’d be making that argument to freaking Loki. Aunt May is already giving him a pointed look that’s telling Tommy exactly what she wants him to say next. Defeated, Tommy says it. “Wanna come with us, Ma — uh, Erik?”
“I would be delighted.”

Now that he thinks about it, Tommy is delighted too because Grandpa Mags is going to end up taking the subway. Aunt May won’t drive into Manhattan on the weekend and he doubts she’d let Magneto fly them there. And that gives Tommy the best idea ever. He plasters an innocent expression on his own face as he says to Loki, “Will you come too? It’d be real nice getting to know you.”

Aunt May beams at him and how she’s missing all the subtext in this conversation, Tommy does not know. Unless she’s screwing with all of them. “What a wonderful idea! Let’s hurry. We don’t want to miss the start of the lecture!”

“Well played,” Loki says softly in Tommy’s ear. “But this is just a battle and you’ve declared a prank war on the God of Mischief.”

True, Tommy thinks, but he’s going to have video of Loki and Magneto on the F train. It’ll be worth losing the war to show that to NTW later.

He hopes.

Then again, he’s got the Ol’ Parker Luck on his side today.

There’s no way even the God of Mischief can beat that.

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Peter is absolutely positive of two things as he takes in the chaos in the park. The first is that the Ol’ Parker Luck is running true to form — again — and the second is that he’s going to have to add circuses to the list of things he can’t stand. He knows it the instant he sets eyes on the jackass in the ringmaster outfit. The lunatic is standing in the middle of the park, hands on hips and looking smug, as his circus-themed flunkies terrorize the kids fleeing the park. Peter can’t wait to wipe that smirk off of the ringmaster’s face.

But first...

He turns to tell Mary Jane to hightail it to safety only to find her gone.

“I sent her back to my apartment,” Billy says and then he solves Peter’s other problem by conjuring their costumes.

Across the park, amid the chaos, Jessica and Gwen are also magically suited up and immediately spring into action, guiding people out of harm’s way.

Peter takes a moment to assess the situation, just like Bucky’s been teaching him to do, and identify the biggest threat. There are so many to choose from. Over to his right are a pair of acrobats. To his
left is a guy with a flamethrower. There’s another guy that Peter thinks is probably the strongman and a lady with a snake.

And of course, there’s a clown.

“Dibs on the clown,” Teddy declares.

“He hates clowns,” Billy says, taking off after Teddy.

“Who doesn’t?” Peter asks but he’s talking to himself. As if that ever stopped him. Which is why he nearly jumps out of his skin when he gets an answer.

“The French.”

Peter turns, wondering why his Spidey sense didn’t warn him about the archer chick and then he recognizes her. “What are you wearing!? Are you with these guys? What’s going on?”

Kate blows out a sigh. “I’m undercover. They’re the Circus of Crime and they’re trying to abduct the Saudi Minister of Finance’s daughter. Go for the Ringmaster first but watch it. He’s a hypnotist.” With that, she lets an arrow fly, skewering the snake charmer’s boa constrictor before it can wrap itself around Gwen’s ankle. “Gotta go.”

As Peter joins the fray, he discovers he’s certain of two more things.

Mary Jane isn’t going to be happy about being taken out of the action and Bucky’s going to freak when he finds out.

Unless he’s too drunk to notice.

As if Peter would ever be that lucky.

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Being a private investigator means spending a lot of time waiting. Annoying as they are, Stevie and Barnes know all about waiting from their days in the Army. Stark doesn’t like to wait but Happy is preventing him from driving me completely bonkers by distracting him.

“It could be hours before Dr. Palmer is out of surgery,” I say again.

“We can wait,” Stevie assures me. Captain Neat Freak wipes down my desk, having just taken out the trash from our burger-and-fries-fest. Ordinarily, I’d let him have it for performing maid service but there’s something about seeing the national treasure holding a roll of paper towels and a bottle of cleaner that makes me let it slide.

“Oh, we’re gonna wait,” Barnes chimes in.
Flipping him off is pointless so I just ignore him and start working on my other case. This one doesn’t involve any wizards or hell-demons, just a cheating wife. No HYDRA or Ol’ Parker Luck involved. At least I hope not.

I’m well into her credit card statements when a fiery hole opens up in the middle of my office and a guy wearing a cape steps through it.

“Jessica Jones,” he says. “I’m Stephen Strange. I understand you’re looking for me.”

Stevie is the first to react, putting himself between Strange and me. As if I need him to do that. And as if he could possibly stop a guy who can walk through holes in space. “We were all looking for you.”

“I know,” Strange tells him. His gaze cuts over to me and he smiles wryly. “Nobody owes me any money.”

“Those are the breaks,” I shrug.

“Wait a second.” Barnes gets to his feet, the plates in his arm shifting into what I’ve come to refer to as ‘combat mode’. “How did you get from the property manager to Jones?”

Strange turns to Barnes. “I looked into the future when Christine gave me your message about the ‘refund’ and I decided it was easiest to just come to you directly.”

“That’s a handy skill, seeing the future,” Stark comments from my couch.

“It is,” Strange agrees. “It’s how I know to do this.” He gestures and my television turns on, a live broadcast in progress.

We all stare in disbelief as the After School Avengers beat the snot out of a circus in Washington Square Park. With pillows.

“It’s not a curse,” Strange tells Barnes. “I checked.”

“Well, it ain’t normal,” Barnes shoots back.

“That’s true.”

“So,” Stark says, “Want to be an Avenger?”
“No sneaking off to Harlem,” Bucky ticks off, shooting a loaded look at Peter as they approach Midtown High. “No demon fighting, no beating up circuses, no inter-dimensional wizard bullshit and absolutely no cutting class today, Petey. You’ve got Mathlete practice after school and I will be picking you up personally. Got it?”

“Well, yeah, but —” Peter starts to protest that none of it was his fault, except for sneaking off to Harlem but it’s clear that Bucky is Laying Down the Law today in an attempt to beat the Ol’ Parker Luck into submission.

“Good.” Bucky turns his attention to Tommy. “You learn your lesson about getting into prank wars with the God of Mischief?”

Tommy flashes a sheepish grin. “It was — “

“Do not tell me it was worth it,” Bucky cuts him off. “No picture of Loki and Erik on the fuckin’ subway is worth turning every shade under the rainbow all weekend. And you’re lucky that Aunt May couldn’t see it and even luckier that whatever evil spell that was ended in time for you to go to school today.”

With his fingers crossed behind his back, Tommy arranges his face into an almost-contrite expression. “Lesson learned, Bucky.”

Bucky narrows his eyes at Tommy because it’s clear he believes Tommy as much as he believes Peter about staying out of trouble. “Behave yourselves. And don’t forget you both have to see the guidance counselor today to discuss your ‘feelings’ about what happened on Friday.”

Facing Ms. Hester, Peter thinks, is a fate worse than dealing with Sid again but he keeps that to himself. “Fourth period.”

“That’s right,” Bucky says. “And don’t bring me any more pamphlets.”

Tommy starts to open his mouth.

“Zip it.”

Mary Jane comes up behind Bucky and she looks as stern as he does as she glares at Peter. It’s been the Silent Treatment for Peter since Saturday, with every voicemail, e-mail and text message that he’s sent to MJ going unanswered.

“Aw, come on!” Peter protests. “Sending you away wasn’t my idea and you know it.”
“Maybe it was,” Mary Jane says. “Billy reads minds —“

“If he did, he would have known I was going to ask you to help people get out of harm’s way,” Peter tells her. “Don’t you think after all this time I know better than to tell you not to do something? If there’s anyone you should be mad at, it’s Billy, and you should be counting your blessings that he didn’t accidentally send you to the moon or whatever. You know what happens when he gets flustered.”

Mary Jane shoots him a look. “I do. I was wearing a Spider-Man suit when I apparated in his bedroom.”

Peter groans. “Please don’t make Harry Potter references. Like, ever.”

“Check this out,” Tommy says, thrusting his phone under MJ’s nose to show her the photos of Erik and Loki looking increasingly more uncomfortable and disgusted as they ride the subway.

Bucky emits a frustrated growl and stabs the air with a finger pointed warningly in their direction. “That’s it. I’m going. You’d both better be here when I come to pick you up.” He starts to turn and then stops. “The school had better be here. And don’t forget —“

“Guidance counselor,” Peter says obediently.

“No more prank wars with Loki,” Tommy chirps as Bucky storms off, not seeing or not caring that Tommy is crossing his fingers again.

“You are so weird,” Mary Jane sighs. “Both of you.”

“What’s really weird is that Peter’s entire Harry Potter collection was gone when he got home on Saturday and Bucky swears it wasn’t him.” Tommy leans in towards Mary Jane. “My money is on Loki.”

Peter rolls his eyes. “You have Loki on the brain.”

“Because he’s actually pretty cool. I’d totally hang out with him again.”

Before Peter can decide whether or not to dignify that with a response, he sees even more trouble coming his way. Ned Leeds, the Mathlete from Summit is approaching fast with a huge, excited look on his face.

“Pete! Oh my God, dude, the whole school is talking about last Friday and...” Ned stops abruptly and turns to Mary Jane. “We haven’t met. I’m Ned.”

Tommy scowls at him. “ Didn’t you go to Summit, like, three days ago?”

“I moved over the weekend,” Ned tells him. “I go to Midtown now and I’m on your team.”

“As am I.”

Peter’s mouth drops open when he turns to see who said that.

It’s Loki.

Except, it’s not.

It’s a teenage Loki, looking kind of Goth and wearing a freaking Slytherin T-shirt and now Peter is sure he knows who took his Harry Potter stuff. “Wh-what are you doing here?!!”
“You know very well what I’m doing here. I’m an exchange student and I live in your house, Peter,” Loki lies smoothly. He turns to Ned. “Lucas Borson.”

“Ned Leeds.” Ned looks thrilled to have made yet another friend.

They shake hands and start talking about Harry freaking Potter while Tommy, Mary Jane and Peter stare in a combination of disbelief and outright horror at what can only be the precursor of a day that’s about to go completely to hell.

And it’s not even eight in the morning yet.

The Ol’ Parker Luck.

It’s the gift that keeps giving.

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“Of all the law firms and all the lawyers in the state of New York...” Matt mutters. “There’s only one explanation why this law firm and —“

“Are you trying to blame Peter for the fact that Hogarth, Chao and Benowitz handles litigation for the Department of Education?” Foggy cuts him off and opens the door to the tall glass tower that houses the law firm.

“Not Peter,” Matt corrects him as they approach the security desk. “The Ol’ Parker Luck.”

“You people blame that kid for everything!”

“Exactly who are you calling ‘you people’?”

“You know who I mean.” Foggy leans in to whisper as they present their identification to the security guard. “Stop being difficult and stop blaming Peter or his luck or whatever. It wasn’t his fault Xavier’s school got attacked, was it?”

Matt is sure if he looked closely at all the facts and circumstances...

“Matty?” Foggy cajoles.

“No,” Matt grudgingly admits.

“And it stands to reason,” Foggy goes on, “that the State would hire one of the top three civil litigation firms, wouldn’t it?”

“...Yes.”
“Especially when Hogarth, Chao and Benowitz specializes in cases involving people with powers, right, Matthew?”

Matt sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. “That still doesn’t explain how, out of the three hundred lawyers in this firm, Marci Stahl ended up with the case.”

“That’s easy,” Marci chirps, coming up alongside Matt and patting his shoulder. “I volunteered. You know how much I love spending time with my Foggy Bear.”

Matt could smell her perfume as she came down in the elevator and knew she was crossing the lobby to greet them. She never had the element of surprise she thinks she did but he pretends to flinch, just to let her think so. “And you know how much we both love spending time with you, Marci.”

“Well, aren’t you sweet?”

The lies hang in the air, the first of many stings and barbs that are about to be traded in the battle to get Xavier’s school reinstated in the Mathlete competition.

And it will be a battle.

Marci is ruthless.

But she’s never encountered the Ol’ Parker Luck before.

Matt can’t wait to see what happens when it strikes today.

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“You cannot be here,” Peter whispers fiercely.

“I should not be here,” Loki says, wrinkling his nose. “When was the last time they bothered cleaning this lavatory? I’ve seen pits that were much cleaner.”

Peter gives himself a mental head slap as yet another person jiggles the lock. Webbing is holding the door securely shut while he attempts to reason with the God of Mischief. “I mean, you cannot be here. Midtown High. Dude, what are you doing?!”

“I’m keeping an eye on you,” Loki tells him. “As I promised Aunt May.”

“And you have to do that here? Like... like that?!”

“No,” Loki admits, “but I want to do it here. Like this.” He gestures to his teenage-looking self. “Why are you so disturbed? Tommy didn’t seem to mind.”
“Why!” Peter sputters. “Be-because you’re *you* and this is my high school and you’re thousands of years old, not a kid and —“

“I have the ability to shape shift,” Loki tells him and suddenly, he’s a ridiculously beautiful black-haired, green-eyed woman.

Peter gawks.

“I could have shown up as one of your teachers,” Loki-ette purrs. “Or as a female student.” He shifts into a younger version of the female Loki. “Instead, I chose this form.” With that, he’s a teen boy again. “I thought we could be *friends*, Peter.”

Bucky is going to kill him. Thor — no. If Thor kills anyone for this, Peter is sure, it will be Loki and not him. Still... “What would Thor say?”

“Thor thought it was a *marvelous* idea for me to spend time with you.”

“H-he what?!”

“Something about keeping all the chaos contained in one location,” Loki muses. He flashes an innocent look at Peter. “What do you suppose he meant by that?”

The bell rings and Peter knows that that means.

They’re late for first period.

Correction, *he*’s late for first period.

Loki snaps his fingers and two tardy slips appear in his hand. “We’re late for English class, Peter. Shall we go?”

Peter doesn’t want to know how Loki knows his schedule. Or what a tardy slip is.

It doesn’t matter.

All that matters is that Loki is now a student at Midtown High.

This day is not going to end well.
So it’s been a bit of a hiatus. I took some time this summer to enjoy it but now I’m back and so is the Ol’ Parker Luck. Buckle up, kids, it’s gonna be a wild ride.
“And then they made you an Avenger.”

“And then they made me an auxiliary Avenger,” Luke corrects Bobby, as he carefully removes what’s left of the large mirror from the wall. “Same as Daredevil, for whatever that’s worth. It still doesn’t mean they’re telling me exactly what happened to Summit High School.”

“I thought it was aliens,” Bobby says, sweeping the smaller shards of glass into a corner where he loads them into a garbage bag. “Half the school looked like it got abducted.”

“It was magic, if you can believe it.”

“I can’t.”

“Me, either,” Luke admits, “but that’s what Jessica said when she called yesterday. She also said the Avengers recruited the wizard responsible for fighting off the demon that destroyed the school.”

Bobby brandishes the dust pan in Luke’s direction. “So the Avengers are gonna teach you magic so you can fight demons too?”

“You may think you’re joking but that’s why they recruited the man. Strange, his name was, Jessica said.” Luke catches the look on Bobby’s face and adds, “Stephen Strange.”

“Perfect name for a wizard,” Bobby decides. “So you’re on speaking terms with Jessica again?”

“I —“

“There was definitely something sparking between you two.”

“There was,” Luke admits. “Once. It’s over now. We’re just friends.”

“Is she an Avenger too?”

“She says no but I’m thinking she must be since they all know her and she’s friendly with Pe —uh. Spider-boy.”

“Spider-Man.” Bucky Barnes is standing in the doorway, hands stuffed in the pockets of his leather jacket. “He hates being called Spider-Boy.”

“Man’s a little ambitious, don’t you think,” Bobby asks him with a grin. “We haven’t had the pleasure yet. I’m Bobby.”

“Please tell me you’re not here to ask me to do security at the kid’s next Mathlete match,” Luke says.
Barnes snorts. “Like I have to ask. Of course you’re gonna be there, if only because you wanna get a look at the wizard behind the last fiasco. Did Stevie fill you in yet?”

Luke considers telling Barnes that Jessica filled him in but decides against it. He’s not sure why but even so, he avoids making eye contact with Bobby when he responds, “Haven’t heard from the man.”

“You,” Barnes says, picking up a sledgehammer and going to work on the decimated drywall, “ain’t gonna believe what I’m about to tell you. Shit, I don’t believe it and I was there.”

Bobby clears his throat and holds up the swear jar, shaking it in Barnes’ direction. “Language.”

Barnes flips him off with a single, gleaming finger and then launches into a detailed explanation of what happened after Luke got separated from them at Summit. If it were anyone else, Luke would dismiss the tale as pure fantasy because not only does the story include Strange, demons, multiple universes and realities but also Thor’s evil brother, Loki.

