From the Top
by garamonder

Summary

Miles let go. Peter B. Parker closed his eyes as he dropped back through the rift, heading home.

It would have been nice if he’d ended up there. Instead, the veteran hero makes an unintended pit stop in another Peter's universe - one where he's an Avenger, of all things.

(Takes place in the MCU, post-Avengers 4)
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

‘Peaceful’ wasn’t the first word that should come to someone’s mind after they’d been dropped into a dimensional rift, but as Peter fell, he felt that way for the first time in ages. Kingpin still menaced this universe, but not for long. He trusted Miles, and the act of trusting was like rediscovering a photograph from an old album, a picture of something he used to know and didn’t want to forget again.

Miles would be fine. His universe would be fine. Peter’s universe…would get there.

Colors whirled past in a blinding frenzy, smashing together and exploding apart. He braced himself against the hurtling sensation and once the pressure let up, starfished in blissful anticipation of falling onto the nice, soft mattress he’d left behind.

He landed flat on his back in dirt.

“OOMPH!” he wheezed, the air knocked out of his lungs.

What the hell? Had he missed his drop zone? He opened his eyes and saw stars, and they weren’t all dancing around his concussed head. Night sprawled overhead.

It felt like he’d broken his back again. He rolled over slowly, acutely aware of every bone creaking. By this point in his career his skeleton was probably as spider-webbed as his suit. Keep that in mind, Miles, and buy Icy-Hot in bulk.

Peter groaned and rubbed his back before looking around and seeing he’d landed in a vacant lot between two ratty apartment buildings. Junky cars stood propped on cinder blocks, looking like ghosts of the vehicles they’d been. Rusted folding chairs lay scattered about and a wary cat glowered at him from the top of a packing crate propped against the fence.

He didn’t recognize the lot, but that wasn’t his immediate concern.

Over the years his spider-sense had developed into something like a radio dial he could twiddle to the right frequency. It hissed at him now—as it had been doing ever since he’d landed on his ass in Miles’s universe.

He knew for an awful, depressing certainty he was not home.

“Great,” he said out loud, “another dimensional kidnapping.”

Could the others have ended up here on their way to their own universes? He hoped not. Their atoms didn’t take to dimension-hopping any better than his did.

Pushing his mask up to rub his head, he tried to unsnarl his memory of the last few minutes. There had been an especially huge flash when he’d dropped into the rift, but in the midst of the chaos it’d seemed right at home with all the other explosions. As boss battles went, it’d been a doozy.
“Hey!” hollered someone right above him, and Peter jumped. Directly above him a woman leaned out a window, her hair all in curlers, and glared at him. “No junkies here! I WILL call the cops!”

“I’m not a junkie, lady,” Peter told her, but he did not entirely fault her disbelieving snort. He was sprawled in a dirty lot, sporting days-old stubble and a lot of spandex. He staggered to his feet, rubbing his back and looking around. Was he actually home, and his spider-sense was just slow in coming down from its buzz?

Nice thought, but not likely. He sighed, deflated. Of course. Of course this would happen right when he’d retrieved his moxie after months of moping around Queens.

This was New York too, right? He looked around. It sure smelled like New York.

He glanced up, where the woman had not yet retreated from her window. “What neighborhood is this?” he called up.

“Woodside, and get the hell out of it,” she said before slamming her window shut.

Peter chanced the subway. Some good Samaritan had stuck a transit card with a few bucks left in a turnstile groove. At this time of night most of the Queens trains hurtled express past endless construction. Getting to Forest Hills from Woodside gave him some time to think, which he mostly squandered on dejection at having to do this all over again. Now that he was determined to reunite with MJ, another delay made him itch with impatience.

Was he never to go home?

He slouched in a corner, avoiding eye contact. That was easy enough; nobody was interested in acknowledging the man wearing a red-and-blue spandex costume, save for the tired wisecrack who’d muttered “You’re late for Halloween, Spidey,” at him in the station.

Bleary-eyed commuters sat with their eyes closed and heads tilted back. One woman yawned while cradling a small child in her lap. The little girl was fast asleep. Peter gazed at them a moment, struck by the simple security a child could find in their parent’s embrace.

MJ had trusted him to be that security for a child, but Peter had never given himself the chance. He wanted it back, wanted to tell MJ he had faith in her too, that he knew she had strength to spare. He would tell her.

Once he got to Forest Hills Peter trudged out of the car with the last stragglers. This stop was the end of the line, which suited his mood.

Forest Hills appeared more or less the same. There were changes, of course; this world was like looking at a ‘spot the difference’ puzzle where buildings wore different facades and scaffolding scarfed the wrong street corners. He wondered if his favorite diner was still open in this dimension as it had been in Miles’s. Worth trying, if he could scavenge a few bucks.

Much of it was identical and he navigated with certainty to a row of small houses that fenced in their tiny gardens with proprietary zeal. It was Christmas in this universe, too, and the houses warred for festive dominance with an enthusiasm so familiar it made Peter grin.
He walked up the dark street and stood before the house he’d known almost all his life. It had the same soothing gray-blue paint, the same well-maintained driveway, the same sense of patience and calm it always exuded. Its lawn was neatly trimmed with roses that would have been the prize of any county fair.

Aunt May had preferred peonies. Peter sighed even before he spotted the nameplate on the fence that read REDDING HOUSEHOLD.

No Aunt May here. He had only the wisecrack’s comment in the subway as evidence there was a Spider-Something in this reality at all.

However ready he hadn’t been for it at the time, seeing May emerge from the Parker house in Miles’s universe had proven a monumental comfort. Speaking to her again had reminded him what an anchor her presence had been for him, once. A second time… would have been nice.

This was the road to ruin, he knew; he couldn’t go looking to steal puzzle pieces from other universes to fit inelegantly into the holes that gaped in Peter’s own. Kingpin had never understood the true nature of consequence, whereas it had always been a bedrock to Spider-Man.

Peter exhaled and glanced up at the sky, hoping to see a glow on the horizon that would herald the break of dawn and with it, library hours.

He looked at his hand, flexing it this way and that. No glitching yet—that was good, right? Yet he still felt that pull, that insistent feeling he should be somewhere else. Maybe he should be grateful. It indicated he was still anchored to his home, that he was not as adrift as he’d once thought. Small blessings.

Number one priority was a disguise for his disguise. He needed a coat.

When he got to the library he was glad to see the boxes of free clothing this branch often left out by the recycling for anyone who care to go through them. He lucked out and the fresh batch had not yet been picked over, and he shopped around before retrieving a shabby but clean coat not unlike the one he’d left behind in Miles’s universe.

No one out in the misty morning took a second look at the spandex-clad man rummaging through the bins. God bless New York. Next he found a shirt and pants, and shucked them over his suit. One of the t-shirts he passed over sported a crudely-drawn Iron Man helmet that gave him pause.

By the time the library opened, dawn had stolen over the street and drawn out sleepy-eyed residents clutching coffee and bowing their heads against the chill, heading to the subway for their daily pilgrimage.

Peter couldn’t believe his luck. One of the pockets on his coat had unearthed a five dollar bill, either an oversight by its last owner or a present for the next. He gladly bought coffee and a danish from one of the breakfast stands set up to ensnare passing commuters. As always, the food bolstered his mood.

At last some library patrons startled filtering into the library. Peter casually followed them in, lingering behind one candidate checking out a book on their hurried way to the subway and memorizing the card number and pin they typed into the station. Then he sidled over to the computer lab and typed the card and pin numbers into one of the machines. It obligingly gave him access to the
Internet.

Spider-Man was his first search, after disabling cookies and any tracking software the library could use to monitor his activity. He spent a while reading the results, sandpapery chin in hand.

Next he typed in Peter Parker, Queens. He scrolled through some unlikely-looking candidates but seized on a link about the Midtown High academic decathlon team. “Like a friggin’ yellow brick road,” he said under his breath. Nerdy tendencies always led to Peter Parkers.

Up popped an image of several smiling students in yellow jackets, holding up a trophy. Peter’s own decathlon team had worn ugly suits and ties, to the disparagement of most of his classmates.

Beneath the photo read their names.

Peter looked at Peter. If he squinted, he could sort of see a resemblance? Or not. The kid was not so long in the face or leg. The Parker in Miles’s universe would have been identical to Peter himself—in better days—if not for the hair and eye colors, and he suspected the one in Gwen Stacy’s universe had been a carbon copy, judging by the way Gwen had looked at him sometimes as though she were seeing a ghost.

Flash Thompson stood there too. Peter grimaced at him.

Avengers was the next search, narrowed to Accords and branching into a series of more precise research on just who was sporting the spandex in this universe.

“Good grief,” he muttered incredulously some minutes later, “he’s an Avenger? An Avenger?”

Peter had rubbed shoulders with Earth’s Mightiest Heroes from time to time, but had never been a card-carrying member of the club and counted himself lucky for it. It looked like this universe’s resident superhero union had experienced its own implosion, he noted dryly, but had patched up a lot neater.

He scanned the roster, which waxed and waned from year to year. Peter's eyebrows shot clear into his hairline. Iron Man, Captain America, Black Widow, Thor, Bruce Banner, the Falcon, possibly Black Panther and Ant Man, Doctor Strange, Wanda Maximoff…

Geez…all the prototypes.

Did this throw a wrench in his hopes of swinging up to his counterpart in this universe and asking for help? Though Spider-Man’s identity was still under wraps, his Avengers membership gave Peter pause out of residual wariness.

Several hours passed as he browsed, and other library patrons came and went. A bored-looking retiree camped out at the monitor next to Peter’s cubicle and started playing an online RPG. To Peter’s amusement, it was a superhero game.

Wilson Fisk's name yielded some results. He more or less appeared to occupy a role similar to the ones from other universes. Were the beginnings of a particle collider prototype in the works already, or did it always take Spider-Man’s interference to get the ball rolling? He did not want to do anything to endanger the wife and son again, or drag this version’s Spider-Man into a fight he hadn’t started. The Spider-Kid here seemed too young to have picked a fight with Kingpin already. It was that confrontation that had topped the first domino in the series of events that had led to the particle
collider’s use—and at least one Peter’s death.

But *something* had pulled him into this universe. He felt it nagging at his elbow, just out of reach. It was a gnawing sense that something in this universe wasn’t right, even beyond the simple fact that it wasn’t his.

This stuff made his head spin. Peter drummed his fingers on the keyboard and closed his eyes, feeling for the telltale tug of instinct that would point him north.

Fingers typed in one last search term: *Particle Collider*. Nothing much on that, though Kingpin hadn’t openly advertised it in any universe.

He aimlessly wandered through the results, clicking this link and that until a familiar face jumped out from the screen and froze him in the act of scrolling.

Liv Octavius smiled at him from a company photo, wearing a white lab coat and looking as benign as Miss Frizzle, ready to drive her magic school bus straight to hell.

Her picture decorated a short piece on the progress being made in the study of particle physics. “It’s going to open up the world,” she was quoted as saying, and Peter could hear the heretic fervor with which she must have said it.

“Sure, Liv, it’s gonna open up a whole bunch of worlds,” he muttered, but she knew that. Kingpin would—

Then his eyes fell on the logo stitched to the breast of her pristine coat, and his stomach dropped.

According to the article, Liv Octavius was head of the department of Exploratory Particle Physics for the Advancement of Human Understanding.

The title was grandiose and ostentatious—but then, Stark Industries had never lacked for flair.

.

Next time:

*Breaking into Stark Industries had never been high on Peter’s to-do list…*

Chapter End Notes

I'd appreciate your thoughts! :)
Breaking into Stark Industries had never been high on Peter's to-do list. Sure, it'd crossed his mind and he'd given it a careless thought as one might hypothetically strategize for the zombie apocalypse, but he really never thought he'd find himself sneaking around Iron Man’s techie playground. 

Ostensibly much of their research was still conducted in Los Angeles but he’d nosed around and seen that Liv Octavius’s work was based in New York. Perhaps Tony Stark wanted to keep the particle physics research within arm’s reach. Knowing him, he’d wind up creating a black hole. 

Peter had a head start on your usual burglar; he had a strong suspicion that prized real estate in New York did not much vary from one universe to the next and there weren’t a lot of places to stick a giant particle collider. So back he skipped to the underground labyrinth of subway tunnels that ran like veins beneath the city. 

“Ugh,” he muttered through the ski mask he’d found for the occasion. He wore dark clothing and gloves, further courtesy of library charity bins, and resolved he’d donate spare clothes to the ones in his Queens as thanks. Knowing there was a Spider-Man here, Peter dared not wear his suit in the event he was spotted and the kid took the blame. It would be best if he minimized his footprint in this universe now that he wasn’t the only Parker breathing in it. 

Sadly, noble intentions didn’t make the tunnel any more fragrant. 

He navigated partly by intuition and partly by Miles’s description of the underground network that had first led him to the collider. “Ah, the life of a hero,” he said to a rat that scurried away at his approach. “So glamorous.” At least it wasn’t a sewer this time. 

Maybe he’d write a memoir one day. More Sewers than Advertised, he’d call it. Chapter One: “An Allergic Reaction.” When he’d first noticed how swollen his spider bite was getting, he’d actually taken Benadryl in hopes of calming the reaction. Peter snorted; he hadn’t thought of that in years. 

“OK, here we go,” he said once his spider-sense announced he was standing where X marked the spot. 

What Tony Stark wouldn’t give for the ability to synthesize an internal compass like spider-sense. It tugged at Peter like a string wound round his wrist, and led him around corners and up shafts no normal human could have climbed. 

Soon he came to grates that flanked the control center around the collider. Through the slats he could see two white-coated technicians crossing the hallway, and wondered if they were armed to the teeth like the scientists at Alchemax. Just what kind of operation was Stark running in this universe?
The door he sought was open. When he angled his head at the grate he could just see the control center behind it. Past that, through a viewing window made of bulletproof glass, would be the cavernous chamber where the collider was housed.

Peter scooted around and clambered up the shaft until he found himself at a ventilation grate above the control center, just outside a panel leading into the chamber itself. It took maybe five minutes of waiting until the lollygagging technician wandered out in search of coffee, then Peter discreetly dropped into the room. The service door leading to the collider was opened by a wheel, which he spun as quietly as possible.

Like much of this world, the collider was a modified take on the ones before it. It seemed more streamlined, somehow. Well, Ock had rushed things under Kingpin’s pressure; maybe Stark had loosened the reins and she’d had more time to develop the product. Maybe Peter wasn’t glitching yet because the science on this one was more refined.

“What the hell you need this for, Stark?” he mumbled. Did the other Avengers know about this? Stark had never exactly sent out a weekly newsletter but this was the kind of thing that would have come up in conversation over shawarma.

He climbed quickly to where he knew the original Goober was located and rapped around the area. …Nothing.

What?

His spider-sense came up blank. Peter frantically checked for a panel somewhere, mindful of his limited time. No panel. No Goober?

“Shit shit shit,” he breathed. Had Ock refined the damn thing to the point it didn’t require the USB anymore?

He was out of time. Peter reluctantly dropped back to the door and slid through it, silently cursing as he darted back into the ventilation shaft. No sooner had he replaced the grate than the technician strolled into the control center, blowing on the top of his coffee, looking for all the world like he worked for any harmless lab.

Now what?

There was always a Goober. Villains always monologued, explosives were always disarmed with one second left ’til detonation, and there was always a Goober. “If I were a Goober, where would I be?” he muttered to himself.

He crawled around the vents aimlessly. Some time passed while he went from grate to grate, peering at scientists alternately fiddling around on computers and talking shit about colleagues who were out of the room. In the space of ten minutes, Peter knew who was cheating on their diet, who stole other people’s lunches from the fridge, and who had a shameful hookup at the holiday party. Then: a familiar voice.

“…budget, scrape some from the margins,” Octavius’s voice drifted into hearing. “The usual ways.”

She paused beneath the vent where Peter was currently shimmying. He stopped cold and
instinctively tugged his mask down. This time he wasn’t about to let her commit the ultimate no-no.

Octavius sipped her latte. She wore her usual lab coat, beneath which Peter guessed her adamantium tentacles were curled up like the legs of a dead spider, fused to her spine by the accident that had also been the birth of her corruption. “I’ve gone over the data from Trial One. It was a real success. Extra bagels for the break room! You’ve earned it.”

The technician said eagerly, “What about those asiago ones from Martin’s Deli?”

“You’ll earn asiago if we get to Trial Two,” said Ock briskly.

Maybe it was time for a course correction, Peter mused. Her friends might call her Liv, but to Spider-Man she could be Goober.

“Trial Two will have to wait another day or so. Stark’s showing off the megaconductor at the expo in Queens tomorrow.”

“We could do the trial without it…” said the technician cautiously.

“And blink out half the power grid? Stark wouldn’t like that,” said Ock dismissively, waving her latte. “Not very discreet, you know, and discretion’s got us this far. We need the megaconductor.”

*Mega*conductor? What was that, a super-duper-superconductor?

Peter rolled his eyes. See, this was what happened when you used ‘super’ as your baseline. Everything that followed had to get progressively flashier. He’d always sort of expected to eventually run into some powered-up idiot calling themselves a megahero or jumbo-villain when they decided ‘super’ was too mundane these days. This *megaconductor* was just the prima ballerina of the choir of superconductors needed to run the collider.

Okay, so the collider needed the megaconductor to control its energy usage sneakily, without alerting the city to a major and sudden draw on power. Peter felt himself getting pissed at Stark. So much for the man’s heel-turn into the light. This was the kind of crap Peter might have expected of Stark Industries before their CEO’s reinvention, but it had no place in the age of the Avengers.

He started to wriggle backwards, away from Ock and the technician. Easier said than done. Maybe he would lay off the pizza, see if he could fit into his old slacks when next he saw MJ.

*You are so lucky,* he told Ock silently. *You coulda been a Goober.*

So…an expo, huh?

The Stark Expo was familiar to Peter from his own dimension, an exciting week of marvels unveiled to the wide-eyed public like the automatic dishwasher which had once dazzled people at the 1893 World’s Fair. Under the glassy roof of the convention center Peter passed robots and virtual reality simulators and high-res hologram projectors the size of a pea. Most of these things weren’t new to him, but he still paused at the self-cooking hot dog. Neat.

It had taken about five minutes to sneak into the expo the next day and filch a pass, which Peter clipped to the lapel of his shabby coat. He’d lost the mask, caught a few hours sleep in a park,
scrounged up change for the laundromat and found a shower at a YMCA, but he still felt disheveled and gray in this company. Many of the scientists wandering around were frenzied-looking enough themselves that Peter didn’t feel too out of place, but there were plenty of glossy executives there too, wafting in clouds of perfume.

As MacGuffins went the megaconductor left a lot to be desired, but he didn’t have a lot of choices outside of wrecking the collider—the very very last of last resorts—or kidnapping Octavius, who he still needed to actually turn on the damn thing. And Peter wasn’t eager to add kidnapping to the list of principles he’d let slide by the wayside.

First he’d try to talk to Stark, who surely couldn’t be too surprised his collider had tracked in some mud from the next dimension over. The billionaire had his moments of rationality. If that didn’t work, well…

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Octavius talking animatedly to a small cluster of people who listened with glazed smiles. He edged away.

In his own universe, in more empathetic days, Peter had felt sorry for Otto Octavius and what his prized research had done to him. It was a case of something like, but for the grace of God… What if the spider that had bitten Peter all those years ago had not only imbued him with amazing powers, but had addled his brain as well? He might have ended up like Ock, blind to his own madness, a hero in his own eyes only and a villain to the world…

Peter shook his head. No more funks.

Now, where was the megaconductor? He consulted a schedule and saw Stark’s lecture was to be held in Hall C in an hour. Peter felt jittery for some reason. Nerves hadn’t bothered him during a mission in years.

Though other companies and scientists were annually invited to the convention, Stark Industries had its own setup in the hall with hologram banners proudly touting this year’s innovations. It looked like the thoroughbred in the room, easily more attractive and impressive than any other entity represented even though it generously allowed the other businesses to strut their best. He craned his head for a look and wasn’t surprised to see that the megaconductor and Stark were nowhere to be seen. That was hall-caliber stuff, and was probably being prepared for the presentation to come.

Well, they were handing out samples of that hot dog. Peter went over to inspect, trying to ignore the gnawing sensation from his spider-sense. Too bad it had never developed a Morse code.

“Dude, it microwaves itself,” said a kid behind Peter delightedly to his friend. “All it needs now is a self-toasting bun.”

Peter squeezed some mustard on the dog and chewed. Not as good as a Nathan’s dog, he thought.

“Not as good as a Nathan’s dog,” echoed a voice from behind. “But not bad, either? I don’t think you’ll see it at a Mets game anytime soon.”

Craig Pelton, the inventor, scowled at them from across the counter. Unable to disagree, Peter shrugged at him and moved away, finishing off the dog and hoping he’d come across a self-frying funnel cake next.
“Oof!” he grunted, stumbling into someone who had stopped short in the packed crowd.

“Oh, sorry man,” said the kid in front of him, wobbling and recovering himself. “It’s like sardines in here…”

Then he turned to the man he’d jostled, and Peter Parker stared at Peter Parker.

Absurdly, Peter’s first thought was: I had that shirt…

The kid froze. “Uncle Ben?”

Peter’s heart stopped. “What?”

Already the kid was stammering: “No—sorry—you look like someone I—stupid, sorry about that… just surprised me…”

Peter rocked back a step. Aunt May had always told him he looked just like Ben. He was less than a decade younger than his uncle had been when he’d died, and somewhere along the line he’d become enough Ben’s likeness to scare the shit out of a teenager who was still freshly removed from his tragedy.

Ned Leeds stood beside him looking similarly like he was seeing a ghost, and Peter wasn’t ready for this either. Both of them wore attendee passes clipped to their collars.

Whitefaced, without completely knowing why he said it, Peter told him, “I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault,” the kid mumbled. Then he frowned, and Peter could almost see the recognition spark behind his eyes. “Hang on…”

“Oh, I uh, hear someone calling me!” said Peter hurriedly; he elbowed his way gracelessly to lose himself in the crowd, feeling shaken and cursing every machination of fate that had brought them face-to-face.

So much for minimizing his footstep. What the hell were they doing there? They attended a technology magnet; maybe the passes were a reward for honors students. He could imagine Harrington’s thinly suppressed envy. It could truly have been an accident.

Still…how coincidental could it be that this universe’s Spider-Man was attending a convention featuring an Avenger?

How possible was it that Tony Stark knew Spider-Man’s true identity?

Now that thought gave Peter the willies. Not so much that it was Tony Stark, but that at this point in the kid’s career, anyone knowing was a major red flag. Peter had gone a solid seven years completely undiscovered. Seven years, alone…at the time, there’d been a sort of nobility to the isolation…but if nothing else, hadn’t the last few days taught him the value of fellowship?

There was no less value in secrecy. He hoped this Peter knew who to trust. At any rate, it wasn’t Peter’s problem.

He didn’t want to admit to himself the encounter spooked him. It wasn’t like running into Miles, or
even seeing his own ghost on the screen in Times Square. He had to move fast, because he’d seen the kid’s spider-sense perk up and if Peter knew Peter like he knew himself, the kid wasn’t about to sit on his heels after that.

Lines were formed well outside of the convention hall where Stark was due to show off his company’s latest. People chattered and strained for peeks as convention volunteers flitted in and out of the doors, looking important.

Peter glanced at the excited queue and walked past it, rounding a corner and spying a back hall. He needed a private word with Stark.

Lingering near an exit in a lonelier stretch of the hall, he was considering how best to do this (what was the vent situation here?) when a low tone caught his attention. He edged toward the cracked door.

“I still don’t like this,” grumbled a deep voice. Peter stepped to the side and pressed his back against the wall. He heard the speaker nudge the door a hair wider. “There’s too many of these idiots around.”

“We’re not gonna get a better chance,” hissed a second speaker. “Better to grab it now. After this clown show it’s going back to Stark Industries under their lock and key.”

With Peter’s luck, they were talking about the megaconductor.

“Are you sure the cases are identical?”

“Oh, yeah—it’s the same one. Stark’s arriving in fifteen. Vess is gonna swap it with the conductor any minute and we’ll get the hell out of here.”

“OK, but I want to try one of those hot dogs on our way out.” The voices moved away from the door.

Peter slunk away, muttering obscenities under his breath. Wasn’t that just perfect! And he didn’t like that he had a goal in common with a couple of thieves—corporate espionage, possibly, or someone nefarious, wanting to power a superweapon on the sly? There were about a thousand cliches he could come up with from the top of his head.

Stark wasn’t here yet. Peter maneuvered closer to the back hall and spotted a suited man carrying a bulky suitcase. He’d evidently filched some credentials, because he was able to get past the outer security with minimal effort and started to disappear through a door. Peter ducked back through the exit and jogged down the back hallway, eyes peeled for the two speakers he’d heard. Only a couple of convention volunteers were visible and Peter walked confidently down until they’d gone out of sight round another corner.

Vent time. Peter sighed.

At least convention centers weren’t the Pentagon, he thought grumpily a few minutes later, or Stark Tower. Those vents probably had motion sensors.

It was easy enough to locate the room containing the megaconductor, especially once he spied a pair of unconscious security guards sprawled on the carpet. He removed the grate and dropped down just as Suit Guy was about to swap his case with one lying on a table.
“Woah!” he exclaimed, and Suit Guy whipped around. “I’m guessing this isn’t the can. Those hot
dogs blow themselves up in more ways than one.”

Vess spluttered. Up close, he didn’t exactly strike fear into Peter’s heart. He could have been any one
of the thousands of scientists wandering around the convention hall. “What—who are you?” he
demanded.

‘What’ was probably more accurate. “Just your average egghead. Whatcha doin’ with that?”

The man’s eyes darted to the unconscious guards as though he wasn’t really sure whether Peter had
spotted them. One hand drifted to a pocket that showed the rectangular outline of what was almost
certainly a stun gun.

“Nah,” said Peter, and darted to catch the man’s wrist.

Suddenly Vess spoke urgently: “Backup needed! In the—”

Peter reached forward and flicked him between the eyes. Vess jerked and clutched at the third eye
Peter had tattooed into his brow and he took the opportunity to pluck out the earpiece. “What kind of
backup we talkin’ about?” he asked.

“The kind that’s gonna lay you flat,” snarled Vess. Peter giggled.

“Easier said than done. What were you gonna do with that megaconductor? Who are you stealing it
for?”

Vess just glared. Peter glanced over his shoulder, wondering how long he had. Would the two he’d
heard in the hallway be the only backup, or were there more? He wasn’t worried about what they
could throw at him so much as who might get caught in the crossfire. He should nab the thing now
and apologize—or accuse—later.

Abruptly his hand spasmed. Peter cried out and tried to clutch it as though he could shepherd the
stray atoms into place, back how they belonged. They belonged in another universe. Only a few
seconds after the glitching started, it stopped and he breathed easier.

“Wondered when that would start up,” he grunted.

Vess’s eyes were huge. “What the hell was that?”

“I think I’m reacting to those hot dogs. OK, if you’re going to be uncooperative, it’s lights out,” he
told Vess, and tapped him on the head.

Vess slumped and Peter lowered the man to the floor. He looked around, finding he was in a kind of
green room. “What, the stupid Goober gets its own dressing room?” he muttered. The two
unconscious guards had handcuffs he used to bind the thief’s wrists and ankles.

He found a pen and paper and wrote: “BAD GUY, TRIED TO STEAL THINGIE.” He’d started to
write more, but his spider-sense warned him there wasn’t a lot of time. Most likely Vess’s backup
would get here first and retrieve their comrade before security got to the scene, but Peter stuck the
sign on the man’s chest anyway and stood to face the case on the table.
It didn’t have a code system or anything. Probably it couldn’t, not without interference from the conductor itself. He flipped the case open.

Okay, it was one hell of a prima ballerina, he had to admit.

Its makeup was a mystery to him. It was ceramic, but not; like porcelain, only way different? It was shaped into a large ring about a foot in diameter, and seemed to emit a low hum that spooked the little hairs in his eardrums.

A particle collider was one of the few environments in which a superconductor operated best, given that the extreme temperature at which it needed to operate could be regulated there, but one that could function at room temp, on this scale? It was easily worth lots and lots of millions.

“So you’re the one ring to rule them all,” he muttered to it.

Stealing a prized brainchild of Tony Stark’s was not exactly how he’d envisioned minimizing his footprint here. Peter quietly snapped the case shut. Maybe he should just go to the Avengers first and hope there was time to explain. They dealt with weird shit all the time. Surely this was just a drop in the bucket. Lifting the megaconductor before he had a chance to justify himself was a good way to end up on the Raft.

But if any one of a seemingly indefatigable number of ne’er-do-wells got their hands on it first…

Then again, since when had he tiptoed around the Avengers? It was Stark’s fault he was here in the first place; if this thing kept him from messing around with the collider for the time being, it was better to keep it away from him. For Peter’s own good.

Peter stared at the case. “Yoink,” he said, and swiped it from the table.

"That is definitely not yours,” came a voice from the doorway.

Before he even looked up to see Spider-Man standing there, Peter groaned.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for the wonderful response! Every comment is appreciated :)
Spider-Man stood framed impressively in the doorway. “That is definitely not yours.”

“That’s true,” agreed Peter, facing him.

“Hand it over and Mr. Stark will go easy on you—”

“Don’t call him that,” Peter groaned. “Can we discuss this somewhere else? It’s about to get hot in here.”

The kid shifted his weight to his back leg. “Hand the case over, and we can talk all you want.”

“Believe me, kid, once we talk you’ll tell me to hold on to it.” His spider-sense was yammering at him to get the hell out of there, and he squared his shoulders to the doorway. The second case, the decoy Vess had meant to buy time, was lying on the table and he picked it up. The case containing the One Ring was held in his left hand.

“I knew there was something funky about you,” muttered Spider-Man.

“Why, have we met?” asked Peter innocently, and rolled his eyes when the kid froze. “Subtle.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” A hint of anxiousness snuck into the words.

“Geez, kid, you have a mask on and your poker face still sucks. You have got to work on that.”

Spider-Man raised his wrist but Peter anticipated him. “Think fast!” he said, hoisting up the unconscious thief. The web meant for the case caught the man’s back instead, and Spider-Man had reflexively jerked his hand back too fast in anticipation. The thief collided with him bodily and smacked them both to the ground. Winded, the kid scrambled out from beneath as Peter bolted past him carrying both cases.

“What if that hadn’t been a web?” demanded Spider-Man indignantly from the floor. “You were just gonna use that guy as a shield?”

“What else would it have been?” Peter shot back over his shoulder. “You’re Spider-Man! What were you gonna pull out, an AK-47?”

He ran pell-mell down the hall, gripping a case in each hand in a lunatic impersonation of a socialite swinging her shopping bags.

“Stop, thief! You—man, you’re fast! Why’re you so fast! What is your deal?” hollered the Avenger.

Peter’s answer was cut short as what felt like a mack truck slammed into his chest. Still hurtling forward, his legs flew up and he backfopped onto the floor seeing stars and the pale face of Tombstone, glaring down at him.
Wait. Tombstone?

He craned his head and saw an inverted Spider-Man skid to a stop. “Woah, who are you?” the kid said in surprise. “I mean—good job, citizen—now why don’t you—”

Tombstone wordlessly leveled his weapon at Spider-Man. Peter kicked his ankles and the shot went wild. The henchman went sprawling on the floor and Peter knocked the weapon from his hand with one Converse.

“Case to the face!” he yelled, and slammed one down on Tombstone’s sneer. Blood spurted from the man’s nose. So this was the backup Vess had called. Was he working for Kingpin in this universe too?

“Is that guy not with you?” said Spider-Man, bewildered.

“No! And this guy ain’t, either!” Peter pointed at where the Scorpion was crashing around the corner like a racehorse down the final stretch.

First Spider-Man shot a web that pinned Tombstone’s hand to the carpeted floor. “That won’t last long,” said Peter, “he’s got filed teeth.”

The hero narrowed his eyes at Peter’s insider knowledge, but didn’t have the chance to say anything else as the Scorpion launched himself at Spider-Man with a curse. Peter heard him snarl, “I’ve been waiting for this—”

“Watch out for the tail!” he shouted. This Scorpion didn’t have the wacky Wild Wild West spider centaur thing going on, but the stinger arcing from the back of his suit was straight off a Xenomorph.

Spider-Man jerked his head and the tail buried itself in the wall. The Scorpion wrenched it out in a shower of drywall, and through the hole it left behind Peter could see the larger convention area and the people still waiting for Stark’s speech. Startled heads swiveled at the sound of crunching wall.

He started to run down the back hall, hoping to take the fight that way, when Tombstone tackled him at the line of scrimmage.

“OOF!”

The two super-powered men crashed through the wall to a chorus of surprised screams. Peter dropped one of the cases and scrabbled for it in the debris, but Tombstone got to it first. Just as Peter reached for the handle the big henchman slammed his elbow into Peter’s nose and he fell back on his butt.

Normally stoic, Tombstone bared his shark’s teeth in a feral smile. “How’s that for a nose job?”

“Joke’s on you, pal, you probably just set it straight again!” Peter told him through the stream of blood running down his face.

He could have sworn the jackass rolled his eyes. Tombstone took off running, past the assembly hall toward the rest of the convention. Peter swore and tripped over debris to go chase after him, still clutching his remaining case. People jumped out of the way and pressed against the wall; distantly, he heard security shouting for them to stop.
Fighting sans mask was a new experience. Peter felt naked as he sprinted past blurs of shocked faces and skidded around the corner into the main hall. Dazzling holograms weaved overhead like a recreation of *Blade Runner*’s futuristic Los Angeles and there was a sort of elevator music-variety EDM playing through speakers. What a weird choice. He rarely got a soundtrack for his chase scenes.

Tombstone knocked aside convention goers like they were made of straw. Not everyone realized what was happening; at first Peter drew more stares for his bloody nose than the henchman did racing down the aisle. Peter leaped for all he was worth and planted his blue Converses squarely in the henchman’s back. Tombstone tumbled down wheezing and the case went flying across the air. Peter jumped for it with an outstretched hand.

“Yoink!”

A web snatched it from the air in front of him. Peter landed with a slide and whipped around to see Spider-Man haul the case in with one hand while swinging into the action with the other. A cheer burst from the crowd at the sight of the famous web-slinger.

Peter threw the other case at his head. Spider-Man yelped and dropped the first one to reflexively catch the second before it gave him an endoscopy. Diving, Peter caught the dropped case with a tuck and roll just before it could hit the ground.

“DON’T THROW THAT! Are you crazy?!”

“Where’s the Scorpion? You didn’t leave him in the hallway did you?” Peter panted.

“What? No, duh, he’s down! Give me both cases!”

“You’ve got other problems,” he pointed out. Tombstone had risen in the main aisle, oblivious to the panicking crowd, with another gun raised.

He aimed it at Peter first and fired. With lightning speed Peter yanked the case up to block the bullet. Thank God it was industrial grade. Even in the noisy hall, the sound of the gun was shocking and unmistakable. Bystanders shrieked and ducked down. Craig Pelton jumped and dropped the hot dog he was handing out, sending mustard spiraling into the air like ribbons.

Spider-Man shot a web that yanked the gun from Tombstone’s hand. “You’re in a public place man!” he admonished. He fired several more webs that tangled up Tombstone at the feet and hands and directed his irritated next words to Peter. “Think you could be more careful with those cases?”

“Oh I’m sorry, I’ll block the next shot with my face,” snapped Peter. He nudged Tombstone with his sneaker to guage how securely the man was tied up. The henchman snapped at him with filed teeth and Peter clucked at him disapprovingly as he looked the man over for more weapons.

Through a haze of color he became aware of the murmuring crowd and looked up. Bloody-faced, dressed in a shabby coat and sneakers, he certainly didn’t make a heroic impression.

“Uh, everything’s OK, folks!” Spider-Man said in his most placating tone, raising his hands to everyone. “Nothing to worry about! It’s all taken care of—HEY!”

Peter had taken off running with the case, fumbling with it as he barreled through bodies who were
now pressing forward to see the action. There was one more face he thought might pop up, and it was better to get the hell away from all these people before that happened.