“Let me see if I understand this,” Bobby says slowly. “He tried to take over the planet. He killed a whole lotta people and destroyed a whole lotta property. And he’s staying in your house?!”

“Everyone stays in my fuckin’ house!” Barnes explodes. “Loki. Fuckin’ Magneto. Stark, for God’s sake —“

Bobby shakes the swear jar vigorously and shoots a disapproving look in Barnes’ direction.

Blowing out a frustrated breath, Barnes digs in his pocket, fishes out a hundred dollar bill and stuffs it in the swear jar. “Does that cover the rest of the fuckin’ day?”


“I hope you’re not here to ask my help in evicting them,” Luke says, “because my answer is most emphatically ‘no’.”

“I came here,” Barnes tell him, “to get away from them. Figured you needed help pulling this place apart and I figured that was the best way to vent my frustration. Other than Jones, you’re the only one that seems to get why I’d be pissed at Strange. Stevie couldn’t wait to recruit the guy and see if maybe he could teach Wanda how to control her powers. Stark couldn’t wait to start studying him. Gotta give Strange credit, he noped his way right outta that.” Barnes rips out a section of drywall with his bare hand. “He ain’t noping his way out of training Billy. Not if I can help it.”

“Billy?” Luke rips out an even bigger section of dry wall with just one of his hands. No, he’s not showing off, no matter what Bobby probably thinks and not that he’s even looking to see the smirk he absolutely knows is on Bobby’s face. “Is that one of your Mathletes or your superhero scouts?”

“Laugh it up. I got a kid with unbreakable skin who’s gonna be sparring with you.”

“Y-you what?”

“We thought he was a mutant but Thor thinks he’s some kinda alien. And he’s a shapeshifter. Can’t fight for shit, though.”

Bobby doesn’t even bother trying to hide his snort of laughter at Luke’s expense.
And why should he?

Luke is an auxiliary Avenger now.

God help him.

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It’s only third period and Peter’s nerves are completely shot. In fact, he’s pretty sure he might be getting an ulcer from the stress of watching Ned and Loki integrate themselves into his life. Ned would be stressful enough by himself, not that he’s a bad guy. He’s just obsessed with figuring out Spidey’s secret identity.

Loki, on the other hand, seems obsessed with ruining Peter’s life under the guise of being ‘helpful’. He’s not only in every single one of Peter’s classes but he’s frighteningly chummy with Ned. It’s only a matter of time until he slips and reveals that Peter is Spider-Man.

Or the fact that he’s not Lucas Borson.

Peter’s stomach aches at the idea of the chaos that would cause.

He’s so caught up in imagining dire consequences that range from suspension to expulsion to destruction of the school by Dark Elves, whatever the heck those might be, that he doesn’t realize that Flash Thompson is waiting for him in the gym locker room.

“Check it out,” Flash smirks. “Penis Parker has a nerd entourage.” He elbows Kong. “You know who Petey’s little friends are?”

“Dude, what did I tell you about involving me in your stupid grudge against Parker?” Kong rolls his eyes, slams his locker shut and storms out of the locker room.

Peter doesn’t hold Kong’s retreat against him. For whatever reason, he’s friends with Flash, just like he’s Peter’s friend. And he knows Peter is Spider-Man. So in matters involving Flash, Kong is Switzerland. A very, very large Switzerland.

Ned and Loki are another story altogether.


Loki slaps down Ned’s extended hand. “He’s not interested in becoming your friend. He’s mocking you.”

“Dude, I’m mocking all of you little dweebs,” Flash snickers.
“By all means,” Loki says coldly, “indulge yourself.”

“Oh, I plan on it, Severus,” Flash tells him. “Especially when you losers spaz out during today’s Captain America Fitness Challenge.” He leans towards Peter, baring his teeth in an approximation of a smile. “We’re doing rope climbing. I can’t wait to watch you losers hit the mats. Especially you, Fatso. I bet you’re gonna bounce.”

Ned’s mouth drops open.

Loki glares with a ferocity that makes Peter’s stomach ache even more as Flash shoves past Peter and heads into the gym, followed by his stupid friends. “He’ll rue his boorish behavior, mark my words, gentlemen.”

“No,” Peter starts to say but Ned cuts him off.

“Awesome! What’re you planning? I’m so in.”

“Leave it with me,” Loki tells him as they enter the gym. “I have it completely in hand.”

Peter gawks at him. “But —“

“No need to thank me, Peter,” Loki interrupts. He turns to Ned. “Now, what in the name of the Norns is the ‘Captain America Fitness Challenge’?”

“Oh man,” Ned groans. “It’s torture and I can’t believe I have to do it again. We just finished doing it at Summit.”

“Of course it’s torture,” Loki sympathizes. “Have you met the man? He’s insufferable.”

“I think I saw him on Friday,” Ned begins.

“We thought we saw a lot of things on Friday,” Peter says quickly.

Ned turns to him. “You didn’t. You fainted.”

As if Peter needs reminding. He’s been hearing jokes about it all morning, which he supposes is probably a good thing because it takes him off the list of Ned’s Spidey suspects. On the other hand, Ned is convinced that Tommy is Spidey.

Before he can say anything else, Coach Wilson blows his whistle and beckons them over to the pair of ropes hanging from the ceiling above a set of mats that have clearly seen better days. There are a number of low groans and muttered complaints.

Wilson glares at them. “You think I don’t hate this as much as you all do? I know almost none of you are gonna be able to climb those ropes. How do I know this? Look at you!” Wilson directs his glare towards Peter, Ned and Loki. “You don’t exercise. You play video games of computer people doing things you can’t. Well, today, you’re going to try. Today, you’re getting to the top of that rope. Know why?”

Flash snorts a laugh and quickly pretends to have been covering a sneeze.

“Because today, you’re all going to channel your inner Captain America.”

It’s Loki’s turn to snort.

Ned kicks his shin.
Peter’s stomach hurts.

“Did you kids know that when he was your age,” Wilson starts to lecture, “Steve Rogers weighed ninety-five pounds, was an asthmatic and there was no way in hell he could have climbed that rope.”

“So why are we doing it?” Flash calls out.

“Because Steve Rogers weighed ninety-five pounds, was an asthmatic and got through Basic Training,” Wilson snaps. “He did a lot more than rope climbing and he did it because he’s a tough son of a bitch who never let the limitations of his body tell him what he could or couldn’t do.” He directs his gaze at Ned again. “And neither are you.”

Ned takes a step back.

So does Loki.


Ned blushes fiercely as Flash makes squealing pig noises.

“Have a nice fall,” Flash intones.

Ned looks like he’s going to be sick.

Loki’s hands curl into fists as he whispers to Peter, “Is this Thompson child always such an imbecile?”

“Pretty much.”

“Why do you not —?”

“Ixnay,” Peter hisses.

“Loosen up, Peter,” Loki tells him. “Enjoy the moment.”

There isn’t much to enjoy as Ned struggles to get more than a couple of feet up the rope. Meanwhile, Flash is shinnying upwards, still making pig noises at Ned.

Ned pulls a face and deliberately lets go of the rope, falling onto the mat.

Flash on the other hand, is nearly to the top when he gasps sharply and then shrieks in pure terror. He lets go and crashes hard onto the mat. Flash is out of breath as he gets shakily to his feet and points to the rope. “Snake...it’s a ...” He trails off. “It was. It was a giant snake and it hissed at me and it had these fangs...”

Loki smirks at him.

“You did this, Slytherin,” Flash snarls, stalking towards Loki. “I don’t know how but I know you’re behind it and you’re dead —“

“I’ve been dead before,” Loki yawns. “No biggie, as you’d say.”

“Dead,” Flash repeats.

“Leave him alone, Thompson, unless you want detention,” Wilson interrupts. “Parker and McFarlane, you’re up.”
“Dead,” Flash mouths over Wilson’s shoulder.

And it’s not even lunch period yet.

Not that Peter is going to be able eat.

He’s sure he has an ulcer now.

And if not now, definitely after fourth period and his meeting with Ms. Hester, the school guidance counselor.

If the Ol’ Parker Luck and Loki don’t kill him first.

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“So,” the Black Widow says from the shadows as I step out of my bathroom, “you were hired to spy on me. How’s that going?”

“Jesus! What is it with you assholes and not knocking?”

“I never knock.” It’s the first time Natasha’s ever been to my apartment-slash-office and she immediately makes herself at home, looking into my bedroom, my kitchen and peering at the few books on my bookshelves. “I’m a spy, remember?”

I perch on the edge of my desk and watch her inspection. Not only do I have nothing to hide, I have nothing other than the super-booze Stark gave me. “You’re a spy who’s spying on Peter Parker so Dad-Devil can get a leg-up on the Mathlete bet. Times must be tough.”

“That was last week.”

“And this week?”

“This week, Aunt May adopted Loki and the Avengers committed to providing security at Professor X’s Mathlete Matches,” Natasha tells me. “It was the only way Matt could get Foggy’s girlfriend to agree to let them be reinstated.”

“So you want my help spying on the mutants?”

“I want your help figuring out what Loki’s angle is, among other things.”

“What about Doctor Strange?” I suggest and I still have a hard time saying the asshole’s name with a straight face. “Isn’t that more up his alley?”

“The good Doctor,” Natasha tells me, “is too busy protecting our reality.”
“I’m busy trying to forget our reality. There’s too much weird shit going on, particularly where Barnes is involved.”

“Exactly my point.” She reaches into my desk, pulls out a bottle of bourbon, makes a face and puts it back. “Remind me to teach you about vodka. Anyway, Jones, as I was saying, there’s a lot of weird stuff going on. We’ve had HYDRA mutant assassins, mutant bounty hunters, school destroying demons, construction-themed assassins and Deadpool in Harlem and the Circus of Crime. All of that’s had Peter more or less at the epicenter but there are two other Spider-kids and a God of Mischief to factor into the week ahead. Not to mention the mutant kids and their own brand of disaster.”

“What if I decide I have other things I’d rather do?”

“Such as?”

“Get a pedicure, how the hell should I know?” I counter. “Anything is better than dealing with more Barnes-related bullshit.”

Natasha raises an eyebrow. “Do you really think you have a choice? You’re in this now, Jones. Just like the rest of us. We’re in this thing until the bitter end, when the kids are either disqualified or make it to the nationals. And who knows what’ll happen if they make it to the nationals given what happened just this past weekend, between the Ol’ Parker Luck and all the other negative forces at work.”

Her words hang in the air like a death sentence.

She’s right.

I’m in this up to my ass, thanks to goddamn PTA Barnes.

One thing is for damn sure.

By the time this fiasco is over, the Chitauri invasion is going to look like a picnic.

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Peter has taken pains to avoid Ms. Hester’s office ever since The Incident. For weeks afterwards, he found pamphlets and condoms in his locker and there was a lot of sniggering in the halls. Unfortunately, thanks to Sid, he’s back and what’s worse, Ms. Hester is going to want him to talk about his feelings.

Maybe it’ll be quick.

Maybe he can get it over with in time to finish the period in Math class so he can keep an eye on Ned
and Loki.

Maybe...

Who is he kidding?

He’s never going to be that lucky.

Peter stares straight ahead at Ms. Hester’s door and not at any of the pamphlets around her office. He’s still staring when she comes out to beckon him in.

“Are you alright, Peter?”

“Uh-huh.” He’s not going to look at the Fishbowl and it’s enormous collection of condoms. Nope. Peter forces himself to look Ms. Hester right in the eyes. It’s going to be monosyllabic answers until he can escape this hell on earth.

Not that Ms. Hester is evil or anything.

At least, Peter doesn’t think she is. His Spidey sense doesn’t tingle around her, which is a sign that she is exactly what she appears to be, a middle-aged guidance counselor who wants to help her students cope with the difficulties of high school life.

She’d probably be really great at her job at a school that hasn’t been attacked by the Green Goblin or any of his enemies, Peter thinks.

“You fainted,” Ms. Hester begins, looking up from his file, and it’s clear she’s not planning on pulling any punches. “Mr. Harrington was worried.”

“Uh —“

“It must have been very frightening to look up and see the damage to Summit.”

“Uh —“

“And I’m sure you’re under a great deal of stress given the competition schedule.”

“Well, I —“

“Here.” She thrusts a stack of pamphlets at him. “These are pamphlets about dealing with stress. Make sure you eat well and get enough sleep. Yoga is also very good for managing stress.”

“I, uh, that is —“

“Thank you, Peter.” Ms. Hester flashes a smile at him that doesn’t quite make it to her eyes. “Back to class with you and best of luck on your competition this week.”

It’s what he wanted, to get this session over with.

And it’s over.

It’s just...

“That’s it?”

“Actually,” Ms. Hester says and Peter’s heart leaps into his throat. “Tell your teacher to send Ms.
Watson when you get back to class.”

That’s when Peter realizes that the Ol’ Parker Luck and the disasters it brings into his life have become part of the routine. That even Ms. Hester probably knows his secret identity.

And worse.

That there are more people betting on these stupid Mathlete matches.

They’re all doomed.
Chapter 35

Chapter 35

The coast is clear.
No Kesler in sight.
Billy can’t believe his luck today as he starts to unlock his locker. He’s managed to avoid Kesler for more than five periods, not quite a personal record, but it’s close. Bullying isn’t supposed to happen at his fancy, progressive public high school. Unfortunately, nobody told that to Kesler. Or maybe they did and Kesler just doesn’t care, just like he doesn’t care that when Billy’s power first manifested, he nearly fried Kesler.

Anyone else would have learned their lesson.
Unfortunately, the only one who learned any kind of lesson out of that experience was Billy and the lesson was to be very careful how hard he concentrates or wants things. It doesn’t always work and now he’s starting to worry that he’s been concentrating so hard on avoiding Kesler that maybe he’s made the kid disappear. Sent him to the cornfield, like in that old episode of the Twilight Zone.

It’s a good life.
That, Billy recalls, was the name of the episode about a little kid who could will anything to happen. His life? It’s okay. Unless he really did send Kesler to a cornfield and —

“Hey Billy.”

“H-hi!” And he didn’t melt his padlock, so there’s that.

“Are you coming to the Pride Club meeting later?” Takashi has been after him to go to a meeting for months.

Billy went to one and one was enough. Not that he begrudges them their club. Far from it. He’s sure the club is a really great support system for kids struggling with their identity and the high school environment. His identity is a lot more complicated than just being gay.

Just.
Gay was enough for a while.
Mutant and gay?
Magneto’s grandson, mutant and gay?
Magically created by the Scarlet Witch, Magneto’s grandson, mutant and gay?
Complicated.

Even more complicated? Takashi has a crush on him and he’s not discouraged by the fact that Billy’s told him that he has a boyfriend. Heck, Takashi’s even seen Teddy. What Takashi is, is persistent.
And yeah, he’s cute but he’s not Billy’s type.

“We’re going down to Stonewall after school,” Takashi is saying, leaning in a little too close for Billy’s comfort. “You should come.”

“I wish I could,” Billy lies, opening his locker. He catches sight of the red balloon inside that he knows wasn’t there before his last class and slams the locker shut, praying that Takashi didn’t notice it. “Uh, I...um...”

“There’s a little cafe off of Perry Street that we’re going to afterwards,” Takashi goes on, clearly not noticing what was in Billy’s locker or Billy’s panic and Billy inwardly breathes a sigh of relief. “Think about it, okay?”

“S-sure,” Billy tells him just as the bell rings. He waits for Takashi to leave and the hallway to empty out before carefully opening his locker again. The red balloon is still there and now that Billy can take a good look at it, he sees the note that’s taped to the balloon.

It’s not really a note. Just a piece of paper with an address.

The address is completely unfamiliar — 177A Bleecker Street — and below it are the words ‘come after school’ are written underneath in an almost indecipherable scrawl.

The handwriting isn’t familiar and it’s definitely not Teddy’s.

Or Takashi’s.

Or even Kesler’s chicken scratch.

Even though he’s not supposed to use his phone during school hours, Billy snaps a photo and sends it to Teddy.

Then he carefully lifts the note off of the balloon and pockets it.

When he looks up, the balloon is gone.

Billy is fairly certain he didn’t send the balloon to the ‘cornfield’.

At least he hopes not.

He’s also fairly certain he can’t conjure up a tardy slip for history so he’s going to get in trouble.

Maybe it’s not such a good life after all.

If there’s any place I hate almost as much as Queens, it’s Brooklyn. In my opinion, Brooklyn used to
be a lot better than Queens but that was only until all the fucking hipsters ruined it with their overpriced coffee shops, overpriced boutiques and double-wide strollers clogging up the sidewalks. Luckily, there are still parts of Brooklyn the hipsters haven’t fucked up yet.