“Oh no you don’t!”

Spider-Man swung and landed right in front of him, hand outstretched to stop Peter like he was an officer directing oncoming traffic.

This time the kid knew better than to fire a web and Peter resisted the impulse to fire one at him, which was as recognizable a trait of Spider-Man’s as the suit itself.

But he didn’t slow down. Seeing this, Spider-Man took the initiative and rushed forward, arm drawing back as though for a right hook. Then suddenly, he shot a web past Peter to a table behind him, yanking it forward in a clever pincer action that almost made Peter proud.

He turned and struck the incoming table with his free fist like a swordsman slicing flying fruit in half, then wheeled back to the kid. Peter launched up and somersaulted, twisting so he came down precisely behind the Avenger and hooking his sneakers over Spider-Man’s shoulders in a reverse Frankensteiner he’d lifted from Lucha Libre wrestlers.

It was a dirty move, but one he knew Spider-Man could handle. Peter came out of his roll at a full run, unable to suppress a cackle.

“Not bad, kid!” he yelled over his shoulder at the dazed hero as he made for the main entrance, and the busy Queens street he could see beyond it.

The only warning was that animalistic screech.

He was almost to the tall glass entrance, which covered the entire front wall of the convention center, when the glass shattered before him sending everyone’s arms over their head. Peter was closest and crouched, skidding on the floor and shielding his head against the shower of glass. Frightened people took shelter under displays, and he scanned the area quickly to make sure no one was seriously injured.

“Oh, crap,” he groaned.

The Prowler stepped into view, flexing his electric claws.

“Give me the case,” he said to Peter in his low, manufactured growl, then noticed Spider-Man swinging up with one of his own. “Both of you.”

Was this Aaron Davis, Miles’s uncle? Or some other man wearing the same gear? Villains could adopt each other’s mantles as easily as heroes could. Peter called that particular trope the Dread Pirate Roberts and it was a constant headache.

“Another one?” said Spider-Man incredulously. “Where are you all coming from?”

Peter watched the dark-suited man warily. He’d come across Prowlers before and none of them were a joke. He could kill every bystander within a ten yard radius, and it wouldn’t be with any bullet Peter could dive in front of.

“The cases,” the Prowler repeated.
Electricity crackled from his claw tips as though from a live wire. The kid noticed this too, and looked worriedly over his shoulder at the crowd.

“Everyone clear out,” he said with authority.

Most listened to the Avenger, flowing as far back as they could get. There should be other exits, and Peter saw security getting people out in as orderly a fashion as possible. Some idiots lingered with iPhones held at the ready, risking their lives for some hits on YouTube.

The Prowler attacked in a flash of light and movement. His claws streaked a swath of lightning in the air as he brought them down on Peter, who jumped back.

“Ah ah!” he said, whipping the case up as a shield just as the claws made for his face.

The Prowler’s hand stopped dead before it could rip apart the case and its precious contents. Peter took the split-second to slam the sole of his foot square in the man’s chest, so unexpectedly the Prowler couldn’t engage the electric field wired into his suit, and sent him flying thirty feet through shimmering holograms to land in a nearby display. The force of his blow was a surprise, and the Prowler stood up amid the debris cautiously.

He was crouching for another attack when Spider-Man lassoed his wrist with a web.

Peter bellowed at him, “No, no, DON’T!”

It was too late. Electricity spiked out from the Prowler’s suit, racing up the web to Spider-Man’s outstretched hand. There was a sickening crackle as it reached its target. The kid staggered back and dropped to the floor.

_Oh God_, thought Peter, stunned.

What happened next he would never have expected: the Prowler froze, staring at Spider-Man as though scared he’d killed him.

He looked at Peter, and if it were possible for a fixed mask to have any expression, Peter could have sworn he seemed vulnerable. There was a moment of silence while they stared at one another.

Then the Prowler turned and fled.

Peter raced over and dropped the case to check the kid’s pulse. When he found it, he breathed a sigh of relief and hardly bothered to acknowledge the warning his spider-sense gave him.

From behind his head came a low whine.

He swiveled his head to see the cold, implacable mask of Iron Man. Its eyes glowed as though lit by some inner fire.

In a voice too soft for anyone else to hear, with the palm of his hand lowered to within a millimeter of Peter’s head and humming with deadly suppressed energy, Tony Stark said to him: “If he’s dead, so are you.”

“He’s not dead,” said Peter.
There was a moment as Iron Man’s readouts confirmed the assessment. He did not fire, but the whine of his suit continued to make the hairs on the back of Peter’s neck stand up.

Already the boy was stirring feebly. Thank God for the hardiness of enhanced individuals. “Wha-?” he said weakly, and the eyes of his mask focused on Peter and the Avenger standing behind him. “Oh, hey man,” he said to Stark.

“Hey yourself,” said Iron Man. “I gotta say, I wasn’t expecting to crash the party crashing my party. Couldn’t you have done this during the Hammer Industries presentation?”

Beneath his flippant words, Peter heard concern. Perhaps the kid did, too, because he struggled to a sitting position. Seeing he was out of danger, Peter sat back and felt his head bump gently against the repulsor still aimed directly at his skull.

“Do you mind?” he grunted.

“Absolutely,” said Iron Man, who did not move.

Out of the corner of his eye Peter saw police drawing near. “We need to talk,” he said urgently to Stark, turning his head as much as he dared.

“I’m sure you have the right to remain silent.”

“Where’z the megaconductor?” asked Spider-Man fuzzily, groping for the case he’d dropped. He flipped it open to find the thing empty. The decoy. Still sitting, he leaned forward and seized the second case at Peter’s side.

It, too, was empty. “What?”

At last Iron Man moved, only to reach into Peter’s coat and withdraw the One Ring from where he’d stashed it in the commotion.

Spider-Man looked at the megaconductor, then to Peter with artificially white eyes. “You have to watch the hands,” said Peter with resigned irony.

“Who are you?” said the kid, getting to his feet. “You’re—you’re different.”

Peter started to rise but the Avenger’s repulsor stopped him at no more than a kneel. “Not an enemy. Listen, I—”

“Hands up!” barked one of the police officers. Iron Man withdrew his hand and Peter instinctively raised his own behind his head, feeling a prickle of real worry for the first time in this universe: he could not waste time sitting in jail.

He would not die in this universe, glitching to death in a tiny cell on the Raft.

“You gotta listen to me,” he hissed to the pair, “you have no idea what you’re messing with, that collider is trouble!” He cut off as the police officers drew within hearing range. One of them took out a pair of high-tech handcuffs that Peter knew at a glance had been patented by Stark Industries.

“What the hell are you talking about?” demanded Stark. For a moment he looked like he wanted to
pause the officers in the act of fastening the binders around Peter’s wrists.

“I know what you’re doing with it,” snarled Peter over his shoulder. “So much for the renaissance
man. How long do you think you can—”

He caught sight of Olivia Octavius standing no more than a dozen feet away, owlish stare fixed
intently on the scene, and snapped his mouth shut. By then the police were pulling him away.

“I’m not gonna keep asking,” said the suited officer. “What is your name? It’s not Rick O’Connell
or John Wick or Max Rockatansky and if you name one more action hero I’m throwing you in a cell
on the Raft with no toilet.”

Peter smiled sourly at him. “John Doe, then.”

The man scowled.

Peter’s gaze dropped to the floor, to which his wrists were fastened by a length of reinforced chain.
A similar binding clapped around both ankles. He’d already proven himself too strong in the
convention center to be handcuffed to a table, and this particular prison was well with the times,
being equipped with measures to detain any “enhanced individuals” brought in. Some of them, he
suspected, had once been meant for the Hulk.

They’d underestimated him, however. For the moment he was willing to let them. He did not intend
to stay the night. He might never have even made it to the police station but for the combined escorts
of Iron Man, Spider-Man and War Machine (who had arrived as he was being arrested) making
certain he got there. Spider-Man had insisted on coming along, perhaps to prove he wasn’t suffering
ill-effects after the shock.

Once Octavius was out of earshot Peter had tried a few more times to get in a word with them, but
was interrupted every time by one of the S.W.A.T. officers.

“Copycats,” he was indignant to hear one guy mutter. What, did they think he was some kind of
super power fanatic?

Fortunately he was seventy-five percent sure his fingerprints would not match the Peter Parker’s in
this universe; prints were so highly variable they could theoretically be the only difference in what
would otherwise be a picture-perfect copy of another dimension. DNA required a warrant. He did
dont think he’d be in the system even if they got it, but he didn’t want to leave any dangling threads
that could be used against this dimension’s Peter Parker in the future.

Once he’d been booked the three Avengers had dropped out of sight. Hopefully they were still
lingering around the station, waiting to ask their own questions once the mug shot and crap were
done.

Peter had caught a glimpse of his mug shot and grimaced at the stubble. No one ever believed crazy
shit coming from a guy with stubble. An EMT had swabbed away most of the blood from his face,
but some still stained his neckline and collar.

“Where’s Stark?” he asked finally.
The officer raised his brows. “You want his attention bad, huh? Bad enough to steal his tech and
wreck the halls with your other pals?”

“They’re not my pals!” Peter protested. “Ask Spider-Man; I helped him take them down!” How
unfair was this?

“What, you trying to impress the Avengers? I don’t think they’re holding tryouts.” The other officers
in the room grinned and Peter rolled his eyes.

“No, definitely not,” he said firmly. “But I do need to talk to Stark. Isn’t he here? You telling me he
isn’t curious about all this?”

The officer took offense. “Tony Stark will wait his turn,” he snapped.

*Defensive,* thought Peter wryly. Probably they often had to remind people who the real authority was
in the city. When heroes brought in crooks it was still treated as a citizen’s arrest; at times he’d relied
on Good Samaritan laws to abet his interference. He’d always worked alongside street cops, but
sometimes middle management proved pricklier and he wasn’t positive this guy wasn’t FBI. “Then
what am I being charged with? Super strength? You’ve got nothing to arrest me on if Stark and
Spidey aren’t pressing charges.”

The officer’s brows shot up. “We have a hell of a lot. You’re not going anywhere just yet.”

It was worth a shot.

They led him to a private cell and re-fastened the binders on him. Peter cooperated like a perfect little
saint, hoping to put them off their guard for later.

The room was windowless and sterile. Harsh blue light, reflecting off gray walls, made it seem as
much an operating room as a jail cell. A cot sat to one side. There was a small toilet and zero privacy
to use it. Everything was heavily reinforced. The cot was not Hulk-sized.

Peter sat on the cot. He was more exhausted than he realized. It’d been a long day—a long few days.
He’d give it a few minutes, just enough to see whether Tony Stark or one of the other Avengers paid
him a visit. Hadn’t “collider” been the magic word; hadn’t he set off Spider-Man’s own internal
alarm? Just a little while. Maybe until they fed him something. Yeah, he’d wait for dinner. He didn’t
have the money for a hot meal and he couldn’t keep chugging along on one self-cooking hot dog. He
hadn’t had a good meal since at the diner with Miles, or a proper night’s sleep in…how long had it
been? Not that he ever needed it, who needed sleep?

Until then, he’d sit back on this cot and close his eyes—not to sleep, mind you, just to block out that
glaring light…

“MJ?” he murmured drowsily some time later…then his eyes snapped open and he shot up straight.
*How long had he been asleep?* In that room he had no sense of time. It could have been forty-five
minutes, it could have been six hours.

He spied a little clock on the wall and almost had a heart attack. Five hours, wasted!
At first he thought his spider-sense had prodded him, or that a bout of glitching had startled him awake, but then he realized he wasn’t imagining the rumbling sensation beneath the floor. Peter swung his legs down and sat his sneakers flat, feeling the ground shake.

Then: a small explosion, right there in his cell. Peter yelped and leaped to his feet away from the hole that had blasted through his wall, sending dust and smoke all around the little room. Concrete tumbled down in small landslides. Behind the hole, he saw moving shapes. Not the Avengers, surely? Weren’t they all about using the front door now?

“Geez, couldn’t you have just posted bail?” he coughed into his coat sleeve.

A figure stepped through the hole and resolved slowly in the swirling dust. Then: electricity crackled low, from the claws hanging at his sides. Peter looked up to see the narrow white eyes of the Prowler. He braced for an attack that never came. The henchman simply stood there, glowering at him.

There was a moment of silence. “No bail?” Peter repeated, with a bad feeling.

“Sorry,” said another, sly voice.

Adamantium tentacles wove around the corner of the blasted hole, drawing in their mistress, who seemed borne upon them like a fantastical queen. Her face was hooded, but Peter had already reassessed his personal biases and needed no reintroduction to Doctor Octopus. His stomach dropped.

Ock drew before him, her feet never touching the ground, and leaned in to inspect him with large, flashing goggles. Peter reeled back.

“Thought I’d skip the paperwork,” she murmured, and he heard the smile in her words.

Chapter End Notes

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I was able to get this one up a little faster. Hope you enjoyed! Thanks for all your comments, every one is appreciated :)
Sometimes, Peter thought, the tendency of things to go from Bad to Worse seemed more by cosmic design than accident.

He was bound up in classic hostage fashion, with adamantium binders circling his wrists up to his forearms at the back of the uncomfortable chair they’d shoved him in. They’d only just removed his gag. All that was missing, he reflected sourly, was a pair of railroad tracks to tie him to.

After the one-sided jailbreak they’d shoved him in the back of a nondescript van like some common bank robbers. An exchange of vehicles had been made, at which point the Prowler had stalked off into the fading light. Either he was off to electrocute someone else or he heard the dinner bell ringing.

“What is this place?” Peter asked like he didn’t know already. They didn’t bring him up through the subway tunnels, so he was still tempted to count them as an emergency exit.

“My lab,” said Ock happily. She’d removed her hood and replaced her goggles with round spectacles. When unencumbered by her lab coat, she tended to maneuver solely by her snakelike tentacles as if walking under her own power was too pedestrian. “This is where I built the particle accelerator that brought you here. Tell me…did it hurt?”

She asked this eagerly, with a manic gleam of interest in her eyes that sent a chill down his spine.

“You are super creepy, you know that lady?” he told her.

“Am I in your universe?” she asked, ignoring his comment. “Of course, you may not know for sure…”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” said Peter. “You friggin’ kidnapped me and started talking sci-fi mumbo jumbo like you think I know what you’re saying—”

Ock’s smile didn’t slip. “Don’t play dumb, or I’ll have no use for you. I know about the glitching. My man here told me about your hand. How long do the spells last? Do they escalate?”

Vess glared at Peter from one side of the room, an ice pack held to his head.

The would-be thief’s arrival had totally confused Peter for a second, and he’d tried to cover his surprise by dryly expressing concern for the man’s migraine before the truth hit him like Mjolnir:

Octavius had been attempting to steal the megaconductor for herself.

It wasn’t the city she’d been afraid of alerting so much as her CEO. A sizable draw of power would
have drawn the attention of the Avengers...because Stark didn’t know. Not only had he never green-lighted the collider, he wasn’t even aware of its existence! Ock would have stolen the megaconductor and hidden it under his very nose to power her machine.

“Stark wouldn’t like that,” she’d said...

Peter looked around the control room and the chamber beyond the viewing screen. This kind of operation was mind-blowingly expensive and secret dimensional splicers didn’t typically qualify for research grants.

Abandoning pretense Peter asked, “How the hell did you build a massive particle collider under Stark’s nose, with his own money?”

Her look of self-satisfaction was all the confirmation he needed. One of Ock’s tentacles waved itself dismissively. “Oh, Stark has more money than he knows what to do with, and I’m nice to Gary in Accounting—I send him a Starbucks gift card every few months, wrapped up in a sizable check—but even Iron Man would notice millions missing from the budget. So I went looking for a benefactor...”

Peter sighed. “Is his name Wilson Fisk?”

Her eyes narrowed. “You do know a lot.”

“You’re not unique, you know.”

She didn’t like hearing that. What had given all the Spider-People comfort, the knowledge they weren’t alone, only irritated someone whose ego would allow no peers.

“This didn’t end well the last time you tried it,” he said conversationally.

“Oh?” She peered at him. “And how did it end?”

“As these things usually end...with a big boom.” Well, so he hoped.

“Aren’t you the prophet,” said Ock. A smile played around her mouth; she thought she was untouchable, the exception to every other timeline.

She peppered him with several more questions he avoided answering: how long had he been there? Had he been pulled into more than one universe? Why him, specifically; who was he to be so involved? It was frickin’ déjà vu. He might as well have been back in the chair at Alchemax.

He squirmed back as her tentacles snaked closer. Peter had never really been sure who wore the pants in that relationship. Sometimes, in his own universe, Otto had seemed as subject to the whims of the tentacles firmly fused to his spinal cord as they were to his commands. Codependent in madness.

“You know... you could just—send me along my merry way, to my own dimension...” he tried, just for shits and giggles.

“Hardly,” said Ock. She adjusted her glasses and squinted at him as if she could prompt an atomic freakout by will alone. “You’ll be kept under strict observation to measure the accelerating rate of glitching.”
“That,” Peter told her flatly, “will kill me.”

That merited less than a shrug from her.

Had she crossed that threshold already; the one that, even at his lowest, he never dared approach? Was Miss Frizzle a murderer?

Apparently losing interest in him until his cells decided to splinter again, she turned to her workstation, tentacles acting in concert to bring up hologram charts and adjust controls. One waved for Vess and a pair of brutes to take Peter away. Judging by Vess’s sneer Peter figured the man would do his damnedest to make sure his charge ended up in the observation room sporting a concussion to match his captor’s.

*MJ,* he thought. At their approach Peter drew his breath to probably lie through his teeth. “I hate to tell you, but Stark’s probably on his way now.”

All eight tentacles paused in midair. She slowly swiveled to face him. “What did you say?”

“I spilled the beans at the precinct. Stark and I had a nice, long chat, and pretty soon we realized what a comedy of errors today was—but he’s rounding up the Avengers as we speak.”

Her face was white. “You’re bluffing.”

He absolutely was. “I’m absolutely not,” he grinned. “How happy do you think he was to hear you’d built a collider in his basement? Somehow I think that violates the non-compete terms…”

“They don’t know where to find you.” Ock sounded like she was trying to convince herself.

“Sure they do. I lied: I’ve actually been here before. You built this place in the same spot as the last dimension. New York real estate, am I right?” He took some pleasure from her clenched jaw. “Like I said, you’re not unique.”

It sounded so good he could almost believe it himself.

“So you’d save everyone a lot of trouble and Vess another head injury if you turned yourself in right now. No one’s died yet. They’ll give the mad scientist thing a little more leniency if the price tag doesn’t have blood on it—”

“Take him away!” Ock snapped to the grunts, who hauled Peter to his feet. He didn’t resist, hoping to lull them the way he’d thought to disarm the precinct into underestimating him.

“Don’t do anything stupid!” he called over his shoulder.

His last sight of Ock was of the scientist rising slowly on her adamantium tendrils, then turning to work furiously at the control station.

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“Come on, I *know* you have bagels here,” hollered Peter. Through a small inset window in the door he saw Vess’s aggravated face. It disappeared from sight, only to reappear moments later with a
bagel stuffed in his mouth.

“Mmmf,” he said, pointing at it and chewing slowly. “Delicious.”

Cute. It would play better if he were doing it without a black eye.

Peter looked for a vent and saw a grate in the corner. Step One: get these adamantium cuffs off his arms. Step Two: go up that grate. Step Three: find a place to pee in the subway tunnel and try not to feel like a bad citizen for it. Step Four: find Stark and make good on his threat to send the Avengers down here.

His battletime shopping list now complete, he tugged at his cuffs. The clasps were held together by a combination lock he could just barely see craning his head over his shoulder. Now, how to get the combination?

“Hey Vess! I—ahh!”

The atom attack he was planning to fake was superseded by a real one. Peter reeled and fell as his vision exploded into fragments of a hundred different dimensions, each one hooking a claw into his skull and playing tug o’ war with it. The room buzzed into different layouts, forms it must have taken in other dimensions, going carpet-to-linoleum-to-tile-to-carpet-to-carpet and everything flickering in-and-out like a bad signal.

His cry of pain was enough for Vess to throw the door open and run inside—not to help, but to observe and record for his maniac boss. The tech clutched a datapad.

By the time he’d reached Peter the attack had subsided, leaving the hostage inhaling carpet fibers from the floor.

“Aww,” that bastard tech said in disappointment. He’d barely begun to stand again before a swath of red and blue dropped through the air behind him.

Peter heard someone say, “Hey, good to see you again,” and then a yelp. The data pad crashed to the floor. He looked up and squinted.

Spider-Man stood above him, holding Vess by the collar. “You dropped this back at the convention center,” he said to Peter, gesturing at the tech who clearly couldn’t believe his bad luck.

“Could I drop him again?”

Vess spluttered as he kicked fruitlessly in midair and Peter stood up. “Combination code for the binders. Now.”

Still dangling, Vess typed in the numbers while Spider-Man watched. The binders sprang free with a loud click, and Peter shook the feeling back into his hands and rotated his shoulders, turning back to face him.

“You’re having almost as bad a day as I am,” Peter said cheerfully, and tapped him on the head again. Vess went lights out and Spider-Man lowered him to the floor. He webbed up the tech’s wrists and hands for good measure.

“So,” said Peter, who had sensed the Spider-Tracer ever since it’d crawled into the back of his collar
at the police station, “Are the Avengers on their way?” Wouldn’t that be a convenient backup to his lie.

“Well, the suit guy—Mr. Stark thinks he’s FBI or S.H.I.E.L.D. or something—he wouldn’t let anyone talk to you right away, so I stuck a tracer to your coat—”

Peter cut him off with an impatient wave. “Yeah yeah, I know how it works. We expectin’ any cavalry?”

“How do you—?”

“Kid!”

“No!” said Spider-Man, throwing up his hands, “They kind of got called to the scenes of some other jailbreaks!”

Indignant, Peter said: “I didn’t break out! These jackasses broke me out before I could do it myself! Hold on—what do you mean? Don’t tell me Tombstone and Scorpion are loose?” He groaned. “Ah, shit. Guess I know what the Prowler’s been up to. Well, let’s scram. We don’t have long before the alarm gets raised. Did you come from the tunnels?”

“Um, yeah…”

“OK, back up the vents we go.”

Spider-Man turned reluctantly to the grate he’d dropped out of, muttering, “I still don’t even know if you’re a bad guy and now you’re bossing me around? We have a lot to talk about.” He sprang up the grate easily and shifted around in the tunnel to give Peter a hand up.

“Nah, back up,” said Peter, and he leaped casually up to join the Avenger in the vents. Spider-Man looked at him for a long moment and began to shuffle down the vent in a direction Peter knew would lead back to the tunnels.

“So…you’re from another dimension, huh?” the kid whispered as they crawled along the metal sheeting.

“How much did you hear?”

“Everything…that Tracer has a micro-recorder. Brand-new stuff.”

Peter guessed Stark had had a hand in that. “Yeah. I’m just trying to phone home.”

“Was…” Spider-Man paused. “What was that freakout you had on the floor? Is it what that lady was talking about?”

Peter muttered, “Glitch in the matrix.”

“You’ve got that movie too?” Beneath the joke, he could hear the kid’s worry. He was reasonably concerned about rescuing this weirdo only to watch him die in a seizure of colors.

Their way took them past the laboratories Peter had seen on his last trip. “This is wild,” he heard Spider-Man say. “All this stuff is hidden away from the main lab. I’ve been to the particle physics
research center. You’d never know any of this was here.”

Peter wondered at that, but there wasn’t time to go over it. It wouldn’t be long before someone discovered the unfortunate Vess and the alert went up.

Just now, however, he noticed an increased flurry of activity underneath them. Techs ran by clutching reams of papers and equipment. One even scooped up the bagel plate, dumped it wholesale into the lap of his lab coat, and sprinted for an exit.

“Think I lit a fire under their seats?” he asked wryly.

“They’re closing up shop,” whispered Spider-Man, almost in awe. He paused at one grate and they watched several scientists hurry past with armloads of computers.

“Amateurs,” said Peter, “They should jettison the monitors.”

“They really believe the Avengers are coming.”

“No chance of that happening?”

On cue, Spider-Man cocked his head and appeared to be listening to an internal voice. Stark, presumably, checking in. “They’re bailing,” he said finally. “Dunno what they’ll do with the big machine. I’m gonna take a look.” He was silent a moment more, and responded to the question Peter couldn’t hear: “Not yet—might get out without a fight.”

Peter was tempted to tell him that was as sure a jinx as anything but didn’t object as Spider-Man started crawling again in the direction of the collider. Truth was, Peter would have gone there anyway. What would Ock do with it now that its hours might be numbered?

Coming up on the machine, both Peters quieted and scooted up to the largest grate. Through the slats Peter could see Ock working furiously at the controls. One tech ran up to her with hair askew and electronics piled haphazardly in her arms.

“Shouldn’t we go?” she asked Ock. The tentacles beared down on her menacingly and the tech stumbled back a few steps.

“Not yet,” said the scientist through bared teeth. Her tendrils whirled around the equipment with ambidextrous competence. So engrossed was each appendage that Ock was actually standing on the floor with support from her own two legs. She could only be pried away from her precious collider, knew Peter, by her fingernails and the grasping mouth of every tentacle.

“What’s with Medusa?” said Spider-Man.

“Stark’s background checks on his employees are evidently not all that thorough,” Peter whispered back with a roll of his eyes. “She’s two-timing him with Wilson Fisk.”

“Wilson Fisk, the industrialist?”

“More like Wilson Fisk, the Kingpin.”

Evidently the kid had heard this moniker before, some bread crumb dropped from the mouths of street thugs over time, because the white eyes of his mask narrowed on Octavius. “Some guy called
the Kingpin has been rounding up the last Chitari hybrid tech on the streets. I didn’t know it was Fisk.”

“He’ll have every criminal in this city under his thumb if he gets the chance,” Peter told him. He did not say: And one of him has killed one of us.

As if he’d been summoned, the doorway darkened as though thrown into a solar eclipse. A massive frame edged through the entrance and loomed over every suddenly fearful face in the control room. Only Octavius seemed unaffected by Kingpin’s menacing presence as she continued to work intently.

His bulk seemed too huge, too out of place for this universe. Beside Peter, Spider-Man hissed an intake of breath. “He’s so big. I didn’t think he was so big.”

After a strained stretch of silence Kingpin said with deadly calm, “What is happening?”

Techs shrank away. Ock responded: “What’s happening is the timeline is moving up—”

Another scientist burst into the room with reading glasses flying about his neck. “He’s gone! The guinea pig is gone!”

“Guinea pig?” grumbled Peter.

“Vess is down! There’s no sign of the subject! He’s probably halfway across the city by now!”

Several techs began murmuring fearfully among themselves. “If the Avengers weren’t coming before, they are now,” Peter heard one say to their nodding companion. “We have to get the hell out of here.” They began edging toward the door, wary eyes on the enormous industrialist. He made no motion to stop them from clearing out of the room. His eyes were fixed on Octavius’s back.

“Trial two,” she said without looking at him. “Right now.”

Her words sounded strangely exhilarated, excited by the prospect of action.

“Have you fixed the issues?” Fisk rumbled in his rockslide voice.

Octavius hardly acknowledged the question. “Stark won’t destroy this place; it represents too much work, so much brilliance…he’ll keep it, and he’ll need me to run it,” she said feverishly. “This is not the end!”

Her collider was the ship and she intended to go down with it. Peter glimpsed the mania she had suppressed so well underneath batty intellect and scientific enthusiasm. In the end mad scientists were birds of a feather. He had a bad feeling about this.

“What is she going to do?” Spider-Man whispered to him in alarm.

She was going to reach into a dimension she had no right to and pluck from it the wife and child of Wilson Fisk. Like fruit off a tree branch. Peter realized with a sick stomach it did not matter that Spider-Man hadn’t toppled that first domino in this universe.

He’d assumed that Spider-Man was the connective element in each instance, but he’d been wrong. Spider-Man was incidental. In every universe where the wife and son of Wilson Fisk had died,
they’d been the victims of Wilson Fisk.

The industrialist faced away from their hiding place but Peter could well imagine the warring indecision playing across that granite face.

Finally Kingpin said, “Do it.”

Peter put a hand up to punch out the grate.

Spider-Man buzzed, “Now what are you doing?” even as he scooted out of the way.

“They can’t do this,” said Peter, and he slammed a fist through the grate. It shot out like a cannon and he dropped to the floor, rising to the shocked stares of the few people left in the room. From the ground Kingpin loomed even larger. Peter was fleetingly reminded of how the Peter Parker in the last universe had died.

Octavius looked outraged. A second later Spider-Man followed him down to the linoleum. One of the remaining scientists dropped his computer in surprise.

Nothing in Miles’s universe had suggested even the remote possibility of reasoning with Fisk but Peter tried it now. “Don’t do it,” he said. “It won’t work—not for long.”

Octavius rose like a deity upon her tentacles. “You should have run when you had the chance.” Eager tendrils writhed in midair. Peter ignored her.

“I know what you’re trying to do,” he said, locking his gaze with Kingpin. “Bring back your wife and son, right? You’ve tried it before. It doesn’t work. You can’t just rip them out of their universe like this!”

“Who is this?” rumbled Fisk without taking his eyes off Peter.

Before Ock could answer Peter said, “I’m Trial One. She snatched me from a dimensional rift as I was heading home from another universe. And the technology isn’t ready!” he shouted at Octavius. “She hasn’t perfected how to keep transdimensional atoms here! Vanessa and Richard—” and here Kingpin’s eyes widened at the name of his wife and son—“won’t be stable. Before long, they will start to glitch.”

“Don’t listen to him!” Octavius retreated protectively to her control panel and activated the particle accelerator.

Every head swiveled to the viewscreen upon hearing the units lumber into motion. A low moan emanated from the machine, as if deriving from deep within the earth itself. No wonder this place had to be hidden underground where the noise could be written off as passing subway trains. Fierce light shone from the two mouths of the collider, aimed at each other like gladiators in an arena; he heard the hair-raising hum of the many superconductors channeling energy in concert.

Kingpin made no move to stop her. He watched in fascination as the colors began to swirl like a desert storm.

“You’ll kill them all over again!” snapped Peter.

Fisk turned slowly, a mountain shifting on its foundation.
“I can fight the instability for a while, but if my body is unstable, theirs will be even worse—their atoms will split apart over and over and it will hurt, it will hurt so bad that by the end, they won’t be able to do anything more than cry on the floor, begging for it to stop, to die—”

“SHUT UP!” roared Kingpin, his face twisted horribly. For a moment Peter thought the man would cave in his rib cage in this dimension, too. “I never—never killed them…”

Yes, he had. But Peter knew better than to push it just then. “If you do this now, you will.”

“I can fix the splitting!” Octavius insisted wildly.

“It’ll be too late for them,” said Peter.

“Then I’ll get more!”

Kingpin looked at her with small dark eyes. Peter was aghast. More? More Vanessas and more Richards, as many as she needed?

“Is that how little you love them, Fisk? Can you just kill them over and over until you get it right?” he asked incredulously. “Look at what you’re doing. My God, she’s talking like they’re ice cream cones.”

Behind him he was aware of Spider-Man tensing for action.

Peter took a breath and lowered his defenses against the atomic misfiring. Almost at once his hand began to fracture into shapes and colors and he held it up against the now-frozen Fisk. “Do you see?” he said, and slammed up the bulwarks once more. With one last spasm his hand resettled into this reality.

Kingpin’s indecision gave way to resolution.

“Stop the trial,” he said to Octavius.

Her cascade of frizzy hair shook in her agitation. “Don’t listen to him! You can’t—”

Kingpin roared. “I SAID STOP!”

He lurched forward and slapped a hand the size of a cement block down on the Emergency Stop panel. Octavius’s howl of rage was drowned out by a horrible screech.

“NO! What have you done?!” she screamed at him.

The machine was not designed to brake like a car. An emergency stop was to be used only in the most dire circumstance, not to power it down; Peter’s eyes were jerked to the collider’s rotating points, which staggered and tripped. Superconductors began to pop off the machine like buttons.

Oh my God…

If it had stopped there it might have been salvageable, but it didn’t. Everyone stared in growing horror as small explosions began to ripple down the length of the machine, escalating in speed and intensity.
Then the collider burst apart.

The viewscreen protected them from flying parts but they hit the glass with such speed a spiderweb of cracks bloomed across the bay. In a weird way they stood united in shock as the particle accelerator, and Peter’s only way home, dismantled itself systematically into irreperable pieces.

When at last it had stopped, everyone stared at the destruction with saucer-wide eyes. Peter forgot to breathe for so long that the next breath his chest forced came as a surprise.

It was gone. He was never going home.

Kingpin was frozen to the spot. Abhorrent as his dream had been, it had represented his last hope.

The first one to give way was Olivia Octavius. Her chest heaved as she was raised higher than ever on her tentacles, for a moment bearing down with as much terrifying menace as Kingpin himself.

“You bastard,” she breathed, “you destroyed everything. All my work…You killed it! You BASTARD!”

And she attacked Fisk in a raging storm of tentacles, every one of them aimed at the man’s eyes and throat and heart, every strike designed to end the life of the man who, not a minute before, had been her benefactor. Initially surprised, he raised his arms to fend them off. Spider-Man started forward to do something…but the tentacles whirled in such a frenzy that there was little opening before Fisk seized one tendril trying to wrap its way around his throat.

He yanked the tentacle, dragging Octavius with it, still screaming, and slammed his fist in her chest, anything to make the strikes stop—

There was a horrible sound. Peter’s first thought was to wonder if that had been what it sounded like to Miles, when that Kingpin had brought down his hands in all their power upon Peter Parker’s ribs.

“Oh God,” mumbled Spider-Man, backing away from the sight of Olivia Octavius laying motionless on the floor, her ribcage caved in like a mouth of broken teeth.

Her tentacles took longer to die. One by one, they fell limp upon the floor. Kingpin himself seemed not to immediately realize what he’d done. He just stood, staring down at Octavius’s body. What few scientists were left fled the room in a panic, save for one who didn’t seem sure how to edge around the massive industrialist to escape into the hallway.

Peter might have stood there for ages, too. Vaguely he became aware of Spider-Man tugging his arm.

Fisk looked up at them. Seeing Spider-Man raise his wrist to pin him with a web, he drew out a gun and grabbed the remaining scientist, cocking the Glock at her head. The woman started to cry and Spider-Man’s hand stalled. The big man edged out of the control room, into the hallway, and they heard him throw the woman aside and felt the earth shake as he ran.

“We have to go,” said Spider-Man. “We need to get out.”

Peter couldn’t stay in that room a moment longer with the horror that had been Olivia Octavius. He followed Spider-Man out of the bay area, with one last look at where the collider had been. Fisk was
nowhere in sight. The woman he’d thrown aside scrambled up and disappeared with a flash of her lab coat, losing a shoe in her haste.

They followed her out.

No one stopped them. No one cared. They didn’t even have to go down the tunnels. They followed the retreating tech up to the main lab and into the night, where snow was falling.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

managed to get this one up a little early!

I probably should have made this PSA earlier but just for reference, 'Peter' will always refer to Peter B unless suggested otherwise in context (which I will try to make clear) as this fic is from his perspective and that's how he'd think of himself :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The kid led them past a park Peter dimly recognized in his funk. In this universe, however, the swings still had both hinges attached and the graffiti on the benches was less spectacularly creative. Night had fallen and snow drifted to the ground with a hush that dampened the ever-present noises of traffic congestion. He trudged through mounds of dirtying snow with little thought to where he was going. Who cared where he went now?

Spider-Man stopped at a bench at the edge of the park. “Wait here,” he said, “I stowed some emergency clothes in an alley nearby. I’ll be right back.”

Not caring that it was an obvious excuse for the kid to relay the night’s events to Stark out of earshot, Peter accepted the opportunity to sit down and parked himself on the bench. “Take your time,” he said. “Give a thorough report.”

Expression unreadable behind the mask, Spider-Man jogged off down a side street. Peter had once hidden his own stashes of clothing around New York’s rooftops and alleys. Sometimes he forgot about them until coming across the piles months or years later. MJ used to tease him for his lack of fashion sense; all his decent clothes had been selected by her expert eye and sat safely in the closet at home. What he squirreled away on rooftops were usually sweatshirts and jeans with holes in the knees.