For example, Clint Barton’s neighborhood.

It’s on the border and could be fucked up at any time the hipsters decide to move in. They’re that close. In fact, they’re so close that Gwen Stacy’s school is a charter school and most of the student body is from the ‘good’ part of the neighborhood. That was enough to get a police presence to watch as the kids board the bus to their Mathlete match against Stuyvesant in Manhattan. As if the cops could do a better job of keeping the kids safe than Hawkeye himself.

Barton is perched on the school’s roof, focusing intently on the kids’ surroundings as they get on the bus. I halfway expect him to startle when I land on the roof behind him, the Black Widow in my arms.

“Nice landing,” is all he says without turning around.

I flip him off.

He returns the gesture without taking his eyes off the kids. “And you’re late.”

Natasha shoots me a look as she says, “Jones was being a pain in the ass about flying here.”

“That’s because she can’t fly — or land — for shit.”

“I can fly just fine without passengers,” I lie.

“Keep telling yourself that,” Barton says, finally looking over at us. “Maybe one day it’ll be true.”

Natasha catches my wrist before I can flip him off again. “Any sign of trouble?”

“Not yet,” Barton tells her. “If the Ol’ Parker Luck kicks in, it’s gonna be during the match. Always gotta think of the worst case scenario with that kid.”

“That kid,” I correct him, “is Peter, not Gwen.”

“So far.” Barton folds his arms across his chest and even I have to admit, it’s a hell of a sight even after seeing Luke’s arms. “Personally, I think Jessie’s gonna be the one to blow next, since she’s got a higher percentage of Parker. The thing is, you just never know. That shit is unpredictable.”

“And it’s not like you get dragged into stupid, unpredictable shit that she could get dragged into because of you,” I say.

“Clint?” Natasha is so deadpan in her delivery, I almost find myself believing what she says next. “Clint never gets in over his head.”

Barton huffs an indignant breath. “Are you two gonna stand here making fun of me or are we gonna go to Stuyvesant?”

“Are we taking bets on the Ol’ Parker Luck?” Natasha asks.

“Do you have to ask?”

As they start haggling over terms, I blame Barnes for dragging me into whatever is about to go wrong and go boom. I’m probably going to have to blame Barton later because his luck is also for
shit. It occurs to me that all of the Avengers and their not-so-amazing-friends have shit for luck.
I’m screwed.

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“You guys wanna come over after school?”

Peter opens his mouth to remind Ned that they have Mathlete practice after school but Ned is already going on without waiting for an answer. He does that a lot but Peter figures he might be nervous, what with it being his first day and all. Or he could just be a babbler, in which case Ned will fit right in.

“After practice, I mean. You guys could help me build my Lego Death Star.” Ned looks over at Mary Jane and turns red. “You too, MJ. I wasn’t trying to exclude you or anything. I was just saying ‘you guys’ generally, like —“

“I get it,” she cuts him off, “and I appreciate it but Liz and I have plans.”

“She could come too,” Ned offers, looking hopeful. “You could introduce us.”

Mary Jane lets him down as gently as possible. “I don’t think Legos are her thing and I’ll be happy to introduce you but you know she’s dating Flash, right?”

Ned pulls a face. “It figures.”

“There are other girls,” Loki declares, “and many of far better mettle than Liz Allen. In any event, I would be delighted to construct this Star of Death with you.”

“Awesome! How about you, Peter?” Ned asks.

“W-well, I... uh....”

Mary Jane elbows him. Hard. “Go spend time with your friends, Peter.”

Peter looks over to see Loki leaning over Ned’s phone, looking at schematics for the Lego Death Star. Loki is a friggin’ god. He’s thousands of years old. And he’s actually having an excited discussion about Legos. With Ned. It doesn’t make sense. Nothing in his life makes sense. Except for Mary Jane, who is always right. Before he can say anything else — as in, agree with her — the bell rings and Spanish class begins.

Ned reaches over and claps Peter on the shoulder, mouthing the words, ‘Death Star.’

Helplessly, Peter nods to confirm that he’ll be joining this fiasco even as he wonders if Loki is going to use a Death Star the next time he tries to take over Earth.

It would be just his luck.
“Thanks for coming with me,” Billy says.

“As if I’d let you come alone.” Teddy flexes his muscles and sure, Billy knows he’s doing it on purpose but it’s not as if he’s going to complain. “Are you sure it’s not that Takashi kid trying to hook up with you?”

Billy pulls out the note and shows it to Teddy again. “It’s not his handwriting. And besides, the Pride Club is going to be over at Stonewall around now.”

Teddy eyes him. “Why do you know what Takashi’s handwriting looks like?”

“We pass notes sometimes.”

“Notes about what?”


“I’m not jealous,” Teddy lies and boy, is he a bad liar. “You said he has a crush on you. Why are you passing notes with him?”

“Because I don’t have a lot of friends at school. Like, any friends.”

Teddy looks like he’s struggling with what to say next and then, instead of saying anything, he takes Billy’s hand in his. They walk hand in hand in comfortable silence until they reach 177 Bleecker Street. It’s a storefront. 179 Bleecker Street is also a storefront. Frowning, Teddy lets go of Billy’s hand, pulls out his phone and punches up Google Maps. “There’s no 177A. This is some kind of joke.”

“I don’t think it is,” Billy starts to say and then he feels the tug of unfamiliar magic. The next thing he knows, he’s standing in what looks like a museum.

A heartbeat later, Teddy appears beside him. “What is this place?”

“This,” comes a voice, “is the Sanctum Sanctorum and I...” A man comes into view and he’s dressed in a set of robes with a dramatic red cape that swirls around him. “I’m Doctor Stephen Strange.”

“Oh, you totally are,” Teddy assures him, “and I’m —“

“Hulkling. I wasn’t expecting you but I’m sure you have homework to keep you busy while Billy and I get acquainted,” Strange dismisses him.

“What if I don’t want to get acquainted?” Billy asks. Blue-white energy crackles around his fists not so much as a warning as an uncontrolled response to this new threat.

“Then Captain America should have let me know instead of having me waste my time preparing lessons for you,” Strange snaps. “It’s not like I’m the headmaster of Hogwarts. I have real work to
“C-captain — you mean, *Steve* set this up?”

“Didn’t he tell you?” Strange scrubs a hand over his face. “Of course he didn’t. They’re over in Madripoor today doing Avenger things. I told them I didn’t have time for *that* nonsense either.”

“Who are you exactly!?” Teddy demands, stepping between Billy and Strange.

“I told you. I’m Doctor Strange.”

“And you’re an Avenger!?”

“Not if your boyfriend loses control of his powers and kills us all.” Strange shoots a look in Billy’s direction. “First lesson, don’t power up unless you’re going to use it and *especially* don’t power up unless you know how to focus your energy.” With that, Strange gestures and orange-red symbols appear around his hands.

“I know how to focus my energy,” Billy says.

“Really? And where did you learn how to do that?”

“Uh, my mom’s self-help books —“

“Self-help books are garbage.”

“My mother *wrote* that garbage,” Billy shoots back. “And it’s not garbage. It’s about focusing to get what you want and it works.”

“You’re Rebecca Kaplan’s son? I love her book about managing expectations!” A man comes up from behind Strange. “I’m Wong and I’m going to help Strange teach you because he has no people skills.”

“Excuse me?” Strange eyes him. “I’ve trained plenty of interns —“

“They had a nickname for you.”

“And how would you know about that?”

Wong smirks at him before turning his attention back to Billy. “You have a lot to learn so you might want to put your book bag down and take off your jacket. I’d offer you a snack but we don’t have any unless your friend wants to go get some for us.”

Teddy’s mouth drops open.

“I’d love a tuna melt,” Wong tells him. “And some chips. Sour cream and onion, if they have.”

“Get me a Cobb salad,” Strange adds. “With vinaigrette.”

Billy exchanges helpless looks with Teddy who gives a resigned shrug and starts to head for the door.

“Am I going to be able to find this place when I get back?” Teddy asks.

“You will now,” Strange assures him.
“I’d better.”


Billy doubts that.

In fact, after five minutes of Doctor Stephen Strange, Billy is pretty sure he’s going to need a library full of them.
“Well,” Bobby says, circling the freshly rebuilt room and nodding his approval at the perfectly smooth walls, “if the hero thing doesn’t work out for you two, you can start a home improvement business.”

“I’m not a hero,” Luke protests.

“Me, either,” Barnes agrees. In fact, he’s spent the last couple of hours grousing about why he refuses to be an Avenger and yet still gets pulled into all kinds of world-endangering bullshit. Bobby missed most of it, though. When the dust and complaints started flying, Bobby took his newspaper and vanished. “Still, knowing how to fix a place up ain’t a bad thing to have in your back pocket.”

Bobby grins. “Nobody shoots at a guy with a trowel.”

“Need I remind you about the guys who busted this place up to begin with?” Luke shoots back. “They had a construction theme.”

“But they were the Wrecking Crew. You’re the Clean-Up Crew.” Bobby snorts a laugh.

“Damage Control,” Barnes says.

“See? Now you’re talking.”

“That’s what Stark is peddling to the government. Some kind of joint effort to clean up the messes he makes with the Avengers,” Barnes explains. “Probably also offering to clean up after the Fantastic Four and the X-Men, too.”

“The man’s no fool,” Bobby says, with more than a hint of admiration. “Those folks leave quite a mess behind when they save the world.”

Just as they start to share a laugh over that, Barnes’ cell phone lights up with a call from Dean Reynolds. That’s all it takes to ruin the moment because the man never calls with good news. Barnes has to fight not to answer with a growled ‘what now’ and instead with a polite, “Hello, Dean Reynolds.”

“Sergeant Barnes —“

“Reilly.” The conversation is already off to a swell fucking start.

“Whatever,” Reynolds says brusquely and there’s no missing the aggravation in his tone. “You can’t just drop off students here and expect us to take them in without question. We only have so much budget and resources per student —“

“What the hell are you talking about, Reynolds!?” Barnes pointedly ignores Bobby and his fucking swear jar.
“I didn’t say anything when Rikki Barnes suddenly showed up in Peter’s classes and since she was gone a few days later, none of the teachers complained,” Reynolds goes on, his tone getting more pissed with each word. “This thing? You can’t just dump a kid in my school with a forged admission file and a forged schedule, claiming to be a foreign exchange student and thinking nobody is going to notice, Barnes! They notice!”


“Lucas Borson,” Reynolds grates and Barnes can picture the man’s clenched teeth.

“I have no fuckin’ idea what you’re talkin’ about,” Barnes growls. “I don’t know any Lucas Borson.”

“He lives in your house, Barnes.”

“What?!” Barnes pulls the phone away from his ear and stares at it while he figures out what the fuck to do next. Nothing HYDRA ever drilled into him prepared him for shit like this.


Barnes nods his gratitude. He puts the phone back to his ear and when he speaks, Barnes keeps his voice soft and gentle because the last thing he needs is this fucking amateur to panic and cause more problems. “You got a picture of this kid, Reynolds?”

“I’m sending his school identification photo now.” There’s a note of suspicion in Reynolds’ voice. “Should I have security pull him out of class?”

“Gimme a sec.” Barnes scrolls to his e-mails and clicks on the one Reynolds just sent. He knows instantly that Midtown High’s security team is in over its head. Hell, even the Avengers might not be enough. “Where’s Lo — uh, Lucas now?”

“He’s with Peter,” Reynolds tells him. “His schedule is an exact duplicate of Peter’s.”

“I’m on my way,” Barnes says, “don’t do a fuckin’ thing until I get there.” He ends the call before Reynolds can say anything else and barely resists the urge to throw his phone through the walls they just replaced.

“What I want to know is Lucas Borson is?” Luke asks.

Barnes opens his mouth to answer but before he can say a word, a fucking rainbow comes out of nowhere and his world turns inside out.

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Bronx High School of Science is exactly the kind of school Peter would love. It’s wall-to-wall nerds having conversations about science, computers and math. The part of Jess that is Peter’s memories
loves the place instantly and wishes she could go there instead of St. Edmund’s.

Jess tells that part of herself to shut up.

She’s not Peter.

And there’s no way she could handle attending a public high school, even one full of nerds.

Not yet, anyway.

Besides, she wants be a lawyer, like Matt.

Speaking of the Daredevil, he texted her that he’s on his way to her match and expects to be there before it begins. He has exactly eleven minutes before that happens.

As Jess peers out into the very sparse audience, she sees that there are no Avengers in attendance. Not that she expected them after the news broke about the armed riot in Madripoor. Still, Bucky could have shown up. Or Jessica Jones.

Someone.

Anyone.

It’s enough to make her think that this is going to be the day the Ol’ Parker Luck kicks in and ruins her life. Of course, she thinks that every day. It hasn’t happened yet, thankfully.

Just in case, Jess crosses herself.

She’s still not sure she believes in God or the Catholic Church but hey, it can’t hurt.

And then she remembers the other team, standing on the other side of the stage.

Mental head slap.

Jess looks over at them and heaves a sigh of relief because it doesn’t look like any of them were paying attention to her little freak out. Well, almost any of them. The lone girl on the team flashes a huge, goofy buck-toothed grin in Jess’ direction and waves almost frantically at her. Jess sends a self-conscious finger-wave back in her direction.

The girl starts to mouth something but Matt’s arrival distracts Jess. In fact, the appearance of a blind man and his one-eyed seeing eye dog is enough to distract almost everyone. Okay, Lucky isn’t an Avenger but Matt is fond of saying that the dog is smarter than Clint and it can’t hurt to have an Avenger’s dog around, just in case the Ol’ Parker Luck rears its ugly head today.

Matt takes his seat but instead of sitting, Lucky wrenches his harness free from Matt’s grip and rushes to the stage where he bares his teeth at something in the rafters.

“Lucky!” Matt calls but it’s no use. Lucky is on the hunt and it’s not like Matt can get up and chase after him without jeopardizing his secret identity.

Jess, on the other hand, springs into action. She lunges for Lucky’s harness but it’s the same instant that Lucky lunges for whatever was in the rafters.

‘Whatever’ turns out to be a squirrel.

And the squirrel seems hell-bent on teasing Lucky.
The two start to race around the auditorium.

“Lucky!” Jess shouts and wonders if she could web the dog without anyone noticing.

“Tippy-Toe!” shouts the buck-toothed girl.

“Tippy-Toe?” Jess echoes. “You have a pet squirrel?”

“No,” the girl says indignantly. “I have a friend who’s a squirrel.”

Before Jess can formulate a reply to that insane statement, her Spidey-sense goes wild.

The doors to the auditorium blow off their hinges.

Before the smoke even begins to clear and possibly just at the second all of the other kids hit the floor, Deadpool storms in, a huge gun in each hand. He looks at the team of Bronx kids, then at Jess’ team.

“All right,” Deadpool demands, “which one of you little monsters is the unbeatable Squirrel Girl?”

Jess has a sinking feeling she knows the answer to that question already.

Just like she knows the Ol’ Parker Luck has finally come home to roost.

If anyone warned Peter that building a Lego Death Star with Ned Leeds, Tommy and Loki would be more stressful than fighting the Sinister Six, he’d never have believed it.

Until now.

His stomach is aching something fierce as Tommy sprawls across Ned’s bed to pretend he’s reading the Lego booklet about the Death Star while Ned and Loki assemble the thing. Of course, Peter knows why Tommy is really here and it has nothing to do with Legos.

Tommy has a man-crush on Loki.

Of course he does. Loki is the freaking God of Mischief and Tommy would love to be a Prince of Mischief or something. The thing is, Loki isn’t focusing on mischief at the moment. He’s all about the Death Star and Star Wars. Somehow, he’s become an expert on all things Star Wars during school hours.

No doubt it’s magic.

Peter hates magic.
Ned, on the other hand, is convinced that Tommy is Spidey and he keeps trying to draw Tommy out with some of the weirdest questions Peter’s ever heard.

“You think Spider-Man can talk to spiders?” Ned asks.

“If he did,” Loki says slowly, “wouldn’t he have used them to defeat his foes by now?”


Tommy snorts a laugh in Peter’s direction.

“He’s male,” Loki says. “Though it’s not inconceivable he could switch genders. There are many beings in the universe that ——“

“Mutants,” Peter interrupts. “Lo — I mean, Luke means there are probably mutants who can do that.”

Loki rolls his eyes at Peter and then adds fuel to the fire. “Perhaps Spider-Man is a mutant.”

“People think so,” Ned agrees quickly. “Except wouldn’t he be an X-Man instead of hanging around with the Avengers?” He looks over at Tommy. “What do you think?”