One time he’d had to recover a set of clothing only to remember he’d hidden them during a brief stage of fascination with football that had seen him emerge from the alley wearing a Brett Favre Green Bay jersey well after he’d gone over to the Vikings, earning snickers from passerby.

Numbly, he wondered what MJ was doing now. Time passed relatively between dimensions. Even though he could be said to have come from the future of his own timeline, he’d been gone from his universe exactly as long as he’d lingered in Miles’s, and now here. Did anyone miss him? Did she know he was gone? If he had gotten back and picked up his phone to see no missed messages, would he have been disappointed or relieved? The answer to that might have changed over the last few days.

Well, it didn’t matter now. The collider lay in pieces and the only person who could have rebuilt it lay in pieces too. He was no worse off now than he’d been before.

Unbidden, the memory of a conversation floated to the surface of his thoughts…

Noir had been the only one to ask, perhaps because next to Peter B, he was the most experienced
and came from a dimension where Nazis still lurked in the shadows and spies on both sides chose cyanide pills over capture.

“What will you do?” he’d asked in a quiet moment, after Peter had made the call for all of them. For some reason they accepted him as the de facto leader of the little group. “Will you wait?”

Peter had hesitated before responding, but Noir’s sympathy was refreshingly countered by practicality of the nature only a Great Depression and world war could produce. “Depends,” he said as matter-of-factly as possible, “but probably not. Don’t tell the others.”

Noir nodded. He’d experienced the glitching himself, after all, and knew what kind of end that would be. No self-respecting crimefighter wanted their obituary to include the word “disintegrated.” In Peter’s place Noir would have done the same.

Not far away, the others were making their fond farewells to Aunt May, whose smile stood stalwart against unshed tears. She did not know he intended to stay behind or he had no doubt she would have marched to the particle accelerator herself with rocket launcher in hand. It did not matter that he wasn’t her Peter. Not her child.

The notion of taking his own life was anathema to Peter and would have made old Rabbi Abraham weep to hear, but worse still was the thought of curling up in a corner like an old dog, waiting to die as his atoms stretched past their breaking point. He’d been in the business long enough to get over his own nobility.

He’d make it fast, and as painless as possible.

But that had been before he’d given up giving up.

After a minute the kid trotted back barefaced across the street, skidding on patches of forming ice and tucking away his mask and, surreptitiously, his phone. “This thing always gives me hood-head. My hair just kind of flattens out,” he complained as the mask went into his backpack.

He was trying to make Peter feel better, which was appreciated and didn’t work in the least.

“Listen, ah,” the teenager tried again, standing awkwardly before him, “I’m really sorry about the collider.”

“Wasn’t your fault,” mumbled Peter in an unwitting echo of the kid’s disappointment back at the Expo, when he’d thought for a moment he was looking at Ben Parker. “Sorry about back there. Things got…I wasn’t expecting that.”

Death wasn’t a new concept to any Parker in any universe but it was one they actively sought to prevent. Octavius might have been a batshit-crazy mad scientist whose work barreled over human lives in her pursuit of scientific frontiers, but given the chance, he would have saved her. For all the good it ever did him.

“I know. You just wanted it to stop. It happened so fast. Did…that happen in the last universe?”

“Not exactly. Though it wasn’t any prettier.” Same end, different means.
“Maybe—maybe there’s another way to get you home,” the kid continued encouragingly, “something else we can try…”

Tony Stark was smart, but not smart enough to do in a few days what had taken Ock over a decade. Peter stood up tiredly and brushed flakes of snow off his trousers.

They set off walking again. “Where are we going?” asked Peter.

“Home, for now,” said the kid. “Ned—my friend—was gonna grab a pizza. You met him at the convention. My Aunt May’s out visiting her cousin.”

Pizza sounded like just the thing. It usually did. Peter noted the kid didn’t try to lead him to any of the subway entrances. Probably he figured the older man would prefer the walk, cold as it was. He was right.

Privately Peter was glad May was not at home; he could only take so much heartache. At this point it would be better to disengage. He’d already seen Ned, so that particular blow he’d had time to absorb.

A pack of teenagers loped nearby, laughing and sharing chips out of a bag. Otherwise the street was lightly populated. Peter knew he should be the first to acknowledge the elephant in the room but he felt very tired and not at all eager to launch into an explanation of the past days’ events.

Spasms briefly splintered his torso and he put a hand to his ribs.

“We’re going to meet Mr. Stark in the morning,” the kid said firmly, catching sight of it. “I mean, crazy tech stuff like this is kind of his specialty. Maybe he knows how to get you home. Plus…there are other people who could help.”

“Avengers, I assume?” Converses were no shoes for the snow. Peter felt the canvas starting to soak through. With his luck he’d end up with a cold.

The kid smiled. “Yeah. And some of them know a thing or two about quantum theory.”

Four or five or fifty things would be better. “OK.” He didn’t really feel like adding Avengers to his headache, but could he really turn down even the smallest chance they could help? Every once in a while they pulled a rabbit out of a hat without killing the rabbit.

They’d jaywalked several more blocks with typical New Yorker abandon before the kid asked, “What’s your name?” In the words he heard many more questions.

Peter glanced sideways, wondering if he should go for the sucker punch.

The teenager shook his head. White flecks of snow fell gently down to stick to his hair. “OK, spit it out. What aren’t you telling me? Come on…you’re like me, I can feel it, and…” he looked at Peter, “you—you look so much like Uncle Ben…”

In his face dwindled a grieving boy’s last hope: that in some dimension, the man who’d raised him still lived, that the spider had found its way to a man so stalwart, so good, that it seemed only natural he should become a hero…

Peter said to him gently, “I’m not Ben Parker. Or your dad. But,” he sighed, “I guess…we do take
after them.”

He saw the kid mouth "We…” and was almost fascinated by how the color drained from his face. The boy stopped dead on the sidewalk and Peter paused after a few feet, watching him. Falling snow partly obscured his face and deadened the world around them.

From somewhere close by came the metallic screech of a shopkeeper pulling down the grate of his bodega for the evening. It was startlingly loud in the muffled street. The shopkeeper trudged around the corner, going home, a his back a smudge of navy jacket against the late evening.

Peter stood with hands in his pockets, waiting. The kid’s eyes were wide as saucers.

“No,” said the kid. “No way. You’re…me?”

“I’m older, so you are me. I,” declared Peter, gesturing to himself, “have dibs.”

For some reason the teenager’s shock lightened Peter’s mood and he couldn’t stifle a grin. Maybe the elephant in the room was a bit of a party animal.

The kid found his voice. “Prove it.”

Peter made a face. “Seriously? C’mon.”

“Do it. You can’t just like, show up like John Connor or something and tell me you’re me!” The poor kid sounded slightly hysterical.

“No, what I said was that you’re me, and it was Kyle Connor who traveled in time. Or he did it first anyway, I haven’t seen the last few.” Peter flapped a hand between them. “Lemme make this clear, I’m not future you. I’m future me. From my dimension. Welcome to the club.”

“You have an ID?” demanded the other Peter.

“What?” Peter rolled his eyes. “No. I was kidnapped from my apartment, kid, I don’t have my wallet.” He grimaced at the teenager’s mingled defiance and wonder. “Fine. Did you have a battery-operated talking Elmo when you were a kid?”

This was evidently not the proof the teenager had in mind. “Um, yeah? Me and half the kids in New York.”

“And did Aunt May tell you it broke one day?”

The kid frowned. “Uh, yeah, she said it wore out or something…”

“Well, I hate to ruin Santa Claus for you, but that Elmo didn’t break. It just ran out of batteries. You played it all the friggin’ time and it drove her crazy so she told you Elmo went back to Sesame Street.”

Maybe this was a revelation too far, because the kid stood gobsmacked. “Holy shit.” He brought his hands to his head. “Holy shit!”

*Man, this one’s a pottymouth, thought Peter.*
“You really are me! Aunt May is so busted!”

“Yeah, well, you didn’t hear it from me.”

“This is so wild!” the kid drew forward, now looking the older Peter up and down and circling around him in the snow. “You’re taller than I thought I’d be. Do you have a tattoo? I thought about getting a tattoo someday. How old are you? When did we start getting gray hair? Ned is not going to believe this.”

Peter raised his eyebrows. “Uh, were you planning on telling him?”

“OK, let’s take it from the top. I was the one and only Spider-Man for twenty years, until one day, I’m minding my own business, eating a slice from Sunnyside Pizza and I’m friggin’ hijacked through a cosmic portal and shot into another universe with like five other Spider-Things because Ock’s crazy ass is consistent across dimensions. So she’s built this collider, right, to bring back Kingpin’s family from another dimension ‘cause he’s in denial except the accelerator is even jankier in that universe so she’s gonna end up opening a black hole that will swallow New York like a sardine so we go to shut the collider down, typical Spider-Man stuff, you know how it goes, and we get the dimensional rift open and I’m sailing home when your Octavius triggers her collider at the same time and snatches me outta mid-flight and I land on my butt in Woodside. Then I do a little detective work and see Ock needs the megaconductor to operate her collider on the sly, so I go to nab it and who shows up? Kingpin’s little cronies! But they’re stealing it FOR Ock because they’re all in league because of course they’re all in league, they’re so unimaginative. You don’t know this yet, but at one point you start a Bad Guy Bingo sheet because you see every trope like fifty times over and no matter how often you rearrange the sheet you get Bingo literally every time. Anyway, I get nabbed but they bust me outta jail before I can bust me outta jail and that’s where you came in.”

He drew breath and turned back to his audience. Ned dropped his pizza slice.

“Holy shit,” he breathed.

Wide-eyed, the younger Peter Parker repeated: “‘Spider-Things?’”

Peter waved his own slice in the air as he stood before the two seated teenagers like a pontificating Roman senator. “Well, in every dimension there’s a spider, and in every dimension that spider wants a snack, I guess.” He sat down in a chair and pretended not to hear it squeak beneath his weight. “It just hasn’t been us every time.” Once it’d been pork.

At his request Ned had picked up a classic margherita pizza which contained no pepperoni. Apart from keeping kosher, even the sight of pork product nauseated Peter now that a pig had numbered among his comrades-in-arms.

“Kingping—”

“Kingpin.”

“Right…what did he want the collider for again?”

Peter hesitated. “His wife and kid died.”
The younger Spider-Man chewed on this, then wiped the grease off on a napkin. They were sitting in the kid’s living room with the news turned on low volume. So far, neither of the poker-faced anchors had mentioned an incident at Stark Industries. “But…if he’d gotten them from another universe, they wouldn’t really have been his family.”

Would the kid have felt the same if the Peter who’d tumbled into this world had, in fact, turned out to be his uncle Ben Parker from a dimension in which the carjacker chose another target? It was one thing to theorize, another to have the flesh-and-blood replacement of a lost loved one standing before you. Peter chose not to address this.

“He’s selfish,” he said instead, “and that means he’ll blame everyone but himself—including you. Be careful.”

Not once could the Kingpin bring himself to face the reality that it had been his greed and villainy which had put his wife’s key into the ignition, every time. His grief had frozen somewhere in a hellish limbo between denial and bargaining. Grief, however, was not an apology. It was not redemption.

Peter was sad for the wife and son. There seemed no universe in which they’d been saved; their fates were as sealed as Ben Parker’s.

He looked at his alternate self and was surprised to see his feelings reflected on the boy’s face. “I don’t know Kingpin, but I know what kind of man he is,” the kid murmured. Beside him, Ned was uncharacteristically quiet. “He’s the kind who convinces himself he does everything for his family, when he really just…did you ever know Adrian Toomes?”

“Yeah,” said Peter heavily.

His explanation had conveniently glossed over what had become of the Peter Parker in Miles’s universe, though he expected that he’d ask at some point. Peter didn’t know whether this Spider-Man was experienced enough yet to crowd that kind of thing out of his headspace. He didn’t want to psych the kid out.

Ned finished his slice and cleared his throat. “So, Peter—”

“What?” they said together, then looked at each other.

“This is going to get confusing really fast,” said Ned.

“Okay, okay.” The older Peter held up his hands. “I get to be Peter. You’re Parker,” he told his teenaged self.

Parker protested. “How come you get the first name?”

“‘Cause I’m Patient Zero!” Peter jabbed a thumb into his own chest. “As far as I know.” Which, come to think of it, was perhaps not something to boast about. Ned snickered.

“Okay, Peter,” he said with a sly look at Parker, who rolled his eyes, “is this guy like your nemesis or something? Or was it that Octavius person?”

“What? No. I don’t have a nemesis. I have enemies. ‘Nemesis’ is just an enemy who got promoted.
Never give ‘em the satisfaction.”

Both teenagers nodded sagely at this advice. In their faces was reflected some of the veneration he’d seen from Miles, which he didn’t know how to feel about.

Some time later Ned had drifted off into a doze, head tipped back on the couch and snoring softly. School was still on winter break and wouldn’t resume for another week so, with Aunt May’s permission, Ned was staying over till May returned from her visit.

Peter felt alternately exhausted and strangely wired. His spider-sense had not ceased its humming since he’d crash-landed in Woodside. Boxes of pizza were piled on the coffee table, behind which the television droned gently. Parker removed the boxes to the recycling and returned from the kitchen with Peter’s favorite Coke.

“This must be pretty weird, like going back in a time machine,” Parker commented as he cracked open his own can. “I mean, even though you’re from a whole other dimension.”

“A little.”

“In a way, though, seems like pretty typical Avengers stuff. We’re like magnets for crap like this.”

Peter yawned. “That’s right, you’re an Avenger.”

“What—are you?” said the kid blankly.

“Naw,” said Peter dryly. “Cramps my style.” For a moment he knew he must have worn his feelings plain on his face, because Parker paused as he reached for a last slice.

“Where are they in your universe?” he said curiously.

Peter barked a laugh. Between them, Ned stirred and mumbled something in his sleep about fifth period. “There’s about a thousand answers to that,” said Peter. “There are still some Avengers, yeah. I’m not a member of the club.”

“Why?”

A familiar note in the kid’s question made Peter feel nostalgic, a little sad and indescribably tired. “I guess there was a moment when I wanted to be. Mostly because I was broke and figured they made a better paycheck.”

He paused and saw the kid listening intently.

Ordinarily he wouldn’t have answered this. He’d gotten the question countless times from fans and foes and heroes alike, and there was never a response he could give that was streamlined enough to offer in a soundbite.

“Oh, I don’t know. When I asked, they said no, and when they asked, I said no. It just never worked out.” He laughed without humor. “Actually, we clashed at times. Philosophical differences.”

One of those differences had been his secret identity, which had always served as a wedge between himself and those who wore their heroism openly. Peter had never bared his face to the Avengers, and they’d resented it. In fact he’d been in more than one skirmish with an Avenger over the years,
usually the result of misunderstanding and lousy circumstance.

Then there had been the Accords.

Parker looked a little crestfallen. Peter remembered the way he’d felt about the other heroes he’d periodically shared peacekeeping duties with in New York City. They were moments of frustration, amusement and occasional admiration, like a romance that could have been and never was.

Not to mention he’d simply never been good at fitting in. Judging by his limited observation of the universe he’d landed in, this Parker fared little better when it came to clique-y popularity. It would be unfair to stomp all over the common ground he’d managed to stake out with the Avengers, who appeared to exist in a timeline where they’d repaired much more neatly.

“Besides,” he went on gently, “I always balked at dropping Queens to go play Space Invaders.”

“Yeah,” said Parker, relaxing with a small smile. He picked up the remote and began flipping channels. “I still patrol and stuff.”

Peter smiled. “Good.”

Parker looked up. “Do you?”

“Sure. Gotta punch in the hours.” Patrol around the city made up the majority of his work, now. The rest of the universe was so whackadoodle it sometimes didn’t seem to matter whether or not he handled every catastrophe himself, or some other plucky individuals got together and made a hash of it. He didn’t tell Parker that.

“Mr. Stark will be able to help you,” Parker said confidently.

Peter’s instinct was to say no.

“Does he know who you are?” he asked instead.

Parker hesitated. “He does, yeah.”

“Anyone else?”

“Um, Doctor Strange. No, he’s alright!” Parker added hastily as Peter groaned aloud. “He won’t say. He’s not exactly an Avenger anyway, he kind of does his own thing.”

“It’s a big universe, bud, but a small world when it comes to superheroes,” sighed Peter. “Do you even have a secret identity anymore?”

“Yes,” said Parker defiantly. “None of the other Avengers know.”

Peter scratched behind his ear. “I’m not going to sugarcoat it, kid—that’s going to be a problem one day.”

Parker looked down at his hands, resting on his lap. “What about you?”

Peter didn’t want to answer that, even to his younger self. Maybe especially not to his younger self. It was like one of those time-capsule things in reverse. How did you explain to a younger, more
hopeful you how your marriage, your life fell apart? It was impossible to maintain secrecy without alienating the people you cared about. In this universe that seemed to include the Avengers, and it was almost painful to know what Parker was going to experience.

Or maybe not. There were parallels and there were divergences. Who was he to say this would stay a parallel?

Anyway, he didn’t have much of a choice.

“Okay, we’ll go meet Mr. Stark,” he said with severe misgivings. “Can I nap on your couch?”

Chapter End Notes

thanks for all the lovely comments, as ever each one is appreciated :) I love hearing your thoughts!

(by the way, I wrote this before the new Spider-Man: Far from Home trailer came out and couldn't help but laugh when Fury showed up. MCU Peter's identity seems to be an open secret lmao)
“You got a razor anywhere?” called Peter, scratching at his stubble in the bathroom mirror. Gray shadow had burglarized most of his jaw.

From the kitchen, amid clanking sounds of breakfast and chatter from the television, Parker hollered, “Should have some extras in my drawer. Top left, brown dresser.”

Morning light filtered through the blinds and did more for Peter’s mood than anything else had yet managed. He wandered into Parker’s room with a spare toothbrush and absently scrubbed his molars while flicking open the drawer. Parker's room was nearly identical to his own as a teenager, right down to the dumpster tech and Star Wars posters. After asking about the old house he'd learned they’d had to sell it after Ben's death.

As he’d feared, the razors were pretty cheap. Parker’s baby face didn’t require much.

He selected one and paused before shutting the drawer. An envelope bearing the venerable seal of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Parker’s name sat in the drawer, opened. Its return address indicated the school’s admissions office and he knew he was looking at an early response to the kid’s college application.

Well, it wasn’t a federal crime to look—he was Peter Parker, too. He took the envelope out and opened the letter with one hand.

Dear Peter,

On behalf of the Admissions Committee, it is my pleasure to offer you admission to the MIT class of 2023. You were identified as one of the most talented and promising students in one of MIT’s most competitive applicant pools ever...

Beneath that envelope sat one from Empire State, containing an acceptance letter of equal enthusiasm; both enclosed full-ride scholarship offers.

Peter knew immediately Parker’s Aunt May could not be aware of these or they would have been pinned to the refrigerator and possibly framed. When his own acceptance letters with their identical scholarship offers had arrived, his aunt had been so proud she’d practically marched down the hall to inform all their neighbors, dragging an incredibly embarrassed-yet-pleased nephew behind her.

Parker came into the room smelling like bacon. “You find the razors?” he asked, and stopped when Peter held up the letters inquiringly.

“Congratulations,” Peter drawled around a mouthful of toothpaste, smiling wryly. “You’ve got your pick of the litter.” He waggled the razor and replaced the letters in their envelopes, tucking them meaningfully back in the drawer. “When were you planning on telling your aunt?”

Parker’s mouth opened and closed as Peter walked past him to spit in the bathroom sink and take out shaving cream from the medicine cabinet. “Well, um, you know how much she loves surprises…”
Peter agreed, “She does. So go ahead and surprise her.”

He slathered on the cream and began delicately drawing the cheap razor down his face, hoping he wouldn’t show up to Stark Tower looking like it’d been his first time shaving. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Parker lean against the bathroom door frame.

“Did you go to college?” the kid asked hesitatingly.

This was a warning sign. “Uh-huh,” said Peter, rinsing the blade, “I picked Empire State. Close to home, and they’re just as good as MIT.”

“And you graduated? Even with—” Parker waved his hand around— “…all this?”

“Yes, I graduated with ‘all this,’ and then I graduated graduate school. I did a lot of graduating.” He slanted a look at Parker. “Why? Are you thinking of not doing a lot of graduating? Or any?”

Defensively, Parker crossed his arms and muttered, “Come on, can you blame me?”

Peter shook his head at his reflection. “No. I can’t. It’s hard and it will get harder.”

“Is it worth it?”

There was a strange look in Parker’s eyes and Peter was suddenly reminded of talking to Uncle Ben like this in his youth, leaning on the door frame and watching as the man shaved, peppering him with morning conversation. It’d become kind of a ritual.

Why were all these echoes returning now, after so many years? Ben had been dead for decades.

Peter flicked foam off the razor and drew it down his other cheek. “You will be broke and beat and stressed but yes, it’s worth it. I can’t tell you how often I’ve had to put those degrees to work, because you know what? Mad scientists have degrees too.”

Clearly uncomfortable with the topic, Parker joked: “They must not go mad until they graduate.”

“Listen,” said Peter. He turned to face Parker, serious-faced despite half of it still being lathered with shaving cream. “I know what you’re thinking. Why put yourself through all this crap if you’re already where you figure on ending up anyway? The Avengers entrance exam doesn’t have any calculus or essays on mid-century American literature.

You’re thinking, ‘I’m smart, I can still learn this stuff on my own time.’ College is your own time. You’ve always wanted this. Don’t let your secret identity become your only identity. Don’t give up.”

Puzzled, Parker asked, “Give up what?”

Peter shrugged. “Everything else you’ve ever wanted.”

Like him. If anything, Parker was just a few years ahead of Peter when it came to abandoning childhood dreams. Much of the indecision Parker was feeling was derived from guilt; how could he possibly spend so much time on himself, with people in constant need of him? How could he justify starting a family, potentially only to put them in jeopardy one day?

Turning back to the mirror, Peter adopted a lighter tone: “Besides, vigilantism doesn’t pay the bills.
You can’t set up a GoFundMe and get the checks written out to ‘Spider-Man.’ Oh, and,” he said as an afterthought, “don’t invest in highly conceptual restaurants. And if you just have to, I mean if someone’s holding a gun to your head, make sure the animals they’re serving are exactly the animals they say they’re serving.”

This served only to totally confuse Parker. “Huh?”

“We going or what?” came Ned’s voice from the living room.

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Peter had seen Stark Tower already, as much a blemish on the skyline as it ever was in Peter’s New York. On the train Parker told him it no longer housed the Avengers, who now lived and trained on a compound upstate.

“Like a cult?” Peter had asked, prompting giggles from Ned and a slightly unwilling grin from Parker.

Peter took a bite out of a danish he’d picked up from a corner vendor. “Did you warn Stark about me?”

Parker didn’t look up from his phone, where he was consulting Google Maps. “I told him, but…he said something about Nigerian princes so I’m not sure he’s convinced. Oh, here it is: Broadway-Lafayette’s our stop. Wait—no, Bleecker Street.”

“You’ve lost all your subway savvy,” Ned told him. “You used to know all the lines before New York became your jungle gym.” Parker rolled his eyes.

Swanky area. At this time the place would be starting to swarm with tourists and sneakerheads lining up for limited-edition kicks. Peter frowned, remembering: “Wait—isn’t the Sanctum Sanctorum around there somewhere?”

“Yes, we’re meeting Mr. Stark there.”

“With Dr. Strange? Is he Stark’s backup or something?” Peter said warily. He wouldn’t be surprised if Stark wanted another impartial Avenger present for the meeting.

“Backup?” said Parker, startled. “Why would he need backup? We thought maybe this stuff fell in his wheelhouse.”

Peter paused, eyes on one of the subway ads crawling across the train car, then said carefully: “Skipping dimensions isn’t like catching the bus. I’ve never heard him talk about any dimensions that didn’t start with ‘Mirror’ or ‘Dark,’ and I don’t come from either of those.”

“Yeah, but he’s worth a shot, right? We’re talking about a guy who can run out to Gdańsk for pierogi any time he wants.”

It was a rational thought, and one that Peter would be lying if he said he hadn’t had already.

His knowledge of Strange’s abilities in that arena were limited. The Dr. Strange he knew—had
known—spoke of other dimensions as something to be guarded against, even feared; they sounded more like alien worlds than corporeal planes. The Dark and Mirror Dimensions, described by the Sorcerer Supreme as “pocket universes,” had seemed like extensions of one reality, like different rooms in the same house.

But opening a portal by magic created another problem. Or, rather, it meant his problem was a different one, one Strange couldn’t solve.

“I don’t think magic’s gonna will fix this,” he muttered, sliding down in his seat. “Can’t we meet in one of Stark’s labs?”

Parker nervously adjusted his ball cap. He’d be walking in barefaced, as it was better to be inconspicuous than walk around Greenwich Village in his Spidey suit. “Ah, no, he thought this would be easier…”

“Meaning he thinks I’m gonna blow up another lab.”

Parker flushed and tugged the cap down lower over his forehead.

By the time they reached Broadway-Lafayette, the commuters heading to work midtown had been replaced by a trendier set of people. Ned led the way to the Bleecker exit and up the stairs, holding his hand up against the bright winter sunlight. “I never get down here,” he commented to Peter and Parker. “Oh, but the new Jordans are out!”

Both he and Parker stared longingly at the sneakers displayed in a shop window, currently the object of several other passing teens’ desire. Peter rolled his eyes. “Okay, mosey on.”

Secretly, though, it made him smile to think Miles would have been similarly enamored of the stylish Jordans. He hoped the kid was doing alright.

Shortly after they were standing before 177a Bleecker Street, a respectable-looking brick establishment in a leafy stretch of the neighborhood. Peter looked around the area, impressed. His coat and threadbare sneakers looked even more drab next to the glossy New Yorkers walking around the trendy area in clouds of expensive perfume.

"So this is where the...magic happens,” said Ned to the groans of both Peters. Nice to know his humor was cheesy across dimensions.

Peter scratched his head. “Geez…how does the Sanctum pay its rent?” A refrigerator box around here would be out of his price range.

“Maybe they pay in gold coins,” said Ned, smirking, “like Harry Potter.”

Parker walked up to the door and rang an elaborate knocker like he wasn’t sure if it was just for decoration. “Um, it’s Peter here,” he said.

The door swung open into a shadowy foyer. When they’d walked inside, they saw no one standing behind it. Peter fought the urge to roll his eyes straight back into his skull at the theatrics. Cute.

A familiar face was waiting for them before the staircase. Dr. Strange stood with his hands clasped together, looking the very picture of the Sorcerer Supreme Peter knew and wearing a look of patient severity. His gray eyes flicked to Peter, bringing up the rear of the little group and trying to act
nonchalant about all this.

“Long time no see?” he asked cryptically.

“Been a while, yeah,” said Peter.

Too fast to react, there was a flash of light. Red ropes snaked around his arms, torso and legs, holding him fast to the floor. Peter recognized the Crimson Bands of Cyttorak but struggled against them out of reflex. There wasn’t much point; these could bind even the Hulk and grew ever more suppressive the more their captive struggled.

“Oh, nice welcome,” he said sarcastically.

Parker was genuinely scandalized. “Mr. Stark!”

Stark emerged from the side and circled Peter even as he addressed the teen. “Kid, what have I told you about bringing home strays from other dimensions and asking to keep them?”

“What are you doing?” Parker demanded, almost moving as though to try and free the man rooted to the floor by the red tethers. Ned’s eyes were wide as saucers, either horrified or elated; Dr. Strange’s were narrowed and suspicious.

Wong strode forward from the other side, golden spells thrown up like shields.

“Your fingerprints don’t match the kid’s,” Stark said to Peter conversationally.

Exasperated, feeling like the Bands were trying to pull him right through the patterned tiled floor, Peter snapped: “Duh. That’s your problem? Why would they match? I’m friggin’ blond in one universe, I’m sorry all the whorls don’t line up.”

“Well gee, you come in and try to steal my property, ruin my keynote speech and get one of my best scientists killed—”

“It’s not my fault your batshit Employee of the Year built a Stargate in your basement—”

“—and now I’m supposed to believe you’re Peter Parker, from a parallel universe,” Stark waved his arm around, “in which you apparently think I’m someone you can steal from?”

He held up a finger and swiveled around to the others gathering close by. “By the way, in my defense I hired Octavius over ten years ago when I was still a bachelor and she had kind of a hot Miss Frizzle thing going on. Her record was stellar.”

“He really is me,” Parker insisted to the two Avengers. “He knew stuff no one else does.”

Stark rolled his eyes. “Everyone hides their Playboys in the same spot, kid.”

“Playboys?” frowned Parker, confused. “No, it was an Elmo.”

Ned spoke up. “He looks exactly like Ben Parker,” he said. Stark looked at him for a moment, then glanced thoughtfully at Peter. Dr. Strange strode forward to look directly in Peter’s eyes, then muttered a few spells and waved his hands around the captive’s head in a complicated pattern, leaving lines of gold light behind in their wake.
After a moment he murmured, “I don’t detect any presence of the Dark Dimension in him.” Slowly, the bright lines he’d sketched faded in the air.

“What, did you think I was a Dark Side clone or something?” Peter asked.

“The exterior is a shell that can deceive the eyes,” said Strange, not yet taking down the Crimson Bands, “hiding the Dark energy within—”

Peter interrupted impatiently. “I once watched you eat three solid bowls of kimchi and chase it down with a lake of soju. Don’t get all metaphysical on me.”

That took Strange aback. Behind him, Wong sniggered loudly. “Karaoke night gets a little wild.”

“Does he still sing ‘Say My Name’ from Destiny’s Child? He always crushed hard on Beyoncé—”

Strange suddenly removed the Bands with a look of disgust. “Maybe you are from the Dark Dimension.”

Freed, Peter primly rubbed at his wrists. The Crimson Bands didn’t hurt, but they gave him a kind of wiggly feeling he shook out of his fingers. Parker drew forward, muttering apologetically.

Stark’s eyes flicked between them, uncharacteristically discomposed. Reluctant belief was little more palatable than the possibility of a spy from the Dark Dimension.


Wong nodded back politely.

He felt them look at him anew, taking in his shabbiness and battered sneakers. Peter tugged at the neckline of his shirt to reveal a sliver of the red-and-blue Spider-Man suit he wore beneath. Parker looked back at the assembly and spread his hands as if to say, “See?”

“Okay, tell me this then,” said Stark, taking a few steps forward. “If you’re Peter Parker and you know us from your own universe, why didn’t you come straight to me when you stumbled into this one? Why go for my megaconductor first?”

There was a note of hurt in his voice.

Peter hesitated and fought the urge to look away. “There wasn’t a lot of time. And Octavius… worked for Alchemax in the last universe, not Stark Industries.”

He could see Stark turning that over in his head. “You thought I was aware of it,” he said finally. “That I was behind it.”

“My bad.”

Stark shook his head angrily. “I’ll say! Why the hell would you think that? Is that something I’d do in your universe?”

“I honestly don’t know,” Peter said tiredly.
Ultron had, after all, been the result of good intentions. So had the Accords. There seemed no inoffensive way to explain that it hadn’t seemed outside the realm of possibility.

Some stories could be read in a glance. Stark was a smart guy. He read in Peter’s wary expression and tense posture and decisions up to this point what had escaped Parker and Ned: that whatever relationship he had to the Stark in his own universe not only wasn’t a mirror of Peter Parker’s in this one, but was altogether of a different nature.

*It wasn’t that different, once,* Peter could have told him.

Something flickered in Stark’s eyes, and he turned away to Strange. “Well, Doc?”

The sorcerer admitted, reluctantly, “There is—”

Suddenly everyone’s attention was drawn to Peter’s arm, which started glitching as if on cue, fracturing into a multitude of colors and shapes. He gritted his teeth against it, grateful it at least hadn’t graduated to full-body spasms yet. Both Stark and Strange started forward, eyes wide with scientific interest.

“Hold it up!” Stark urged.

Peter grimaced at him. The spasms receded after a moment. “Light show over,” he grumbled.

“Woah,” breathed Ned.

“And this happened in the last universe, too?” Strange demanded, circling him, searching for other glitching. Right then Peter knew it was the medical professional asking and not a magician.

“Yes, and faster.” Peter fought the willies that came from being under such close scrutiny.

Stark’s eyebrows raised. Just then he and Strange wore comically identical expressions. “You mean it’s different here? It’s dependent on the technology used?”

This approached the fringes of the matter Peter was afraid of. He said, “Uh huh,” and waited for them to reach the obvious, depressing conclusion.

“Can you open a portal to his dimension?” Parker asked the sorcerer anxiously.

“It’s difficult, though possible…” said Strange slowly, looking at Peter from beneath his brows, “But…”

Peter sighed, his stomach sinking.

“But it won’t save you.” Strange’s tone was almost gentle, apologetic.

The teenagers stared at him, then Peter. “Why not?” they said together.

Peter answered for him. “Because if you can travel between parallel universes with magic, it means being in the wrong dimension isn’t what’s causing my atoms to freak out—or sorcerers couldn’t do it for long either. The theory of inter-dimensional travel isn’t the problem, it’s the flawed technology Ock used to do it.”
Strange nodded. “Even if I opened a portal right now, you’d likely reenter your own dimension...only to die in it anyway.”

Parker and Ned were horrified. Peter examined one thumb, which glitched teasingly. It wasn’t trying to creep back to his own universe; in their confusion, the atoms were trying to scatter with one shot.

Both times, at Fisk’s urging, Ock had rushed the science at the end. In this universe she’d had more time to work and so the aberrations were less frequent, but it was still a death sentence for anyone who couldn’t get back.

He looked up to see something indecipherable come over Stark’s face. It had been a long time since Peter had watched him try to hide his worry.

Too casually, the Avenger put a hand to his chin and turned to the sorcerers. “Out of curiosity, Doc, when were you going to mention you could hop around parallel dimensions?”

Placidly, Wong clasped hands behind his back, saying, “Our concern is this reality. We do not tamper with natural law, we defend it.”

“It’s kind of our motto,” said Strange wryly. Seeing Stark’s obvious dissatisfaction with this explanation, he added with the patronizing calm of someone explaining the obvious: “It’s best to leave the other dimensions alone—or you’ll end up with more Wilson Fisks, people looking to erase their problems in this universe by stealing solutions from another.”

“Okay, so what do we do with Peter?” asked Parker a little desperately, gesturing at his alternate self. Peter saw the kid was genuinely upset, and not because of any particular kinship he felt to the other Spider-Man, but because he was a good kid who didn’t like thinking there was someone he couldn’t help.

Strange’s cloak swirled as he addressed the dimensional interloper. “If you could find a way to stabilize your atoms, I could do the rest. It will require a period of meditation: opening a portal to your universe is possible, but not easy. Without the proper concentration, the consequences could be…dire. How long can you hold off the glitching?”

“A few days, at least...maybe a week.” He hoped. “If I had to.”

Peter frowned at the tile, noting distantly it was of a different design than he remembered, biting the inside of his cheek. He mused out loud, “I’m going to check out Alchemax. Fisk still owns it in this universe, and it’s where Octavius worked in the last one. She might have kept backups of her work in his lab. Actually, knowing Fisk, I’m sure he insisted.”

It could be a long shot, but it was something. Just the prospect of action was energizing. If he could retrieve her research somehow, maybe...maybe Stark could piece together the missing links. Peter already had his own theories about what had gone wrong; Stark was possibly the only one outside of Wakanda with the brainpower and resources to fix Ock’s work.

Speaking of which... “What’s Wakanda up to now, anyway?” he asked.

As he’d expected this disgruntled the billionaire, who was ever competitive in the realm of technological advancement. “Let’s grab the research first, why don’t we?”

Seeing Peter’s smirk, Stark huffed and twirled a finger. “Okay, what are we waiting for? Everyone
Peter almost argued. This was his problem, not theirs; it wasn’t like it had been for Miles, who had been protecting his New York as much as he was the Spider-People who had hurtled into it. They gained nothing by helping him, and he felt certain he could handle this on his own.

Plus, it'd been a long time since he'd teamed up with an Avenger. The team-building exercises he'd engaged in over the past week had been made easier for dealing with other Spider-Things.

Reading his mind, Stark grimaced and waved away all the possible objections. “One: Fisk is a menace and he can’t keep access to blueprints for another collider down the line. If he's there at Alchemax, I'm nabbing him. Two: the two of you need supervision.”

Parker looked indignant.

“Why not the one of me, unsupervised?” said Peter grumpily.

“Because this is our universe, pal. You’re a guest and you forgot to wipe your feet on the mat, so from now on we’re on you like bacteria. Or, here’s a thought: you should kick back here and watch Strange levitate.”

The sorcerer rolled his eyes and strolled off in the direction of his library, cape trailing behind him.

“One: Alchemax might have the same layout I saw before,” Peter grumbled, peeved at having to ask permission to come along on his own damn adventure, “and Two: I’m going anyway.”

“A draw. I can live with that. Off we go. Got your suit on, kid?”

Ned waved goodbye as the two Peter Parkers trooped out behind Iron Man. As the doors closed Peter heard him say to Wong, “Dude, I know where the good karaoke’s at.”

“Oh?” said Wong with great interest.

“Show me how to do a spell and I’ll let you in on the secret.”

Chapter End Notes

thanks for all the comments! Your thoughts are appreciated :)

note: a reviewer correctly brought up the Daredevil Kingpin recently and I have to confess: I've never gotten into the Netflix Marvel shows (sorry) and totally didn't think to look up their take. So he's pretty much Spider-Versey. Sorry!

next chapter: a caper!

(also, I love Ned and hope he's in Endgame)
“It looks so normal,” commented Parker.

Alechmax sat before them, a modern glassy structure squatting incongruously against the snowy Hudson Valley forest, looking very much as it had in Miles’s universe. Pretty ballsy of Fisk to keep shop so close to the Avengers compound.

“I’ve never seen so many Teslas in one place,” added the kid. “For a bunch of scientists working at an evil company, they’re sure environmentally conscious.” He squinted. “That license plate’s from Hawaii. How’d they get that car from Hawaii?”

“How bout this guy?” Peter asked Stark, nodding at an approaching car. “He looks nerdy enough for an all-access pass.”

Stark made a face at the man driving his Chevy Volt down the long drive from the main stretch of road, heading to the parking lot. “I guess. Look at that beard. I guarantee you he brews craft beer in his basement.”

“You passed up the last two, how long we gonna wait?”


Peter sprang from behind a tree and stumbled into the drive, wrist to his forehead like a fainting heroine, and swooned as the Volt screeched to a halt before him. He collapsed on the hood and groaned, then giggled when Parker webbed the man as soon as he exited the car to clear the obstacle.

A minute later the man was napping in the bushes and Stark had donned the stolen white lab coat over his Black Sabbath T-shirt. “This is so tragic,” he complained of the shapeless coverall. “I’ve never made my employees dress like this.”

“Well, not everyone’s got the legs for a miniskirt,” said Peter.

Stark gave him a disparaging look and plucked a pair of glasses from a case in his pocket. As he drew it slowly over the unconscious man’s face it emitted a glinting sort of webby light, mapping the contours of the forehead and brow, down the nose to his collarbone. Fortunately the scientist’s height and build resembled Stark’s own and didn’t require a lot of scanning.

Standing, Stark brushed his knees and said, “Okay, that should do it. The charge on this will last about an hour.”

He tapped a discreet place on the glasses, and Parker made an impressed noise as Stark’s features were overlapped by an incredibly realistic hologram parroting the scientist’s face. Something in the expression was still very Stark.

“Is that the emitter from the B.A.R.F. project?” the teenager asked interestedly.
“Yes, and don’t even think about using it to skip school,” said Stark.

His voice was heavily modified, a tone higher and raspier. Before tapping the scientist’s head nighty-night, the captive had spluttered enough threats for Stark’s tech to record, analyze and extrapolate the man’s voice to emit one that was practically identical. Yet as with his face, the cadence of the words was pure Stark.

Stark looked at the man’s employee badge. “Stuart Halberstadt.” He grimaced as he entered the Volt. “Sandalwood air freshener? This is so undignified,” he said, checking the side view mirror. “A real low point in my career. See you inside.”

Accelerating, he headed down the drive to the Alchemax parking lot. He’d suggested that Peter and Parker stay outside and Peter had suggested Parker and Stark stay outside and Parker had suggested they all go inside, so that’s what they did.

Peter shivered slightly in the snow. As usual he did a few stretches to wake up the hammies and crack his back. Parker watched, then windmilled his arms unconsciously and swung them around.

“How come you’re not just dressed in your suit?” asked Parker.

Peter wore the suit beneath his outer clothing out of habit, but wasn’t going into Alchemax as Spider-Man. “The bad guys have already seen my face. If I show up in a suit alongside another Spidey they’ll put two and two together. Even if they don’t know my name, they’ll figure out to look for a version of me in this dimension.” Peter would get to leave this universe—he hoped—but Parker would get stuck mopping up any mess he left behind.

That was, Peter suspected, also the reason Stark hadn’t invited any other Avengers along for the field trip. At least he did have concern for Parker’s secret identity in this universe.


Never for long, anyway. Peter decided not to mention he was technically wearing a dead man’s suit. Instead he touched his toes and twisted, trying to remember some of those yoga stretches MJ had taught him. They helped his back. He’d always been pretty good at them but never got the hang of controlling his breath right. MJ said it was because he had to stop letting his thoughts bounce around like jumping beans.

“Well, I’d hate for all the knockoff tourist gifts to end up in the landfill. That’s a lot of cheap Halloween costumes to toss,” he said.

“I saw a Spider-Man themed popsicle,” the kid confided. “Did Mr. Stark make your suit too?”

Peter stood and frowned at him. “No…he made yours?”

“Do I look like I know how to sew?”

“I learned. I can double-stitch the crap out of a seam.”

“Well, I can’t,” said Parker defensively, shifting his feet. “I mean, I was gonna try and learn more, but then Mr. Stark showed up and I hadn’t gotten much further than goggles and a hoodie in six months…”
Six months, huh? That explained a few things. They shot a series of webs and swung quietly to the facility’s roof. Peter led the way over to the workman’s entrance and easily broke the lock, lifting it up to reveal the service tunnel beneath.

He’d already informed Stark as to the location of Ock’s lab but warned him he wasn’t sure it’d be in the same place or whether Ock kept a regular office in Alchemax at all. Peter had also given him her password, which again was subject to change. They’d meet at the lab, if it existed, grab everything they could find, and exit through the roof. Iron Man couldn’t sneak in inconspicuously, hence Stark’s disguise, but getting out was easier.

If Kingpin turned up Stark intended to apprehend him on the spot and blast out of there. He also mentioned Fisk Tower as a possible fortress, speaking of the other architectural monolith with some disdain. Neither of them really expected Fisk to run for the hills; he was New York to the bone and had built an empire there, only some of which was visible from the surface.

As usual, it was the glamorous vents for Spider-Man. Vents were for heroes who wouldn’t show their faces and didn’t kick down every door. Parker followed behind.

They scooted along in silence for a minute until Parker whispered to him, voice tinny against the metal sheeting, “I gotta ask. If you’re not an Avenger, how come you know so much about them? I mean,” he went on, stifling a sneeze, “for someone who was never in the club, you know an awful lot about the club.”

Peter didn’t really want to have this conversation, now or ever. “We run into each other at Trader Joe’s.”

“And karaoke?”

“New York’s big, smart ass, but when you get this many ‘enhanced individuals’ running around one city we might as well be breathing each other’s carbon dioxide.”

They paused while some scientists lingered beneath the nearest grate, chatting. Ock’s death had yet to make the rounds, but it would soon. Not even Stark could hush that up forever.

This was the kind of place Peter had expected to work at, once. Midtown High had seemed the auspicious start to a career dedicated to science. In a way, his career was dedicated to science, except it tended to wear capes and monologue and try to take over the world. Maybe he would have even ended up at Stark Industries, or here at Alchemax wearing one of the white lab coats Stark hated, rather than laboring as a poorly-paid research fellow in the physics department at Empire State where they were always trying to strong-arm him into teaching undergraduates. Surely not all of Fisk’s employees started their first day of work at the firing range; he remembered Alchemax recruiting his classmates from the university.

It wasn’t that Peter felt unfulfilled as Spider-Man. Like he’d told Parker, he put his degrees to good and inventive use in far more interesting ways than he might at Alchemax.

It was more that he felt unfulfilled as Peter Parker.

He’d been vaguely aware of this but had been pinning the tail on the wrong donkey for years, something he hadn’t understood ’til he’d met that bright, gawky, decent kid in the last universe and said he loved him and realized with a shock he was even capable of the same love his aunt and uncle had felt for him, their child.
Suddenly Peter got impatient with the whole caper and kicked it into high gear, shimmying in the direction of Ock’s old office. Maybe he’d beat Stark there and they could get this over with.

Soon he spotted it and knew by the blue ball chair it was definitely the late Ock’s lab. It seemed weirdly forlorn and her computer still stood on the desk, waiting for a ghost to type in the password.

Wrong ghost, thought Peter.

He clambered down the weird modern-looking light setup and dropped languidly on the bouncy exercise ball.

“What a weird choice for a supervillain,” said Parker, landing silently after him. “You’d think they’d all have, like, an Iron Throne or something.”

“Well, she probably needed the lumbar support,” Peter said absently, clicking around and bringing up the password prompt.

“Lumbar support?”

He didn’t look up while he rapidly typed the password he’d recalled, hoping it was the same one. The previous incident at Alchemax had somewhat drilled it into his memory. “If her background is the same as ol’ Otto Ock’s from my universe, those adamantium tentacles were fused to her spine in a lab accident years ago.”

“Oh.” Parker’s voice was quiet.

“Damn,” said Peter, shoving away from the desk, “password’s different. Must have been randomly generated. Okay, we’ll just take the computer.” He disconnected it from the tangle of cables and propped it on his shoulder like a boom box. His atoms fritzed for a moment before he wrangled them back into the sheep pen.

“We’re good to go, Mr. Stark,” said Parker quietly, touching a hand to his ear. Peter listened for Stark’s reply in the earbud Iron Man had supplied on their journey to the facility. All he heard was silence.

They looked at each other.

“Mr. Stark?” the kid tried again.

The abbreviated flow of conversation filtered through their earbuds. “—Well, if Monica thinks she can just take over the Christmas party planning again, she’s got another thing coming.” The words were coming from Stark’s borrowed voice, and they were met with sounds of agreement from his audience. “I mean, an escape room? Really?”

Peter sniggered. “He got caught up in the office gossip mill.”

“And you know she dyes her roots,” said a conspiratorial woman’s voice.

“Good genes, my ass,” said Stark. “You don’t find that shade of toffee in the wild.”

“Hey, Just for Men, you’re one to talk,” Peter said into the earpiece.
“Poor Monica,” said Parker.

“Stark, we’ve got the computer. We’ll meet you back at the woods.”

They turned to head back up the vents. “I still can’t get over how normal this place is,” said Parker as Peter shifted the computer on his shoulder, preparatory to leaping. “I mean, they have a cafeteria. They drink lattes. I can’t imagine Thanos drinking a latte. Maybe the Maw.”

Peter stopped. “Thanos?”

“Yeah. Oh! Did you face him too?” the kid said excitedly. “Did he snap you? Man, that was bad. I mean, I wasn’t around, but I heard it was bad.”

“Snap?” Peter asked, slowly, then: “Holy crap. You used the Infinity Stones.” For a moment he rocked on his heels. Then he threw up his free hand before slapping it to his head. “That’s it! That’s why this universe is so freakin’ twitchy!”

“What?”

Reality had changed. Peter strongly suspected they were now in the redo, the second chance, and the reality it had wiped out had not yet faded from the cosmos. Stephen Strange would have putzed around in Earth’s collective memory of the incident because there would otherwise have been a whole lot of PTSD in the streets. He’d had to do the same for Peter’s world—save for the Avengers, lest history repeat itself.

Peter gesticulated to the world at large even as he kept his voice down. “Ever since I landed, my spider-sense has been going haywire. This whole reality is like a computer screen that needs recalibrated. I thought at first it was just that weird intuition that I was in the wrong universe.” He paused in the act of pacing, the kid’s words from a moment before sinking in. “What do you mean, you weren’t around?”

The kid seemed confused. “Well, we got, you know…” He snapped his finger. Peter stared at him. “Unless—weren’t you?”

“No,” Peter said strangely, “I wasn’t.”

He’d died later on.

“Oh. Well, I guess it’s a fifty-fifty chance,” said Parker with a slightly nervous shrug. “You, uh, you think any of this other stuff is important?” He waved his hand around.

More equipment lay scattered about the room, including that deeply freaky chair.

“Not unless you need a new microscope,” said Peter, feeling disconcerted. Maybe the snap was a fifty-fifty chance, but Peter Parkers sure seemed like they generally didn’t have a great life expectancy. He felt like he’d unwittingly gone past his expiration date.

They jumped back into the ventilation shaft and Peter began pushing the cumbersome computer ahead of him.

“Is your spider-sense better than mine?” Parker wondered aloud once they were crawling along
again. “I mean, mine does the same stuff as yours—I think—but I don’t always know what it means.”

“Comes with experience,” grunted Peter. *And independence.* He brushed a normal spider out of the way and continued to push the computer forward. “Maybe lose your suit every once in a while.”

“Huh?”

Peter tried not to inhale a cobweb. “You started relying on Stark’s tech too early. Six months in? You were still figuring out what you could do.”

Parker had told him some of the suit’s modifications, and mentioned he’d even donned the Iron Spider already. From what Peter could tell the kid had a fairly good handle on his own abilities, both superpowered and intellectual, but they lacked refinement. Parker had developed his own web fluid and system to fire it but wouldn’t advance much further if all the support tech he’d developed himself in every other universe was supplied to him in this one by Iron Man.

“It’s a good suit,” said Parker, uncertainly, from behind.

“It’s a training wheel you don’t need.”

Not to mention a debt of gratitude. In all his own history with the Avengers, Peter had never accepted more than he gave. He’d FedExed his own Iron Spider suit back to Stark Industries years before and never bothered to check whether Stark had received it.

But Peter wasn’t in this dimension to stomp around the garden, either. Parallels and divergences. “*Would you play nice?*” he could almost hear MJ and Miles saying in united exasperation. “Listen, it’s good you’ve got help,” he added reluctantly. “Really. Just be careful how much you owe.”

Uncertainly, the kid muttered, “Sure.”

From below them floated the sound of a tech’s uneasy voice. “It’s all this way. It’s all on her computer, like Mr. Fisk ordered…she’s really…dead?”

The Spider-Men stopped dead and stared at each other. A familiar growl answered the tech: “Yes. And she was never here.”

Tombstone came into view, chewing on his toothpick and looking like he was waiting for an excuse to put it through someone’s eye. Peter felt his nose throb and was glad to see a bandage casing the henchman’s own nose bridge. Then a long, metal tail swung into view, heralding its owner, the Scorpion. Evidently the lunatic’s gear had been broken out of the precinct with the rest of him.

“They’re here for the research,” hissed Peter. Fisk wasn’t giving up on that collider. Ock laid the groundwork, but he’d find some other bright-eyed and adamantium-tailed scientist to finish the work. Peter was willing to be he’d already cleared out a space beneath his own tower.

Parker touched his hand to the earpiece. “Mr. Stark,” he said with quiet urgency, “Two of the guys from the convention center are here. Jaws and the Scorpion. Think they’re here for the same reason as us.”

“Jaws?” said Peter.
Parker gestured toward his mouth. “He’s got those sharky teeth, you know?”

“Where are you? Where’s the research?” Stark’s words were lowered and they could hear chatter in the background.

“Back in the vents, just outside the office. Had to take the computer with us,” Parker chewed for a second, glanced at Peter, then breathed: “We gotta take them back into custody.”

Peter stifled a groan. “What? We’re not here to wreck the place! This is an intelligence mission, remember?”

“I can’t just let these guys wander the streets again,” whispered Parker, gesturing animatedly at the two henchmen, who were looming over the Alchemax employee.

“We don’t know where the Prowler is,” Peter pointed out. “If we stick them back in jail now, he could just bust them out again and this would be for nothing.”

“They’ll go to the Raft this time. Not even that Prowler guy can break them out of there right away.”

“And who do you think the police will ask to make sure they get there this go-round? There’s no time to babysit them! If we let them go, you can probably follow them to wherever Fisk is hiding. Tombstone’s his bodyguard; he won’t stay away for long. We’ve gotta be smart about this.”

“And if they hurt someone in the meantime?” Parker demanded. “That’s on us! If we nab them now maybe they’ll flip on Kingpin. We already figured he’s at his tower anyway!”

Peter blew out his breath. “Sorry, kid, but that’s your problem. I didn’t ask to get sucked into this universe but I’m asking, really nicely, pretty please can I get out? I’d stick around but I can’t stick around. I’m kind of on a deadline here and I didn’t pencil in taking out half your rogue’s gallery for you!”

It was bad enough he’d had to deal with them all in his own universe, now he was expected to do it in this one? He wanted to go home.

With his mask on, Parker’s expression was indecipherable. Peter didn’t care. One side of his head glitched, then his jaw. He rubbed at them, wondering if he was imagining it aching worse. After a moment the kid said, “You should take the computer and go. We’ve got this. If there’s a problem, I told you where the compound is.”

Peter shook his head in frustration. “No. Just stick a Tracer on ‘em and track where they go.”

Miles would have listened. So would Gwen, however reluctantly. Though Peter had never thought of himself as much of a team player, he’d assumed the responsibility of leadership within the group of Spider-Things with an instinctive authority he hadn’t analyzed at the time.

Throughout this conversation the third party had remained silent. Probably there was no good way to weigh in without alerting stray ears on his end of the line.

“Mr. Stark?” asked Parker, deliberately not looking at Peter.

Possibly Iron Man hesitated. Or perhaps he had to remove himself to a safe distance, outside the range of eavesdroppers, so he could say, low and firm: “Web ‘em up. On my way.”
“On it,” said Parker.

Peter tried very very hard not to take it personally and it almost worked.

Seeing the kid start to move, he snarled into the crook of his arm. “Fine. Fine! You win. I’ll take Jaws. Make it quick, at least?”

He had to leave the computer there, hanging out in the vent. Crawling around in the ceiling was getting old anyway. They doubled back to the office, where Tombstone and the Scorpion were waiting for the employee to unlock the door with her keycard. She did so nervously and sprang back as soon as the lock unhitched.

Tombstone and Scorpion walked a step inside and stopped. Some martial instinct made every muscle in Tombstone freeze save for his eyes, which tracked the area quickly. The Scorpion drew a little closer, looking around, and rumbled: “Where is the computer?”

The tech peeked inside. “It stays right on that desk—look, there’s the monitor,” she said.

Scorpion tapped the desk with his Xenomorph tail. The sharp point cracked the glass top. “I see the monitor. I don’t see the computer. You were supposed to give us the computer.”

At a loss for words, the tech could only splutter in surprise. Still searching the room, Tombstone drew a Glock from holsters on either side. They weren’t meant for her but the tech stumbled back in fear, turning to scramble away, attracting the attention of the Scorpion as movement might draw a predator’s ire in the wild. He lunged and sank the end of his tail in the glass directly in front of her, cutting her off.

“Going somewhere?” he growled.

“I don’t know where it is!” she cried.

A web took the Scorpion out at the ankles. He crashed forward against the glass wall and left a bloody smear down its side, a bright white tooth tumbling to the carpet. Parker swung out of the ceiling, firing a blast of web that pinned the Scorpion’s tail to the glass. The tech charged out of the room, hollering at the top of her lungs.

Peter was in motion too. He dropped directly on Tombstone, knocking the Glock from one hand and seizing the henchman’s other wrist so that the shot fired straight into the exercise ball chair, which rocketed around whizzing its last breath. Tombstone was strong but Peter was plenty stronger and he pried the gun away while kneeing the man in his stomach. Then he hit the jackass square in his nose bandage and was rewarded with a rare howl of pain.

“Fisk must have you on pretty good health insurance,” Peter taunted.

Tombstone’s eyes intensified at the sight of the shabby man from the convention center who’d reset his nose bridge. He went for another weapon strapped to his side with lightning speed.

Peter made to catch the man’s hand—

Then he seized in midair, paused in motion like an ACME character who hadn’t yet realized they’d run off a cliff, before crashing to the ground in a fit of colors and shapes. The attack was so swift and
sudden it distracted him from the sound of the Glock going off and when his shoulder erupted in fire, it was indistinguishable from the rest of the frenzy.

He struggled to slam up his defenses again. All sound was drowned out by the static in his head and he heard snatches of noise and conversation from a dozen different universes. When at last he managed to open his eyes and saw the blood staining the linoleum he wasn’t sure at first whose it was. Then he looked into the barrels of two matching Glocks.

These were soon joined by the sounds of more than a dozen other weapons being cocked. Several scientists had crowded into the office, each holding up a blaster that Fisk was almost certainly intending to sell to some Third-World dictator and pointing it directly at him and Parker, who had just managed to web up the Scorpion before getting distracted by Peter’s attack.

Now, one bullet—even two—Peter could handle. Fifteen weapons presented a stickier challenge.

Speaking of sticky—he clasped a hand to his shoulder, from which blood streamed in small rivulets. He’d had such injuries before. Usually MJ patched them up—she was no stranger to a double-stitch herself—and he’d wake up the next morning to find the wound nearly healed.

Which required him to live long enough to wake up the next morning.

Annoyed as he was at Parker and Stark for going ahead with this, he felt a little bad for screwing it up.

“Where is the computer?” demanded one of the scientists, and Peter was outraged to see it was the woman they’d saved from the Scorpion’s anger.

“You are so ungrateful,” he told her indignantly.

She squared her laser rifle’s sight between his eyes. Evidently she wasn’t happy about getting blamed for the theft. “Where. Is. It?”

“THERE THEY ARE!” roared someone from the hallway.

The speaker shouldered their way through the crowd and emerged to tower over Peter, who had been dissuaded from standing by the warning clicks of every weapon in the room. He wore the face and beard and voice of Stuart Halberstadt, the man they’d bushwacked in the driveway, but not the white lab coat. Stark had stolen the lab coat.

"I thought you webbed him up," he told Parker.

"I thought you did!"

“These guys AMBUSHED me in the parking lot and stole my Volt and my coat and my I.D.!” Halberstadt screamed at the vicinity, red-faced beneath his beard. “There’s one more here! Someone go FIND him!” He brandished a laser handheld weapon at Peter’s face. “If there’s one scratch on that car you are DEAD!”

“They’re dead anyway,” snarled the Scorpion from against the wall. Several scientists were working to detach him from the webbing but Parker’s web fluid stymied their efforts. “I will put my blade through their throats.”

“Hey, pal, that plan didn’t work too well on Ripley,” Peter shot at him, then turned back to the man
whose identity they’d hijacked. “And Chevy doesn’t deserve this level of brand loyalty.” Knowing Stark, he’d parked it halfway on the curb and busted the front axle.

Was it really Halberstadt glowering at him? Or was it actually Stark playing for effect, trying to buy time and split up the assembly to look for a third intruder?

Tombstone said in his low, gravelly voice, “They both die.”

Head shots didn’t heal the next morning. Peter’s mind raced. Parker stood poised to fight, but if everyone started shooting at once, both Spider-Men would wind up as pincushions. He grimaced at the kid as if to say, “See?”

He gestured at Halberstadt. “Here’s your guy!” he insisted. “You want the third? Here he is! It’s a hologram! How else do you think the third guy snuck into the building? It’s Tony Stark!”

Chapter End Notes

I must have re-written parts of this three times. I had to split the caper into two chapters because it was getting a little long. First part had a lot of buildup. Sorry!

I appreciate hearing your thoughts! Thanks for your comments :)
He gestured at Stuart Halberstadt. “Here’s your guy!” he insisted. “You want the third? Here he is! It’s a hologram! How else do you think the third guy snuck into the building? It’s Tony Stark!”

Halberstadt scowled at Peter. “What? Do I look like Tony Stark?”

At the Avenger’s name several of the scientists muttered to each other. Some paused in the act of freeing the Scorpion from where he decorated the glass wall separating the late Ock’s office from the corridor until the henchman started spewing curses that set them hastily back to work. One of them had extracted a blowtorch from somewhere and was using it to fruitless effect in an effort to burn the webs away. All it accomplished was to make the brute howl.

“What are you doing?” Parker hissed, mindful of being square in the sights of twenty different weapons.

Peter ignored him and addressed the irate Halberstadt. “That’s what a hologram is, duh. What were you gonna do, walk in as yourself?”

“This is horse shit!” A vein was popping in the apoplectic scientist’s head.

“It sure is, Stuart! Or should I say: Stu-ark?”

He then looked at the scientists attempting to burn off the web fluid and lied encouragingly, “Keep at it—you can burn it off if you make the flame really hot.” He tried not to giggle when the Scorpion roared a second later.

“This is ridiculous!” The man threw his arms around wildly, “I’m me! He’s clearly trying to make you suspect me! You better not have wrecked my car!”

“No! I’m turning you in!” Peter stuck his bloody forefinger a mere inch from the reddening forehead and shouted, “and I’m jumping ship! You roped me into this mess! I’m team Kingpin now!”

“What?”

“I’m switching sides!” Peter bellowed to the room at large. “How do I sign up? Is there a sheet? Can I get on the mailing list?” Ignoring the pain in his shoulder, he spread his hands to the armed audience, who looked at each other. “Do you hold a job fair?”

“Are you serious?” demanded Halberstadt. “NO!”

“I don’t know if Mr. Fisk is hiring at the moment,” came a plaintive offering from the peanut gallery.

“Can you keep my resume on file?”

“Kathy’s in HR, she’d know. That’s Kathy.”
A stout woman in the crowd cheerily waved a weapon bigger than she was.

“KILL. THEM!” Halberstadt screamed at Tombstone.

“Shut up, Stark, I’m in an interview!” Peter snapped at him, then wheeled to the stone-faced henchman. “Do you think I’m here by choice? They dragged me here! I tried to steal that megaconductor too, remember?”

It was just enough to pause Tombstone in the act of tightening his finger on the trigger. His eyes flicked suspiciously to the bearded scientist, who realized the shabby idiot was being taken seriously.

“Shoot him!” he yelled.

“No, shoot him!”

“No, shoot him!” said a curly-haired woman, earning dirty looks from both of them.

At that suggestion Tombstone decided he wouldn’t be keeping Peter’s resume on file, but he’d open up a job position nonetheless. A Glock in either hand traveled to aim between their eyes. Gibbering, Halberstadt fell back.

Damn it, now Peter was going to have to rescue his ass.

Tropes came in handy. No matter how often they popped up during his career, their effectiveness rarely delivered diminishing returns. Affecting a horrified look, Peter pointed at the ceiling and yelled, “OH MY GOD!”

It actually worked. Every person in the room froze and looked up. Peter shot a web at the ceiling overhead where he knew the ventilation shaft threaded like an artery and yanked down hard. Half the ceiling came crashing down, obnoxious light fixture and all, showering the scientists and sending them running for cover in the dust and debris.

Sometimes that Parker luck found a penny, because a fair island of ugly ceiling landed on Tombstone’s head. It wouldn’t take him out, owing to whatever freaky circumstances had gifted the brute with strength beyond the average human, but it bought enough time for Peter to hoist Ock’s desk and chuck it at his head as soon as he emerged, coughing, from the rubble.

The desk knocked the henchman off his feet. Webs relieved him of his Glocks, delivering them to Parker’s outstretched hands.

“I was thinking this place could do with some redecorating,” Parker snickered at all the mess. With a quick effort he snapped the weapons in half and tossed them to the floor.

Some brave souls had remained in the room, and the ungrateful woman they’d spared from the Scorpion raised her weapon to aim it squarely at Peter.

Then a concussive blast threw them all back. Peter turned to see the curly-haired woman standing with her palm outstretched, ready to fire another from the repulsor concealed behind the hologram.

Deciding this was well above their paygrade, the techs scammed out of the office, leaving the Scorpion howling against the glass partition he was still webbed to.
“You really hated being that guy, huh?” said Peter, before he doubled over in a spasm of glitching. It didn’t last long but he felt winded as he rolled over, peering up through swirling dust.

Tony Stark’s face loomed directly over him, blocking out the office’s glaring industrial blue light filtering through the clouds.

“Did you enjoy yourself?” said Iron Man sardonically.

Peter giggled from the floor. “You know, I kind of did.”

“You were pretty sure that wasn’t me, right?” Stark squinted at him before the mask glided up to shield his face.

“Duh. You hated that Volt.”

“Fair enough.” Stark began to scan the area. “And I hate showing up to a party wearing the same clothes as someone else. One of us was going to have to change.”

“Where’s the computer?” said Parker, searching around for it worriedly.

Without looking and from flat on his back on the floor, Peter fired another web that tugged the remainder of the vent out and down, like one of those worms out of Dune, to slope toward him with a protesting screech of metal. The computer slid down the shaft and into his waiting hand.

“Can we go now?” he groaned.

The only answer was a rat-a-tat of metal on glass, sounding like someone sliding their nails down a chalkboard, shattering the wall. Finally free, with pieces of glass wall still sticking to the webbed spots, Scorpion raised himself with a bellow and delivered a lightning blow aimed at Parker’s head. The kid yelped and jumped back, firing webs at the metal tail which was made less ridiculous for being so deadly.

Iron Man raised his hands and shot a beam of pure energy that made the suited man stagger. His tail lashed in a frenzy and then he did something neither of them expected: as his tail whipped in a wide arc, it released a series of pointed darts that raced through the air.

Both Peters shrieked and ducked as the darts shot over their heads and embedded themselves five inches deep through the remaining walls like ice picks. Iron Man, less mobile, stood braced as they ricocheted off his armor and fell to the floor, leaving small cracks in the metal.

The tips were stained a bright green and were almost certainly poisonous.

“Okay, I’ve changed my mind. Let’s do your civic duty,” said Peter, clutching the computer after a quick check to make sure it hadn’t been punctured.

Simultaneously he and Parker fired webs that seized at the Scorpion’s face and tail. He reeled back, clawing at the web fluid, his tail unable to load any more darts. Equipment and stupid modern-looking furniture went flying as he crashed through them.

Stark had wheeled to deal with the other grunt. Tombstone had regained his feet by then and this time he held one of the Chitauri weapons Kingpin had been so diligently collecting. He aimed it at Iron Man and pulled the trigger.
Fortunately it was only a stasis weapon, but it was enough to freeze Iron Man as though he were suspended in a kind of miasma. Stark groaned, not unduly concerned. By the time Peter and Peter had finished webbing up the Scorpion, Tombstone had drawn yet another handgun.

“Do you get those from a freaking vending machine?” Peter demanded.

Tombstone sneered a wordless reply. Peter saw his sharpened teeth flash and click, then the hand holding the gun began to droop, and the henchman lurched.

“What…”

Then Peter saw the dart. It glinted innocuously from where it had lodged in an arm. Teetering, Tombstone felt around his shirtsleeve for the dart and pried it out with one shaking hand. His grip on the Chitauri weapon loosened and Iron Man dropped twenty inches to land solidly on the floor, feet apart and repulsors already thrown up.

How deadly was a lethal poison to an enhanced individual? Peter had seen many answers to that question over the years. Tombstone slumped to the floor and both the remaining Glock and Chitauri gun clattered out of reach.

Peter reached for them slowly, keeping his eyes on Tombstone, and took the bullets out of the Glock’s chambers before snapping the gun in half as Parker had done. The Chitauri weapon he slid aside with one Converse.

Iron Man glanced at the Scorpion, who seemed pinned for good this time, before commanding Friday to send the police and an ambulance.

There was nothing to be done if the dose was lethal, but Peter drew near to Tombstone anyway. The henchman had lapsed into a state of semi-consciousness and lay prostrate on the floor, breathing shallowly. Peter put his fingers to the man’s neck and felt a weakened but stubborn pulse.

“Hoo boy, are you ever lucky,” Peter murmured to him.

Parker webbed his hands and ankles for good measure, then kneeled next to Peter.

“What will he die?” the kid asked.

In the question Peter heard himself. Though he’d been a witness to death, far too many times, at no point in his twenty-two years in this gig had he ever accepted it as a given. Not even for men like Tombstone, who doled it out so casually to others.

He was grateful to Parker for caring.

“I don’t think so,” he said, putting a hand on the computer again. “But he’s done crashing the party.”

Halberstadt was still on the floor, winded but not seriously hurt, raggedly inhaling drywall particles as he clutched his sides.

“You’re welcome, by the way,” Peter said over his shoulder.

Halberstadt groaned. Parker webbed him up too, because he was a bad guy working alongside a
bunch of bad guys for an even badder guy. Alchemax was pretty much done for once the D.A. sorted out just what the hell was going on around here.

“Are these guys a headache in your universe too?” Parker asked.

These guys and many others. “They keep me on my toes.” When they weren’t knocking him off them.

“Backup’s on the way,” said Stark. He glanced at the computer at Peter’s side and made the disparaging noise you’d expect from a tech giant. “You think that thing has Minesweeper?” He went over to intimidate Halberstadt. “Where’s Fisk?” he growled.

“Like I’d say! That’s suicide!”

“Is he in his tower?”

Halberstadt coughed up some drywall and struggled to a seated position. “You’d better hope not. If he is, it might be worth leaving him there.”

The Peters looked at each other.

Next to Thanos hardly anything seemed scary these days. Nonetheless, Peter wasn’t jazzed about the thought of waltzing into a 75-story death trap. His imagination conjured up the start of Raiders of the Lost Ark, only Peter was Indiana Jones and Fisk was the giant boulder chasing him down carpeted hallways strewn with sharpened pikes and trap doors.

Was Peter expected to stick around that long? He had some decaying cells to resuscitate and but once they were hale and healthy again it hit pause on his biological countdown to extinction.

Still crouched, he flinched as the atoms in his hands weaved in and out of dimensions, trying to clench his fists as though it would corral them back into shape. His entire outline fizzled and shifted like a signal lost in static.

“What the hell is that?” barked Halberstadt, scooting away as if the condition were contagious.

Peter opened his mouth to deliver a snide reply but it snapped shut again as the seizure intensified and he almost panicked as he felt his atoms stretch further than ever, as though magnetically repelled by each other and desperate to get away.

“Hey, are you—” he heard from a distance, filtered through interference from twenty other dimensions.

The shorting stopped as suddenly as it had started and Peter rubbed his neck. He tried not to let his alarm show on his face: for a moment it had almost seemed as though his entire arm had existed separately from his body.

“Oookay, Twilight Zone,” said Stark with the flippancy he always used to mask strain, “mind sticking to one television channel?”

“I think my rabbit ears are askew,” Peter mumbled.

He shook his head and looked at the bewildered man. “What kind of—”
A loud alarm blared over his words. Red light pulsed in the office and hallway, then came a woman’s cool voice: “Code Halcyon. Code Halcyon. You have sixty seconds.”

“Halcyon?” Peter and Stark said together even as the Spider-Men got to their feet. What a dumb color for an emergency code.

“You’re in for it now,” said Halberstadt, with a simpering smile, his eyes on the computer Peter held.

Parker hoisted the now-unconscious Tombstone over his shoulder fireman style. “What’s Code Halcyon?”

Halberstadt laughed, and nodded at the computer. “Let’s just say you won’t have any need for that.”

“You know, Stuart, you suck,” said Peter. He held the computer under one arm and scooped up the scientist under the other. Distantly the wound in his shoulder yammered a protest, but it barely registered. “We going?”

Fortunately the rest of the facility seemed to have evacuated. There was always a chance someone had gotten stuck in the crapper but there wasn’t time to go knocking on bathroom stalls.

Iron Man dragged the Scorpion behind him in the grip of a kind of tractor beam Peter suspected at a glance had been adapted from the Chitauri tech they were still sweeping off the streets. The beam was unwieldy and the brute kept smacking into corners and walls to Stark’s total disregard.

“Where’s the exit?” Parker shouted as they ran.