“I think you’re distracted by Thomas’ flashy white hair,” Loki says. “If you’ve done any kind of serious inquiry into the matter, you’d know Spider-Man appeared at Midtown High months before Thomas did. Ergo, he couldn’t possibly be Spider-Man.”

Tommy tosses a pillow at Loki. “Spoilsport.”

“Now Peter,” Loki goes on. “Peter’s been a student at Midtown High since before Spider-Man appeared. He probably knows who Spider-Man is.”

Peter’s mouth drops open. “I—I—“

“I’d wager most of the students do,” Loki adds. “It’s a mystery for you and I to solve, Ned.”

Ned narrows his eyes at Peter. “Or Peter could spill his guts.”

“I—“

“Everyone else knows, right?” Ned looks over at Tommy. “Do you know?”

Tommy smirks at Peter, a Prince of Mischief in the making for sure. “Maybe. Maybe Flash Thompson is Spidey.”

Ned throws his head back and groans. “No way! There’s nothing heroic about that jackass.”

“He’s also too tall and too muscular,” Loki puts in. “Spider-Man is much smaller, rather like Peter.”

“I’m going to find out who Spidey is,” Ned says. “And I’m going to be his sidekick. The guy needs a sidekick.”

“He has Spider-Girl,” Tommy tells him.

“Spider-Woman,” Peter corrects him. “She prefers — uh, I mean, I heard she likes to be called Spider-Woman.”
Loki flashes a smirk at Peter before he says, “I heard there are two Spider-Girls.”

“There totally are!” Ned says, leaping to his feet, grabbing his laptop and turning it around to show Loki. “They showed up months ago, but not at the same time. It’s like there’s an army of Spider-people out there.”

“Do you want to be a Spider-person?” Loki asks innocently.

“Dude, don’t you?” Ned gushes. “He’s our age and look at the bad guys he’s taken down.”

“What about the rest of the After School Avengers?” Tommy asks. “They’re pretty cool.”

“I guess,” Ned says slowly. “It’s just, Spidey was the first and he’s from Queens, like us. Well, not you, Luke, but you know what I mean. And Spidey knows all the other superheroes. Look...” He grabs his laptop again and clicks on a folder full of photographs, some of which Peter instantly recognizes because he took them. “Here he is with Bucky Barnes... And Captain America... And Luke Cage... And Magneto.” Ned pulls a face. “No idea why he hung out with Magneto but I think Magneto might be a good guy now and if he is, it’s because he’s friends with Spidey. I think... I think that meeting Spidey makes people want to be better.”

The smirk fades from Loki’s face and he nods solemnly in agreement. “Yes. Yes, Ned, I believe you’re right. He’s very inspiring.” Then he looks over at Peter and winks.

Tommy is barely holding back his laughter.

Peter’s stomach is aching.

He hasn’t had a best friend since Harry Osborn but God help him, because he thinks he’s got a bunch of them now.

He’s doomed!
“Don’t interfere,” is what Thor says while Barnes is still recovering from the effects of traveling across the fucking universe by a goddamned rainbow.

Barnes blinks away the last of his stupor, ignores that he’s in some kind of golden observatory and there’s a guy with golden eyes holding a fucking sword to glare at Thor. “Don’t interfere? You couldn’t come to Earth to tell me that!?"

“Welcome to Asgard?” Thor flashes a smile that’s half-apologetic and half-amused.

Barnes flips him off and, since he figures the guy with the sword is the famous Heimdall and is the person responsible for his rainbow experience, he flips off Heimdall as well.

“Greetings to you, Barnes of Midgard,” Heimdall says, flipping him off in return.

“You know damn well that’s not a greeting,” Barnes shoots back. “I know who you are.”

Heimdall’s lips curve ever so slightly into what might be a smile.

Barnes rolls his eyes and turns his attention back to Thor. “Your dumbass brother —“

“My dumbass brother has decided he wants to be friends with Peter.”

“Disguised as a kid,” Barnes counters, “pretending he is a kid. Going to school with other kids —“

“Making friends with other children,” Thor interrupts. “It’s a bit unusual, I agree, but he’s gone to these lengths to protect Peter.”

“Disguised as a kid,” Barnes repeats.

“He’s disguised himself many times before,” Heimdall puts in. “He’s done it to help Asgard and he’s also done it for his personal amusement. When Thor and Loki were boys, Loki disguised himself as a snake —“

“No need to bring that up, Heimdall,” Thor interrupts quickly and pointedly ignores the daggers Barnes is now staring at him. “Loki is clearly intent on helping this time. He’s protecting Peter and Ned —“

“Who the hell is Ned?!“

“The new boy at Peter’s school. From Summit,” Heimdall explains and Barnes realizes the guy lives up to his reputation. He really does see everything. “That lout Flash Thompson mocked Ned and Loki punished him for it.”

The plates in Barnes’ arm whir wildly as he tries to imagine what the hell that means and what Dean Reynolds is going to say about it. “What did he do?!“

“Just a harmless illusion,” Thor says quickly. Too quickly. “The boy is fine.” And then he changes
the subject. “Loki is at Ned’s home right now, with Peter and Tommy. They are building a weapon.”

“What?!”


“Your batshit brother is disguised as a kid,” Barnes says through gritted teeth, “going to high school, fighting with other kids and building a Lego Death Star and you’re okay with this?!”

Thor beams and claps Barnes on the back. “Yes! And you should be too, Barnes! Loki’s made friends!”

It took all of the Avengers to take down Loki before, Barnes reasons. Including Thor. If Thor thinks having Loki doing this shit is a good idea, there’s no chance in hell of stopping him. And that’s when Barnes has his epiphany. There’s one force in the universe that’s stronger than the Avengers and Asgard combined. One that’s guaranteed to keep Loki on his toes.

That force is Aunt May.

Loki isn’t gonna know what hit him.

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Of the many anxieties that Matt grapples with, this is one of his worst fears come true. He’s in a public place — with Jess — and he can’t do a damn thing to help her without exposing his secret identity. But maybe he doesn’t have to... Maybe being Matt Murdock is enough to stop Deadpool from doing whatever the hell he’s doing this time. And also to stop Deadpool from exposing Jess’ secret identity. If he knows it. Matt can’t remember if Deadpool only knows Peter’s identity and now isn’t the time to worry about it.

“Excuse me,” Matt says, making a show of getting to his feet. Lucky slinks back to Matt’s side and noses at Matt’s hand.


“These are children,” Matt tries again to distract Deadpool.

“Yeah,” Deadpool agrees. “And one of them has big buck teeth, a big bushy tail and is a complete badass.”

If Matt had any doubts about whether the Ol’ Parker Luck is finally claiming Jess as its victim, those doubts are gone now. How else would the existence of a ‘Squirrel Girl’ even be possible? Or that her existence would be revealed during a Mathlete match? By Deadpool?

Before Matt can try anything else to distract Deadpool, there’s a loud chittering sound from underneath his seat. The squirrel that Lucky chased around the auditorium emerges, marches angrily up to Deadpool, plants itself in front of him with its little paws on its hips and seems to scold Deadpool.

Which is impossible.
But then, the Ol’ Parker Luck is in control, so ‘possible’ is completely out the window.

“You’re a lot shorter than I thought,” Deadpool is saying to the squirrel, who Matt remembers is called Tippy-Toe. He holds out his arm and the squirrel hops onto it, still chittering. “Anyway, I need your help. There’s a contract out on that Bug-Eyed Voice guy and I know you’ve kicked his ass before —“

The squirrel chitters again.

“Great. So you’ll work for peanuts, right?”

Tippy-Toe’s chitter actually sounds offended.

“Fine, you can have half of my fee.”

Matt considers saying something — anything, really — but Deadpool pulls some kind of disc out of his belt and vanishes. With the squirrel. To take on somebody calling himself the ‘Bug-Eyed Voice’, for God’s sake.

Now, Matt realizes, comes the aftermath.

Where Jess introduces herself to Squirrel Girl, whatever her real name is.

And someone else learns Matt’s identity.

And then the three of them have to rescue a squirrel and possibly the Bug-Eyed Voice.

The Ol’ Parker Luck.

It’s truly terrifying in action.

And Foggy will never let him live it down.

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Teddy is half-expecting not to be able to find 177A Bleecker Street when he returns with the food, but true to Strange’s word, the ornate wooden door is visible this time. So is the rest of the unusual three story townhouse with architecture that is completely at odds with the surrounding buildings. What’s also weird is how much space there is between 177 and 179 for 177A Bleecker Street, with its front and back yards, to magically fit even though it wasn’t there when he arrived with Billy.

He’s pretty sure if he thinks too hard about it, his brain might break, so instead, Teddy goes through the open gate, climbs the stairs and discovers that Doctor Strange has neither a doorbell or a knocker. It figures. As he raises his fist to knock, Billy opens the door. Strange is right behind him. What happens next is magic, pure and simple.

Billy steps over the threshold.
The bag of food vanishes from Teddy’s grasp and appears in Strange’s hand.

The door slams shut.

177A vanishes again, leaving 177 and 179 Bleecker Street adjacent to each other once more.

Teddy stares open-mouthed and points at where the Sanctum Sanctorum was just seconds ago, unable to believe what just happened.

“What?” Billy looks over his shoulder and sighs. “Yeah, that’s one of the things I won’t be learning about for a while. There’s a whole lot of other stuff I supposedly have to learn first. Would you believe I’ve got homework? And it’s due Friday, for my next lesson.”

“Did you see what he did?” Teddy manages.

“Yeah,” Billy says. “I have to master a lot of other stuff before I can think about manipulating realities like that. I’d show you but Strange put a spell on the book he gave me so if anyone else sees it, it goes right back to him.”

“No,” Teddy says, scowling at where 177A Bleecker should be. “Not that. The food.”

Billy blinks at him, clearly not following. “What about the food?”

“They didn’t pay me for the food.”

Billy blinks and turns back to where the Sanctum Santorum was. “I’m sure that was an accident.”

“It doesn’t feel like an accident,” Teddy says. “In fact, it felt pretty deliberate, the way he magically zapped the bag out of my hand and slammed the door, not to mention disappeared the whole freaking building.”

“You’re saying a guy whose job it is to protect our reality and lives in a mansion wanted to cheat you out of ten dollars?”

“I’m saying a guy whose job it is to protect our reality just cheated me out of seventeen dollars and eighty-one cents,” Teddy says.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Billy protests.

“Neither does the fact they didn’t have anything to eat in the first place.”

“He’s a doctor.”

“He’s a jerk.”

“True,” Billy agrees. “But I still think it was an accident. I’m sure he’ll pay you on Friday if you want to come to my next lesson, that is.”

Teddy considers asking if Billy wants to bet on it, but he has a feeling that would probably invoke the Ol’ Parker Luck somehow and there’s too much of that in the air already. Instead, he takes Billy’s hand and they start walking towards the subway.

Besides, Billy’s inherited whatever luck Magneto’s got.

Strange is going to deserve whatever he gets when Zayde Magneto shows up at his door, demanding to talk about Billy’s progress.
Teddy knows it’s only a matter of time before that happens.
He almost wishes he could be there.
Almost.

Tommy’s never been particularly religious but after spending the day hanging with the God of Mischief, Tommy is ready to convert and build a shrine in the dude’s honor. Pete, on the other hand, looks like he’s closer to hurling with each step they take towards the Parker house. It’s the reason Tommy can’t resist asking Kid Loki, “You staying for dinner?”

“I believe I shall,” Loki says and suddenly, he shifts from Kid Loki to grown-up Loki. “I rather enjoyed breakfast.”

“Also, you’ve got homework,” Tommy reminds him. “Unless you’re not coming back to school tomorrow.”

Pete actually looks hopeful until Loki responds, “I wouldn’t miss it for the world. After all, that fool, Flash, has no doubt spent all of the day plotting his pathetic attempt at revenge. I’d hate to deprive the imbecile of his opportunity.”

Tommy snorts a laugh. “I’d love to see what you’d do to Pete’s real enemies, like that Octopus guy and HYDRA. Heck, Kid Loki would make a great After School Avenger. The bad guys would never know what hit ‘em.”

Peter’s mouth drops open. “B-but —“

“Kid Loki,” the God of Mischief muses. “It has a rather heroic ring to it. What do you think, Peter?”

“I...I...”

Tommy doesn’t even have to teach Loki how to do a fist bump. “Adult Loki by night, Kid Loki by day. It’s the most awesome secret identity ever.”

“And nobody suspects a thing,” Loki crows.

They fist bump again and Tommy’s sense of elation at their mutually assured mischief lasts up until they step over the threshold and into the Parker kitchen where Bucky, Aunt May and Magneto are waiting. None of them look particularly happy.

The smile slowly fades from Loki’s face.

“So,” Aunt May says, “how was school today, Loki?”
Busted.
“Heimdall,” Loki hisses between clenched teeth. Of course Heimdall would be spying on him. He should have known. Should have taken appropriate countermeasures...

Barnes eyes him coolly. “Nope. It was someone even more observant.”

“Impossible.”

“Nope,” Barnes says slowly, looking Loki up and down. “Midtown High has its own all-seeing guardian. Didn’t you think Dean Reynolds was gonna find it weird to have an exchange student suddenly show up in the middle of the school year? There’s a whole damn bureaucratic process for exchange students and even a special budget. And I know about budgets because I’m on the PTA.”

“Don’t be modest,” Magneto tells him, a smirk playing at his lips. “You’re the president of the PTA.”

Loki has not the foggiest idea of what a ‘PTA’ is but he’s not about to ask. Whatever it is, Magneto is mocking Barnes’ involvement, which means it’s of no concern. Though the obvious rivalry between the two is interesting and possibly something he can use to his advantage.

“I am,” Barnes agrees. “I’m also the one Reynolds calls when there’s a problem involving Petey.”

“There was no problem,” Loki counters and he silently vows to exact appropriate revenge on this Reynolds person for interfering. Perhaps some snakes in his office. Perhaps something far worse. “I told you I was going to watch over Peter.”

“You didn’t tell us you were going to pretend to be Peter’s age,” Aunt May says and she’s giving him a disappointed look worthy of his mother, Frigga. It’s even having the same effect on him. He’s feeling, Norns save him, guilty.

Until Tommy steps up to defend him, that is. Which is completely unexpected. “It was freakin’ brilliant! I mean, anyone can keep an eye on Pete before and after school. But who’s got his back during school?”

“Exactly,” Loki says, pouncing on the momentum that Tommy’s just built. “During classes is when Peter is most vulnerable. As I understand it, he’s been attacked in school many times.”

“Even by you,” Magneto tells Barnes.

“Like you didn’t? Twice?” Barnes shoots back before adding defensively, “Besides, I was there to save him from HYDRA.”

”The second time I went to his school, it was to seek your help,” Magneto snaps.

The scolding Loki dreaded just moments before has devolved into glorious chaos, which is all he needs to make his escape, except that’s when Peter decides to break his silence.
“Cut it out!”

Everyone stops and looks at the boy.

“What Loki did maybe wasn’t perfect,” Peter says slowly, “but he was trying to help.”

“I was,” Loki agrees quickly. Not that anyone is likely to believe it.

“You should have discussed it with us first,” Aunt May says. “Now we’re going to have to try to straighten out this mess. Assuming you intend to continue to attend school with Peter, that is.”

“If you quit now,” Barnes agrees, “it’s going to look suspicious and create even more problems for Petey.”

“And Ned’ll miss you,” Tommy adds. “Besides, you kicked ass at practice today.”

Aunt May claps a hand to her mouth as she looks at Loki again. “You didn’t.”

“He did,” Peter sighs. “Loki’s a Mathlete and Mr. Harrington loved him.”

“Well, now you can’t quit,” Barnes sighs. “The last thing I need is Harrington crying on my shoulder about how the exchange student had to go home and the team’s gonna lose.”

“Which means,” Magneto tells Loki gravely, “that you, young man, are going to have to abide by the rules of the house.”

“Young man?” Loki echoes in disbelief, both at the condescension and the turn the conversation’s just taken.

“Have you finished your homework?” Aunt May asks.

“What?! No, I —“

“Go upstairs and wash up before dinner,” she says. “After that, I expect all three of you to finish your homework.”

“But —“

“I’m gonna check to make sure it’s done,” Barnes adds. He raises a gleaming finger in warning at Loki. “And I don’t wanna hear about you messing around with that fathead, Thompson.”

“It was just an illusion. Harmless —“

“Do it again and you’re grounded.”

“You can’t ground me! I’m —“

“A kid living in this house,” Barnes interrupts. “We have rules.”

“Does this mean he’s an After School Avenger now?” Tommy asks, with a fake innocence that impresses even Loki.

“Upstairs!” Barnes barks in a display of parental bluster that Odin himself would approve of.