Peter yelled back, “This way! Follow me!”

They ran down a bunch of halls, Peter gripping the computer and the asshole under each arm like barrels, and tumbled into the large glassy cafeteria he remembered from his last field trip here. Nobody sat at the round tables with their coffee, newspapers and laser guns this time, but the bagel plate remained and Peter ran past them with regret, his hands full.

“Balcony ahead!” he warned.

“Code Halcyon in effect,” said the recorded voice. “Ten seconds remaining.”

“Shitshitshitshit,” panted Parker.

Now that they were in open space all three of them surged ahead, causing Halberstadt to yelp as they crashed through the glass wall—everything in this friggin’ place was glass, why were tech companies like this—and reached the balcony, leaping for the railing as the seconds counted down to nothing from outdoor speakers, jumping for all they were worth—

If it were a theme park ride, this would be the moment the camera snapped a picture of their faces, looking like they’d looted the souvenir shop and run for it, frozen in midair as the cool calm female voice said “zero” like the entire place wasn’t about to blow up—

They landed in heaps in the snow, except for Stark, who’d flown straight out.

Peter and Parker covered their charges and waited for the blast.
There was a *whumpfff* that emanated from somewhere within the facility like it’d broken wind, then

—

Nothing.

The Peters uncovered their heads and stared back at Alchemax, then each other. Both became vaguely aware of Halberstadt still screaming his head off.

“‘You can shut up now,’” said Peter, feeling weirdly jilted out of a cool explosion. “‘Where’s the kaboom?’”

“What kaboom?!” screeched Halberstadt. “It’s a fucking EMP! Did you think the whole place would go up?”

“Yes!” Peter and Parker said indignantly.

The scientist wriggled in Peter’s grip and was gracelessly dropped in the snow. Iron Man descended to ground with the Scorpion in frustrated tow.

Landing, Stark commented casually; “‘Well, that was anticlimactic.’”

Halberstadt was attempting to get up but only succeeded in rolling over onto his face. “Oh, for God’s sake,” he said irritably into the snow, “it’s a data-wiping EMP. It wipes out every computer on the premises. What else would you expect?”

“We’ve seen too many movies,” said Peter.

“Yeah,” said the kid, “where’s our explosion?”

“Two of you are two too many,” grumbled Stark.

.

Peter watched from a distance, at the edge of the woods while sitting on the same rock he and Miles had crouched behind in the last universe. Swarms of newly appointed S.H.I.E.L.D. agents and S.W.A.T. teams and a myriad of other acronym’d units flowed in and out of Alchemax, arms laden with equipment and confiscated weapons.

They wouldn’t get much out of the data-wiped computers. Explosion-less Code Halcyon or not, Peter was massively grateful they’d gotten Ock’s computer out of the EMP’s reach. It sat beside him now, Stark having conveniently forgotten to hand it over to the agents now taking charge of the scene.

Lab-coated scientists and techs milled around. Many had escaped into the woods; a handful might have made it, but authorities had already come swooping in to pry most of them out. Some were already being taken away in handcuffs while others seemed willing to cooperate.

Tombstone was taken away in an ambulance, heavily reinforced and monitored closely by War Machine. Without his exosuit, the Scorpion proved less of a threat and limped under his own power under the watchful eyes of many rifle sights. He clambered into the back of a truck and heavy metal
doors slammed shut on his scowl.

Parker jogged lightly up the slope to where Peter sat putting pressure on his shoulder with a bandage they’d swiped from an ambulance. “They’re being taken right to the Raft,” the kid said. “Scorpion’s suit isn’t going with him.”

“T...Their lesson learned,” said Peter wryly.

Parker glanced at the drying tracks of blood going down Peter’s sleeve. “Are you okay waiting til we get to the compound to look at that?”

“Oh, sure. Drop in the bucket.”

He’d sooner have a hairdryer to wave at his soaked canvas sneakers and wet ass.

Despite all that he was actually in a pretty good mood. Dare he admit he’d even had a little fun? The escapade reminded him of working with Miles and Gwen and the other Spider-Things, and, more distantly, moments when he’d even rubbed shoulders with the Avengers if the situation called for it.

A hiss made him look over at Parker, who pointed to his suit and giggled, “Built-in heater.”

Peter had never developed one of those. He’d toyed with the idea of a butt warmer once but had abandoned the project after an early model had singed his buttcheeks so red MJ had laughed herself to tears.

Relaxing, Peter stretched his toes and felt kind of stupid for being wound so tightly earlier. It wasn’t fair to project the future in his universe on the present here. All it served was to interfere with what seemed a more promising friendship; he did not want to be the catalyst that fractured it, like stomping on a butterfly back in the Triassic era and turning everyone in the future into mothmen or whatever.

After all, even if it was a side dish to their civic duty they were helping him get home.

“I guess the suit’s okay,” said Peter with a grudging smile.

“And hey, at least Mr. Stark took out the Instant Kill Mode,” said Parker with a little laugh.

The kid kept smiling, looking ahead at the distant authorities wrangling stray techs into cop cars and vans. Only when Peter’s silence prompted a sideways look from Parker did the kid see that the smile had been wiped from the man’s face.

“Kill Mode?” said Peter after a very long moment.

Something in his voice made Parker wary. The kid didn’t reply at first.

Peter repeated, quietly: “Kill Mode?”

The kid muttered, “Enhanced Combat Mode.”

“Oh, Instant Kill is a feature? And what,” said Peter, "does that entail?”

“I don’t know,” the kid said testily, “I never tried it out, okay?”
He squirmed in the face of Peter’s taut jaw and admitted, “Look, Ned and I hacked the suit when I first got it. We didn’t know about the stupid Training Wheels protocol, I just wanted to take out the tracker. All that stuff is gone now.”

“So,” said Peter evenly, “you’re saying he put a Kill Mode in your suit and didn’t tell you.”

“Can we not talk about this now?”

Peter gauged him a long moment. “What if you’d activated it accidentally?”

The kid slid off the rock and insisted, unconvincingly, “I had it under control.”

Bullshit. By skipping the manual he might as well have jumped onto a bucking horse.

Kill Mode? After all the shit he and Parker and every other Spider-Man gone through to preserve life, all life, it felt a slap in the face and it wasn’t even his suit. That commitment had kept Peter going in the worst times; it had been what made him pull on that onesie every lousy evening in his studio apartment, the thing that kept him from throwing it in a trash compactor. The idea that life mattered so damn much he’d never willingly take it himself, never willingly let it be taken from others.

If Spider-Man ever decided to become an executioner, he didn’t need Instant Kill to do it. All he had to do was stop pulling his punches.

“He made me a suit once, too, you know,” Peter said in a low, fierce voice. “Ask him what contingency he put in yours. Ask him about overrides.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Omega Omega Epsilon Nine, chanted the words in his memory, filtered through a mechanical suit.

“Have you killed anyone?” Peter asked him suddenly.

Everything felt like it depended on the answer.

Just how big an influence were the Avengers on him? Peter remembered too well his own uneasiness with the Avengers’ methods, which remained nonlethal until they didn’t. Neither side really got the other’s objection: Peter had accused them of getting lackadaisical in their judgement of when the situation required lethal force, becoming complacent with what they called a necessity; more than once they’d indicted him on counts of naivete and a reluctance to do what his positions required of him.

Shaking his head either in frustration or refutation, Parker had opened his mouth to reply when Stark came flying up. His helmet receded as he touched down. He looked pleased and didn’t notice the warning look Parker shot at the older Peter.

“Rhodey asked if you could add webbing to Tombstone’s restraints,” he told Parker. “Probably don’t need it but they’re not taking chances this time. It’d be kind of embarrassing if they broke out twice.”

Parker swung off after a fast glance at Peter, who remained on the rock, eyes ahead and pressing the bandage to his shoulder.

“There’s no chance they’re getting away this time,” said Stark with satisfaction. “Hap’s coming up to
loan ‘em a pair of my new nano-tech binders. They adjust their grip the more someone struggles.”

“You do think of everything,” said Peter, his eyes on the activity.

Some giveaway made Iron Man slant a look at him before returning his attention to the commotion, where the Scorpion was swearing loudly at the grim-faced officers. “You know, we haven’t had a chance to shoot the breeze, but I’m inferring, here,” he gestured between them, “from the joyless reunion, that maybe we’re not such pals in your universe.”

“We haven’t done karaoke in a while.”

Stark appeared to teeter on the edge of suppressed, maddening curiosity. Peter felt tired and wanted to go home.

At last Iron Man shook his head. “I gotta say, I like our version of you a lot better.”

Peter gave him a thin smile. “That’s funny, I was just thinking I liked this version of you about the same.”

He’d never been in this room before. Peter sat on a table like he might in a doctor’s office, but otherwise he could have been in a video game. Holographic displays rotated, popped up, and closed. The tech in the office was so sophisticated that half of it did not even exist as corporeal equipment, but could be conjured up in the air and waved away at will.

Bruce Banner hovered in a corner, examining the massive amounts of data now rolling in from Ock’s computer and every so often throwing curious looks Peter’s way. Parker still wore his mask, but Peter strongly suspected Banner had connected the dots. He had seven PhDs, after all, and his lack of probing questions around the matter of the stranger’s identity seem to confirm his suspicion of Spider-Man’s.

When Peter had arrived Banner had injected his throbbing shoulder with a painkiller. It was now nicely stitched and bandaged, and Peter thought it’d recede to a bruise the next day. His accelerated healing abilities rendered most injuries as temporary inconveniences—save for his broken back, which would have been a spinal catastrophe and certain death for anyone else.

“I’m just gonna, ah, run this over to Tony in the lab,” said Banner in his soft voice, jerking his thumb awkwardly at the door. He gathered up his tools and left, throwing a last curious look over his shoulder when he exited.

Parker removed his hood casually enough that Peter figured the kid had reached the same conclusion as to Banner’s suspicions. Bruce was pretty benign, and Parker could handle that however he wanted.

He’d been the only other Avenger Peter had run into and he’d be fine, honestly, if it stayed that way. The compound was lightly staffed today. Perched on a nice expanse of land, the facility was designed with an eye toward both function and form, imposing without tipping over into gaudiness. Every line of the place engineered an impression of perfect competence.

“Well, you’ve got two of the smartest guys around working on your case.” Parker unwrapped a Ding
Dong he’d unearthed from a yellow Jansport backpack. “I bet it won’t take them long to figure it out.”

He did not need to say, *It can’t take them long.*

“Uh-huh.”

“I’ve got an ‘internship’ at Stark Industries,” the kid added, using air quotes, “but it’s mostly Avenger stuff. I wish I could have, like, an actual internship. The stuff Mr. Stark comes up with is cool.”

He said it in a tone designed to frame his mentor in the best light, conscious of their charged conversation from earlier. Obviously he regretted bringing up Instant Kill, even as a joke.

“Just remember, kid,” Peter said to him lowly, “you’re Spider-Man without him.”

Parker looked at him for a long moment. “Yeah, I know,” and he sounded annoyed. “D’you think I’m his, like, superservant or something? ‘Cause I’m not.”

Peter sat back on the table and crossed his arms. “No, you just do what he says, call him ‘Mr.’…”

“Because I’m respectful.”

“Does he see you as an equal?”

“You’re letting your, I don’t know, *bias* get in the way here,” Parker said angrily. “I’m sorry you’re not pals with the Avengers in your universe, and maybe it’s not even your fault—you seem like… like they let you down or something—but that’s not the way it is here.”

“No, they’re so much more harmonious,” Peter snapped. “Oh wait—Sokovia happened here too. So did the Accords, and the split—though I’ll grant you, it cleaned up so much better in this universe. In mine? In mine, it didn’t end at some gentlemen’s disagreement. It was a *civil war*, and we all got dragged into it.”

At some point every bitter ounce of resentment that had built up over the years had crept into his words; he was startled to find himself on his feet and on the edge of emotion.

There was a long moment while he looked away and sat back in the squeaking chair, embarrassed to have lost his cool.

“What side were you on?” said Parker at last, anger gone.

Peter laughed harshly. “Doesn’t matter. I never should have gotten involved at all.”

Why had he? He’d been in his twenties, a veteran of the trade by then. He’d thought: well, *finally*—at last they had to take responsibility. Maybe he was a vigilante—and boy, did the Avengers let him know it—but he’d been street level and he cooperated with the police. He’d cared about making their job easier. Following the law as closely as possible, not tampering with crap unless he had to, never using lethal force.

Not like the Avengers.
But then, somewhere along the line, he realized it had become less about responsibility than about control. By then, it’d been too late to pull out bloodlessly.

And after the blood had been mopped up and the sides reconciled, every one of the Avengers had looked at Peter with doubt in their eyes.

Stark begrudged Spider-Man for jumping ship. Captain America did not trust Spider-Man the way he did the ones who had stood with him since the beginning. He did not even trust Peter the way he trusted Tony Stark, with whom he’d fallen out. There was no long history of friendship Peter could offer as proof of his sincerity.

It ended as it always did with them. Peter stood on the outside looking in, with nothing more to show for his idealism than a headache, a heartache and a broken back.

He didn’t realize he’d gotten lost in memory until the kid’s voice cut across his thoughts.

“Look, ah,” and Parker’s tone was conciliatory, “I’m just trying to make stuff work here. You know how bad the split could be. If I can keep something like that from happening again by playing nice, shouldn’t I?”

Peter looked at him, then gave a small, hoarse chuckle and nodded. “Yeah, you should.”

“Besides…look, maybe you would have been right once, but I’m an Avenger now. An equal partner. I take the same risks as anyone, and you’re right—I have the most to lose, because I’ve got the most to hide. So…my opinion matters, and that means I’m going to disagree with them sometimes. I’ve disagreed with them already. I have the right.” He spread his hands. “I always did.”

Feeling strangely drained, Peter nodded. He hoped this universe took a different track, because he remembered saying something similarly confident in the face of MJ's doubts. None of them had really expected the Avengers to implode then.

“You want a Ding Dong?”

What was he, five? Peter considered the little cake Parker held out. “Yeah, thanks.”

Chapter End Notes

Let it be known I actually do love Tony Stark :B Omega Omega Epsilon Nine is from the comics. I envision Peter B's universe as kinda being part 616, part MCU.

Originally I had written an argument over Ebony Maw but cut it as it seemed unnecessary drama. I sort of count that as a 'kill' but it's debatable how much that's on MCU Peter, or what else he or Tony could have done. Maw was pretty powerful.

After seeing the Endgame trailer and Banner in the lab with Peter's face popping up on a screen, I figured he was in the know too lol. So many!

oh, and! Sapphire1219 drew a lovely illustration of the scene in chapter 5 where Peter B tells Parker who he is. It captures the mood so well! Thank you!! You can see it here: http://violet-catsarelife.tumblr.com/post/182757352255/peter-said-to-him-gently-im-not-
As always, thanks for your comments! I appreciate your thoughts :)

ben-parker-or
Peter got his first very real surprise in this universe the next morning when, after a fitful night of glitching and interrupted sleep, a stylish young woman in white sneakers strode into Stark and Banner’s lab, greeted him cheerily and said her name was Shuri.

“My brother is the Black Panther, King T’Challa,” she said. “Is he a blockhead in your universe too?”

“If he is, you’re the only one who says it to his face,” he told her, and she giggled in delight.

Stark, Banner and Parker watched from the side of the lab. Parker was hoodless and appeared to have given up the charade in front of Banner with good grace. Both Stark and Banner had seemed a little anxious for the Wakandan princess to tour their lab, which they showed off with great flourish and she responded with the particular brand of politeness that denoted she had good manners but was at best only moderately impressed.

Parker was bashful around her and spoke only when she spoke to him. Upon realizing this, Tony’s expression was now one of suppressed mirth and he constantly prompted the kid to try speaking to her.

Peter had to resist the strong impulse to ask Parker whether he knew a cute girl named Mary Jane. Better to let him make his life choices organically. (Right?)

They’d brought her in to get as many minds as possible on the problem. Peter appreciated the effort.

Before long she was all business, gliding her wrist slowly over his face. Drawing it back, she tapped one of the large beads encircling her wrist and it projected a video close-up of his cells. As they watched two of the cells deteriorated. Did they evaporate, Peter wondered, or had they simply found another universe to hang their hat in?

As she worked Shuri clucked her tongue disapprovingly. “Reckless, very reckless,” she tutted. “From her research notes I gather she rushed the science at the end.”

Though he wasn’t compelled to defend Ock given that he’d twice been her unwilling guinea pig, Peter responded, trying to keep as still as possible as she swept the beads over him again: “Fisk did kind of rush things along, both times. The glitching happened even faster in the last dimension.”

“What pulled you into that universe to begin with?” Shuri asked clinically, her eyes on the neon schematics scrolling across the air. “Not random chance, surely?”

Random chance hadn’t been a factor in Peter’s life since that spider picked him, of all snot-nosed teenagers, to bite on the hand.

“Not exactly. Another Peter Parker was the, ah, launch code, so to speak.”

Stark looked sharply at him. This was the first time Peter had mentioned a third Spider-Man. Banner paused in the act of typing sums into a holographic computer and watched, while Parker frowned.
Shuri’s eyebrows raised in curiosity but her eyes stayed on the rolling figures. “You were pulled into his universe, but he wasn’t taken to this one?”

“No.” Peter hesitated. “He died. I never met him.”

It was a weird thing to say about himself. No, he’d never had the occasion to shake Blond Peter’s hand, but who would have known him better? He’d simply been Peter B. Parker at a different point in his life.

“Did the collider kill him?” asked Banner. It was a reasonable question, searching out the technical hurdles to avoid when it came time to fixing Peter’s jumping cells. It didn’t require the empathy he heard in the scientist’s voice. Parker seemed uncomfortable while Stark brought a hand to his chin and looked away.

“Wilson Fisk killed him,” said Peter. “Peter Parker only got caught in the collider long enough to scramble the signal. Hence, me,” he gestured to himself. Shuri clucked at him to stay still but her face was troubled.

“The problem is easy enough to diagnose,” she announced a little while later.

She stepped back and began tapping her beads in a sort of Morse code. They projected a shimmering image she enlarged for the benefit of the room at large. “Human bodies are comprised of ten trillion cells, all of which the collider must analyze and process.”

She gestured to the rather beautiful rotating holographic display showing just a small sample of the extraordinary data making up a human being. All present knew this already but the image never ceased to inspire a kind of wonder. For some reason Peter was put in mind of Rabbi Abraham, who loved to talk of the intricate systems that operated life and pointed to them always as a divine work of art.

“There’s no .zip file for that kind of thing,” Parker said from the side, earning a smile from Shuri that made him blush.

Peter rarely got to dust off his graduate degrees around scientists who weren’t actively trying to kill him. Nice change of pace. Scratching his jaw, which was already stubbly again, he said: “String theory solves the problem of how electrons can jump around without actually traveling, but that’s just what it is: a theory. Ock didn’t make the jump from theory to theorem. All she could do in either universe was mimic the result.”

“Doctor Strange can open portals to other universes,” Parker pointed out. “Doesn’t that prove the theory is possible?”

“That’s magic, not science,” grumbled Stark. “Magic cheats.”

“If anything’s possible, it has to be scientifically possible.”

Secretly, Peter was delighted to hear his younger self talk this way. A proper mind.

Shuri nodded in agreement, similarly pleased to be among intellectuals. “From what her research notes indicate, in order to process that amount of information in a short amount of time the particle accelerator acted as a kind of scrambler and descrambler. It took the atoms apart at one end of the rift and rearranged them in order to pass through in a way that,” she said, gliding her hand in the motion.
of a beach wave, “can be more easily put together on the other side. It simply did not do a good job. Your cells are convinced they still must reconstruct and are constantly attempting to do so, but they are not on the same wavelength, so to speak.”

Peter nodded, following along. “Intermodulation. Like when you hear two radio signals at the same time. Ock was trying to impersonate string theory and ended up with a crackerjack set of rabbit ears instead.”

Shuri clapped her hands together, delighted to find she did not have to softball the explanation to him. Stark, Banner and Peter were all nodding in understanding as well.

“So we gotta finishing descrambling his atoms,” said Stark, crossing his arms and staring beyond the lab walls. “If he’d gone through the rift again as intended, his cells would have ended up in their normal pattern again—like a reversal—but since he got snatched in midair, they never had a chance to reconcile.”

It wasn’t as often anymore that Stark was truly tested by a scientific challenge and Peter saw the old light he got when he really got to sink his teeth in one.

Too bad it was Peter they were all gonna sink their teeth into. “What are you gonna do, stick me in a rock tumbler?” he asked nervously.

“In a manner of speaking,” Banner said, starting forward. He looked at Stark, Shuri and Parker in turn. “We could attempt to recreate Octavius’s process from scratch, and just get it right this time, but we’d need to modify a lot of machinery for the purpose and that takes time. Time Peter might not have.”

He had Shuri’s attention. “What are you suggesting?” she asked.

“We start from the middle. Skip the scrambling process and go straight to descrambling.”

Parker wondered aloud, “Like a stolen cable channel?”

“Yes, like my cable channels,” Peter muttered under his breath.

Stark raised an eyebrow at him and Peter shrugged. “Not all of them.” He’d pay for them if he were any more liquid than a gaseous state.

“Well, I happen to have another particle accelerator in the cabinet,” said Stark, rubbing his hands together. “Shall we?”

“Ah.”

Stark, Shuri and Banner had drawn enough air during their conversations to consider another possibility for the time being. “More specifically, it’s a ‘quantum chamber.’ A Bill Foster specialty,”
Banner added with a small smile. “Of course, we’ve made some modifications since then.”

Did Hank Pym know? Peter didn’t know the man but had heard he was territorial over that field of research. It probably didn’t matter. “Of course. What does it do?”

“You get in and sit,” Banner pointed at the spartan bench inside the tank, “and the chamber uses, um, quantum energy to stabilize your molecules for the time being. It’s just a temporary measure, sort of like an oxygen boost for your atoms, but it might give you more time.”

Time would be good. Peter felt as though he were glitching constantly, making every movement uncertain lest it be undermined by a seizure that threw him off balance. Much of his enhanced physiology did the work subconsciously but more and more he found he was having to put up a determined effort to keep the spasming at bay. It was like having a chronic condition; you learned to ignore it.

“I never thought I’d hear you say ‘quantum energy’ with a straight face,” said Peter slyly.

Banner rolled his eyes, though not unkindly. “Blame Hank Pym. He thought it sounded catchy.”

Quantum had achieved ‘parsec’ status in terms of its scientific misrepresentation. It was such a conveniently science-y word.

Peter walked into the clear-walled chamber, feeling like a lizard stepping into its aquarium. “How long do I sit here?” he asked, his voice muffled by the panes.

Banner set his watch. “We’ll try an hour first. See what that does.”

The scientist moved to the controls and adjusted the settings, then turned a dial that set the machine built into the chamber’s side to humming. Peter didn’t actually know if he was supposed to be feeling anything. This wasn’t going to hurt, was it?

He rapped his knuckles on the panes. From the sound and feel he guessed the material was Stark’s patented take on palladium microalloy glass, one of the strongest materials in existence after adamantium and vibranium. Graphene scaled the joints and ceiling of the chamber. It was a cautionary measure for the kind of energy it was supposed to channel and he felt a little jittery about being on the inside.

“I’ll be back in an hour,” Banner told him.

“Thank you,” said Peter, looking at him through the glass. “For all your help.”

Banner smiled and tapped his clipboard. Turning, he paused and almost seemed on the verge of saying something else, then gave an awkward little wave and walked from the room to rejoin the scientists in the lab, leaving Peter to his thoughts and the small hum of the chamber’s ventilation.

He sat down on the cot. It wouldn’t hurt to try and sleep.

What would Miles and Gwen and Noir and all the Spider-People and May Parker say, knowing he was sitting in a fishbowl instead of his home? He felt weirdly like he’d let Miles down. Peter’s job should have been the easy one but he couldn’t even fall into a rift right when he was literally dropped into it.
If he hadn’t held on so long to his—what, his nobility, his denial, his reluctance?—if he’d let go of his fears just a few seconds sooner, would he have sailed right past the window of time where this universe’s Ock had activated her own collider and gone home?

Peter sighed. He’d had an epiphany, damn it, hadn’t the cosmos gotten the memo?

Stretching, Peter closed his eyes against the chamber’s soft light and mused: what exactly was his epiphany? That it wasn’t too late? He felt like he’d arrived at the answer to a mathematical equation without showing his process on the homework.

Dutifully, he ticked off the stages. First step when he got back: clean his apartment and throw away what were certainly piles of decaying pizza slices. Second step: find his suit—a regular suit, not a crime-fighting suit—clean it, and hope it fit. Third step: show up on MJ’s doorstep with flowers in his hands.

Those were a good start, but there were going to have to be a lot more steps that followed. It wasn’t a process with any definite end—it was a progress. That’s what steps were for.

Seeing Tony Stark again; being here, in this compound where the Avengers lived and trained, opened an old and grody can of worms he’d managed to squirrel away in a forgotten corner of the cabinet nearly ten years ago. He’d have to clear all those cans out. No more cans of worms.

Peter couldn’t go back to MJ dragging along all his old baggage. Baggage had sabotaged them the last time. He’d get strong again, really mentally strong.

She’d never blamed him, either. If anything she worried about all the strain he put on himself, intensified for the conviction he’d have to do it alone.

The day before he’d been pulled into Miles’s universe, she’d called him. He’d let it go to voicemail and hadn’t listened to the message she left. He was scared to listen to it. How could he be so dumb? If he’d died he would have blown his chance to listen to her voice one last time. He could have picked up so she could hear him a last time.

It was all kind of muddled together in his head. Each problem seemed to be a knot tied into the same long string. Sleepily, he resolved to untangle the entire thing.

Peter drifted to sleep. It was hard to tell whether the chamber was doing anything but he did seem to glitch a little less and it allowed him to get an uninterrupted nap.

In his drowsy state, his spider sense alerted him to Parker coming. He turned his head from the bench to yawn at the kid coming up to examine the controls.

“How are you feeling?” Parker asked.

“Better, I think.” Still lying on his back Peter held his hands up against the industrial light. The atoms didn’t do much more than shiver. “If a little like I’m a specimen in the reptile house. How long does the effect last once I’m outside of the tank?”

Parker drew up a stool and took a seat. He wore a hoodie over his suit and was sipping a Coke.
“Probably not long,” he admitted. “At least, Mr. Banner doesn’t think so. You could leave if you want, to test it. Or you could hang a while longer.”

Peter was inclined to stay lazy for as long as possible. “Have you heard from Strange?”

“Mr. Stark talked to Wong. I think Doctor Strange ran out for a sandwich a while ago. Wong says a ham on rye helps him think. He said they’ve about got it sorted out.”


“Sure,” said Parker. “Anything for me.”

Knowing it was a lame joke, he grinned at Peter’s unwilling snort. Then his fingers drummed a little on the Coke can and he shifted on the stool. “So this, ah…this other Peter Parker…”

Peter closed his eyes. “Yeah?”

“I mean, you said you didn’t meet him, but—I mean, do you know what he was like? Was he like us?”

“I’d say he was squarely between you and me.” Peter thought. “Also blond. And blue-eyed.” And perfect.

“Really? Weird,” said Parker in amazement. “Did he look at all like us?”

Eyes opening, Peter motioned down the length of his torso like Vanna White showing off a car on Wheel of Fortune. “Think a carbon copy of me, only someone messed with the saturation in Photoshop.” And removed the crow lines.

Parker played with his Coke. “Why didn’t you tell me about him?”

“Honestly, I thought maybe it’d freak you out.”

Not unduly. Weirdly, the living Aunt May had unnerved him more than the deceased Peter Parker. “I guess it should have, shouldn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” said Parker honestly. “I mean, you’ve probably kind of seen it all by now.”

Peter sighed. “Oh, I still manage to get the rug pulled out from under me once in a while.”

A smile tugged at the corner of Parker’s mouth. Then it faded as he plucked at the can’s snap lid. “Did he leave a lot of people behind?”

Most of New York, judging by the outpouring of grief. Peter suddenly wondered what that Spider-Man had thought about having kids someday. Maybe he’d planned on it. He’d had his act together completely and it hadn’t done him a damn bit of good at the end. “Most of us do, kid.”

“Yeah. I just feel sorry for them.” Parker stared at his Coke, lost in thought. “I mean, I worry about what would happen to Aunt May if something—you know. Happened to me. She already lost a husband, and his family too…I just don’t want to leave her alone again.”
Peter remembered that the kid had died in the Snap and guessed that May Parker hadn’t. Was her memory of the incident wiped along with most of the world’s? That would be kinder. In a way, Parker had already been through this and might understand why Peter so badly feared leaving a kid fatherless.

Parker’s phone buzzed and he pulled it out of the hoodie’s pocket to check. “Ned says you have to say goodbye before you go portal-hopping.”

Yawning away a smile, Peter sat up and stretched. Just the hour he’d spent in the tank had done wonders for his energy. It really was like an oxygen boost.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” he asked.

“I don’t think so,” said Parker, putting his phone away. “I think they’d have liked to do an MRI, but you’re too unstable. The magnets might screw stuff up.”

“Where are the other Avengers, anyway?” asked Peter.

“Mr. Stark says he found stuff for them to do. I think he’s trying to keep them of our hair,” the kid confided. “‘Cause, you know, if they see you and then me…”

That was encouraging, at least. In Peter’s universe, Stark had come very, very close to convincing Peter he should unmask to give a degree of legitimacy to the pro-Accords faction. At one point Peter had even intended to do it. It was the only time in his life he could remember cold feet being a saving grace.

It also added a wrinkle to this dimension: though Tony Stark had left some doors worryingly open, others seemed shut, if not locked. If he could be convinced to shut all of them for good and throw the key away…

Parker hopped off his stool and stowed it to the side. “Well—I’m gonna have to run out for a while,” he said. “I spent last night here and I should probably do some patrolling. And get a change of clothes,” he added with a grin.

“You didn’t have to stay,” Peter told him, feeling weirdly like some jailbird, staring out at him from the tank.

Parker smiled and shrugged, pulling on his backpack. Though he didn’t say it, Peter rather thought the kid had been fretting over the increased rate of glitching. Now that the quantum chamber was helping, he felt okay to leave for a while and do his normal rounds around Queens.

His phone buzzed again. “Hap’s here,” he announced. “I’ll come see you again before you go.”

With a little wave, Parker walked out the door.

It was tempting to linger in the chamber but eventually Peter began to feel increasingly nauseous from the atom therapy and let himself out. Dizzy, he rubbed his temples and squeezed his eyes shut until everything seemed to settle again.

He wandered back to the lab, feeling like an interloper walking the Avengers’ stomping grounds alone. When he got there he found only Tony Stark, eyes on some readouts scrolling across the air.
He glanced up as Peter came in.

Banner and Shuri were not in sight and Peter was debating whether to return to the chamber room (chamber chamber?) and park his kiester there when he paused at the sight of the Iron Spider suit standing attendant in a unit behind Stark’s table.

When he’d looked around Blond Peter’s trying-too-hard secret lab, he’d seen the Iron Spider numbering among the many other suits (geez, was it a lab or a walk-in closet?) So far as he knew, that Peter had not been an Avenger either, though he hadn’t yet reached the point of division after which Peter B. Parker had actively avoided Earth’s Mightiest Heroes.

Peter would have bet money he didn't have that Blondie had probably been a lot warier than anyone had credited him for; though his ties to the Avengers were certainly cordial, he’d stayed at arm’s length too.

Stark’s eyes followed his gaze. Peter shook his head as if to dislodge a fly. “Dr. Banner and Shuri?” he asked.

“Working on the accelerator,” said Stark tersely, picking up a tool. “I suppose the chamber helped?”

“Yeah.” Peter didn’t mention it made him sick after a while. “Thanks.”

Stark inspected the superconductor he’d been comparing against the data readouts.

Peter’s natural curiosity perked up at all the gadgets around but he started to take a step back to the door when Stark, still looking at the superconductor in his hand, asked in a clipped tone: “Mind explaining why Parker was in here a little while ago, asking me about overrides?”

“What?” Peter was surprised. The kid hadn’t mentioned it during their chat, and hadn’t seemed duly bothered by the information anyway. Peter had just figured that Parker had let it go.

“What have you been putting in his head?” Stark said sharply, putting the superconductor down.

Maybe Peter’s zen time in the quantum chamber had subconsciously relaxed him, allowing him real rest from the constant cell firing, because he didn’t immediately rise to meet Stark’s brittle tone. “What did you tell him?” he asked, as curious as he was wary.

“What I’m telling you now: I gave a multi-million dollar technological marvel to a teenager I didn’t know at the time. Would you let someone drive a Ferrari off the lot without a GPS? Yes, I put in an override. It’d be asinine not to.”

“You know him now. Have you taken it out?” Peter asked, with a critical look at the suit behind Stark. “Like you did Instant Kill? Or did you just…hide it better?”

“Listen, Quantum Leap,” Stark snapped, pushing back in his chair, “I get that you crash landed in this universe but I’m busting my ass here trying to help, practically defying established laws of physics with barely a thank you by the way, which you didn’t seem to have a problem saying to Banner—”

“I am grateful. I really don’t want to turn into Sam Beckett.”

“No, Beckett tried to fix things that went wrong, not screw up what isn’t broke.”
Peter tilted his head. Already he could feel the glitching trying to start up again. “Out of curiosity, does 'Omega Omega Epsilon Nine' mean anything to you?”

Some passwords, chosen at random, were totally different in this universe. And some of them, chosen by intent, evidently remained the same. Stark said nothing at first, which said everything.

Unsurprised, Peter went on, leaning against the doorway with arms folded across his chest: “Is that the override for the Iron Spider, or for the suit the kid’s wearing now?”

“Did I have to use it?” Stark said acidly. “In your universe?”

“I didn’t give you the chance. Like I said then: what kind of protege would I have been if I didn’t anticipate you?”

At the word ‘protege,’ a line formed between Stark’s brows. Peter sighed. “The Accords are over with in this universe, so why the paranoia? You’ve all patched things up, but it’s like you’re planning for the chance it could happen again.”

It was easy to forget they were practically strangers; this argument felt like an old one between them.

Stark left his seat, rubbing at his chin and stepping away like an agitated cat. “The override protects him, too, did you think of that? What if that suit went haywire? What if it did something he couldn’t control? I’m not having another Ultron.”

Peter rolled his eyes and said, “That’s the only reason, huh? Does your suit come with an override?”

Stark swiveled to face him. “You’re a hypocrite, you know that? You say you and our Spider-Man aren’t the same person, yet ever since you got here you’ve resented me for what a different Iron Man did in your universe. What’s next; do I hold Parker accountable for the screwup you became?”

Peter’s zen evaporated. “A screwup?” he snapped.

“You think I can’t tell? You don’t exactly project the aura of a guy who’s got his act together. Somehow I don’t think that’s your Stark’s fault. So he put in an override too, boo hoo. It’s not like he billed you for the suit.”

Stung, Peter shot back: “It’s not just about the override, jackass! It’s about trust!”

“Parker trusts me!”

“Yeah, he does! So how do you think it makes him feel that you don’t trust him?”

Their voices reverberated around the lab and down the empty hallway.

“He’s a kid! It’s for his own good!”

“That kid’s an Avenger! You can’t make his choices for him! A Kill Mode? A tracker? Really? What else is there?” Peter waved animatedly at the Iron Spider and leaned forward. “If he’s going to use your tech, fine! But he should know it inside and out! Hasn’t he earned that?

Admit it, Stark,” he added, pointing at him, "you're a doomsday prepper. Ever since the first split
mended you've been preparing for the next."

Why else had Peter fought so hard to learn so much? Maybe his own gear wasn’t as sophisticated, maybe his attempted buttwarmer had nearly set his ass on fire, but he still felt pride in his work—maybe more now than he had in years. And yeah, he’d recently learned that independence only got you so far, but Peter had seen what Miles could do when he’d been able to build upon the guidance he’d gotten from others. Miles was Spider-Man, uniquely Spider-Man, and so was Parker.

Tony shook his head. “You seem to have a hard time believing this, but I do actually try to look out for him.”