“Now!”

“And that,” Tommy narrates in an undertone as Loki follows Peter upstairs, “is how the God of
Mischief became a Parker.”

Norns help him.

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“Hey, Squirrel Girl, wait up.”

The girl with the buck teeth stops in her tracks, whirls angrily in Jess’ direction and she does it so quickly that it’s only Jess’ spider-sense that gets her out of the way in time. “Who do you think you are —?!”

“I’m Spider-Woman and I want to help you.” The part of Jess that’s Peter isn’t the only one who hates this plan of revealing her identity. Matt’s even less thrilled than Jess but he’s off somewhere, stripping off his street clothes and putting on his mask so that he can meet them a few blocks away. “Besides, you’re obviously the Squirrel Girl that Deadpool meant because you called that squirrel your friend.”

Squirrel Girl — because Jess doesn’t know her real name yet — narrows her eyes at Jess. “There’s two Spider-Girls. Which one are you? The one in the red costume or the one in the white costume? And how are you related to Spider-Man?”

“I’m the one in the red costume and it’s Spider-Woman.”

“So is the other girl Spider-Girl?”

“No. I-I think she’s also Spider-Woman.”

“Is she your sister?”

“No —“

“Is Spider-Man your brother?”

“Kind of —“

“Do you talk to spiders?”

“What?!”

“How do I know you’re really Spider-Woman then?”

Jess shoots a jet of webbing from her fingertip onto Squirrel Girl’s shirt. “Is that enough proof?”

Squirrel Girl doesn’t look impressed. “I guess. Do you have a secret identity?”

“M-my name’s Jess,” Jess offers. And since she’s shown hers, she asks, “Do you really have a tail?”

“Doreen and yes, I do.”
“Daredevil is waiting for us,” Jess tells her.

Doreen looks even more skeptical. “Isn’t he usually in Hell’s Kitchen?”

“He is,” Jess agrees, “but he’s my dad so he was here.” Catching the look on Doreen’s face, she quickly adds, “I’m adopted. Long story. But the thing is, we want to help you get your squirrel - er, friend — back from Deadpool and deal with the, uh —”


“Yeah, him.”

“This is really weird.”

“Tell me about it.” Jess bites back a sigh because, well, sighing at the idea of a Squirrel Girl, her squirrel friend, a bad guy who calls himself the Bug-Eyed Voice and friggin’ Deadpool would probably be rude. “Are you coming or not?”

“I have a feeling I’m going to regret this,” Doreen mutters.

That makes two of them.

Three, because Jess is sure Matt already regrets it.

Deadpool and the Bug-Eyed Voice are going to regret it, too.

The Ol’ Parker Luck is in motion.

Regret is inevitable.

For everybody.

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Matt knows better than to ignore a call from Foggy. Even if his pants are around his ankles and he’s half in and half out of costume. He wishes he could ignore the call but Matt knows it’s probably better to get the ‘I told you so’ out of the way so he can deal with Deadpool and the Bug-Eyed Voice in peace.

Relative peace, that is.

“How did you find out so fast?” is how he greets Foggy.

“Find out about what?” Foggy asks. “I’m calling to tell you Xavier’s team blew off today’s match because — wait for it — they’re supposedly dealing with a crisis on another planet.”
“If they’re on another planet, how did they tell you?”

Matt is almost positive he hears Foggy shudder. “It was creepy as hell. One second I was talking to a client, the next I had Professor X’s voice in my head telling me he was sorry and he hoped we could fix things.” Foggy sucks in a breath and changes the subject back to the one Matt now wishes he could avoid. “What should I have found out about?”

“It’s nothi —“

“Jesus, Matt! I just Googled! Deadpool —“

“Yeah. He’s after someone called —“

“The Bug-Eyed Voice?! Squirrel Girl?!“

“I’ve gotta go, Foggy —“

“You know what this is, Matty?“

Matt knows. He just doesn’t want to admit it so he ends the call before Foggy can say it.

Besides, he’s going to be hearing it for a long time to come.

And though he knows it’s wrong, Matt is glad that Charles Xavier’s luck is even worse than the Ol’ Parker Luck.

Even better, Xavier’s luck comes with billable hours.

That’s probably the only good thing coming out of his day.
Even though Matt’s mask conceals most of his face, Jess has lived with him long enough to recognize the set of his jaw and shoulders. He’s frustrated. Jess gets it. He’s in an unfamiliar part of the city, being forced to reveal his identity to a kid and worse, having to deal with Deadpool, who he probably can’t find because... duh, teleportation disc. Deadpool and that squirrel could be anywhere. And because she knows Matt, she knows he’s dreading having to tell Foggy this tale of how the Ol’ Parker Luck finally struck. Or worse, Clint. Clint will laugh his ass off.

Regardless, Jess takes a deep breath and does what she’s supposed to do, namely make introductions so they can move this little adventure of theirs to the ‘find and stop Deadpool’ phase. “Dad, this is Squirrel Girl.”

“Doreen,” Squirrel Girl introduces herself cheerfully, holding out a hand as her enormous and very fluffy tail flicks from side to side. “I’ve read a lot about you, Daredevil, but Jess tells me you’re not as bad as the Daily Bugle says.”

Jess watches Matt’s reaction to the tail carefully because it freaked her out, too. He’s hiding it well, or maybe that’s just his mask, but he’s definitely a little freaked out. Because, hello, giant squirrel tail. Also, the Bugle comment probably irritated him enough to get past the tail. For now.

“Hello,” Matt says at last and then he moves the conversation to safer ground. “No sign of Deadpool and with that teleportation disc, he could be anywhere.”

“JARVIS — “ Jess begins.

“Nothing.”

“JARVIS? You mean Tony Stark’s AI?” Doreen is obviously impressed but then she already explained to Jess that she’s a computer science whiz and she’s impressed about the coding behind JARVIS, rather than the fact that Matt knows Tony well enough to have access. “Wow, that’s cool. Also, sad. Because you’d think with all the data inputs and processing capability —“

“Deadpool,” Matt cuts her off. “Logic goes out the window where he’s involved.”

“Then we should do something that defies logic, too,” Doreen says.

Jess winces because she knows how that’s going to go over. Matt’s a lawyer. Logical reasoning is his stock-in-trade, even when dealing with the Ol’ Parker Luck.

“Let’s ask the squirrels for help.”

Matt’s mouth opens and then closes. There’s an abnormally long pause where Jess is sure his logical reasoning is on the floor and screaming for mercy at the idea of asking squirrels for help before he finally simply says, “Fine.”

“No sudden movements,” Doreen warns. “They don’t like that and they don’t know you. Not personally, that is. They’ve seen you around but —“
“Oh my God,” Matt breathes. “You talk to squirrels.”

“I told you —“

“And you understand when they talk to you.”

“Yes!” Doreen’s tail flicks in aggravation and more than a little offense. “I’m Squirrel Girl, remember?”

“I... yes.... fine. Talk to the squirrels and — oh, shit.” Matt tilts his head, lips curling.

“Did you find Deadpool?” Jess asks and then she hears the familiar whine of a Quinjet’s engine. It’s a smaller Quinjet, one the Avengers use for short hop missions, not that she’s ever been invited along.

The hatch at the base of the plane opens and Gwen’s masked face appears. “Get in, losers. We’re going after Deadpool.”

Matt perks up slightly. “Is your Mathlete match over already? Did you win?”

“Her team lost,” Mystique says over Gwen’s shoulder as Gwen snags Matt with a web and lifts him upwards. “But she’s still competing. Meet Stuyvesant’s new star Mathlete.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s cheating,” Matt tells her.

“You can argue with Clint about it on our way to Connecticut,” Mystique tells him. “That’s where Deadpool is. Don’t ask me why, either. Nothing he does makes sense.”

“He kidnapped a squirrel,” Matt says with a straight face. “We have to rescue it.”

Mystique flips him off as they make their way to the cockpit.

Doreen vaults upwards, landing neatly inside the Quinjet beside Jess. “Are they always like this?”

“Worse,” Jess assures her. She jerks a finger at Gwen. “This is the other Spider-Woman —“

“Ghost Spider,” Doreen says. “Much cooler name. Goes with the costume and less confusing.”

“I like her,” Gwen announces.

To her shock, Jess realizes she does too.

She hopes the rest of the After School Avengers do too, because Squirrel Girl is going to be the team’s newest addition.
“Your understanding of the universe is depressingly primitive,” Loki says. He’s sprawled across Peter’s bed, back in his guise of Kid Loki, and scowling at the chemistry textbook. “These equations are —”

“Just do it,” Peter cuts him off. “Bucky’s going to be in to check that you did your homework any minute.”

Loki rolls his eyes. “Oh, I’m long since finished and I’m not even going to comment on your concept of literature.” He peers over at Peter’s notebook. “You’ve been finished a while, too, I see. Would you like to know how your science really works?”

“No!”

“Neither of us believes that, Peter.” He gestures and the equation for atomic structure appears in the middle of Peter’s bedroom, in glowing green balefire. “This is only the tiniest fraction of the truth —”

“Dude!” Peter leaps to his feet, slashing his hands through the equation. “No magic in the house!”

Loki raises an eyebrow with an amused smirk. “Is that really a rule?”

“I don’t know,” Peter admits, “but don’t you think we’re in enough trouble?”

“Do you always do as your elders tell you?”

“I —”

“Of course you don’t. That’s why they’re so strict, aren’t they?” Loki is sitting up now, his expression earnest. “Besides, this is harmless schoolwork —”

“Just like the spell you did on Halloween was harmless?” Peter counters. As much as he’d love to unlock the secrets of the universe with Asgardian science, he knows it’s just not going to end well. Not with his luck.

“Did you not have fun?”

“You almost got Deadpool killed!”

Loki cocks his head to the side. “Deadpool?”

“Kate was wearing his costume.”

“And?”

“Deadpool has this off-the-charts healing factor,” Peter explains. “He walks through explosions, gets his arms and legs chopped off because they just grow back! Bucky shot him in the head! Twice! He’s nuts! And he was out there, thinking his healing factor worked and —”

“He sounds fascinating,” Loki decides. “I’d like to meet him.”

Peter shudders at the idea of the God of Chaos meeting Deadpool but he decides to be diplomatic about it. “Sure. We can do that some time, I guess.”

“We can go now.”

“It’s a school night and we’re already in trouble.”
“We’ll only be in trouble if we’re caught.”

“Dude, your entire immortal life is about getting busted doing stuff you’re not supposed to do,” Peter reminds him.

“Your entire existence as Spider-Man is about getting in trouble, Peter,” Loki counters.

“It’s not about getting into trouble,” Peter explodes, flapping his arms in frustration. “I’m trying to help people.” He narrows his eyes at Loki. “Meeting Deadpool is *not* helping people. Meeting Deadpool is a recipe for disaster. He’s probably out there right now, killing someone and spewing his insides all over —“

“That’s it!” Loki leaps to his feet and suddenly he’s in full Asgardian armor. With a gesture, Peter is in his costume. “We’re going to find him.”

“But —“

Green light flashes and Peter feels the uncomfortable lurch of teleportation taking him God only knows where.

Where doesn’t really matter.

What happens next doesn’t really matter either.

The Ol’ Parker Luck is in motion, magic is involved, and it’s not going to end well.

For anybody.
At precisely eight o’clock, Billy’s StarkPad chimes to let him know that Erik is video-calling him. Video calls from Erik have become part of Billy’s routine. And while Billy is used to speaking to his other grandparents at least once a week, conversations with Erik are an entirely different thing.

Sure, they start off the same way, with Erik asking about school, then his family and then Teddy. But conversations with Erik veer into MGH rings he’s broken up, mutants he’s rescued and sent off to the safety of Professor X’s school and about what’s really going on in the world. Or in Peter’s life. Or Tommy’s internship with Trish Walker. Or the stupid Mathletes.

Unless Billy’s been training or fighting with the ASA’s he usually doesn’t have much to say and lately, he’s been wondering if Erik thinks his life is boring compared to Tommy’s.

Tonight, Erik’s got a surprise coming.

And Tommy can suck it for a change.

“Hi, Zayde,” Billy greets him.

“Hello, Billy.” And there it is. The awkward greeting. Followed by the inevitable, “How was school today?”

Billy decides to shake things up by skipping over the awkward small talk and diving right into his exciting news. “I’m learning the mystic arts! I had my first lesson today.”

The change in routine seems to throw Erik for a fraction of a second and he uses the excuse of reaching for his mug of coffee to stall while he recovers. The Parker kitchen where he’s sitting is completely quiet but Billy has a feeling Aunt May is nearby, in case Erik needs advice on how to have a pleasant-kind-of-normal grandfatherly conversation.

“That’s wonderful,” Erik says at last and then he asks the question Billy’s been dreading. “Who is instructing you?”

“Well, you know that Doctor Strange guy—”

“Strange?!” Erik’s eyes narrow. “The man who dragged Peter across realities and made him fight a demon?!”

“W-well, yeah, I guess,” Billy stammers before recovering enough to narrow his eyes back at Erik because this is about *him* and not Peter, for once. “I mean, yes. Steve set it up —“

“Did he, now?”

“It’s not like Professor X can teach me how to use my powers to walk between realities,” Billy retorts.

“True,” Erik concedes. “Is this what you’re learning?”
“Not yet,” Billy admits. “A huge part of mastering the mystic arts is being able to harness your will and —”

“As is mastering your mutant abilities, which I’ve been teaching you.” And suddenly, what was a little one-upping of Tommy is now a pissing match between Erik and Doctor Strange about who’s a better teacher.

Billy barely stops himself from rolling his eyes at the most dangerous mutant on the planet and instead shows him what he learned to do today. The thing he’s been quietly practicing in his room. With an unnecessary flourish, Billy conjures a sword made of electro-magnetic-mystical energy. Unlike the orange-hued weapons Strange conjured during their lesson, Billy’s sword is blue-white and, if he concentrates hard enough, it’s stronger than anything Strange can conjure. At least for a minute or two.

There’s no mistaking the impressed look on Erik’s face and Billy basks in that moment. His sword is way better than Tommy’s internship for sure. “That was your first lesson?”

“It’s actually a bit advanced,” Billy admits, “but Doc wanted to see my abilities for himself. Also, how well I can control them. So he could adjust his lesson plan, that is.”

“When,” Erik asks slowly, “is your next lesson?”

Oh. Crap. His game of one-upping Tommy is now turning into a game of Mutants against Humanity. Or maybe Mutants against Magic. Erik meeting Doctor Strange is probably one of the worst ideas ever. And then he remembers... His next lesson is on Friday, the same day that Midtown High Mathlete matches are scheduled. There’s no way Erik would miss those. Not with both Tommy and Peter participating. “Friday.”

“May I accompany you?”

What?! “What?!”

“These lessons sound fascinating. I should like to observe one.”

No. Oh no. Think, Billy tells himself. Think fast. “What about the Mathletes? Don’t Peter and Tommy need you to watch over them in case the world ends or whatever?”

“They have Loki to watch over them now,” Erik says with a scowl that, up until now, was accompanied by Erik trashing tanks and police cars.

Billy’s mouth drops open. “Loki? The guy that caused the Battle of New York?!”

Erik sighs and rubs his eyes. “He’s decided to put Peter under his protection.”

“But —”

“In fact, he’s gone so far as to disguise himself as a boy their age and enrolled in their school as an exchange student.” Erik leans closer to the screen. “I suspect he’s mere hours from being grounded by Sergeant Barnes or Aunt May for some mischief or other.”

Maybe he’s in another reality. Maybe this is one of Doctor Strange’s lessons. Maybe he’s being punished for talking about his lessons, even though Doc didn’t say he couldn’t. This can’t be real, it can’t be. But just in case it is, Billy asks, “Is Loki living with Peter now?”

“He is upstairs with Peter and Tommy, doing his homework.”
“The God of Mischief is doing homework?!”

“For his sake, I hope so.”

This, Billy decides, is where he gives up. His life is never going to be as interesting as Peter’s or Tommy’s.

It’s probably better that way.

The only person I can blame for this bullshit trip to Connecticut is myself. Sure, if I reach really hard, I could blame Barnes but even I have to admit that would be a stretch. No, this torture is one hundred percent self-inflicted. Trish would say I’m stepping up and being a hero and that I should be proud of myself.

Trish isn’t on a mini-Quinjet on a couples cruise heading to Connecticut to beat the shit out of the Bug-Eyed Voice. Or Deadpool. Or both.

I don’t know what’s worse.

That I’m going to fucking Connecticut.

That I have to deal with fucking Deadpool for the second time in less than a week.

That I’m surrounded by couples. Matt and Natasha. Clint and Mystique. The two Spider-Girlfriends, for God’s sake.