Was Peter jealous? He stopped, taken aback by the thought. No—Tony had loved him too, taken him under his wing no less than this Stark was doing for Parker.

Peter was jealous all the same: of this universe, and the circumstances that had inspired different choices.

He started talking before he realized it, before he could stop. “Tony Stark made choices for me too—without asking, without even telling me. I was loyal. I didn’t hack that suit until I realized just how militant the Accords were getting, what the powers behind them were willing to do to get control over as many ‘enhanced individuals’ as possible. Tony couldn’t see it; he was so paranoid and guilty over Sokovia but I thought he loved me better.”

Peter had never said this to anyone except MJ. Was he shaking, or were his atoms glitching? Stark stared at him with an unreadable expression, hands at his sides.

“He put a spy on my spider sense,” Peter said in quiet disbelief, renewed after nearly a decade. “He threw it red herrings to confuse me in a fight. He got so suspicious. He didn’t just make sure the suit couldn’t be used against him; he used me. To build his own sixth sense and sabotage mine. How could he do that?”

He looked to Stark as if the man could tell him the answer. “Say you’re totally honest with him,” Peter rasped.

Stark hesitated.

Peter suddenly cried out and doubled over, his loss of control seized on as a moment of weakness by atoms that suddenly went haywire. He dropped to his knees and clutched his head, feeling himself pull apart at the seams. Peter wrenched his eyes open and saw his hand spasm between dimensions, tugging his atoms across an abyss they couldn’t cross.

Stark moved forward instinctively to help, but Peter stopped him in his tracks with a raised hand that even then was splitting between universes.

Tony drew back as if scalded.

Eventually the glitching subsided.

For a full minute neither of them spoke and Peter just tried to regulate his breathing. The electronic noises of the lab sounded unusually loud in the midst of the silence between them.

His ears burned as they always did when he was ashamed. He stared at a stain on his Converse.
The truth was…one of the missed calls in his phone’s history was not from MJ.

One had been from Tony Stark, his universe’s Tony, made in the last month after years of silence between them. Peter hadn’t missed it deliberately, he’d just been taking delivery of a pizza and and absently pressed play on the short voicemail left on his phone.

In the message Tony had simply said that he and Captain America both were trying to get hold of him; they wanted to talk.

He didn’t know what they wanted to say to him. It hadn’t seemed fair for them to reach out, after all this time. Isolation had gotten comfortable to Peter, like a well-worn butt groove in his La-Z-Boy, and he wasn’t sure what he’d do without it.

All he had to do was change his cell number again. He’d changed it once in the last ten years, on the first day following back surgery that he’d felt well enough to march into an AT&T in Queens and demand a new number from the bewildered shop assistant.

True, it’d take the retired Iron Man a literal heartbeat to suss out the new one, but Peter knew he wouldn’t. He’d accept the message Peter was sending and leave him alone.

One day they’d stop trying. For the first time Peter suddenly dreaded that.

What if MJ gave him the cold shoulder? It wasn’t the same, he’d never divorced the Avengers because he’d never been one, but the thought of turning up on her doorstep and seeing her look away was unbearable, a thought that wrapped cold fingers around his heart.

But of course she’d never do that, she was too kind, she—she was better than that, better than him. She’d always kept the faith.

Standing against the table counter, Tony folded one arm but held the other hand in the air as if it could speak for him. “I don’t know what I’ll do if he dies again,” Tony said unexpectedly.

Peter looked at him from where he still knelt on the floor.

“He died, right here.” Stark held his arms out, loosely. “There was nothing I could do to stop it. No override. No special mode. That suit is the best thing I ever made and it did nothing to save him.”

Peter believed the grief he saw. He struggled to his feet, feeling really drained.

Chewing the inside of his cheek, Stark hesitated, then motioned between them. “Tell me what to do to avoid this.”

Slowly, Peter said, “Parker’s a good kid. If you want him to trust you, you have to do the same. If he says he doesn’t agree with you, listen.”

Stark nodded and looked away to his counter, tapping on it with one hand. Knowing him, he was embarrassed by the uncharacteristic display of deeper emotion. So was Peter. Catharsis acted as a muscle that went sore with every use.

“And the next suit you make?” Peter called to Stark’s profile.
Tony turned, waiting.

“Make it together.”

Stark’s phone rang.

Both of them jumped at the sound, made shriekingly loud for the silence it had interrupted, and Peter had to fight a nervous grin. The billionaire glanced at the caller ID on its screen and frowned at an unfamiliar number. The ring had the effect of cutting the tension and Peter detected some relief in the eye roll Tony directed at the phone. “I know the spam callers can’t find this number. If I have to hear about chronic back pain solutions one more time…”

He hesitated, then tapped the speakerphone and answered the call while picking up the superconductor again. “This is Stark.”


Peter froze.

Not as familiar with the voice, Stark caught Peter’s reaction and responded warily. “Who’s this?”

“We’ve met, actually, Tony. Can I call you Tony? I’m gonna call you Tony. We met at one of your Expos. Alchemax is nowhere near your equal, but I haven’t done too bad for myself. You can call me Wilson, but Kingpin works too.”

Chapter End Notes

Talky chapter, oop. I don't think I've ever edited one so heavily. Some of the conversation at the end was intended for a later chapter but it didn't work with the pacing, as we do get action again :>

I've never watched Quantum Leap but it's one of those references I was vaguely aware of growing up. I heard somewhere how the show ended and it's always depressed me lol.

As always thanks for your thoughts :)
“We’ve met, actually. Tony. Can I call you Tony? I’m gonna call you Tony. We met at one of your Expos. Alchemax is nowhere near your equal, but I haven’t done too bad for myself. This is Wilson Fisk, but Kingpin works too.”

His eyes on Peter, Stark pushed back from his counter top. “Calling to turn yourself in?”

Wilson Fisk laughed. For a guy about to lose his empire, he sure sounded cheerful. “Not hardly. Actually, I’ve got a proposition.”

“We’ve got a few of our own,” said Stark blandly. Peter imagined some violence was involved.

“Oh, mine’s better. By the way, is John Doe with you? That’s the name he gave to the police, isn’t it?”

Peter stared at the phone as if Fisk could see him through it.

“Am I right?” Fisk sounded amused. “I figured he’d run to you after the collider was destroyed.”

“By you, I’m told,” said Stark, folding his arms and looking at empty space from beneath his brow.

“Well, what’s in the past is in the past,” said Fisk. Peter rolled his eyes at the irony. “Is John Doe there?”

Stark said wryly, “Can I take a message?”

“Sure. Tell John I’ve got his ticket home.”

Peter and Stark glanced at each other.

“At first I figured he had the right idea, coming to you,” Fisk said in a dangerously pleasant way, “and I thought: why not let you do the legwork on a new collider? I know ole John’s ticker is counting down. But imagine my reaction to the little shortcut you found.”

Peter got a really, really bad feeling. His knee started fritzing and he took a seat on a work stool near where he’d been standing.

“Shortcut?” asked Stark, after prompted by Fisk’s expectant silence, gaze tracking Peter’s glitching.

“Magic.”

*Oh, shit.* Stark and Peter stared at one another across the lab.

How had he found out?

“You figure you can kidnap your wife and son this way?” Stark challenged the faceless voice, not
bothering to deny it. He paced a few steps away, raising his volume for the speakerphone and his own ire. “What are you gonna do, bring ‘em into a universe where you’re about to get your ass handed to you by the Avengers and every agent around? So they can, what, join you on the run?”

“I’m not runnin’,” Fisk said easily. “I built an empire and I’m keepin’ it. My fortune wasn’t handed to me by my daddy like yours was, Tony. Mine’s built on blood and sweat and tears.”

“The blood and sweat and tears of everyone but you.”

Peter could almost see Fisk shrugging. “I built it all the same. And I figure there’s a lot of blood and sweat and tears in your kingdom, too.”

“You’d turn your family into fugitives.”

“No, I won’t. The FBI will make a deal with me.”

“What?” snapped Stark, whirling around. “You’re out of your mind! You think they’d just sweep everything you’ve done under the rug?”

“Why not? They’ve swept most of what you’ve done under the rug, and I only make primetime news when I’m generous to charities—not by toppling cities.”

Some things were more parallel in this parallel universe than others. Peter’s eyes were on his knee, which had resettled, and he kept his arms crossed while Stark looked belligerently at the phone.

“You killed Olivia Octavius,” he said to it.

“Out of self defense,” said Fisk calmly. “Lotta witnesses to that, including your spider pet. Would you have him commit perjury? Of course, they’d never put a vigilante in a spandex onesie on the stand. He’d have to remove his mask.”

“You funded a dangerous particle accelerator.”

“So did you. I challenge you to find my money trail.”

“You were a weapons dealer to your employees!”

Unconcerned, Fisk replied: “Every one of ‘em has a license to conceal and carry. You’re the one gonna have to explain what you were doin’ on my private property, guns blazin.’”

“What about the Chitauri tech?”

“What Chitauri tech?” Fisk said innocently. “If they had any, they didn’t get it from me. Add some years to Adrian Toomes’s sentence.”

“You’ve been collecting it for months from thugs on the street,” Stark said stubbornly. “Spider-Man can tie them to you.”

“The hearsay of junkie convicts is not worth what you think it is, Tony. Neither is your testimony. Alchemax is a rival in the field and the Accords are toast; your word is crap. It’ll take the FBI years to build a case with tangible evidence against me, and they’d much rather I just pinky-swear to be an upstanding citizen and save themselves more blood, sweat and tears—and you and me, Tony, we
know there’s a lot of that to go around.”

Stark was indignant. “You can’t compare us. Besides, what about your henchmen? By now they’re on the Raft.”

“And how I do regret placing my trust in them.” Peter could almost see Kingpin placing his hand over his heart in mock sincerity. “If I had known how they’d subvert my generosity for their own gain, I’d have sent them to the Raft myself.”

Tony glared at the phone in pure disgust, but Peter was unsurprised. Tombstone and the Scorpion knew better than to talk. Kingpin’s brutality had long masked a ruthless cunning that extended not only to business pursuits, but his thorough understanding of political science. He was a master at covering his tracks. If he asked for a deal from the beleaguered FBI, he’d probably get it. Peter had watched it happen before.

The man went on. “You might have her research, but not all of Octavius’s records were lost with the collider. I happen to know just which universe our John Doe hails from. And you know what? In that same universe, my Vanessa and Richard are only a few years older than they would have been here, if they’d lived. I don’t know how that works,” chuckled Fisk, “you’re the brainiac, you tell me. I don’t care.

“So here’s my proposition. You bring me Vanessa and Richard. John Doe gets to go home. I get my family. I retire to a life of post-crime. That’s more than fair.”

He had no idea that Peter would find no relief from the glitching in his own dimension. Kingpin thought the delay only a matter of Doctor Strange’s meticulous research. Not that he’d care if he did know.

“I imagine the other Wilson Fisk may object,” said Stark.

“I imagine that too. That’s your problem.”

It was the insane plan of a desperate man who still had not reconciled himself to the truth his family was gone for good. Yes, Vanessa and Richard Fisk still lived in Peter’s dimension, something he knew and had deliberately avoided mentioning. Some of his own blood and sweat, if not tears, had seen to that. Quantum theory acted as a tantalizing hope and a subsidy to suspended grief; he’d had to guard against it when coming across May Parker in Miles’s universe, and it had consumed Fisk completely.

One hand on his chin with the other hand cupping his elbow, Stark said: “And if we turn down this incredibly magnanimous proposition of yours? What’s to stop me from handing this little conversation over to the FBI?”

“I have insurance,” Fisk said sweetly. “If you turn this in to the feds, if you don’t bring me my wife and son, every lowlife in New York and the world at large will know just where to find Peter Parker…Spider-Man. Not to mention everyone he’s ever met.”

Dead silence fell over the lab.

No, no no… Peter’s hand found his forehead and he stared, confounded, at the phone.

“My man sussed that out,” said Fisk. He sounded pleased by the silence that signaled their shock.
“I’d say he’s more than worth his bonus. I’ve selected my employees with a little more care than you, Stark.”

Speechless, Stark rocked back from the counter and looked to Peter, who hesitated, thinking fast, then shrugged helplessly and mouthed, *The Prowler.*

It had to be him. Had to be. He’d dropped off the radar after the convention center, but Peter knew from experience and Miles’s testimony that the man’s job was eighty percent skulking.

He could have been shadowing Stark ever since Tombstone and Scorpion’s initial breakouts from the precinct in Queens, the last time anyone had heard of him; he might have watched Parker, barefaced, walk into the Sanctum with the man he’d helped escape from Ock’s lab under the guise of the webslinger. And it was there, maybe with a parabolic dish held from a parked car or a nearby rooftop, he would have learned about Strange’s magic and the possibility of another way.

Even if Peter had run into the man on the streets, he wouldn’t necessarily have recognized him. He’d gotten no better than a glimpse of Aaron Davis’s face, and who was to say it was even the same man, or if it was, that he resembled the other Davis?

Peter felt sick. His spider sense hadn’t picked up on the man’s presence because the Prowler hadn’t been there to attack them. Judging by Stark’s white, tight-lipped face, he was furious at his own misstep. No one had snuck up on the Avenger in a long time.

It was too late to pretend Fisk was dead wrong; their silence had given them away.

“How do we know this name doesn’t go beyond the two of you?” Stark kept his voice level with some difficulty.

“If it did,” Fisk said, with a growl at last, “you’d know it already. They’d be knocking down Parker’s door as we speak. Or rather...they’d be shooting it down.” That much was true. "I'm a businessman, Stark. A deal's a deal.” That much may not be true, but they were in no position to challenge it.

As if struck by a thought Fisk added, “Oh, by the way: I know about your nasty little hologram trick back at Alchemax. Don’t think you can get away with it again. My Prowler will see right through them.”

*You’ve got twenty-four hours*, thought Peter.

“You’ve got eight hours,” said Fisk.

..."Can’t Strange just wipe his memory?” Peter asked. “Like he did for the whole planet after the Snap?”

“He had to use the Time Stone to do that. We don’t have any of them any more.” Stark frowned at him, stress etching lines above his brows. “Didn’t he need it in yours?”

Frustrated, Peter shrugged with his hands out. “I don’t know, I wasn’t around.”
One minute he was dying on Titan and the next he’d woken up to his alarm telling him he was late for an exam. He hadn’t asked a lot of questions and maybe he’d gotten it into his head that memory wiping was a tool in Strange’s regular kit and caboodle. But no need to say all that in front of Parker.

The kid had been quickly recalled from Queens. He stood to the side now, unsure of how to stand, wearing his full suit because he, Stark, Strange and Banner weren’t the only Avengers in the room now.

Peter wore his suit as well. It was a welcome barrier between him and the Avengers who were now staring curiously between the two Spider-Men.

Captain America. Romanov. Barton. Falcon. The Winter Soldier. Wanda Maximoff. He hadn’t stood in a room with so many in nearly a decade. Weirdly, it didn’t seem like it had been so long ago.

When the Captain had entered Peter was forcibly reminded of the message Tony had left on his phone, back in his own dimension. It was bizarre to see them assembled again when most of the ones he knew had retired from active duty—the ones still alive, anyway. Stark had given them a rundown of the situation so far and cut off their amazement and questions so quickly it had seemed an abbreviated revelation.

Vision was in Wakanda for some kind of checkup Peter didn't ask more about. Shuri said it could wait until she got back. Scott Lang, Barton, T’Challa and Thor all had homes off-base, Barton being the only one of those in town at the moment, but Peter felt there were more than enough Avengers to be getting on with. When Banner had passed word along Peter had muttered to give the others his regards.

“What’s the deal with your Wilson Fisk?” Stark said, facing Peter.

He shook his head. “It was the same in my universe, except I even had evidence. I gave him to the FBI. The FBI gave him a deal.” Peter scowled beneath the mask. “Fisk rolled on a lot of lieutenants. He has dirt on half the planet. The FBI made him promise to keep on the straight and narrow, which he definitely isn’t doing, but they don’t care so long as he’s warring with other crime bosses. I was told in no uncertain terms to back off.”

“And if he’s kidnapped a woman and child from another dimension?”

Peter rolled his eyes. “The FBI isn’t really equipped to handle inter-dimensional legal proceedings.”

“Well, we’re not kidnapping anyone,” said Romanov.

Her gaze flicked to Parker and then back to the group. They had been quickly briefed on Fisk’s ultimatum, omitting only Spider-Man’s actual name from the recounting. From the Falcon’s sardonic look it was clear he thought the continued charade with the suits was a bit of a joke and that Spider-Man might as well take the mask off.

It was a sentiment Peter suspected most of the Avengers shared. The Winter Soldier probably didn’t give a damn either way, Rogers seemed sympathetic and Banner probably wished he had a mask that could fit the Hulk, but the only ones truly committed to Spider-Man’s secret identity were Spider-Man and Tony Stark.

Banner gave no indication he already knew. Neither did Strange. It came too close to seeming like
Parker had chosen sides, elevating some Avengers to the “VIP” status of having seen his face, possibly fostering resentment from those still in the dark.

Shuri was busy at work on the particle accelerator. Excusing himself with a soft-spoken apology and a commiserating smile for Parker, Banner went to join her. They still had a deadline (Peter's incessant gallows humor put the emphasis on “dead.”)

“Sorry, but—is this really the end of the world?” Romanov asked frankly. “Spider-Man’s the only one on the team who wanders around in a mask. We all handle the publicity fine.”

*That* was a matter of opinion, Peter reflected wryly. But it was one of the same issues that had existed between himself and the Avengers from his universe, who couldn’t press the issue since he was at best a freelancer, not a member of the union. Coming from a spy, it was a little surprising. Peter would have thought she’d understand but maybe spies were just hardwired to protect their own secrets and begrudge any kept by others.

Parker shifted. “You know I’m not just trying to piss you guys off,” he mumbled. “Wearing this thing.”

If Romanov was surprised by him addressing the issue directly, she didn’t show it. Instead, she arched a perfectly penciled eyebrow ever-so-slightly.

Clint whuffed a laugh. “Kid, if I could go back in time and stick a mask on my face too, I’d do it. Just because Tony passed up the chance doesn’t mean we all would. Nobody begrudges you for protecting your family.” This was said with a little bit of emphasis that wasn’t directed at Parker.

“But—” and Clint raised his eyebrows here—“it also means you’ve gotta handle a lot of things on your own. And that sucks.”

It sort of did, but Peter didn’t tell him that that was what both he and Parker liked about it, too. He’d come to appreciate the freedom that was unique to his position, now that the Accords weren’t trying to rip the hood off his face every second.

Romanov rolled her eyes, but without real rancor. “Fine, then. How would the FBI feel if Fisk were to just…disappear?”

“No,” Peter and Parker said simultaneously.

She raised another eyebrow. Parker said, a little self-consciously, “I don’t want anyone dying for this.”

“I wasn’t necessarily talking about killing, but that may not be a choice you get to make either,” Romanov pointed out. “Either it’s someone you care about or someone you don’t. Do we have any leads on this Prowler?”

She didn’t speak from callousness so much as the cold necessity of her career as a spy and agent. Secrets didn’t keep themselves.

Peter thought of Miles. He didn’t know for sure that it was Aaron Davis under that mask, though he moved much the same way. If Peter were pressed he’d guess it was the same man.

It would be so easy to tell them…if there wasn’t a chance he’d sic them on the wrong guy and if he
didn’t think there was a strong likelihood the Prowler would go down swinging, and that the
Avengers might be happy to encourage it. The Prowler Peter remembered would not allow himself
to be taken alive. His mysterious reluctance to harm the kid aside, Davis—if it really was him—had
shown less objection to endangering the boy’s family and friends.

Miles is his nephew. But Peter could only help so many. Thanos had taunted him for it; at the end,
he’d lectured Peter on the futility of trying to save everyone, only to fail and save no one at all, then
smiled with the satisfaction of someone about to prove their point.

Peter said nothing and felt like he was holding a key, only to swallow it whole.

Steve Rogers had remained quiet. Perhaps he felt he couldn’t weigh in. Captain America had been a
very short-lived secret. Barnes similarly looked as if he thought he should not be there and was
intruding on what was entirely Spider-Man’s business.

“Guys, I don’t—” Parker took a breath, and scratched at his neck. He started over. “Listen, I—I can
handle this.”

Peter looked sharply at him. Stark looked away, to the floor.

Parker hesitated, then continued: “I mean, duh, I’m not gonna kidnap anyone for him. So…this is the
only choice, right? Going public?”

“You don’t know that,” Peter told him urgently.

“It’s just—there’s no time. And even if there was some way to put him off now, the next time
Kingpin wants something he’ll just make the same threat. Won’t he?” Parker asked. He spread his
hands and Peter hated hearing the defeat in his words. “I might as well…you know.”

Parker was putting on a good face in front of the Avengers, trying to play it cooler than Peter knew
he was feeling. He thought he had to act grown-up about it. All because he wanted them to think he
could handle being one of them.

If it were really no big deal to him, Peter thought, Parker would have casually removed his hood
right then and there. Maybe with a flourish and a joke, like he was re-introducing himself. He didn’t.

Everyone subsided into an unhappy silence. But no one argued. There was no room in the equation
to play devil's advocate.

“I should go,” muttered Parker. “Take care of some stuff.”

Preparing for the explosion. He was going to go home, warn his aunt and pack his suitcases,
resigned to an inevitable fallout.

"We'll help you through this," Wanda said to him kindly. Several others gave him encouraging little
smiles that vexed Peter as much as he was admittedly touched by the sentiment. Parker nodded
minutely, then awkwardly left with a little wave.

Peter watched him go, feeling like it was his fault. Knowing it was his fault.

There was a collective, dissatisfied exhale after he’d gone. Whatever they each privately thought
about Spider-Man keeping his identity secret, no one liked Kingpin calling the shots.
Peter’s sideways look at Stark was met with a hard frown. “What do you want from me?” Stark said in a low voice, moving closer, mindful of the Avengers still lingering nearby.

“You can’t seriously be thinking of letting him do this,” Peter hissed.

“What other options are there?”

“There has to be something. At least play for time. He can not unmask! I can’t believe you’re really considering it!”

Stark spread his arms. “Do you have a better idea? You heard Fisk, holograms are off the table, we can't fake it. I'm not in the cloning game. Even if we gagged him somehow, his purple minion knows too and he wears a mask. That’s what masks do, have you ever thought of that? That maybe good guys shouldn’t even wear them? We wouldn’t find this Prowler in time to keep him from blathering.”

“If I can get to the Prowler—”

“It’s over. Now we deal with it.”

Peter shook his head angrily, catching the eyes of the milling Avengers and propelling them back with his mask's blank, white-eyed stare. He could feel the glitching starting up but barreled through it. “What the hell’s he gonna do? He can’t stay in Queens after the bomb’s hit.”

Stark exhaled, looking around. “I guess he comes here. Brings his...family along.”

“And what,” Peter said incredulously, “he lives on this base for the rest of his life? Away from Queens? Shuts himself off from the world like the rest of you?”

His voice had risen once Parker was truly out of earshot and it acted to draw the rest of the Avengers’ attention.

Stark shook his head. “No! He can still lead a normal life.” Before he’d even finished the sentence Peter had turned away with a short, harsh laugh.

“We’re not shut off from the world,” said Steve Rogers, unfolding his arms from across his chest. He wore civilian clothes instead of his suit, which was oddly disconcerting.

His voice was calm and authoritative and thoroughly got under Peter’s skin. The captain added: “He can still protect Queens. Just because people know our names doesn’t change what we do.”

“Oh?” Peter said dryly, looking at him askance. “You’re still street level heroes, yeah? Looking out for the little guy, the ones who don’t get your attention with cool robot invasions and alien attacks?”

“Yes,” said Captain America defiantly.

“So you go on patrol with the kid?”

Cap’s eyes flickered and he didn’t respond.

Peter didn’t want to get Parker in hot water with his teammates but he couldn’t help himself. He was tired.
“No? No schlepping around Queens, looking out for robbers in ski masks? Old Lady Berks can’t file a missing purse report with you? Well,” Peter pointed to himself, “they still look for me. They look for your Spider-Man. When they’re being assaulted or threatened or scared, and they look up, is it ever the Avengers they expect to see? Or just him? Your base isn’t even in New York City anymore.”

“You’re saying we’re not doing enough?” demanded Romanov with uncharacteristic heat. “It’s not enough to save the world over and over, now we have to be beat cops too?”

“I’m saying you can’t get satisfied with dissatisfaction. That’s when you start to let things slide… that’s when you start to think about ‘acceptable casualties.’ You know what makes every Spider-Man in every universe the real Spider-Man?” He gestured at the spider logo on his chest. “It’s that we don’t believe any casualty is acceptable. Yeah, we say you can’t save everyone and maybe we know that’s true, but there’s not a universe out there in which we really believe it.

“So we go help Old Lady Berks and stop stickups and protect the bodegas. That will get a lot harder if Spider-Man’s trapped here because every thug on the streets knows Spider-Man’s name and can track down everyone he’s ever known for revenge.”

“That’s something we all face,” Romanov shot back. “You think we don’t all have to worry about repercussions for the people in our lives?”

“Duh, of course you do! That’s what I’m saying! That’s what you want for him?” Peter demanded. “No more friends, no more family?”

“The Avengers are family,” said Rogers. “We are each other’s loved ones.”

Peter slanted a look at him. “Each other’s only loved ones. No offense, but those of you who stay on the compound have no lives outside the Avengers. That really sucks.”

“Some offense taken,” mumbled the Falcon. “We literally just met you.”

“Spider-Man’s a kid. You guys had more time. He hasn’t had the chance to build his own life yet.”

“I know you don’t know this, but we’ve all had to make that sacrifice,” Romanov said acidly. “It’s part and parcel of being an Avenger.”

“Then maybe he shouldn’t be one!”

Peter’s words hit silence.

After a moment he threw up his hands. “Co-dependency. That’s what this is. This is one of the reasons I never joined your little frat. You guys make me look like the poster boy for normalcy. I—”

Suddenly everything fractured and he hit his knees. The room split into a hundred visages, like he was looking out at every universe through compound eyes. The seizure spread all over until he could feel every one of his ten trillion cells trying to make a break for it. It was as painful as Olivia Octavis had hoped it would be.

Then it was over. Peter found himself laying on the floor, feeling fried and breathed raggedly into his forearm, braced against the ground.
“Can’t even finish a freaking conversation now,” he muttered into the floor.

Vaguely he became aware of a hand placed lightly on his back. He raised and saw that it belonged to Maximoff, whose face of concern was touched with compassion.

“Does this happen often?” she asked.

“Oh, yeah,” wheezed Peter.

Red energy flowed gently from her fingers, through his shoulder and the rest of his aching back. It didn’t dispel the pain so much as infuse a calming sensation that gradually overtook it, corraling his atoms into a semblance of their proper place. Soon he’d regained his breath. Muttering his thanks, he lurched to his feet and brushed at his suit.

“What the hell was that?” said Barton uneasily.

“Oh, my atoms are fussing at me again,” Peter said, resisting the urge to rub at his ribs. “They don’t like being in the wrong universe. They keep trying to go back without me.”

No one laughed.

“Can it kill you?” said Black Widow, looking askance at the rest of them.

“It escalates,” Peter said shortly.

He was about to say something else when he staggered again.

This time, he blacked out.

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Peter woke up to the fluorescent white light of the quantum chamber. He groaned, struggling to a sitting position on the bench and putting his head between his knees like a seasick patient.

“You know, it’s lucky Wanda was around to shut that seizure down before it could get worse,” a voice from outside the chamber commented. “There was barely enough of you in one piece to carry back.”

Peter turned his head to glimpse beyond his knee to where Stark was leaning against the microalloy glass, arms crossed.

“How long was I out?” Peter asked.

“Thirty minutes.”

“Six hours to go.”

“Not for you.” Stark unfolded his arms and walked over to the control panel. “You will be staying here until Banner and Shuri’s rock tumbler is ready to roll. You are way too unstable.” He tapped
something on a readout and looked at Peter from beneath his brow. “And in case you’re tempted to leave and go yell at everybody, I’ve bolted the entrance.”

Peter looked and saw strips of graphene over the glass door.

“Did you seriously just lock me in my room?” Peter demanded.

Stark held up a finger. “OK, yes, but this is inarguably for your own good. This chamber is literally keeping you from dissolving into ten trillion separate pieces. I cannot possibly be the bad guy here.”

Peter stood up with a dark look. “Why are you letting this happen?”

Defensively, Stark said: “Parker made his choice. No,” he told the other man's scowl, "of course I don’t like it, but I’m respecting it! Isn’t this what we spent an entire therapy session yammering about?”

“I told you to stop treating him like a science experiment that might turn on you, not stand aside as he ruins his life. An ultimatum isn’t a choice!”

“Yet you’re acting like it is, ‘cause I don’t see a choice. Seriously, what else are we supposed to do?” Stark said in frustration. “I’m open to suggestions!”

“Tell Fisk you’ll do it.”

“No,” said Stark flatly.

“It might buy time.”

“It won’t. That's why it's called a deadline, Pete. We’re gonna use the time we have instead of wasting it bargaining for more.” The billionaire checked his phone. “The Avengers are gonna take a field trip to the FBI. If they retract a deal it could take the wind out of Fisk’s sails.”

“Then he’ll spill the beans out of spite. The FBI won’t give a damn, they’re dying to know who Spider-Man is.”

“You know, the kid’s identity isn’t the only thing on the line, here,” Stark said irritably. “Fisk has to be taken down. The guy’s been building a criminal empire under our nose, he’s got Chitauri tech, he’s got strings tied all around the city. The second we get the FBI to back down, we’re going after Fisk ourselves.”

Peter huffed a frustrated sigh and paced the length of the glass like an angry tiger at the zoo. He needed to think, he just needed a few minutes to think. He could always weasel out of a bad spot. Part of getting back up every time you got knocked down was thinking of a way to avoid getting knocked down again.

“This place isn’t so bad,” said Stark, sweeping his hand around. “We have a sauna, a gym, a movie theater. He’ll impress the hell out of any girl he brings here. Beats paying rent. What’s so noble about a crackerbox in Queens?”

He was trying to convince himself and wasn’t succeeding. Peter heard it in his voice.

“If he does this,” said Peter, stopping before him, “if he unmask, it doesn’t matter if he can do his
laundry on-site. Do you really see him graduating high school? Going to college, getting married, having a family? When everyone knows exactly who he is? He won’t do it. I know he won’t.”

“He might,” Stark insisted, though doubtfully.

“Stark, my identity is still a secret and the thought of kids scared me shitless. I worry constantly about my wife. Her freedom’s on the line too. Knowing Parker, do you think he’d ever subject someone else to that?”

Despite the differing attitudes and, well, cosmetic disparities, he knew he and Parker were more alike than they were different. Their foundations were the same, built on Ben Parker’s gentle counsel and May’s fierce warmth; so, too, were their values. He could predict Parker’s life trajectory as clearly as if it were defined on a map. He’d be a good hero still, an optimistic one, but he’d lose out on everything he’d ever wanted.

Peter had warned him against allowing his superhero identity to be his only one. Now it could end up that way regardless. Because of him.

Stark had stopped at Peter’s mention of his wife, then made a frustrated swing of his arms. “There is nothing to be done here! We can’t memory wipe, can’t go back in time again. Fisk has us over a barrel. The least we can do is see that he’s put out of action.”

Peter wanted to argue, but he couldn’t. He had nothing to offer, no plan to give Parker any alternative, just impotent anger at the way things were happening. This universe had been doing fine until he’d landed in it and now he was powerless to even fix the damage he’d caused here the way he at least hoped to do in his own universe.

How ironic was that? Peter would get to sail away and return home to a city that didn’t know his name, run back to a wife, go back to a life. And Parker would lose any chance of that.

Maybe Stark saw the guilt he felt, because the billionaire exhaled and stepped back. “We’ll weather this out,” he promised. “Just relax. Banner and Shuri say they’ve got things figured out and it’s just a matter of fine-tuning the programming. I’ll put on some music. Pepper’s making a wedding playlist, you’ll love it.”

He pressed something in a small dock to the side of the energy chamber. The strains of “I’ll Make Love to You” from Boyz II Men filtered through speakers placed throughout the larger room. Peter stared flatly at Stark through the glass.

Hiding a small cough, Stark fiddled with his sunglasses. “We’re still making adjustments. Anyway, stay here.”

At the doorway, he paused. “Everything’s gonna be fine,” he said over his shoulder.

“Tony, you don’t even believe that.”

Stark grimaced and stepped out the door.

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Peter might have liked the chance to sleep again—he was getting so tired of fighting the glitching all
the time—but his worry prodded at him as persistently as the atomic firing.

By now the Avengers were on their way to FBI Headquarters. Soon Parker would be unmasked. Peter hoped he would not try to beat Kingpin to the punch and do it before the industrialist's announcement in an attempt to take initiative. His chance for a normal life would be over in—Peter glanced at the clock on the wall—five and a quarter hours.

The glitching had somewhat subsided after the time spent in the quantum chamber. He was getting more and more tired and it showed in atoms that were still, even with the “boost” the chamber gave them, shivering in place. Shuri and Banner were working at a feverish pace to finish their accelerator.

Was this how Miles had felt, tied to the chair, frustrated by his inability to stop the worst?

Peter groaned.

He hadn’t even told them about Aaron Davis, who may or may not, at this moment, be standing at Fisk’s side. All because he was sure it would end in blood. Parker did not want anyone to die. Neither did Peter.

But what were his obligations to a man who would threaten innocent people? Just because Peter knew he had a nephew he loved, had died for in another universe? Was it just his old grief over Ben Parker rearing its head?

If the Prowler did not change, he was destined for the same fate as Miles’s uncle. What if Peter could spare this Miles the same loss?

…Then there was Vanessa and Richard. Knowing they were only a magic portal away now, Fisk would stop at nothing to drag them, possibly kicking and screaming, into this world. If the Avengers would not let him use Parker’s identity as a hostage, he’d find another.

Peter could not save himself, Vanessa and Richard, Parker’s secret identity and everyone he cared about, and the Prowler all in one…could he? Just as Thanos had accused, he had an inability to sacrifice anyone else. You just can’t save everyone. But…Spider-Man always tried.

Miles had done it. He’d figured it out. He’d gotten out of that chair and taken that leap of faith, finding control where before there was none.

Maybe, despite his anxiety, he'd been tired enough to let his mind go drowsy when an idea suddenly bloomed in his mind, as fully-formed as if it had simply walked into his head.

Peter shot up straight, pulse rocketing.

His mind raced. The idea was a little crazy. It could go so wrong. It was a gamble. It was such a gamble. But—if there was any way, this was the only, only way.

Peter cleared the space to the palladium microalloy glass in a blink. “HEY!” he hollered, banging on the wall. “Hey! Anyone still here? Lemme out!”

His pounding must have sounded like distant thunder from the outside of the glass. He waited. No one appeared.

Peter stared down the glass wall of the chamber that was keeping him alive.
There was no time. None.

He’d just have to hold out against the glitching, and place his trust in Banner and Shuri.

Unexpectedly, “(I’ve Had the) Time of My Life” came up on Stark’s playlist. He could just picture Patrick Swayze lifting Jennifer Grey for the big finale. Not exactly the badass music he would have liked to act the soundtrack for his renewed drive. Where was “Eye of the Tiger” when you needed some adrenaline?

He’d make do. On the crooning words “and I owe it all to you…” he reared back on one leg and delivered a kick to the wall. Small fissures blossomed across the glass. Palladium microalloy glass was stronger than steel, and surely Stark had added a secret ingredient or two of his own to the recipe. This wall was inches thick. He kicked it again. Such were the properties of this glass that it actually bulged rather than shatter, turning the wall convex, like a massive bubble.

“Hey!” he heard someone shout. He looked up to see Sam Wilson, Barnes and Rogers striding quickly inside, alerted to the sound of the chamber breaking. Maybe there was a security camera nearby.

“Oh hey, what’s up?” asked Peter cheerily. “Guess you missed the bus to the FBI.”

Wilson surveyed the damage and drawled, “We figured you might try to do something stupid.”

“No, I’m actually trying to do something really smart. You could just let me out.” Peter gestured at the graphene-barred door and added brightly: "I have a plan now."