The only other person who’s as out of place as I am is a kid with buck teeth a squirrel tail.

And she’s here to rescue a squirrel that Deadpool kidnapped.

Squirrel-napped.

Whatever.

I need a drink.

“I didn’t realize you’re an Avenger,” Squirrel Girl says to me.

It’s a half-decent attempt to make small talk but it’s not going to give me answers about what the fuck we’re doing in Connecticut. “I’m not. Who the hell is this Bug-Eyed Voice asshole? JARVIS says the guy’s a thief, which isn’t exactly the kind of threat the Avengers deal with.”

“I know,” Squirrel Girl says slowly and just like that, all the goddamn bickering over the Mathletes
comes to a halt. She looks over at the Spider-Girls. “He’s kind of a loser. His real name is Arthur Bigelow. He’s just a thief and not really a very good one, either.”

Which would make my being here a complete waste of time. Not to mention everyone else’s. Having a pair of Avengers, Daredevil, whatever the hell Mystique is and the two Spiders is the very definition overkill. “What the hell did Bigelow steal that someone sicced Deadpool on him, Barton?”

All heads turn in Barton’s direction, except Murdock’s. Instead, Murdock’s head cocks slightly, his nostrils flare and I know without even having to ask that all of Murdock’s super-senses are focused on Barton.

“Normally,” I go on before Barton can try to deflect, “the Avengers don’t give a shit what Deadpool does when he takes out the trash. So why is this particular piece of trash so important?”

Barton blows out a sigh and rubs a hand over his face. “He stole something from Roxxon that Fury wants and that’s all I can tell you until Deadpool or Bigelow breaches the classification around this op.”

“Roxxon is a front for HYDRA,” Jess tells Squirrel Girl.

“Deadpool has a big mouth,” Gwen adds. “Not that I’ve met him in person. But I’ve heard.”

“Crap,” Squirrel Girl says, pulling a face. “I have to rescue the Bug-Eyed Voice from Deadpool and HYDRA.”

I consider mentioning that it was inevitable that HYDRA was going to get pulled into this Mathlete fiasco but without Barnes here, it’s pointless.

Then again, HYDRA is involved.

Barnes is probably on his way.

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Barnes knows without even getting up from the living room sofa that Petey and Loki are not in Petey’s room. Their homework may or may not be done. But they are most definitely not in the house.

It was completely inevitable.

Still, he forces himself to go through the motions.

He marks his place in the book he’s reading, sets the book down carefully on the coffee table and rises slowly to his feet, well aware of Erik’s eyes on him.
Erik’s no idiot. He also knows Petey and Loki are gone. And because he’s no idiot, he’s waiting to see what Barnes is going to do next.

The thing is, Barnes has had well over an hour to plan for it. Stevie isn’t the only one who can come up with an airtight plan. The Winter Soldier was never the mindless automaton most people assumed. He needed to plan for every contingency to carry out his missions for HYDRA and the Russians and he used every scrap of intel, including what his handlers didn’t tell him. It’s how he stayed in the shadows for so long.

So of course Barnes has a plan as he climbs the stairs, takes the steps down the hall to Petey’s room and knocks.

There’s no answer.

As if he even expected one.

Barnes turns the knob and walks in to confirm that yes, the homework is indeed done and waiting for his inspection and that his fears are real.

Petey and Loki are nowhere to be found.

Barnes doesn’t even have to turn around to know he’s got an audience. Aunt May, Erik and Tommy are standing in the doorway, waiting for him to say something. To do something.

So Barnes does it.

“HEIMDALL!!!!!!”
Clint knows better than to congratulate himself for getting away with telling everyone not to ask questions about what Bigelow stole. He knows better than to congratulate himself for running this op, too. It’s going well enough, he supposes, but those are famous last words and he knows good and damn well the Ol’ Parker Luck is in control now.

“Bigelow stole a spider,” Raven announces, breaking the silence. She slants a look in Clint’s direction. “There. That’s the end of your precious ‘it’s classified’ excuse. Now we can actually come up with a plan that works.”

Clint has to thank all of his trainers because his mouth does not drop open nor does he stare in shock even as he wonders if he talked in his sleep or something. There’s no way in hell Raven should know that. Which is why he asks, “How the hell do you know that?”

“Who do you think Fury’s ‘inside man’ is?” Raven shoots back, making air quotes. “All that great intel you’ve been working with? That’s all me, Clint.”

“Since when do you work for Fury?!”

“Since we got back from Sokovia,” she says.

“And you didn’t tell me?!”

“It was classified,” Raven says, with all the fake sweetness she can muster.

Clint cuts his eyes to Natasha. “You knew, right?”

Nat smiles pleasantly at him. “Of course I knew. Who do you think gave Fury the idea?”

“You really didn’t think Fury was going to let Erik and I just hang around in Brooklyn and Queens, did you?” Raven asks. “This is the deal we cut to keep SHIELD off our backs. We get to be on the side of the angels and get to know our families.”

Clint is going to have words with Fury. Lots of words. For all the good it will do. Because the thing is, it was the right play. Mags gets to spend time with his kids and maybe Raven is trying to patch things up with Rogue while she builds a relationship with Gwen. And him. Still... “But the MGH rings —?”

“Oh, we took care of plenty of them, too,” Raven shrugs. “So many in fact, that the rest are running scared. When Fury told me he needed me undercover at Roxxon to sniff out what they had Conrad Markus —”


“I remember,” Murdock agrees, jaw clenching.

“So do I,” Jess says quietly, “Even if they’re not my memories.”
“Well, the rest of us don’t,” Jones snaps, “so let’s cut the ‘it’s classified’ and only some of us know stuff bullshit and tell us everything.”

“Markus was the geneticist who ran the clinical trials of Oz on spiders,” Jess explains. She turns to Doreen. “Oz was a super soldier serum that Oscorp was working on for Norman Osborn —“

“And the spider is how you spider-people got your powers,” Doreen concludes.

“Sort of,” Jess says. “That’s how Peter got his —“

“Who’s Peter?”

“Peter,” Jones smirks, “is the spider-kid who’s going to be pissed that one more person knows his not-so-secret identify.”

“You’ll meet him,” Jess goes on, “I’m his clone and Gwen got attacked by a symbiotic being made from Peter. She got a transfusion of Peter’s blood which is how she didn’t die and also how she ended up a spider-person.”

Gwen gives a little finger wave.

“That,” Doreen says, “is the weirdest thing I ever heard. Are there any more of you out there?”

“God, I hope not,” Jones mutters.

“It gets better,” Raven says, drawing all of their attention back to her. “HYDRA smuggled Markus out of SHIELD custody before SHIELD fell and they’ve had him resuming his work with Oz. He’s still testing on spiders but he’s been trying a few other, more dangerous kinds.”

“And someone hired Bigelow to steal the spiders,” Murdock concludes, sounding completely disgusted.

“Just the one, I’d wager,” Raven agrees. “Number 42. It’s the only one that’s still alive.”

“Number 42?” Gwen snorts a laugh. “That’s the answer to —“

“Life, the universe and everything!” Doreen finishes.

“It’s also what happens when specimens one through forty-one die or don’t meet expectations,” Raven says. “42 had them jazzed —“

“Jazzed enough that Fury wanted you to steal it,” Murdock finishes. “Are you sure Bigelow’s not one of Fury’s?”

“No,” Jones says slowly. “But he’s a distraction.”

They all look at her.

Clint realizes exactly where she’s going with that thought and that she’s right. As usual. Which also means Squirrel Girl is right. “Bigelow was set up to distract HYDRA while the real thief made off with the spider. We’re gonna have to save his ass, just like Squirrel Girl said.”

“And Deadpool?” Gwen asks.

“Probably trying to do a ‘solid’ for his pal Petey,” Clint says, “Didn’t realize there’s a bigger picture.”
“Neither did you,” Raven points out.

“We’re also going to have to find that spider before it falls into the wrong hands,” Murdock says.

Everyone looks at Jones.

Except Murdock, of course. He just cocks his head in her direction.

Jones scowls at Clint. “No.”

Like that scowl is going to faze him. Clint’s been scowled at by Nick Fury, for God’s sake and Jones is an amateur compared to Fury. And what would Nick Fury do in this situation? He’d start barking orders and nobody, not even Jessica Jones, would do anything except follow those orders. Since Clint was trained by the man himself, he can give orders too. He has given orders and he’s about to again. “Yes, Jones. Finding things is what you’re good at. I need you, Nat and Raven to head back to the lab and find that damn spider before we end up with more of the Ol’ Parker Luck running wild out there.”

“What about HYDRA?” Jones counters. “Don’t you need us to deal with them?”

Clint’s more than familiar with what the spider-girls can do and what Murdock can do. He knows what Deadpool is capable of. The only wild card is Squirrel Girl. In all the commotion, nobody asked what she can do, besides flick her enormous fluffy tail. “What’s your shtick, kid?”

“She talks to squirrels,” Murdock tells him.

Clint fights every impulse to flip him off for that bullshit answer.

“I’m pretty strong,” Doreen says.

“Proportional strength of a squirrel?” Jess asks.

“I think so.” Doreen looks over at Clint. “And I do talk to squirrels.”

Because of course she does.

Why wouldn’t she when he’s dealing with Oz-spiders, HYDRA, Deadpool and the Ol’ Parker Luck?

No wonder Fury is always so pissed off.

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Peter doesn’t even have the luxury of a moment to feel sorry for himself before he finds himself in somebody’s fancy home theater. There’s a guy in a weird costume tied to one of the leather recliners with Deadpool standing over him. On the movie screen behind Deadpool, footage of Jar Jar Binks repeats itself on an endless loop with the sound turned up to a level that makes Peter’s head throb.

The guy in the chair makes an incoherent squeaking sound and thrashes wildly at the sight of Peter and Kid Loki.
Deadpool turns around, a gun appearing in his hand as if by magic — which, of course, it’s not and Peter’s never been happier about that. “Spidey-boy! Fancy seeing you here! Who’s your little friend?”

Loki steps forward and the air around him shimmers gold and green as he moves. When he stops in front of Deadpool, the illusion of Kid Loki is gone. “I am Loki of Asgard and I am quite honored to make your acquaintance.”

Deadpool makes a show of looking Loki up and down as he mercifully switches off the volume. “You’re Loki.”

“Yes.”

“The guy who led the Invasion of New York.”

“Yes.”

“The invasion that flattened my favorite pupuseria?”

“You have my most sincere apologies,” Loki says without missing a beat even though Peter’s pretty sure he doesn’t know what a pupuseria is.

Peter exchanges looks with the guy in the chair. As much as two people wearing masks that conceal their eyes could, that is. And then it occurs to Peter that they’ve interrupted some kind of bizarre torture session and the guy in the chair might actually need his help. “Uh, Deadpool, who’s the guy in the chair?”


“I swear I didn’t —” Bigelow whines, his mask distorting his voice into a ridiculous computerized warble.

“I caught you there with your hand in the proverbial cookie jar!” Deadpool cuts him off. “Actually, your hand was in the secured tank.”

“The spider was gone when I got there,” Bigelow insists. “I swear!”

Peter is starting to have a very bad feeling about the spider in question and the situation in general. “Um, where was this spider, exactly?”

Deadpool sighs theatrically. “Take a wild guess which HYDRA-fronting organization would be doing experiments with spiders and why, Spidey-boy.”

Bigelow emits an alarmed mechanical screeching sound through his mask. “HYDRA?! Nobody said anything about HYDRA when they hired me to steal that stupid bug from Roxxon.”

“First of all,” Deadpool says, pinching the bridge of his nose through his mask, “spiders aren’t bugs. They’re arachnids. It’s different. I don’t remember why but just ask the kid in the silly spandex outfit and he’d be happy to explain it to you in boring scientific detail. Second, how stupid do you have to be to not know that Roxxon is a front for HYDRA?”

“I would imagine,” Loki says, reaching for the Bug-Eyed Voice, “our friend here is quite stupid and even now doesn’t realize he’s been the victim of the machinations of others far smarter than he.”
Bigelow twitches in his chair. “I... uh, what you said.”

“Let’s take a look, shall we?” Loki cups Bigelow’s head in his hand. “I doubt you know much but it may help us solve this puzzle yet.”

Bigelow’s eyes grow wide and his jaw drops slackly open.

Loki emits a disgusted sound as he releases the Bug-Eyed Voice and turns to Deadpool. “He’s not lying. The spider was gone when he got there and then you showed up.”

“Did you just read his mind?” Deadpool wants to know.

“That’s a very simplistic way of describing it, but yes.”

“Were you able to see who hired him?” Peter asks. He knows he’s not going to like the answer because only somebody really crazy and really dangerous wouldn’t care about ticking off HYDRA.

Loki shakes his head before cutting his eyes to Deadpool. “On the other hand, we can ask our friend here how he discovered the plot to steal the spider.”

“I know about it,” Deadpool says, “because I turned the job down before they hired this clown.” He turns to Peter. “And yes, I could have told Winnie about it and let him handle it but I figured he had his hands full with the PTA and the Mathletes and whatnot so I’d help him out with his Spidey problems.” He jabs a finger in Peter’s direction. “I should have known that nothing involving you is ever easy.”

Peter wants to be outraged by that statement. Unfortunately, it’s completely true.

Nothing involving him is ever easy.

And as if to prove it, gunfire erupts outside.

HYDRA has arrived.
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

Is it a coincidence that what happens next happens in Chapter 42? Or is it the Ol’ Parker Luck in action?

Chapter 42

“How was school today?”

New, is what Miles wants to answer. Brooklyn Visions Academy is brand new and it comes with new everything. Wearing a uniform every day is new. Living in a school, like it’s some fancy boarding school is new. Being surrounded by kids who are as smart or even smarter than him is new. Having schoolwork that actually makes him have to think and work is new. The expectations are new, too. And worrying about living up to those expectations? Also new.

It’s a lot of new for him to handle.

Instead of going into all that detail, Miles just says, “Fine.”

Uncle Aaron snorts a laugh and then proves he knows Miles better than almost anybody, even his parents. “Don’t let that fancy school and those other kids intimidate you, kiddo. They’re just as freaked out as you are. The trick is not to show it.”

“How?” Miles asks even though he’s not so sure that those other kids are freaked out in any way. They walk around in their blazers and ties as if they’ve been doing it their whole lives and they’ve already cliqued off. Miles doesn’t have a clique. Miles has Ganke Lee, his friend who also, miraculously, got into Visions and even more miraculously, bunks with him. It’s because of Ganke that Miles was able to sneak out tonight.

“How?” Uncle Aaron says. “You mind your ABCs, little man.”

Miles just stares at him.

“ABC,” Uncle Aaron repeats. “Always be cool.”

Except Miles isn’t cool. He’s never been cool. Uncle Aaron? He’s the epitome of cool, with his slick consulting work that he can never talk about. Uncle Aaron knows how to code and he also plays with tech and robotics even though he never went to a fancy school. Except it’s not playing. He uses it for the consulting work that he can’t talk about.

“Just believe you’re cool, Miles,” Uncle Aaron tells him, “and everyone’s gonna believe it, too. You’ll fit right in, like your friend Mikey.”

“Ganke,” Miles corrects him. He doesn’t correct Uncle Aaron about Ganke being cool or fitting in.
The thing is, Ganke fits in at Visions about as well as he fit in at their old school, which is to say not at all. And Ganke doesn’t care. He does his own thing and most people leave him alone and let him do it. So maybe he does fit in.

“Look Miles,” Uncle Aaron says, suddenly serious. “This school is the key to your future. And I know you’ve heard that a million times from your dad and you think it’s bogus but I’m going to tell you the truth. I always tell you the truth, don’t I?”

Miles nods. He could use some truth about his future because right now, the weight of his future is kind of crushing him.

“Maybe this school is kind of harder than your old middle school,” Uncle Aaron begins. “But maybe you weren’t living up to your potential at your old school. You’re a smart kid, Miles. Super smart. And it was going to waste. Here, you’ve gotta work for it and maybe you’ve got to put up with snooty teachers and snooty principals but, Miles, the truth is, the world is full of snooty people trying to prove you don’t belong. You belong, Miles. You earned your spot at that school.”

“It was a lottery,” Miles reminds him. Number 42. His ‘lucky number’ which Ganke told him actually is a lucky number and then gave him Douglas Adams’ Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy trilogy to read.

Uncle Aaron stops short of rolling his eyes. “You earned your spot in that lottery and then you got lucky. That’s what successful people do, Miles. They get a break and they use it. If you do it right, you have opportunities open to you that you wouldn’t have had otherwise. That your dad and I never had —“

“You didn’t need those opportunities,” Miles reminds him. “You’re a successful consultant.”

“I do okay,” Uncle Aaron says. “Right now, I’m waiting to get paid for a job I just finished but I did get enough up front to get us some ice cream from the store on the corner.” He eyes Miles. “I gave you your pep talk and now I’m gonna give you some ice cream before I send you back to school. You know the rule about ice cream.”

“Nobody can be sad while they eat ice cream,” Miles dutifully recites.

“That’s right.” Uncle Aaron grabs his keys and goes without saying goodbye or that he’ll be right back.

It goes without saying.

Just like Uncle Aaron isn’t saying anything about Miles sneaking out of school at night.

Miles’ dad? He’d have a lot to say about that. His mom, too.

Miles tries not to think about it while he checks out the stack of Roxxon stuff on Uncle Aaron’s desk. There’s a handful of flash drives and a cylinder with holes on the top. Or the bottom. There are grooves at the other end of the cylinder, which means it’s supposed to be sealed and whatever was in there isn’t in there now. Miles crouches down and looks under the desk to see if he can find the cap for the cylinder and maybe what was inside. It’s a small thing to do, to help Uncle Aaron. He slides his hand under the desk and his fingers make contact with something smooth and metal.

Just as he hooks his index finger around the lid, something stings his hand.

Miles jerks his hand out from under the desk and sees the biggest, nastiest spider ever on his hand. Biting his hand with visible spider fangs. Like something out of a horror movie.
The spider has a number painted on its back in bright red paint.

Number 42.

The Miles Morales Luck.

It never lets him down.

And then — of course — everything goes black.


I knew before we even arrived at the Roxxon lab in Secaucus, New Jersey that it was going to be a complete waste of time. The spider was long gone, taken by the real thief. What none of us expected was that the building was going to be completely empty.

As in, HYDRA cleaned the place out.

Mystique doesn’t even need her fake ID to get us in because the security scanners have been ripped from the doors. Every piece of furniture and equipment is gone. Not even a paper clip is left. “If there was anything useful, it’s gone now.”

“Not everything,” I say. “There’s the scientist.”

“Markus,” Mystique supplies.

Nat looks at me and I know she’s thinking exactly what I’m thinking. That Mystique wasn’t the only ‘inside man’ at Roxxon. “Markus worked for the Kingpin for a while after Osborn was captured by SHIELD.”

“Fisk wouldn’t be crazy enough to declare war on HYDRA,” I counter. “He’d double-cross them but this? They’d vaporize his fat ass in a heartbeat for this and he knows it.”

“My point,” Nat says, “is that Markus follows the money. We’re going to follow him and see where he leads us.”

“I know where he lives,” Mystique says.

“Of course you do.”

“Of course.” They share a look before Mystique explains, “Nat’s my handler.”

That’s not nearly as weird as the fact that I think they might actually be friends now. That we all might actually be friends.

And Avengers.
Which is absolutely Barnes’ fault.

Just like the fact that I’m in New Jersey, looking for a goddamned spider to prevent the spread of the Ol’ Parker Luck by outmaneuvering HYDRA.

The explosions can’t be far behind.

Matt has to admit that Clint’s plan is a good one.

He’s not crazy about the idea of the kids setting up a perimeter with Clint to hold off HYDRA while he talks down Deadpool but he knows that at least Jess and Gwen are up to the task. Still, he’s the one who can easily locate Deadpool in the enormous McMansion and he does it within seconds of vaulting over the gate.

Deadpool and Bigelow are in the basement.

With Peter.

And somebody else with a distinctive heartbeat.

The house hasn’t been lived in for a while and there’s a thick coating of dust on all of the surfaces. Matt ignores the dust and focuses on the conversation taking place downstairs in what apparently is the home theater.

The distinctive heartbeat belongs to Loki, which is disturbing enough but it’s not as disturbing as what he hears next.

That Deadpool might actually know who’s behind the theft of the spider.

Just as he lays a hand on the handrail, gunfire erupts outside.

Matt vaults down the flight of stairs and sprints down the hall into the home theater.

“Did you bring all the Avengers?” Deadpool asks Peter.

“You’re going to need us,” Matt says. “HYDRA is here.”

There’s a strange shift in the air around Loki’s hands and then Matt realizes he’s holding a pair of blades. “It shall be my pleasure to dispatch Pe —“

“Ixnay!” Peter interrupts him. “And nobody’s dispatching anybody. We have to get the Bug-Eyed Voice out of here before HYDRA kills him,”
“Squirrel Girl here can handle that,” Deadpool says, gesturing to the squirrel sitting on his shoulder.

“That’s not Squirrel Girl, you idiot,” the Bug-Eyed Voice says, his voice mangled by his mask. Matt can only assume that the mask is as stupid as his field name. “That’s just a squirrel.”

“Its name is Tippy Toe,” Matt can’t help himself from saying. “And it’s her friend. But don’t worry, Bigelow, Squirrel Girl is right outside with the Avengers, fighting off HYDRA to save your sorry ass.”

And then, in the midst of the gunfire, Matt hears something else.

Something unexpected.

Something that smacks of the Ol’ Parker Luck in action.

Bucky Barnes has arrived.

Barnes is ready to give Heimdall and Thor and any other Asgardian who gets in his way a huge piece of his mind about the sheer stupidity of letting Loki run around on Earth. There’s no way he’d give Aunt May a piece of his mind about letting Loki stay in her house. But the Asgardians?

He can let them have it.

He’s ready to let them have it.

Except when the rainbow finishes transporting him, Barnes isn’t on Asgard looking at Heimdall.

He’s God-knows-where looking at Clint.

And a swarm of HYDRA assholes.

“I’d ask what you’re doing here,” Clint greets him, “but since HYDRA is here and Deadpool is here, I’m figuring you were transported here by the Ol’ Parker Luck itself.”

“I was transported here by Heimdall,” Barnes says, pulling a Sig MCX Rattler from his jacket and opening fire, “because Peter is here. With Loki.”

Clint’s jaw clenches. A muscle jumps in his cheek. And if the arrow he’s shooting goes off with a little more force than usual, Barnes understands why. “What the hell does Loki have to do with any of this?”

“He’s Petey’s friend now.” Barnes fires angrily at HYDRA, taking out three of their guys.

Clint shoots another arrow and takes out three more with it.
“And Aunt May’s letting him stay at the house.” Barnes takes out four this time.

The next arrow Clint fires has a stun grenade attached to it and it takes out the entire team of HYDRA assholes in one shot. “The Bug-Eyed Voice was hired to steal a spider from Roxxon that’s identical to or more powerful than the one that gave Peter his powers except else someone stole it first.”

Barnes wants to shoot something.

There’s nothing left to shoot.

Except Loki.

“Dibs on Loki,” Clint announces, jerking his head in the direction of a garish mansion.

“I’ve got dibs on Loki,” Barnes counters. “It’s a goddamn school night and he brought Petey here so he could meet Deadpool.”

“I called dibs first. You can have Deadpool and the Bug-Eyed Voice.”

Barnes doesn’t even want to know what a Bug-Eyed Voice is. Or who. “I’ve got dibs on whoever took that spider.”

“Jones, Nat and Raven are looking for him. Or her,” Clint says. “Sorry, Barnes, you’re too late to get dibs on much of anything.”

“Oh, I’m gonna have dibs,” Barnes promises. “And when I do, it’ll make the Ol’ Parker Luck look like a goodnight kiss.”

It sounds good.

The thing is, Barnes knows that the situation is completely out of control at this point. Every element of chaos is involved, right down to the goddamn God of Chaos himself.

He hopes he has enough ammo for whatever happens next.
Chapter 43

Miles isn’t sure how he ended up on his uncle’s floor or how his dad got there so quickly but one thing he does know for sure is why his dad is yelling at Uncle Aaron. Miles is not supposed to be here. Ever. Not during the daytime and especially not after lights out at Brooklyn Visions. It’s going to be a toss-up to see whether Miles ends up in hotter water with his dad than his uncle.

“This isn’t funny, Aaron,” his father is shouting, hands on hips and eyes narrowed.

“It’s not a joke, Jeff. The boy was right there. Unconscious and foaming at the mouth,” Uncle Aaron says, pointing at Miles.

“Well, he’s not there now.” His father scowls at Miles. “Probably got scared that I was going to find out you gave him drugs and ran right back to school.”

“I didn’t give him drugs!”

“He was foaming at the mouth, you said.”

“Jeff, you know I don’t deal drugs.”

“Do I?” Miles’ dad gestures angrily around Uncle Aaron’s apartment. “I know you’re not doing anything legal. You’ve never done an honest day’s work in your life. If I searched this apartment right now, what would I find, Aaron?”

“You’d find me getting pretty damn pissed off about an illegal search,” Uncle Aaron says.

“But would I be wrong?” Miles’ dad blows out a deep breath. “What does Miles think you do?”

Uncle Aaron squares his shoulders. “He thinks I do exactly what I do. I’m a security consultant.”

“The search would be legal,” Miles’ dad says softly, “You let me in. Relax, Aaron, I’m not searching and I’m not calling this in.” He runs a hand over his face. “If Miles felt okay enough to leave, I’m counting you both as lucky but remember this...” He narrows his eyes at Uncle Aaron again. “You stay away from him like I told you, got me?”

“I’m not —“

“You are. You’ve always been a criminal, Aaron. You almost ruined my life and I’ll be damned if I let you ruin Miles’.”

The two of them start arguing again and any other time, Miles thinks he might say something to try to defuse the situation. Right now, the arguing sounds loud. Really, really loud. And while he’s not dizzy, exactly, he’s feeling overwhelmed. Since they both seem to not notice him, Miles takes advantage and sneaks past them both out of the apartment and out onto the street.

When he gets around the corner and two blocks away, Miles looks down at himself.
Or, where he should be.

He’s not invisible. Not exactly.

The color of his skin shifts to match whatever’s around him.

Like the wall.

Like the concrete on the ground.

Like a...

Like a mutant.

Miles’ heart starts to pound again.

He’s a mutant.

People hate mutants.

“Yo, freak,” a voice says from behind him. “What’re you lookin’ at?”

“Y-you can see me?” Miles turns around to see a three guys who are maybe a few years older than him but he has a feeling they’re not in high school. Or any school. Except possibly the school of hard knocks.

“He wants to know ‘can we see him’,” the tallest one says to the one on his right.

The one in the middle snorts a laugh. “Yeah, we see you in your fancy school jacket.”

“This?” Miles looks down at his Brooklyn Visions jacket like he’s seeing it for the first time. “I-it’s just a charter school —”

“You think you’re better than us?”

“Wh-what? No... I —“

“He think’s he’s better than us,” the tall one says, elbowing his friend who elbows the one next to him. “I think you need to come down to earth, little man. Give me the jacket.”

“B-but —“

“I said,” the tall one says menacingly, “give it to me.” He makes a grab for Miles’ arm.

Miles reaches up to do something. Anything.

What happens next is...

Weird.

His hand hits the kid’s chest and then Miles feels something like an electric shock only stronger. The kid feels it too because his eyes go wide and then he drops like a ton of bricks at Miles’ feet.

Miles looks down.

Then he looks at the other two kids looking down at their friend.
And then he runs.

Fast.

Faster than he ever thought he could run.

Miles keeps running. He runs for blocks and it dawns on him that he’s not even a little winded. Freaked? Yes. But not winded. He’s so busy focusing on how he’s not tired that he almost doesn’t notice the car honking its horn until he’s jumped clean over it.

How —?

What?!

Oh. Right.

He’s a mutant.

This is what mutants do.

And the rest of the people hate mutants.

Miles starts running again. He has no idea what he’s going to do about being a mutant. Yet.

He’ll figure it out when he’s back at Brooklyn Visions.

If his dad doesn’t get there first.

Oh God.

Maybe he should have stayed invisible.

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The nanotech isn’t cooperating but Tony isn’t worried. It’s going to cooperate and when it does, he’s never going to have to wait to suit up again. Or to repair damage. The tech will repair itself. Within reason. According to his calculations.

Which are obviously wrong because the tech isn’t cooperating.

“JARVIS —“ Whatever else Tony wants to say is lost when he see the video JARVIS is showing him of a kid playing hopscotch over a bunch of moving cars. The way the kid moves looks familiar. Too familiar. “Why are you showing me video of Peter?”

In response, JARVIS zooms in more tightly and that’s when Tony sees that the boy is most definitely not Peter. “Who is that?”

“Attempting to verify.” JARVIS zooms in on the boy’s jacket and it’s obvious now that this kid is really a kid and that he’s a student at —
“What’s Brooklyn Visions Academy?”

“It’s a charter school in Crown Heights.”

“Is the kid back there yet?”

“He’s in the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens.” JARVIS shows him footage of the boy leaping the fence and then dropping onto a bench, burying his face in his hands. “This is a live security feed.”

“Is he...*crying*?”

“He appears to be.”

“Fantastic,” Tony sighs as he activates his non-nanotech suit. “Keep the feed going while I go deal with —”

“Miles Gonzalo Morales,” JARVIS informs him as Tony takes flight. “Age twelve. Parents are Rio Morales, social worker, and Jefferson Davis, lieutenant in the NYPD.”


Barnes is going to have a heart attack when he finds out. Tony is sure of this because he’s pretty confident that he might be having a heart attack.

A twelve-year old spider-kid.

How the hell did that happen?! 

Probably... God, help him... HYDRA.

It's always HYDRA.

And this? This kid? That’s the Ol’ Parker Luck in action.

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Miles is so screwed.

Not only is his father at Brooklyn Visions but now there are other cops and Principal Drutcher is there with them. Miles’ dad is gesturing angrily at Principal Drutcher who’s gesturing angrily back. They’re blocking the main entrance and to get to the back entrance that Miles sneaked out of earlier, he has to pass them to go around the corner.

Which might not be a problem because he can turn invisible.

Kind of.

Or...
Maybe not.

“Come on,” Miles tells himself. “Turn invisible.”

Nothing.

He concentrates harder.

Nothing.

He concentrates hard enough to probably give himself a stroke, he thinks, and still nothing happens.

Crappy mutant powers.

Being a mutant sucks!

Blowing out a sigh, Miles ducks back the way he came and then sprints around a corner when a police car starts cruising in his direction, ducking behind a tree until it passes. He’s going to be in so much trouble for sneaking out of school, for going to his uncle’s place and probably for being a mutant.

What he needs is a minute to try to figure a way out of this mess.

He needs to get off the street.

Miles thinks fast and the only plan he can come up with is the Botanical Gardens, which is six blocks away. Since he’s suddenly a super-runner — as long as his stupid mutant powers work — he can run that distance in nothing flat.

Right?

Right.

So he runs.

And thankfully, his stupid, crappy powers actually work this time. In fact, they work well enough for him to jump the fence but not well enough for him to land without falling on his face.

Stupid mutant powers.

When he’s sure he’s far enough from view, Miles drops onto a bench and lets himself review the night in excruciating detail while he tries to figure out how he’s going to get out of this mess without ending up in a mutant jail or something.

Maybe nobody noticed him using his mutant powers.

Maybe nobody else knows he’s a mutant.

Maybe they just think he’s a truant.

Which is just as bad.

Maybe even worse.

“I’m doomed.”

And of course, that’s when Iron Man shows up.
None of us actually expect to find Dr. Markus in his overpriced condo in Edgewater. At least, I hope none of us do. Still, the amount of effort we go through to bypass the security gate in the parking garage and the secure elevator seems like maybe the people who aren’t me might think there’s a chance he’ll be here.

I don’t.

If it was me who double-crossed HYDRA, I’d be long gone.

Still, Markus is the only lead we have.

Natasha, being the professional spy in the group, has a small disc that she uses to scramble the security cameras. Mystique, on the other hand, just changes her appearance to look like the good doctor himself.

Me? I just don’t give a shit.

I don’t bother picking the lock to Markus’ apartment.

There’s no need.

The lock has already been broken.

We’re too late.

Then again... We never expected to find him here anyway. At least I didn’t.

Nat turns to me. “His clothes are gone, which means he’s in the wind and we’re the second ones to toss the place. I trust you to find more information than a HYDRA retrieval squad, Jones.”

“Looks like the usual hiding places have already been searched,” Mystique adds, as if I couldn’t tell that by the mess we just walked into. She shifts back to her usual blue self again. “You’re the expert on unusual hiding places, right?”

It’s a challenge and I hate being challenged. Not that I’m competitive or anything. I just hate people thinking I’ll fall for that kind of bullshit. “It’s not about getting ahead,” I say. “We’re behind and we have to at least catch up if we’re going to have a chance in hell of finding out where that damn spider is.”