“If it involves leaving that fishbowl, no you don’t,” said Wilson.

“What plan is it?” said Captain America. Peter noticed he wore his suit now, and his shield. The Falcon wore his wings folded behind his back like a steampunk character. “Stop kicking that! Tell us the plan and maybe we can carry it out for you.”

That was a totally reasonable request and absolutely impossible.

“I don’t really have time to explain it,” Peter told them, “but trust me, I have to be the one to do it. No one else can. So let me out!”

“No! That aquarium’s keeping you alive!” the Falcon snapped. “And it’s expensive!”

“Tell Stark he can bill me,” Peter said with the carelessness of the eternally destitute. He kicked the wall again and again in rapid succession. The bulge began to fracture.

“Just what the hell do you think you’re going to do?” Barnes demanded. “You need that chamber!”

“The chamber and I have some irreconcilable differences,” said Peter, slamming his foot down.

This time the glass finally began to shatter. The Avengers drew closer but out of the range of any possible shards.

“Don’t do this,” Rogers said in his best trying-to-diffuse-the-situation tone. “Please. I know you feel responsible, but putting yourself in worse danger won't help.”
“How is he so strong?” Wilson muttered to Barnes. “Did we know he was this strong? Nobody but the Hulk could get out of there.”

Cap squared his shoulders to the Spider-Man he had just met. “If you try to leave, we’re going to have to stop you. You could get killed—and jeopardize our Spider-Man.”

Then venom-strike me right now, Peter said to Miles, in his memory, truly hoping the kid would do it. Or turn invisible, on command, so you can get past me.

Peter shook his head. He could offer them no more assurance than his simple conviction. “I’d lay it all out for you, but honestly, I don’t even know if it will work. So I’m gonna save my breath. Just tell Spider-Man not to unmask before the time runs out.” He pointed at them with a suited finger. “You tell him that!”

With one final effort, Peter drew his leg back and kicked the wall. It split like a giant had reached down and dragged a knife through it. Glass shattered everywhere and the three Avengers hastily hopped back.

Peter stepped out.

He dropped two feet down to the floor to stand among the remains of the wall.

They formed a barrier between him and the door.

Overhead, Bill Medley and Jennifer Warnes warbled together: "And I've searched through every open door..."

Peter gave an aggravated sigh. “You could just trust me.”

“If you’re anything like our Spider-Man,” said Cap, “then I do. But you can’t leave. The chamber’s busted but we can get Wanda back here. If you go, there’s nothing to keep your glitching in check.”

“I’ll keep it in check.”

Barnes’s expression was faintly sardonic. “Because you’re doing such a good job of it already?”

Peter glanced at the clock. He probably should have stretched in the tank. Well, his hammies would just have to suffer. “Listen, I appreciate the concern. Like, it’s actually touching. But I’m not an Avenger. You can’t keep me here.”

Cap said calmly, “We’re going to have to try.”

He raised his shield to a defensive position. Wilson unfolded his wings, and Barnes shifted his right foot to the back.

“You guys look super cool,” Peter commented, putting his hands on his hips and nodding approvingly. “Like a movie poster. Just wish I had some cooler music than Stark’s wedding playlist.”

The music changed. “Dancing Queen” from ABBA now took over.

Peter nodded thoughtfully in time to the music.
“I can work with this,” he said, and crouched.

Chapter End Notes

oh dang this got long. my bad. also there are a bunch of Wilsons in the Marvel universe.

congrats to Spider-Verse on their little gold guy! Well deserved.

thanks for yer great comments!
The opening trills of “Dancing Queen” reverberated off the concrete floor and walls.

Peter quickly surveyed the area. “I was hoping for ‘Eye of the Tiger,’” he confessed, indicating the music blasting from the speakers while mentally estimating the distance to the door. The larger room outside the chamber was an open, industrial-looking bay with fifty-foot high walls. “But I guess that’s not on a lot of wedding playlists. It’s Vanessa Carlton or Black Sabbath for Tony Stark.”

Standing between him and the door in an inadvertent Charlie's Angels action pose were Steve Rogers, Sam Wilson, and Bucky Barnes, each one a soldier and veteran of war. It was a stroke of rare good fortune he didn’t have to worry about Thor, and Banner would hopefully stay busy.

“So you got stuck with babysitting duty, huh?” he asked them. “I have to warn you, I’m a handful.”

Barnes tensed and asked, “Are you really going to fight your way out?”

“If I have to, Sergeant.” Peter rotated his shoulders. “You can still move aside.”

That earned him one of the Winter Soldier’s patented hard eye rolls. “This is stupid.”

Well, that much they agreed on.

ABBA sang, “…you can jive, having the time of your life…”

It would be one thing if he just had to get past them, but Peter needed to make a pit stop by Stark’s lab and couldn’t have anyone following hot on his trail. Plus, he needed to scope out the transportation situation, which hopefully didn’t end with the Quinjet. So the level of effort involved was regrettably promoted to Incapacitate. Neither side intended to actually hurt the other but they weren’t going to stop at ‘please,’ either.

“He,” started Captain America, when Peter suddenly struck.

He went for the legs. Peter shot a web at Cap’s ankles and was about to yank back when Rogers slammed the edge of his shield down on the web strand, pinning it to the floor and cutting off the force of Peter’s pull. It couldn’t slice through the web, however, and now the shield’s edge was stuck to the strand.

So Peter changed direction and yanked up. The shield bounced like Cap had dropped it on a trampoline and it made a satisfying *clang* as it crashed against the Avenger’s helmet. Rogers fell back a step and Peter fired simultaneous webs at his foot, sealing it to the floor, and another at the shield, yanking it from his grasp to come sailing into Peter's hand.

“I always wanted to play Frisbee with this thing,” said Peter admiringly.

Then he noticed the little device anchored on the shield. Before he could shot-put the thing away, it detonated with a blue flash. He shielded his face instinctively but the device merely expelled a stasis field, obviously derived from the Chitauri tech, that suspended him as though he were riding the Willy Wonka bubbles to nowhere.
“We weren’t going to use a stun grenade on a seizure risk,” Sam Wilson said huffily, noting his surprise.

“Can’t blame a guy for flinching,” said Peter. “Dancing Queen” burbled through the gelatinous miasma as if playing from underwater.

The Avengers drew forward. Peter was startled to see Rogers was free of the web that had pinned his foot to the floor.

Web fluid didn’t dissolve for a full day! Peter was indignant. “How’d—?”

Cap waggled a little vial Peter recognized as his web solvent. “A gift from our Spider-Man. For when his hands are full.”

“Cute,” Peter grumbled, hanging in the air like Peter Pan and wearing about as much spandex.

His web strand was still attached to the shield. With a swing of his arm, Peter fought through the thick miasma to whip the shield hard at the ceiling high overhead. It shot up with a whirring sound, attached to the strand still attached to Peter. The tractor beam moved with him until the shield’s momentum carried him out of reach of the transparent blue muck like someone dragging fish bait through Jell-O.

Sailing up, Peter landed lightly on the ceiling, catching the shield in its rebound from the concrete. “You can tell Thor I stole that move from him,” he shouted from fifty feet overhead.

Barnes threw another stasis grenade at him and Peter hurled the shield at it. Midair, the two collided with a dull bonk and, detonating on impact to the disco beat, the device suspended the shield thirty feet off the ground.

“Guess it doesn't always return, huh?” Peter commented. The shield's defiance of every law of physics had long aggravated him.

“Are you enjoying this?” Wilson demanded.

“I take my yuks where I can get them.” Peter lassoed the shield and maneuvered it further out of reach, bringing it gently bouncing to rest near the ceiling, and mused, “Hey, it's not often someone's just trying to make me sweat, not bleed. Kind of like a high-stakes workout. I'm adding ABBA to my gym playlist.”

He did not mention that it was, so far, the only song on that playlist. He'd trim down, okay?

Wilson's wings fired up and he blasted from the ground. Peter didn't wait for the Falcon to come to him and launched down, intending to sail past him and web him up from below.

The Avenger rocketed upwards, then suddenly pressed something and Redwing shot out from his back like a missile. Peter yelped in surprise and, twisting in midair before the thing could tattoo him a third eye, scissor-kicked the little machine like a penalty shot. It went whirring with a pitiable R2-D2 squeal to crash into a wall and clatter to the floor in a heap of metal.

Wilson hollered angrily but he was too close and Peter's trajectory was off course now and they were going to crash—

With arms flung out like a tightrope walker Peter skittered down the Falcon's back like he was a rope bridge, then leaped off to land in a superhero crouch that would have made Deadpool proud. Barnes and Rogers approached warily.
The Falcon pivoted with better agility than Peter would have credited the wings for and sailed down to a sliding stop. “Look what you did to my Redwing!” he said furiously.

Peter actually did feel kind of guilty about the little guy. “Stark can fix him,” he said, “But I’m not getting hit by a drone twice. That’s just embarrassing.”

Eyes on Wilson, Peter casually ducked a stasis grenade that Barnes chucked at his head from behind. It struck the floor and detonated perilously close to Wilson’s foot. The Falcon jumped back and made an indignant gesture at the Winter Soldier, who shrugged. Cap looked exasperated, like a dad moderating squabbling kids.

Peter tapped his temple. “Spidey sense,” he reminded them. “Yours has it too.”

“What are you two, precogs?” muttered the Falcon.

Peter preened a little. “Just call me Minority Report.”

“Is there literally any movie either of you hasn't seen?”

Barnes and Rogers rushed in. Light reflected dully from the Winter Soldier’s black arm as he swung it in a grappling motion, trying to pin Peter by the shoulders.

Rogers slid behind Peter and soon the shoe was on the other foot: in a real fight Peter would have dispatched them with some hearty Lucha Libre maneuvers—maybe he should stop getting all his moves and some of his one-liners from pro wrestling—but here it was like he was fighting with both hands webbed behind his back. He didn't want to truly piss off the people helping him, as he'd need to come back to this place, so he thoughtfully parried their strikes while wondering if Rogers only had one vial of solvent. Well, only one way to find out...

“Dancing Queen, feel the beat of the tambourine...” Was it just Peter's imagination, or were they fighting in time to the music?

The three Avengers were willing to put a little more elbow grease into putting him down. Rogers tried to kick his legs out from under him. Peter bobbed up lightly in a kind of figure skater's split jump and thumped one foot in the chests of both Barnes in front of him and Rogers at his back. The old soldiers staggered back, grunting hard but not as winded as Peter expected; he probably could have put a little more mustard on that one.

The Falcon's shadow darkened the ground. Instead of flying at him directly as Peter would have anticipated, he went just beyond and flared his metal wings, creating a barrier that stopped Peter short, then propelled backwards in a steam-shoveling action, feet just a foot off the ground and wings angled to bear down on Spider-Man.

Peter shot out his palm and it acted as a speed bump to knock the Falcon up and away.

Just then, though, a blast of glitching unexpectedly knocked him off balance. Still buoyed by the quantum chamber, it was over in a flash but by then Barnes and Rogers were back. Barnes got his metal arm around Peter in a wrestler's grip and Rogers knocked out his legs, sending Peter to his knees. Then both of them worked to pin Peter's arms, wrist already raised to deliver a web, behind his back.

“Just stop!” Cap growled. “You're going to hurt yourself!”

“Or us,” muttered Barnes.
Peter wriggled against their grip. Barnes and Rogers strained to keep him pinned. Over his shoulder he caught a better look at Barnes's arm. "Woah, vibranium?" he said appreciatively. "You've leveled up. That's a custom paint job. How'd you get on the Wakandan VIP list?"

"T'Challa tried to kill him," Wilson said casually, taking out a pair of Stark's nano tech binders, "and apparently regrets it." Peter didn't need spider-sense to feel the Winter Soldier rolling his eyes at Wilson. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Cap frown, possibly wondering why Spider-Man was taking this development so lightly.

Peter eyed the binders. Those nano tech restraints were a bigger threat than all three of the Avengers combined. Knowing Stark, a considerable amount of adamantium was involved.

"Dancing Queen" wound down and Peter wondered regretfully whether a slow dance was coming.

Instead, to his delight, the next song in line was Hanson's "MMMBop." Deadpool would just be living his best life right now. Of course, if he were here, things wouldn't be going quite so bloodlessly.

All three Avengers groaned, drowning out Peter's snigger. It was a strong reaction considering how two of them had been on ice for the better part of the boy band era.

"Okay, now I know Pepper's messing with Tony," said Rogers.

Short of breath from the effort of keeping Peter's arms pinned behind his back, Barnes groused: "Can somebody shut off the freakin' playlist?"

"Don't you dare," said Peter.

"I'm going to call Wanda," Cap told him reassuringly. "She'll come back and handle the glitching. This is for the best."

Wilson was approaching with the binders, but Peter had what he needed by then. "Yeah, it is," he agreed, then said suddenly: "Actually, wait! Hang on—"

They waited expectantly. Still on his knees, Peter nodded along to the music.

"Well?" said Wilson with impatience.

"Hang on a sec!"

"The hell you—"

"Okay here it comes—wait for it—" Peter rocked onto his heels, bracing for it— "Mmm...BOP!" he yelled, rearing back and planting both feet in Wilson's chest right on musical cue. Barnes and Rogers lost their balance against the sudden weight displacement and Peter heaved forward, easily dislodging their grips and throwing them over his back to tumble in front of him in a move he'd definitely appropriated from wrestling.

"Ba du bop, ba duba bop!"

He shot webs at them both and yanked hard, sending them spinning back in the strand like yo-yos. "I kind of hate that I know all the words to this. And Stark's a bald-faced liar if he says he doesn't."

Wilson made to propel out of immediate reach. Peter, an Avenger now cocooned in each hand, shoved them at the Falcon. The sticky webs stuck to him too, resembling giant weird floaties on a
child's arms, and all three bowled backwards.

"Were you just waiting to do that?" Barnes demanded even as he struggled against the web restraints.

"When you get a soundtrack, you make the most of it," Peter lectured him.

He made short work of webbing Wilson up alongside the other two, ignoring the curses from him and Barnes. The Falcon's wings were not easily removed and he decided against trying, instead webbing them up solidly.

Grossed out, Wilson snapped over his shoulder: "Dude, stop! You are getting web all up in there!"

"Sore loser."

"I really hope this stuff ain't coming out of you."

"No, real spiders spin webs from their butts. If you see me 'bout to moon you, then it's time to worry."

"I think I'd worry anyway."

Cap looked exasperated. "We'll get free again. You can't get to my solvent through the web."

"Nah." Peter stood back, revealing the vial of solvent in his hand like a magician producing the missing card from the deck. "Thanks for confirming there's just the one, though." They couldn't see his grin through the mask. "How often do I have to tell people to watch the hands?"

The ghost of a smile tugged at Steve Rogers's mouth. "Well, I guess you've earned this," he said sardonically, then turned serious. "For your sake, and for the sake of our Spider-Man, I hope it works."

Peter could tell he really did hope that. He had to hope that, or else believe he'd failed to stop Peter from barreling into a catastrophe. "I'll be fine," he promised, hiding one hand with a glitching finger behind his back. "I seem to recall you pulling a stunt like this back in 1943. What if you hadn't?" He glanced at Barnes, who'd turned his eyes to the floor. "What if you'd listened to everyone who told you otherwise?"

Rogers had nothing to say to that. Peter took a step back. "Remember, tell Spider-Man not to unmask. Do it as soon as Banner or Shuri find you. I'll call them once I'm gone. Do not come after me—I mean it. You will just make it harder. I'm serious: back off. Tell the rest of them too."

Looking up, he saw the shield still suspended in the gravity field near the ceiling. "How long does that stasis last?" he asked.

Rogers sighed. "About an hour."

"Well, you're not directly under it, so you'll be fine. It'd be like dropping a dinner plate off the Empire State building."

He made to step for the doorway, then paused, struck by a thought. Quickly, he jogged over to the control panel for the quantum chamber and leaned over the dock.

"What are you doing now?" Wilson grumped.

"Adding a little something to Stark's playlist," Peter said distractedly. "Consider it a wedding gift."
Then he stepped back, satisfied. “There we go.”

“MMMBop” was fading out. It was replaced by a whispering voice that rose suddenly to a crescendo:

“Let the bodies hit the floor. Let the bodies hit the floor. Let the bodies hit the floor. Let the bodies hit the...FLOOOOOOOOORRRR!”

“Have fun with this,” Peter said, trotting back past them and pointing to the ceiling, from which earsplitting heavy metal now blared. “When it's done, it's going to play Vanessa Carlton's ‘Ordinary Day’ on repeat. Wish me luck!”

“You suck,” Peter heard one of them mutter as he left them behind. Then, grudgingly, they added: “Good luck.”

After leaving Stark's lab, Peter jogged outside fiddling with the transmitter he'd filched and hoping there was a car nearby with manual locks. Much as he'd like to take Stark's Ferrari for a spin, the billionaire was going to be pissed enough and Peter didn't have time to hack through the car's security system.


And...a classic blue Volkswagen Beetle. Well, if that didn't just scream—or, in the case of its owner, politely state—Steve Rogers.

Peter stared around. Weren't there company cars? Ah, but they wouldn't have manual locks. He sighed and jogged to the Beetle, figuring it'd be easier to parallel park than the minivan. Hopefully Cap wouldn't be too irate, but Peter was aware of the tab he was racking up on their good will.

It didn't take long to pick the lock with the thin metal rod he'd swiped from Stark's lab and bent into a bobby pin shape. At least he could return the thing without busting open its windows. Craning his head around the steering column, he cracked the casing open and found the starter and power wires. A moment later, the Beetle spluttered to life.

Two tense hours later, the NYC cityscape loomed ahead and Fisk's raspy growl was in Peter's ear. “Glad you came around,” the Kingpin said.

“An ultimatum's an ultimatum,” said Peter, “and I want to go home.”

That, at least, was true.

Fisk sounded amused. “Did you fly the coop?”

“The Avengers don't know I'm gone. By the time they find out, well...it'll be done. Or near enough.”

"How do I know they're gonna respect this deal? What’s stopping them from whisking Vanessa and
Richard away some other time?"

"That won't happen."

"It had better not," Fisk said in a low, warning rumble. "You have no idea what will come if it does." Then his tone changed. "So how come you're so keen to keep Parker's secret, and not the Avengers? This ain't even your universe. You're gonna go home, what do you care whether Parker makes the evening news?"

"I owe him. But I'm not just doing this for Spider-Man," said Peter, his eyes on the road. "I'm also doing it for Vanessa and Richard Fisk."

This was not the answer Kingpin was expecting. During his surprised silence, Peter steered down the EZ-Pass express lane to pass through the Lincoln Tunnel, the main artery leading into New York City, praying traffic congestion would be light for once. It moved with the typical cacophony of horns and heedless jaywalkers, but it moved.

Peter said, "I know what happened to them in the last universe. It happened to them in this one, and it's going to happen in mine, because in my universe, Wilson Fisk doesn't know what's coming. You do, and I think you won't let it happen again. This might be the best chance to save them.

"But," he added, "you still have to keep the bargain. I go to my dimension and bring back Vanessa and Richard, you zip your lips. Everyone wins. And you said it yourself: the Prowler won't be fooled by a hologram, and that's the only gimmick we've got."

"I told you, a deal's a deal." Kingpin didn't comment further on Peter's motives, but Peter's mention of gimmicks seemed to give him pause. "But I want insurance. I want to know ain't tricks up your sleeve. For all I know, you might have robots or clones or somethin'. So my Prowler's going with you."

Peter's pulse quickened. "Those weren't the terms!" he snapped, slamming on the brakes at a sudden red light.

"They are now. What's it matter, John Doe? Don't want the supervision?" Fisk said cuttingly. "Sides, if I know me, you're gonna need all the help you can get. Stealing from me ain't a one-man job. And if you leave him there in your universe," he added with menace, "if he's not back here to tell me, to my face, that they're the real deal, well...you can guess. And I've given him a code, so I know he's not a hologram."

"It won't be a problem," Peter said roughly. "Fine. Tell me where to meet you."

"No. My man will come to you." His tone brooked no argument and Peter knew there would be no convincing Fisk to meet in person until Vanessa and Richard breathed in this dimension again. "The Prowler will be at the...Sanctum, is it called? in half an hour. Once you're gone I'll let your wizard know where to go to open the portal again on this side. You just have to make the train back."

"I think we're owed an extension on the deadline," said Peter.

Fisk grunted a small laugh. "You know what? Sure. For schlepping back from the Hudson Valley, you're rewarded with another hour. That gives you four. Never let it be said I'm not a reasonable man."

Peter was glad the jackass couldn't hear his eyes roll.

"Besides, I figure I owe ya. If it weren't for you, the collider would have failed me and I'd be back
where I started. I'm getting my wife and son back—and this way, I get to keep them.”

Peter suppressed a chill.

Ned was waiting for him when he pulled up before the Sanctum fifteen minutes later, hurriedly gesturing him to park in the empty spot he'd been standing in to the irritation of every other motorist trying to park there.

Peter executed his fastest ever parallel park and sprang from the Beetle, slamming the door shut. “Thanks for coming on short notice,” he called.

“You stole Captain America's car?” Ned asked, frankly admiring. He pulled the door open and Peter grinned at him before hurtling inside.

Wong stood in the tiled foyer, his normally placid face tense. “I hope you know what you're doing,” he said by way of greeting.

“Me too,” Peter admitted, stopping before him. He quickly updated them on the conversation he'd had with Kingpin, and the man's insistence the Prowler tag along.

The first hour-and-fifty minutes of Peter's drive from the Hudson Valley had been spent on the phone with Wong and then Ned; the former's incredulity giving way to cautious incentive the more Peter talked, the latter determined to help from the moment he'd picked up the phone. When Peter had asked after his alternate self, Ned had reported that Parker had already warned him about the bomb about to hit Forest Hills.

“Why didn't you tell Peter about this?” Ned asked him uncertainly, once they all stood together. “I mean, Parker. Maybe he could help.”

“He's got enough to worry about. And if it goes wrong, ah—better if he's here. I know this is a lot to ask,” he said, suddenly concerned.

Ned shook his head. Peter noticed he'd caved and bought the new Jordans he and Parker had been admiring. “Dude, what'd I say? I'm the guy in the chair! Or out of it, this time.”

For a moment Peter was struck by what a friend Parker had in Ned Leeds, and smiled at him.

“Here,” he said to Wong, producing a package wrapped in a paper Trader Joe's bag he'd found in streetside recycling. Unclasping his hands, Wong shook its content open and examined it closely. “Is that enough?”

For a moment the sorcerer frowned consideringly, turning it over in his hands. “I believe so,” he said gruffly, “but it's not ideal. In better circumstances I would want more time to study this.”

“What about these circumstances?”

Wong cracked a small smirk. “I am no poor sorcerer myself. It will be done.” With a wave of his
hand and some golden symbols, he made the bag and its content disappear into a magical “pocket” for safekeeping, as the Prowler would consider its presence strange. Then he grew serious. “And what of your end? Whether it will work is entirely contingent on a leap of faith.”

Ned looked at Peter, waiting for the answer.

Peter couldn’t help a lopsided smile at the irony. “Sometimes a leap of faith is all you’ve got left.”

“Yes...but it's a long way down. That's why I'm concerned.”

That's why Peter was too. “Leave it to me.”

“I suppose,” drawled Wong, “I'll have to. Once I leave the Sanctum, you know, I will have to recall Stephen Strange. This place must not remain unguarded for long.”

“I'll guard it,” grinned Ned.

“Oh gee, Strange will have to house-sit?” Peter said innocently. “Bummer.”

Wong rolled his eyes. “Yes, it will be so inconvenient to get one of the Avengers out of your hair, particularly the one who would be in the best position to try and stop you.”

“Not from here he isn’t.”

“You realize I shall have to answer for my part in this?”

“You're not an Avenger. What're they gonna do, kick you out?”

Ned nodded thoughtfully, sticking his bottom lip out. “Starting the alternates. I like it.” He looked at Wong. “Sides...we're doing this for Peter. Our Peter, I mean. And for the lady and her kid.”

Though Wong exhaled deeply, Peter knew he was on board. “Wong,” said Peter, "your next karaoke's on me.”

“Damn right it is,” muttered the sorcerer, not without grudging humor.

"Everyone's clear on what they're doing?"

Both Ned and Wong nodded. Ned took a deep breath and checked his phone nervously. “He'll be here soon. You're sure he can't eavesdrop now, right?”

“If he's trying, he hears only a discussion about Ben & Jerrys ice cream. Fool us twice, shame on us,” Wong said dryly. “But it's better that he doesn't see you.” The sorcerer waved open a local portal that appeared to cut into a park. “I'll get you once he's gone.”

Stepping towards the portal, keeping careful distance from the spell's razor-sharp edges, Ned looked back at Peter. “Good luck,” he said with rare solemnity.

“You too, Ned.”

With a small wave, Ned walked forward and the golden gate fizzled shut behind him.

Peter took a deep breath. Wong looked at him askance, then squared his shoulders to the door. “How did you predict—?”

“Have you ever seen Inception?” Peter asked him.
“How many of your ideas come from movies?”

“Oh,” Peter blew out a breath, “probably too many of them.”

His hand started glitching, as though his atoms were testing the waters. He shoved it into the pocket of his coat but Wong missed nothing, and turned his concerned frown forward. Too late to change course.

The difficulties of this plan weren't lost on him. Now, in one of the first quiet moments since he'd kicked open the aquarium, doubts closed in. It was every bit as precarious a leap of faith as Wong feared. He'd always been a good Spider-Man—if not a great Peter Parker—but he'd messed up before, too; what made him so determined now?

Well, like he told Miles: that last little bit of time before everything went to crap was where he did his best work. And things were, inarguably, getting there.

A shadow fell over the glass in the doorway.

In his mind's eye Peter saw Miles, hyperventilating, fading in and out of invisibility in sheer panic as his uncle's shadow passed over the windows of May Parker's house like a wraith; afraid, for the first time in his life, of the family he'd always loved. Though it had happened mere days ago, it felt a much longer time.

Unenthusiastic about admitting the man to this place of ancient study, Wong made a stiff gesture and the door opened.

In stepped the Prowler, wearing his heavy armor and his hood, drawing a curious look from a woman walking her terrier. The door shut behind him.

It felt odd for an enemy to cross the threshold here, like the very nature of the Sanctum should repel him. Drawing to a stop, Prowler looked between the two men standing silently before him and said, in a low, heavily filtered growl, “Let's get this over with.”

“Fine,” said Peter, exhaling.

Reconciling the masked villain who'd balked at harming Spider-Man with the same man who'd given up the kid's identity to Kingpin was difficult. Where did this man draw the line?

Both of them faced the sorcerer, who nodded and drew forward with obvious resignation.

“Oh, that reminds me.” Wong drew his hands from his sleeves and stretched one out to Peter. “One of your hairs, please.”

Peter blinked at him. “Uh, okay—taken from the root, or—?”

“Any length will do. It's not a drug test,” said Wong with a trace of amusement.

Peter plucked out a hair. One of the gray ones, he hoped—he had too many of those as it was.

Wong took the strand of hair, which glowed brightly and folded into the larger circle that the sorcerer now sketched in the air, face tight with concentration. The Prowler's mask was impassive but he had to be impressed at the sparking gold spell that cut a swath through the fabric of this world to reach another. Wong stood back and all three men gazed at the portal.

Beyond it, Peter saw his dimension. The one he'd been trying to reach for—how long had it been,
now? And now, astonishingly, he wasn't too happy to see it.

Clearly the Prowler was waiting for him to go first.

“Well,” Peter muttered, “let's get to it.”

And he stepped through.

Chapter End Notes

I really enjoy the idea that MCU Peter is still new enough to the Avengers at this point that it was never really clarified to Sam Wilson just where those webs were coming from.

While doing a bit of research I watched a video analyzing Spidey's fighting style in the PS4 game which compared some of his maneuvers to Lucha Libre wrestling. Now I'm entertained by the thought that Spider-Man, who isn't a trained martial artist and relies more on spider-sense and speed than technique, watches a lot of pro wrestling for research purposes and probably gets sucked into the theatrics. Peter B doesn't just watch nature documentaries.

If you're curious about Spidey's strength he can lift 10 tons easily and I think can go as high as 20-25 depending on circumstance? He's had greater feats of strength than that in moments of need or high emotion; it's hard to pinpoint his limit when he doesn't approach it often.

Thanks for reading! I’d love to hear your thoughts. Thanks to everyone for their comments. :)
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Three hours later

They stepped through the gold-rimmed portal into freezing rain.

Glitching badly, Peter kept Vanessa and Richard ahead of him. Fisk's wife shivered in the weather and immediately wrapped herself tighter in her coat, which was fine for the milder New York winter they’d left behind but held up poorly against the sleet. She kept a white-knuckled grip on the arm of her son, who bowed his head against the frozen rain and looked sideways for the menacing silhouette of his father.

The rain battered against Peter's glasses and he wiped off the lenses, hoping they were weather-proof. He was breathing hard. Drawing a deep breath hurt. It seemed a long time since he'd broken out of the quantum chamber.

He saw immediately they were on the roof of Fisk Tower. Just to their right was a blue helipad. Beyond the skyscraper's railing lay the rest of New York, looking uncharacteristically small and remote in the inky night. This high up, the wind howled and whipped like daggers at any exposed flesh. The rooftop seemed a world apart, set aside like a city in the clouds.

Beside Peter glowered the hooded Prowler, silent and implacable.

The portal sizzled closed behind them. Vanessa looked back at it as if watching a rope bridge burning down behind her. Wong, grim-faced, returned his hands to his sleeves.

“My instructions are to leave now,” he told Peter, eyes flicking briefly to the masked presence next to him. “Afterwards, you will come to the Sanctum and I will take you home. For good.”

Peter nodded, still focusing on his labored breathing. He'd been right to think Vanessa and Richard would lead him face-to-face with Fisk. Without an exact location, even a sorcerer could not open a portal directly to him.

Atoms weaved in and out of this dimension. Peter looked like a television signal partly lost in the airwaves. Wong's brows furrowed in concern at how quickly his condition had deteriorated in the last few hours.

“See you at the Sanctum,” said Peter pointedly.

Unhappily, Wong sketched another portal in the air and retreated, leaving them on the rooftop.

Despite its proximity to Kingpin himself, he'd surely chosen the location for its security. Not only was it squarely on his home turf, but there were no bystanders, no one for Vanessa and Richard to approach for help should their presence in this dimension prove unwilling. It was certainly that.

The Prowler touched a finger to a communicator in his ear. “I have them,” he said in his filtered growl, and looked at the blinking light of a security camera. Peter had to imagine that Fisk was watching through the lens and turned away, adjusting his glasses.
In response to an unheard request for a code, the Prowler said: “Halcyon.”

“Is that his code for everything?” Peter said grumpily. “He just like the word or something?”

The Prowler ignored him and listened to the instructions Kingpin was now giving over the earpiece. “Yes, sir,” he said. “We'll go there now.”

Vanessa watched them and clutched at Richard's coat in a way that both shielded her son and tried to draw comfort from his presence.

“Please, take us back,” she turned to Peter and pleaded. “You don't have to do this.”

“I'm sorry. This is for the best,” he told her, and put a head to his spasming chest with a grimace. “Let's go.”

There was nothing for the wife and son to do but allow themselves to be ushered along. They drew into a small enclosed structure on the roof containing a short flight of steps leading to an opulent, red-on-gold-patterned hallway decorated with marble busts and classical paintings. A large set of double doors stood directly opposite them.

Persistent glitching made Peter jittery and short of breath. It wouldn't be too long now, he could hang on. Maybe even now Banner and Shuri were just waiting for him to get back—assuming he could expect a welcome back there. Of course he could.

The Prowler led the way to the entrance. Vanessa and Richard followed reluctantly behind, Peter bringing up the rear of the group and cutting off any chance of escape.

Covertly, he drew the transmitter from his pocket and, under the guise of scratching his nose, whispered something into it.

Prowler opened the doors. Vanessa and Richard stopped short, eyes wide with fright. The masked henchman said only, and with no room for argument, “In.”

They entered into a marble foyer. Kingpin's tastes, hewn from the rough rock of a hardscrabble upbringing, clearly reflected his wife's influence in the penthouse's classical design. Vanessa Fisk, nee Mariana, was born a sophisticated New York socialite whose circles ran concentric with Rockefellers and Vanderbilts, ensconced in that increasingly small bubble of old New York money immortalized in oil paintings and donor plates by priceless works of art at the Met. Though Fisk had already made much of his sizable fortune by the time they wed, Peter knew from his own universe that the marriage had been looked down upon by the purebreds as an unequal exchange of status. She had loved him once, to marry him.

None of that history was evident in her face. She and her son looked around as if expecting Fisk to jump out of the shadows.

They moved forward into a lofty, open space that presented the New York skyline on a platter. Every piece of furniture was expensively upholstered; there were artful sculptures placed selectively around the living room and an elaborate Turkish rug softened the cold gray marble floor. Bereft of family portraits passed down the generations, Kingpin had settled instead for collecting valuable works of art that hung in gilt frames.

Despite using most of his concentration to corral his cells, Peter couldn't help but wryly muse: And some people live like this. He'd trade mansions to go home to his shoebox with MJ.

Wilson Fisk stood against the windows, waiting for them like an ominous judge.
Revealed in silhouette, the Kingpin looked large as ever. For all that bulk Wilson Fisk drew forward almost furtively, eyes locked on the white faces of his wife and son. Then his glance flicked to the Prowler, who nodded his confirmation and said: “They're real.”

“Vanessa. Richard,” Fisk breathed, as if speaking to amnesiacs who had to be reminded of their history together. Harsh lighting threw his craggy face into sharp contrast.

Kingpin was a terrible man, Peter reminded himself, trying to focus. It wasn't easy, now that the glitching had grown so painful. Fisk's only understanding of love was reflected through a prism of pure selfishness; it would destroy what it sought to preserve. He was a murderer, a kidnapper, a thief and a liar. He didn't deserve the pity that Peter could no more help than stop water from running through his fingers.

Wife and son drew together. “Stay back!” she shrieked. “Stay away!

“Vanessa, baby, it's me,” he said. Spreading his hands, Fisk came closer. “You know me!”

Richard found his voice. “You stay back! Don't touch her!”

Peter nervously touched the glasses he wore. Fisk didn't notice them.

He tapped on the transmitter but didn't dare speak into it now.

Breaking the silence, Peter said: “Kingpin. The deal?”

Not taking his eyes off Vanessa and Richard, Kingpin nodded. “Go. I ain't saying a word. That's a deal.”

Desperately, Vanessa backed away and looked to Peter like he was her last hope. “Take us back,” she cried. “Please! This isn't our home!”

“Course it is,” said Kingpin, advancing, “this is home, this is the home we built!”

He seemed hurt by their fright, breathtakingly oblivious to his own hand in causing it.

Tears falling, Vanessa shook her head, sending her cascade of handsomely graying dark hair over her face. “It's not, it's not home,” she sobbed.

Unnerved despite himself, Peter started to say, “You'll be safer here—”

Gripping her son's arm, Vanessa turned to run. They fled through the foyer, heading to the entrance, where the gold-on-red-patterned hallway lay just beyond.

“Vanessa!” Kingpin shouted, and he took off after them. Peter hastened to jump out of his way but the man's wild arms flung out unexpectedly and caught him in the chest, sending him sprawling to the floor, winded and splintering into pieces. His glasses, previously invisible to anyone else's eye, flew off to crash on marble and shatter.

Vanessa and Richard vanished.

Peter froze, glitching in place.

Oh God.

Kingpin was so close to the door leading to the hallway. He stopped just before it like a locomotive heaving to a heavy standstill, staring, perhaps distantly registering the hallway's pattern had changed.
slightly, to a wallpaper Peter knew from his own universe.

Fisk stared at the place where Vanessa and Richard had vanished like a mirage in the desert. “Not—not real,” he said uncomprehendingly. “But...” His gaze slowly turned to the Prowler, who had been his insurance, and to the henchman’s claw tips, which were extended and ready.