With that, I stuff my hands in the pockets of my jacket and survey the shithole that once used to be a pretty damn nice condo. Drawers, closets and cabinets have been ransacked, sofa cushions are sliced open, the kitchen trash is scattered on the floor and the toilet tank is cracked. Someone was clearly frustrated by their lack of success.

My audience watches as I check the less likely hiding places — freezer, vents, wall sockets — and come up empty. Not that I even know what I’m looking for. I stuff my hands back in my pockets, take a deep breath and look around the living room. It’s a bright, open space with a desk where
Markus probably spent hours. The drawers have been pulled out and emptied, so if anything had been hidden there, it isn’t now. Despite that, I lift the desk and move it away from the wall. Nothing. And nothing underneath the desk, either.

But above the desk is another story.

There are a series of framed photos, each featuring the good doctor. There’s Markus in his Oscorp lab coat, smiling like he’s just won the lottery as he stands beside Norman Osborn, also in an Oscorp lab coat. Another photo shows Markus shaking hands with Norman Osborn. Yet another has Markus and a bunch of geeks, including one that I recognize as Otto Octavius, standing under a banner that says Oscorp Annual Idea Retreat. In that one, Markus is standing shoulder to shoulder with Norman Osborn, both wearing matching corporate polo shirts.

I have my clue.
I hope to hell I’m wrong.

“Do we know where Norman Osborn is?” I ask.

Peter’s Spidey sense goes off in time for him to shove Loki out of the way of an arrow flying in his direction but not from the wrath of Bucky which is directed at everyone, all at once. Except maybe the squirrel.

“Hello again, Agent Barton,” Loki says cheerfully, earning another arrow shot in his direction. It vanishes in mid-air. “And greetings to you as well, Sergeant Barnes.”

“You’re grounded,” Bucky snarls at him before whirling on Clint. “And you, cut it out with the arrows unless you’re shooting ’em at HYDRA.”

“There’s no HYDRA left,” Matt informs Bucky. “Spider-Woman, Ghost Spider and Squirrel Girl took care of the ones coming from the south.”

“Who the hell are Ghost Spider and Squirrel Girl?”

“Let me tell you who’s not Squirrel Girl,” Deadpool says, pointing to the squirrel sitting on Matt’s shoulder.

“That’s Tippy Toe,” the Bug Eyed Voice adds helpfully before making a choking sound and pointing.

Everyone turns to see that he’s pointing at Gwen, Jess and a girl with an enormous fluffy squirrel tail as they enter.

“We kicked HYDRA’s collective bu — huh?” Jess’s mouth drops open at the sight of Loki. “I-is that —?”
“I believe you owe me some cookies,” Loki tells her.

“I owe you an ass-kicking,” Clint hisses at Loki.

“Hey Spider-Man,” the girl with the tail says, “I’m Squirrel Girl.”

Because of course she is.

The squirrel leaps from Matt’s shoulder onto Squirrel Girl’s and chitters excitedly.

“Bucky Barnes grounded Loki?” Squirrel Girl says. She looks over at Bucky. “Can he do that?”

“He most absolutely cannot —“ Loki begins, looking affronted.

Bucky cuts him off. “You wanna be Pe — uh, Spidey’s friend? Then you’re grounded and that’s nothin’ compared to the lecture you’re gonna get from Aunt May and Magneto when you get home.”

“There’s a lecture?” Peter asks, trying to ignore Clint’s eye roll at the idea of anyone lecturing Loki. “Magneto gives lectures now?”

Squirrel Girl stares at Peter. “Magneto lives with you?”

“It’s complicated.”

“And weird,” Gwen adds.

“But not as weird as having to protect the Bug-Eyed Voice,” Squirrel Girl says. “HYDRA is still going to come after him, right?”

“Probably,” Deadpool agrees. “As long as they think he’s got the spider.”

“Which brings us back to who tried to hire you,” Matt says, cocking his head in Deadpool’s direction. Peter knows that means Matt is fully focused on Deadpool.

“The guy was an amateur,” Deadpool begins. “Someone had to point him in my direction because he’d never have been able to find me otherwise.”

“And?” Clint prompts. “While you’re drawing this out, HYDRA is sending more guys.”

“You’re being binary in your assumptions,” Deadpool scolds him. “And we’ll all be long gone by the time they get here. The spider-kids and squirrel-kid will be back home and I’ll be babysitting Bug-boy until the coast is clear, right Winnie?”

Bucky nods tightly.

“The name,” Matt reminds him.

“Conrad Markus.”

And just like that, Peter knows exactly what kind of nut job would be crazy enough to steal from HYDRA.

Conrad Markus’ old boss.

Norman Osborn.

The Green Goblin.
Miles feels like he’s having an out-of-body experience as he watches Iron Man land right in front of him. He’s seen Tony Stark on television and the Internet but seeing the gleaming suit in person is something else altogether. If ever there was a time he wished he could control that invisibility thing, it’s now — and he’s only been able to do it for maybe an hour.

“So,” Stark says as the suit opens and the man himself steps out. He’s wearing a faded AC/DC T-shirt and a pair of jeans that have holes in them. His Converse look pretty well broken-in, too.

“You’ve got yourself some powers.”

“And you’ve been watching too many Captain America videos.” It pops out before Miles can stop it and he claps a hand over his mouth, horrified. “Ohmigod. I just sassed Iron Man. I found out I’m a mutant and I just sassed an Avenger. My life is over!”

“Miles, calm down — hey! Where’d you go?”

Just as Miles is about to celebrate his sudden invisibility by beating a hasty retreat, Stark points at him.

“That’s new,” Stark murmurs before addressing Miles directly. “What else can you do?”

“Wh-what do you mean?”

“Did you shoot webs from your fingers?”

“What?! No!”

“Stick to walls?”

“No!”

“Have you tried?”

“No!” Now Miles does get to his feet. “I’m not Spider-Man.”

“Been bitten by a spider lately?” Stark asks.

Oh no. No! “M-maybe.”

“Did it by any chance have a number on it?”
“Yeah...” Oh God. Ohgodohgodohgod.

“Was that number, oh, let me think... Forty-two?”

Miles’ voice cracks as he asks, “How’d you know that?”

“While I’ve been suiting up to find you, a few of the other Avengers have been busy looking for a spider that was stolen from Roxxon,” Stark tells him. “That spider was kind of like the one that gave Spider-Man his powers except with the invisibility thing, I think maybe they made a few improvements.”

“I zapped a guy,” Miles admits quietly.

“What do you mean, you zapped him?”

“I don’t know! He tried to grab me and I zapped him. With my hand!”

Stark’s brow furrows slightly. “Oh, the taser victim over on Sterling Street — ‘

“H-how do you know that?”

“I know almost everything and when I say ‘almost’,,” Stark says, “I mean I don’t know where that spider is...” He looks pointedly at Miles and waits.

That’s when Miles realizes his dad is right. Uncle Aaron didn’t have that spider and all that Roxxon stuff by accident. He’s probably the thief. Which means Iron Man is going to arrest him! “I-I think the spider’s dead.”

“Whoever you’re trying to protect has worse problems than me looking for him,” Stark tells him. “HYDRA’s after him because, if you didn’t already know, Roxxon is a front for HYDRA. Also, whoever hired that person to steal the spider isn’t going to be very happy if it’s dead or if it gave you spider powers.”

Miles swallows hard. “It’s just — “

“Your uncle has a rap sheet a mile long, kiddo.”

“What?!“

“Aaron Davis,” Stark recites. “Goes by the name, ‘the Prowler’ and according to his SHIELD file, builds his own tech. Guess that skillset runs in the family.”

“I—I—“ Before Miles can think of anything else to say that would probably embarrass him more, there’s an explosion in the distance.

In the direction he just ran from.

Something huge and green and not human flies overhead.

Stark’s suit snaps into place around him and he rises into the air, circles and then he comes back to hover in front of Miles. “That was the Green Goblin and he just firebombed your uncle’s building. You’re coming with me while we figure out what’s going on.”

“The Green what?!“

“One of Spider-Man’s enemies. Probably yours now, too.”
“What?!”

“Come on, kiddo.” Stark’s metal-encased hand reaches for him.

“My uncle —“

“We can’t help him. Our focus has to be keeping you safe while we figure out how spired up you are.”

“But —“

“Osborn probably knows about you and is going to come looking for you.”

“Who’s Osborn?”

“I just told you. The Green Goblin.”

“My enemy.”

“Right.” Stark’s face plate flips up. “You know how I know?”

“I was bitten by a spider?”

“Forget the spider-bite. You’ve been infected by the Ol’ Parker Luck so everything that comes after him is probably coming your way now.”

Infected? He’s infected?! “Am I gonna die?”

“Worse,” Stark says, “You’re going to be the death of everyone around you.”

Maybe being a mutant would have been better...
Chapter 45

Just as Deadpool teleports away with the Bug-Eyed Voice, Matt’s comm-link buzzes in unison with Clint’s. Barnes’ phone buzzes with presumably the same alert that confirms what they all know.

The Green Goblin is on the loose and he’s just spit in HYDRA’s eye by stealing the spider.

It’s the next message that none of them expected. Or maybe they did and just didn’t want to acknowledge how much they dreaded the possibility.

Tony’s message says he found a kid that was bitten by the spider in question.

And the kid has spider powers.

Because of course he does.

Barnes breaks the silence and he sounds incredibly calm, despite the way his heart is thundering in his chest. “Loki, if you don’t wanna be grounded for the rest of your immortal life, you’re gonna get yourself and the rest of the kids home right now.”

“Are you serious with that, Barnes?” Clint demands. “It took all the Avengers to bring him down and you think threatening to ground him is the kind of punishment he deserves?”

“For breaking curfew? Yeah,” Barnes says. “For what you’re thinkin’ of, that’s a different story and not one I’m gonna get into right now. He gets whatever punishment Aunt May dishes out when he gets home and that’s the end of it.”

Clint is bristling with fury and Matt barely needs his enhanced senses to know how hard he’s working to control his temper. “Odin punished Loki for years and it didn’t do any good. What makes you think Aunt May —”

“Because Aunt May wouldn’t let anyone sew his lips shut like the Asgardians did,” Gwen interrupts. “There’s punishment and then there’s...well, that.”

“Which he probably had coming,” Clint grates, “even though it’s a myth and all myths are bullshit, aren’t they, Loki?”

“Indeed they are but if they’re not, well, Norns know, I probably had it coming.” Loki follows up his comment with an indignant sniff and in a blast of green light, he’s gone with all the ASAs, including Squirrel Girl and Tippy Toe.

Matt, a faithful Catholic, has his own thoughts on myths and parables. He’s never spent a great deal of time on Norse mythology but in this case, he doesn’t need to bother. He heard Loki’s heartbeat and it was probably the most honest the god has ever been, despite himself. Maybe Aunt May and being friends with Peter are exactly what Loki needs. He clears his throat and brings his thoughts back to the next problem at hand. “We need to get to the Tower.”
“We do,” Clint agrees.

“We could take our time,” Barnes suggests as they climb the stairs and make their way out of the house. “Maybe do a quick patrol first and see if we spot Osborn?”

“You know the first place he’s probably going is Queens, right?” Clint sighs. “He’s fixated on Peter.”

“You know if he does that, he not only finds Peter, but also Tommy, Magneto and now Loki,” Matt counters. “Magneto fought the X-Men to a standstill on more than one occasion and we all know what Loki can do.”

“Osborn’s nuts,” Barnes counters, which is a pretty effective argument since they all know the damage the man is capable of.

“So’s Loki,” Clint reminds him. “The kid’ll be okay until we get there. If we need to get there.”

“What do you think the new spider kid is like?” Matt wonders aloud.

“He’s gonna be like every other spider kid,” Barnes answers immediately. “Cute and in trouble up to his eyebrows.”

“Forget the Goblin, maybe we should stop for a drink or two first,” Clint suggests. “And Matt should pray for us.”

“We might need an exorcism to do something about the way the Ol’ Parker Luck is spreading,” Matt deadpans.

“You only think you’re joking,” Clint says.

The sad part is that Matt isn’t sure that he was.

Iron Man doesn’t say a word on the flight to Stark Tower which is just fine with Miles, who’s hanging on for dear life. The flight from Prospect Park across the East River isn’t long at all, maybe a few minutes, but that’s what’s freaking Miles out. The speed. And also the height.

Not to mention maybe being another Spider-Man.

And having Spider-Man’s enemies.

And what about Uncle Aaron?
“Kid! Hey kid, you can let go now,” Stark is saying.

“Huh?” Miles opens an eye and sees that they’ve landed at Stark Tower and while it’s not exactly solid ground, it’s solid enough.

“You can let go,” Stark repeats.

Except, Miles can’t.

He tries. Like, really, really tries.


Miles is breathing and then he feels the cool metal of Iron Man’s gauntlet encircle his wrist, gently tugging his left hand free. Miles manages to let go with his right hand on his own. “I -I —“

“You should have something to drink,” Stark says as his armor disassembles and folds into itself.

“Milk? Juice?”

“W-water?” Miles asks and winces when his voice comes out in a nervous squeak.

“Sure, we’ll get you a water.” Stark beckons him along. “I need to run a few tests so we can figure out what abilities you have and after that, I’ve got a suit that is going to look amazing on you. I was going to give it to Peter, but you’re going to need —“

“No, I don’t!” Miles protests. Peter? The real Spider-Man’s name is Peter?! “I can’t be Spider-Man!”

“Why not?”

“I have school!”

“Spider-Man has school too,” Stark tells him as they step into an elevator where the man doesn’t even bother to press any kind of button. “And he’s even a Mathlete.”

“What?!”

“That’s Barnes’ fault.”

“Barnes? Y-you mean Bucky Barnes?”

“The world’s scariest PTA mom you’ll ever meet.”

“What?!” Miles blinks and then tries to steer the conversation back on track. “Look, Mr. Stark, I can’t be Spider-Man. There’s already a Spider-Man —“

“We have two Spider-Girls —“

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Miles cuts Stark off. “But my dad’s a cop and he’s not big on the whole superhero-vigilante-whatever thing. He wouldn’t like it —“

“He’ll love it,” Stark counters. “You’ll be an After School Avenger and you can hang out here. With me. Which you’ll love.”

The elevator door slides open and Miles finds himself staring at the kind of lab that he’s dreamed about.
“I figure since you’re going to a STEM school, this is your favorite kind of playground,” Stark says. He beckons Miles over to a workbench, gestures and a block of code appears, projected onto thin air. “See if you can figure out why that’s not working.”

“Wh-what? Me?”

“Sure, you’re a smart kid and it’ll give you something to do while I run tests on your blood.”

“You wha — owww!”

Stark looks at him, concerned. “Did that really hurt?”

“No,” Miles admits, “but you’re freaking me out. Like, a lot.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, man. Really.”

“Shit.” Stark blows out a sigh, hooks a stool with his ankle, pulls it over and drops into it. “You grab that one, kid.”

Miles uses his ankle too, not because he’s trying to copy Stark but because he’s afraid of sticking to the stupid thing. He perches carefully, resting his hands in his lap. When he’s sure he can handle it, he looks at Mr. Stark and is completely dumbstruck by the kind expression on the billionaire superhero’s face.

“I get that you’re freaked out, Miles,” Stark says slowly. “You didn’t ask for these powers but you’ve got them and now Avengers are dropping from the sky and a dangerous psychopath might have killed your uncle the thief.”

“Not helping —“

“Shh. Just listen, okay. It’s a lot. I get that. The thing is, you can freak out all you want but you’re not alone. You have me and you’re going to have a bunch of other new people in your life who’ve gone through, okay, maybe not the exact thing you’re going through, but close enough.” Stark stops, takes a breath and then goes on. “You’re a little kid —”

“I’ll be thirteen next week —“

“A kid,” Stark amends, “and your dad the cop isn’t fond of superhero-vigilante-whatevers. But now you have powers. You’ve got invisibility, zapping people — which is really cool, by the way — speed, sticking to things and I’m pretty sure you’ve got strength and spider-sense, too.”

“What?”

“A whole bunch of cool powers.”

“But I don’t want powers —“

“You’ve got them anyway. That doesn’t mean you have to use them until you’re ready,” Stark says. “And you’ll want to use them, Miles. The world needs good people who can do good things, even if your dad isn’t a big fan of how they do it.” He leans forward. “School comes first though.”

“I want to be an engineer,” Miles blurts out like an idiot.

“Then we should be friends, don’t you think?” Starks asks. He holds out his hand for Miles to shake.
“Try not to stick to me this time.”

Gingerly, Miles reaches out and takes Stark’s outstretched hand.

He doesn’t stick.

And maybe having spider powers isn’t going to suck.

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