Too soon, thought Peter, raising to his elbows, too soon! Glancing at the broken B.A.R.F. holographic projector he muttered, “Aw, crap, I owe Stark so much money.” He stumbled to his feet to try and push Kingpin through the doorway, but a full-body seizure dropped him back to his hands and knees.

“Wong!” Peter shouted, struggling to rise.

Instantly a fizzling gold wipe shifted the hallway pattern subtly, from gold-on-red back to red-on-gold, like the dial of a kaleidoscope rotated ever so slightly. Wong darted into view in the doorframe.

Faster than anyone with his bulk could be expected to move, and seemingly on robotic instinct, Fisk snatched his gun and fired several successive shots at the sorcerer, who dived out of sight from the doorway, unable to throw up a portal in the time it would take to riddle him with bullets.

“You—you lied—why...” he breathed, rotating his boulder-like shoulders to the Prowler.

“Blame me,” said Peter raggedly, holding his ribs and lurching to his feet. “My idea.”

Fisk’s eyes rolled to Peter. The barrel of his gun traveled with his gaze. “You—you thought to lure me back to your universe? To find, what,” he said in a shaking, florid rush, color rising in his cheeks, “your FBI there, surrounding me? Or S.H.I.E.L.D.?”

“Extradition treaties between universes is complicated,” Peter panted. “Whatever deal you made in this dimension won't hold up in mine. Not when you're monkeying around with realities.”

“Give yourself up,” said Wong firmly, advancing cautiously back through the doorway with golden defense spells thrown up.

“What you said, that they'd be safe...” Kingpin's chest heaved as he shook the gun at Peter. “That was true, I'd have kept them safe!”

“At the expense of their freedom, their free will?” Peter snapped, feeling a leg start to give under him. “You were right about one thing, Wilson—Vanessa and Richard are still alive in my universe. Do you know why? Do you get why they lived there, when they died in so many others?”

Wong drew closer.

Fisk stood transfixed, letting the gun droop in his hand, almost childishly intent on hearing Peter's answer.

“Because in my universe, she left you,” said Peter.

He'd helped her do it.

After he'd failed to put his universe's Wilson Fisk behind bars, in the wake of his impotent frustration he’d turned his efforts to enabling Vanessa and Richard to safely leave the man whose criminality had been horrifyingly exposed, if not punished by jailtime. At least he could do some good there. Even without a conviction, it remained a rare bright success in his memory.
“There is no universe,” he said, suddenly angry, fighting to stay upright, “where I'd ship them back to you.”

For a moment Kingpin continued staring in that open incomprehension, then clouds passed over his face and Peter saw the last traces of vulnerability drop forever.

What Miles had told him of Blond Peter's last words flashed through his head: “It won't work. They're gone.”

Those words had plucked the nerve stringing Wilson Fisk together: the idea that his will was so immense it could supersede all reason or decency. It wasn't real love, as that Peter had known, but Fisk could no more accept the truth than bring his wife and son back to the living and he'd killed the first person to tell him so.

“You...” His knuckles turned white and the gun went back up to aim at Peter.

A crackling of electricity alerted him to the Prowler flexing his claws. The barrel swiveled to the man who'd turned on him.

Peter knew immediately what the Kingpin would do. There was no reality in which he tolerated betrayal from a subordinate, as Miles had learned to his great sorrow.

Fisk’s eyes turned to flint. “No one betrays me,” he snarled, “and lives.”

As he fired at the Prowler, Peter moved.

Wong couldn't reach Aaron Davis in time, but Peter could.

Three hours earlier

Peter stepped through Wong's sizzling gold portal into mostly darkness. A moment later, the Prowler followed and the portal fizzed shut behind them.

The henchman's mask traveled left and right, his white eyes the brightest thing around. His night vision could penetrate the dark easily, but the surroundings did not yet make sense to him.

“Where are we?” he growled.

“We're supposed to be in the Upper East Side,” said Peter, stumbling into the edge of a table and grunting. “Wong must've miscalculated our drop zone. I mean, s'not like catching an Uber.”

He fumbled around on the table, feeling his way over power tools and half-finished gear. “Too bad there's not a spell for Google Maps. Hopefully we're not in, like, Staten Island. I bet this is how everyone ends up there—on accident.” Peter's hand found a purchase on a small work lamp and turned the switch.

The room was swathed in a low, yellow light, illuminating the outlines of strange equipment. It took Peter all of five seconds to find what he was looking for. He discreetly slid on a pair of thick rubber work gloves that went halfway up his forearm while pretending to poke around. “Pretty techie, huh?” he commented. “Weird.”
“Someone's squatting here.” The Prowler was looking distastefully at a futon in the corner.

“Or maybe,” Peter said through gritted teeth, “they just like to nap.”

He plucked a small device from the work station and darted toward the Prowler, who seemed to recognize the trap as soon as Peter reached him and reacted.

Crackling claws streaked for Peter's face at the same time that Peter ducked, sliding beneath the slash and spinning back to face him. He blocked the next incoming blow by seizing the Prowler's wrist and slamming a Converse shoe up squarely in the man's hooded face, the only part of his suit that wasn't wired into an electrical field. The henchman would have flown backward but for Peter's grip on his wrist, making him snap like a rubber band.

Immediately the Prowler activated the electric wiring in the exolayer of his suit. Lightning met the insulated rubber of Peter's glove.

“Geez, you hug your mom with this suit?” Peter asked, whipping the Prowler into a nearly flawless front somersault. The henchman landed flat on his back with a satisfying 'oof.' “Nice form, but you didn't stick your landing—”

He was interrupted by a frenzy of flashing lights the Prowler abruptly emitted from a device on his arm, straight up into his face.

Peter threw up a hand to block the strobing from his vision, but it was too late. It triggered an atom seizure that made Peter stagger back, clutching his head while he fractured into agonizing pieces.

In an impressive feat of agility, the Prowler swung his legs around in a kind of break dance and regained his feet. He approached the debilitated Peter like a wary cat gauging the incapacitation of a prey it'd wounded.

With supreme effort, Peter threw up every bulwark he could against the glitching and reclaimed some control. The Prowler noticed and rushed forward to take out his unprotected legs with an electrified kick.

Peter had to hastily leap up to avoid getting his legs swept out from under him. The jump carried him to the rough-hewn ceiling, to which he kept his feet stuck while reaching down to slap the device he'd been holding in one hand on the Prowler's back.

For a second the man comically tried to reach the device, just out of reach, circling like a dog chasing its tail, then realized Peter was still on the ceiling. “What?” The white eyes widened.

“Bonk,” said Peter, flicking him between the eyes. He put a little mustard on it and the Prowler staggered back.

Stripping off a glove, Peter shot a web that sealed the little device in place on the Prowler's back. The henchman yanked his fingers away before they could get glued to his suit.

Peter fired more strands at the Prowler's ankles. Snarling, the henchman tried to send a shock up the line the way he had at the convention center.

Nothing.

Grinning, Peter yanked and sent the Prowler to the floor, then hoisted him up like a punching bag to dangle from the ceiling.
Then he glitched and crashed gracelessly to the ground, totally ruining the cool somersault to the floor he'd intended to execute.

“Shitty form, and you didn't stick your landing,” said the Prowler evenly.

Indignant, Peter leapt up and stuck his finger close to the mask. “Hey! Inducing a violent seizure is one thing, but turning a guy's one-liners against him? That's low.”

He webbed the Prowler securely, leaving only his hood fully exposed. Then he stepped back and exhaled a small, slightly breathless laugh. “Well now, that's better.”

The white eyes glared daggers at him.

“Can't activate your suit?” Peter asked him. “Good. Not exactly how I wanted to field-test my little gizmo, but bad guys tend to be my only focus group.”

He plucked a gadget from the workbench identical to the one he'd stuck on the Prowler's back and showed it to him, pinched between his thumb and forefinger. “It's a spot EMP. Disables any electronic it's attached to. I've been workshopping names for it. So far it's between the ElectriCull—get it?—or the Volt Bolt. I got the idea from Star Wars. You know, those little things they stick on 'droids to make 'em behave? I thought about calling it the AnVoid but I don't know if everyone would get it. Spider-shaped, natch: gotta stay on brand. I admit sometimes I come up with the pun before the product. The Caddy Longlegs isn't quite ready for the Home Shopping Network.”

“How do you have Spider-Man's webs? Why were you on the ceiling?” the Prowler demanded.

“Because you were on the floor, duh. I thought we could have a little chat.”

“Oh yeah, Shelob?” muttered the Prowler, twisting a little in his cocoon.

Peter stopped cold. Did this bad guy seriously just reference Lord of the Rings? “Okay, as much as I'd suddenly like to discuss Tolkien ad nauseum, Scowler, we don't have a lot of time. I need your help.”

He twiddled the henchman back to face him.

“My help?” the man said scathingly. The web strand kept trying to unwind and he twirled in place, rendering the bite in his voice a little impotent. “What do you think I'm here for?”

“Not what you think you're here for. You're Kingpin's last powered-up lackey, I figured he'd send you along to babysit—specially once I mentioned gimmicks. Thank Inception for that idea. I wanted to talk to you where he couldn't butt in.”

“And what,” said the Prowler with withering disdain, “makes you think you're gonna get anything out of me?”

“Because I know who your nephew is.”

The man froze.

Peter reached for the hood and pulled it off, finally revealing the stunned face of Aaron Davis.

He was younger in this universe, of course, but a career as the Prowler hadn't yet aged his features prematurely; he was still new to the game.

“That's not a threat,” Peter told him, grimacing at the sweaty mask—the Prowler hadn't learned the
secret of baby powder yet—and tossing it on the workbench. “Do I look like Kingpin? Wondering
where I got Spider-Man's fly moves, right? Come on, you're already putting it together.”

Davis stared at him wordlessly, drifting clockwise. Peter spun him back around.

“You know I was pulled from another universe while I was trying to get back to mine,” Peter went
on, keeping his hand on the Prowler's shoulder to stop him spinning. “There was a Peter Parker
there, too. Kingpin killed him. You were there. Kingpin killed you too. And there was a Miles
Morales.” Who hopefully Kingpin hadn't killed as well.

Peter considered the man dangling upside-down in front of him, who was taken aback at the mention
of his nephew.

“Why did you back off at the convention center?” he asked.

It had bugged him ever since that first tussle over the megaconductor, which seemed ages ago now.
When he'd asked Parker about it the kid had no idea; he'd never even come across the Prowler
before. There was nothing he could think of to account for the vulnerable fear the henchman had
shown when it seemed he might have killed Spider-Man.

Davis didn't answer, assessing him with sharp, dark eyes.

“What also interests me,” said Peter conversationally, releasing his hold on Davis's shoulders and
circling to keep the henchman in front of him, “is that you didn't tell Kingpin who Spider-Man was
right away.”

A crease appeared between Davis's brows.

“If you'd told him as soon as you found out, soon as we'd left the Sanctum, we'd have heard from
him a lot sooner, wouldn't we? Does Kingpin even know the timeline? Or does he think we went to
the Sanctum after we left Alchemax?”

“Shut up,” said the Prowler roughly.

“Why did it take you so long?” Peter said, leaning close. “Did it slip?”

“I didn't tell him!” the Prowler snapped.

A moment passed where he seemed to regret the outburst.

Then he shook his head, causing the cocoon to shift sideways, and said in an angry rush: “I told him
you entered that Sanctum place alone.”

Peter rocked back. “What?”

“There's no cameras around there, so he bought it...but then he started looking around for others.
There was something in the footage from the convention center, where you two bumped into each
other and it seemed like Parker almost recognized you...” Seeing Peter's incredulity, the Prowler's
white eyes narrowed. “That place was full of techie crap. Do you think he can't get hold of security
tapes? Stark doesn't own the convention center. It bugged Fisk that the kid from the footage looked
so familiar.”

Peter frowned. “Familiar? Where would he have seen Parker before?”

The Prowler hesitated, then seemed to decide it was not worth holding back now. “There was a
“A photo.” Peter repeated.

“You know who the Scorpion is, yeah? Mac Gargan? We worked together once in a while. Got me this gig.”

“You may yet get to thank him in person.”

Ignoring that, the Prowler said, “Dude's nuts. I didn't like him, didn't want to work with him again, but I needed the job. Kingpin sets his boys up.”

“Before tearing them down, usually,” Peter said dryly.

“Will you shut up? I took the job. But Mac was always stuck on Spider-Man. He'd put Mac in Rikers before he busted out. Back when the Vulture was handing out Chitauri tech like candy, Mac had made a deal to get hold of a big cache, but it was busted up on the ferry by Spider-Man and the FBI. Mac always said there were rumors Toomes knew Spider-Man's real name. Toomes denied it, but...Mac never really bought it.”

Surprised, Peter leaned against the workbench. “Why would Toomes protect Spider-Man?” His own experiences with the Vulture were more painfully straightforward.

“That's what Kingpin wondered too. He started looking into it. I dunno how, whether it was posted somewhere—it's not up now—or if it was some piece of evidence the police had, or what—but somewhere he saw a photo Toomes's wife took on the night of his kid's Homecoming dance. His daughter and her date. It was Parker. It was just a random photo, though, Kingpin never thought twice about it 'til he recognized the kid on the convention center's cameras. It was just a hunch, don't think he actually expected to find Spider-Man, but then he sees that same kid was awarded an internship at Stark Industries...and Spider-Man saved Toomes's daughter during a school trip to D.C.”

Swiveling slowly, the Prowler added, “He gambled. He still wasn't sure Spider-Man was Peter Parker 'til he called you and Stark.”

Their damned poor poker voices, Peter inwardly groaned. “What if he'd been wrong?”

“Kingpin wouldn't care. If it wasn't Parker he'd just put that out there anyway. A hostage is a hostage.”

“Has anyone else put this together?” Peter snapped. “I mean it. Does anyone know outside the two of you?”

“No. Mac was already on the Raft and Kingpin doesn't give shit away for free.”

Even as he inwardly cursed himself and the long, star-crossed damnedable history of Parker luck, Peter suddenly felt more hopeful. “He only went looking for security cameras because you told him about the meeting.”

“I work for him,” the Prowler said flatly.

“So why do you give a damn what happens to Spider-Man?”

For a moment the man seemed like he wouldn't answer. Then, reluctantly: “He stuck his neck out for me, once. Deal gone wrong. He saved my life.”
“And you repay him by doing grunt work for Kingpin?” Peter said witheringly, pacing to a stop before him. His atoms were seizing painfully, making his temper worse. He stuck his face close to Davis's. “Parker didn't save your ass so you could go back to being a lowlife!”

“Hey, I got people to look out for,” Davis said just as angrily. “I owed Spider-Man so I honored it. But Kingpin holds every key to this city!”

“You didn't just honor a debt, you sheltered a man you knew your boss wanted dead. Don't give me that crap.”

“Guys like me don't become superheroes, prick!” Davis threw back, swinging. “Or Avengers!”

“So your only other option is a villain?” Peter said, incredulous. “Was there literally no other job opening in New York City?”

“Not for me,” said Davis. “Nothing worthwhile. I—I'd already dug myself in too deep.”

It was an admission borne of agitation, and now his gaze found the work bench, traveling over all the detritus of Peter's efforts.

“And you thought this would be worthwhile? Did you realize what you were getting into, when you signed up to work for that man? What you'd have to become?” Peter said, cradling a glitching arm.

“Kingpin can make things happen for you. For your family.”

“For Miles, you mean.”

Davis glowered but didn't deny it. “Yeah. For Miles.”

Peter sighed, flexing his aching hand. “Aaron, I know the kid your nephew grows up to be. He'd never want whatever Wilson Fisk could give him. And he wouldn't want that for you either. He's a good kid. That's why he's Spider-Man now.”

Davis's eyes grew huge. “Spider-Man?”

“Yeah. Complete with radioactive blood and everything.” Suddenly tired, he dropped his arm. “I don't know if it will happen in this universe, Aaron. I hope it doesn't have to, because being Spider-Man sucks sometimes. Sometimes it's great. But I wouldn't wish it on anyone. Because you know what's part of the formula making up every Spider-Whatever in every universe?”

He poked Davis in the chest. “Tragedy. And for him, that tragedy will be you. It was for the Miles I know.”

Why was that always the common denominator? Why did the foundation of Spider-Man's commitment to life have to always be rooted in death? If Uncle Ben hadn't died, if Peter hadn't stared into the wild-eyed face of his murderer and sworn to be better than that, would he still be as good a guardian to others?

Or maybe he would have been a better one, if Ben had lived. It was one of the questions Peter had had to learn to stop asking himself. Peter was who he was not just because Ben Parker had died, but also because he'd lived; the twelve years he'd had to be a father to Peter were enough to sustain a lifetime as Spider-Man. So, too, had Aunt May's guidance been an anchor.

“If you love him, you'll stop. You'll go be a better man. Screw the Avengers if you think a superhero is the only hero Miles wants. You’re already the man he wants to be. You’re not the man
he should be. But it’s not too late.”

There had to be a better way than finding meaning in death. There had to be.

Peter chewed his cheek and asked: “If he does go down the same path, are you going to be there for him?”

“How do I know you're telling me the truth?” said Davis, almost hushed.

“It's a leap of faith. We all take them.” Peter thought, then slanted a look at him. “Actually I'm taking one now, banking on you. This Spider-Man's sticking his neck out for you, too, you know. The Avengers weren't gonna play as nice.”

“Neither will Kingpin, if I leave him,” said Davis lowly. “He'll find Miles. And Jeff, and Rio.”

He wanted to leave. Peter could see it. He just couldn't see a way out.

“I can help you,” Peter promised.

This wasn't a decision the Prowler could sleep on. It was life-altering and he had seconds to make the choice.

It seemed a long time before Aaron Davis gave a minute nod.

Peter just had time for a lovely moment of relief before clutching at his ribs, which were spasming badly.

“How come you're still glitching?” Davis frowned, turning his head to watch as he swiveled gently. “Shouldn't you be cured?”

“Wonder why you're not glitching? Magic's got nothing to do with it. Crazy Ock did a number on my atoms.”

An indecipherable expression flashed over Davis's face. “You're still going to die?”

“No,” Peter said firmly. “I am not.” He straightened with an effort. “Once and for all: you on board?”

Davis huffed, “Damn it man, I'm on board! Not like I was looking forward to kidnapping that lady and her kid anyway. Can you get me down now? All the blood's gone to my head.” Davis wriggled around in the cocoon. “My skull's about to pop.”

Peter made short work of dissolving the web strands. Davis thudded to the ground and kicked out of the web as it disintegrated.

“Uurgh,” he said disgustedly from the floor.

“Aww. Like a butterfly from a chrysalis, you emerge a better man.”

“Shut up.” Davis brushed his suit off and shook out his stupid cape. “What's your plan, anyway?”

As Peter took out the B.A.R.F. transmitter he'd filched from Stark's lab and began to mess with it, he told Davis the plan, haltingly and careful to note Davis's reactions. He thought they seemed genuine.

“I understood like half of what you said,” Davis said several minutes later, “but all of it sounded crazy. This is some sci-fi level shit.”
Peter threw the purple mask at him. “And you thought hero work was glamorous. You should see the sewers I have to go through.”

“You really think this will work?”

“It better. C’mon, have to make up for lost time we spent on that heart-to-heart.”

They checked their gear. Peter tucked the B.A.R.F. glasses away in their case, feeling reasonably sure about how they worked. Funny how the device Stark had invented for the purpose of therapy never seemed to get used to therapeutic purpose. The case he stuck in a deep coat pocket. Then, with a level look for Davis, Peter removed the EMP device from his back. Davis arched an eyebrow and didn’t move to attack him. Peter gave an exaggerated sigh of relief that made the other man roll his eyes.

“Where are the wife and kid, anyway?” said Davis, taking one last look around while Peter locked up.

“Uh, they live on the Upper East Side.”

“Rich-lady-opolis.”

Peter stepped past him to wrench open the workshop's door. “Uh-huh.”

“And Kingpin?”

“Banished to Japan. Vanessa told him he could leave New York or she and Richard would. Fisk has some spice business out there and apparently,” Peter yawned, “spends his free time in violent disagreements with the local crime lords.”

Once they’d emerged from the glorified shed into evening air, Peter breathed deeply.

Davis watched him. “And you did that?”

“Did what?”

Gesturing, Davis said, “Helped her leave him. Divorce him.”

“Oh.” Peter secured the door behind them, glitching a little and pretending not to notice Davis’s weighing look. “Yeah. Wasn’t pretty, but we got there.”

Far cleaner, as separations went, was Peter's own divorce, conducted with such antiseptic efficiency that the sleazy lawyer he regretted hiring out of a newspaper clipping joked, oblivious to the misery of both parties involved, that they could have made at least some fuss for the sake of his hourly billing.

MJ hadn't wanted a penny of alimony. All she'd asked was that he not drop off the face of the planet, and even that was a promise he'd had trouble keeping.

“Where are we anyway? How are we supposed to get there?” Davis said instead of whatever he'd been thinking.

“We're in Forest Hills, and the subway, I guess. Should still be running express.”

Davis made a face. “Can't I hotwire something?”

“No. We wouldn't have time to return it.” Peter was not a hypocrite; he definitely intended to return
Captain America's Beetle. And Tony Stark's hologram projector. And maybe devise a payment plan for the quantum chamber. And—“Your great redemption starts now.”

Davis rolled his eyes. “Can't it start tomorrow, like a diet?”

Now that Davis wasn't personifying intimidation as the Prowler, he was proving to be something of a laconic smart ass.

“Hey, you're still a criminal, Mr. Criminal. You've got to atone for all the crap you've done already, which hopefully doesn't include anything that will make me regret giving you a second chance. By the way, you can start by singing to the FBI.”

“Yeah, every nephew wants a snitch for a hero.”

“I mean it, Davis. This is your fresh start. You're not getting another.”

Though Davis muttered, “Yeah, yeah,” Peter saw acceptance there, and maybe even some relief at the unexpected call to grace. “Fine, we'll take the damn subway.”

“Great. You look like a nutjob in that cape, so no one will give you a second look.”

Davis scowled at him.

Peter lurched to the side and seized his chest, which convulsed with manic frenzy. After a minute he stood back up, panting sharply.

“Is it speeding up?” Davis asked, slowing.

Probably his little strobe-light trick had inflamed Peter's already excitable atoms, but he didn't tell the Prowler that. There had been a note of genuine concern in the question. Instead he repeated what he'd told Black Widow: “It escalates. C'mon.”

They were crossing the open space that led to the street from the overgrown, seemingly abandoned lot where Peter kept his lab. A subway entrance lay a few blocks down. Peter's hands were shoved into his pockets and he was concentrating on preventing his canvas shoes from sinking into one of the snowpiles lining the road, so when a surprised voice said “Peter?” his chin jerked up, totally startled.

Then he froze.

The woman standing before him was as incongruous in that moment as a polar bear that had wandered up and spoken his name.

Davis drifted to a stop, looking between them.

Peter found his voice. “MJ?”
ramping up! I had to double-check that Doris Toomes did take that photo in Homecoming that Davis is referencing.

I appreciate your thoughts! :)
She stood on the sidewalk wearing an old coat, a knitted hat and snowboots, arms slack at her sides and blue eyes wide at the sight of Peter emerging barefaced from his workshop with Davis, still suited as the Prowler and carrying his hood.

“MJ, what—what are you doing here?” Peter breathed.

MJ drew forward. “Looking for you!” she said incredulously. “This is the second time I've tried here!”

Already white-faced, reflection from the snow paled her further and made the freckles pop out from her face.

(After they'd started dating and Peter had finally got up enough nerve to tease her, he'd make up constellations from MJ's freckles with increasingly ridiculous names and stories until he'd win an eye roll and a secret, pleased grin from her.)

His feet felt rooted to the spot as she approached. Then abruptly, she threw her arms around him. Nothing short of a locomotive could bowl him over and yet, just then, Mary Jane knocked him on his heels. She squeezed him hard around the chest and almost by instinct, his arms were reaching up to hug her back when she suddenly drew back and punched him sharply in the chest.

“What,” she demanded, eyes bright with anger, “happened to checking in? You promised you'd at least let me know you were all right so I wouldn't think you were dead in a ditch somewhere! I've been worried sick! Do you know how upset everyone is?”

“Everyone?” said Peter before he could stop himself. Upset?

“Yes, everyone! You dropped off the face of the planet! Your phone went straight to voicemail, I went to your apartment looking for you and your neighbor had no idea where you were, the university hasn't heard from you since you went on sabbatical, Wade Wilson's wandering the city like a lost puppy—I went to Tony Stark!”

“What?” Peter said, so startled he didn't heed Davis's impatient look at him.

“It was that or file a missing persons report! You know he's got Steve Rogers out looking for you too? Peter...where have you been?” Her tone changed, and Peter could see how distressed she'd been. “I was afraid you were...hurt, or—”

Only the fact that his glitching had grown more persistent and painful prevented him from lapsing into the reverent distraction he'd fallen victim to in the last universe, at Fisk's stupid tacky memorial dinner.

Without thinking he began to place his hands behind her back as he'd done so many times, then embarrassedly retracted them as if it was a gesture they hadn't earned yet. He started to reassure her, “I'm okay—”

Of course, just then static tore his vision apart and gave the lie to his words. He cried out and
staggered, and the hands she put out to steady him passed through his chest like water. Peter crashed to one knee, doubled over with gritted teeth while through the white-hot noise he vaguely felt MJ's hands find a purchase on his head and shoulder. This time, the glitching wasn't over in a flash, but receded gradually like the tide reluctantly giving up the shore. When it was over his breath came raggedly and he couldn't seem to stop trembling.

When he looked up, MJ's face was white. “What the hell was that?” she said, shaken.

Peter lurched to his feet. “MJ, I'm sorry—I have to go,” he told her, and when she began shaking her head, he kept going: “I'll be back soon, I promise, I'm going to take care of this—”

“Peter, you literally just came apart at the seams—”

“Parker,” Davis said urgently.

Peter took a step back.

“No,” said MJ, throwing the impatient Davis a dirty look. “You can't just go missing, then pop up and short-circuit in front of me and run off without an explanation!”

“We're in a hurry,” said Davis. “The sooner we get this done, the sooner this—” he waved at Peter's glitching torso—“gets fixed.”

“He's right,” Peter told her, hands held up. “We have to get to the Upper East Side. Listen, MJ,” he said to the protest she was about to make, “I know this is the worst possible timing, I do, but we've only got a couple hours.”

For a moment she looked from one to the other, then exhaled sharply and shook her head.

“Can't you swing there, if it's so urgent?” she said.

With Davis? If Peter were alone he might have chanced it, but he didn't trust himself to carry a passenger when he was liable to faceplant at any given second.

Not that Davis was sold on that idea anyway. “Uh-uh, I'm not playing Jane to his Tarzan, thanks,” he said.

“We've got a train to catch,” said Peter, trying to ignore the punishing flickers from his faithless cells, “and we don't have a lot of time.”

“Hope the F runs faster in this universe,” Davis muttered.

“This universe?”

Realizing he needed to give her something, Peter said in one breath that emitted a steady cloud in the cold air: “A bunch of dimensions got crossed due to a mad scientist's fundamental misunderstanding of quantum theory so now we need to scan Vanessa and Richard Fisk to create a realistic hologram that will fool the Kingpin from this guy's universe long enough that we can lure him into a trap so he'll stop causing serious, irreparable grief in his own dimension.”

MJ absorbed this as one might face a stiff wind, and by the end of it she looked about as windswept.

“And...this has what to do with you showing up needing your rabbit ears adjusted?”

“Could we discuss this on the train?” said Davis, then he seemed to really take her in for the first time. “I'm Aaron, by the way.” He adopted an slick smile Peter assumed he probably thought was
charming and held his hand out. Beneath his suit Peter strongly suspected he was flexing.

Slowly MJ shook the proffered hand, covering her bewilderment well. “I'm Mary Jane. I like your cape.”

Peter gagged theatrically. Davis rolled his eyes. “You know this loser, I see.”

“F Train?” Peter reminded him, huffy.

MJ frowned and sighed, resigning herself to the demands of the moment. “How do you know they'll be at home?”

Surprised, Peter said, “It's late. Where else would they be?”

Taking her phone from her pocket, MJ removed her glove and quickly typed in a search online. A moment later, with an unreadable expression, she flipped the phone’s screen to show Peter an article about the Met Museum's Christmas gala for their high roller donors. Her phone showed it was Thursday, and Peter was startled to see more days had passed than he'd realized. “Vanessa Mariana and her son are at the Met reception tonight,” she said blandly.

“Oh.” Peter and Davis looked at each other with plebeian incomprehension. “But—it's Thursday.”

“Rich people don't wait for the weekend,” MJ said dryly and pocketed her phone.

This complicated things. Peter hadn't counted on an audience of wealthy New York bluebloods. How was he supposed to wrest away the wife and son without causing an incident? He couldn't show up as either Spider-Man or his glitching self without attracting a ton of attention, and Davis was dressed for Comic-Con and unfamiliar with this universe. Chewing the inside of his cheek, Peter contemplated his ex-wife.

“MJ, I need your help,” Peter said, looking her in the eyes and willing himself with all his strength not to glitch while he did it.

At this she seemed yet more surprised, but didn't interrupt.

“We can't march up to Vanessa and Richard in the middle of a crowd. I can barely go a minute without my atoms trying to change the channel on me and Davis looks like an escapee from Disney Villains on Ice.”

Davis made an indignant noise.

Peter said from the corner of his mouth, “It's the cape.”

“The cape is badass.”

“Is this where Miles gets it?” Peter demanded. “You two and your capes.”

“Boys, focus. How were you going to scan them?” MJ asked him.

He told her about the B.A.R.F. holographic projector and showed her the case he'd filched from Tony Stark's lab. She scrutinized the glasses and thought for a moment. Meanwhile, Peter really, really tried not to be affected by how near she was.

MJ snapped the case shut thoughtfully. “I have an idea.”

“Ideas are good,” mumbled Peter.
“We'll need to stop by the apartment really fast. No, it's not far,” she told Davis's frown.

Peter was disconcerted by the idea of returning so soon to the home they'd shared but thought it might be asinine to make a fuss about it.

“Trains stop running express soon,” Davis reminded her, shoving his mask in a pocket. “Unless you live in the one universe where they don't go local after ten.”

“Nine through next month, there's a ton of construction right now,” said Peter.

“Damn man, still? Is there a dimension where they actually finish it?”

“If there is, I'm moving there.”

MJ raised her hand like a child in class and they both turned to look at her. “I have a car,” she said mildly.

“Oh,” Peter said sheepishly, “Right.” Emergencies probably shouldn't rely on the dependability of train lines in Queens. Davis raised an eyebrow and Peter made an irritated face at him. “Let's go.”

While double-timing the way to the apartment Peter gave MJ not only an explanation of his plan but also a Wikipedia plot summary of the events thus far, an extension of the rundown he'd given Parker and Ned. By the end of it he was winded from the exertion that walking and talking so much had become, and both MJ and Davis were visibly shocked.

“Good to know my nephew's a boss, but a pig?” Davis demanded as they came up to the apartment building, a handsome old structure in the heart of Forest Hills. “How am I ever gonna eat a BLT again?”

“Go kosher,” suggested Peter.

MJ had absorbed the onslaught of information quietly, and Peter knew she was saving much of it to process later. He'd omitted certain details, like Blond Peter's grisly end or the fact that he'd originally intended to follow suit, that he didn't have the energy to go over just then.

The apartment building was a walk-up. Their—MJ’s—apartment was on the fourth floor. Three ancient, flower-patterned carpeted flights of stairs were nothing to Spider-Man but after reaching the second landing he was uncomfortably short of breath and lagged behind the other two. MJ slowed with evident worry at the tight grip Peter had on the carved wooden railing. Embarrassed, Peter rallied before anyone could offer to help and came to a stop before the heavy wooden door he'd last closed several months before.

Taking out a silver key, MJ let them inside. She went in first and Davis followed. Peter surreptitiously touched the mezuzah he'd left behind on the doorpost before entering.

Apart from what Peter had taken with him the apartment was not much changed. One particular floorboard still creaked beneath his weight. Mismatched mugs dangled from hooks beneath the wooden kitchen cupboards and MJ continued to keep fresh-cut flowers in small vases scattered around the cheerful living room. When their scent had at last disappeared from Peter's possessions in his studio apartment, it had truly seemed the end of their life together. He breathed deep.

Going to a solid oak side table, MJ pulled open a drawer they'd used to store odds and ends by its brass ring and rooted around inside.

“Remember this?” she asked after a couple of seconds, holding up an identification card.
Peter squinted at it. “My old press pass?” He moved closer. “Geez...look at that baby face.”

“Uh huh. Like a human retriever puppy. Back in college, Peter used to schlep around for the Daily Bugle as a photographer,” MJ informed Davis, rummaging around further in the drawer.

“The good ol' days, at JJJ's beck and call,” grumbled Peter. Was he supposed to have turned in that press pass? Was it like forgetting to return a library book in the third grade? “But that pass is—”

“Very expired, and won't get you through the door,” finished MJ, locating what she sought. She held up a small ream of 2x2 passport photos she'd had taken a few years before. “But if you get me inside the Met, I can clip this on and no one will bother me. Press is always at this stuff.”

“They might wonder why you're named Peter. Or look at the dates on that pass.”

“Label maker,” said MJ succinctly, holding one up. “One of the many weapons of a domestic warrior. Once I'm in, I'll just waltz up to Vanessa and Richard and whisk them away for a few minutes.”

“You really think they'll buy it? How are you going to convince her to walk away from a group of fancy donors?” Davis asked skeptically.

MJ flashed her dimples. “I'm persuasive,” she drawled with a sly glance at Peter.

She could always make his cheeks burn when she wanted. He raised his gaze to the ceiling.

With a shrewd, smirking look for Peter, Davis commented smoothly to MJ, “Lovely as you are, Mary Jane, I don't doubt it.”

“I don't doubt you're overestimating how much she likes the cape,” muttered Peter.

Though she was smothering a grin, MJ moved briskly and located a digital camera from another drawer. Piling it with the pass, label maker and photos, she said: “Just give me a moment,” and went to change.

Strangely absent between them was the heavy tension that had darkened the final weeks of their foreclosed marriage. It felt oddly liberating to be around her this way but he worried it was only a temporary distraction that procrastinated a fall into awkwardness. Well, he'd resolved to barrel through that if it came, hadn't he?

Peter dropped into the squishy recliner and rubbed his shoulder. He was beginning to hurt all over. It was tempting to close his eyes but instead they traveled over the familiar lines of the living room. He'd been sort of afraid to find that all traces of his life there had vanished and was relieved to see it didn't look that different.

Sitting in that old chair, being in the apartment again, gave him a surreal feeling. Against his will his eyes unconsciously sought out any signs she'd moved on already, any flowers it seemed like she hadn't picked out herself... He'd been the one to request the divorce, after all, under the mistaken impression it would free her to live a fuller life, without him.

_Idiot. You broke her heart._

As much as he needed her, she'd needed him. When you loved someone, that's when you began to need them. That was how marriages worked.

Shaking the webs out of his head, Peter suddenly remembered something from his Bugle days.
“Press wears black,” he called down the hallway.

“Fiiine,” floated back the disenchanted reply. MJ always thought black washed her out.

Davis strolled through the living room, looking around. In his getup he looked no more out of place than Peter ever had sitting on the couch in his Spider-Man suit, which he was not wearing now.

Peering at a framed photo of MJ’s parents, Davis led with: “So, she's your...”

“Ex,” Peter mumbled.

“Doesn't look like an ex,” drawled Davis with a sneaky glance at him. “More like an ex-ex.”

Slouching in the seat, Peter crossed his arms and looked out the window. “What do you know?”

“I'm an expert on exes. I've had plenty. I know when it's over, and that,” he pointed to where MJ had disappeared around the corner, “ain't over.”

Uninterested in discussing this with someone who had recently tried to take his head off, Peter grumbled, “Thank you, Dear Abby.”

“You know about the shoulder touch?” Davis asked him, undeterred.

“The what?”

“You put your hand on a lady's shoulder, look her in the eye, and go,” Davis stopped before him and acted it out, placing his hand on Peter's shoulder and looking quickly up from beneath his lashes, “Hey.”

Peter waited. Davis removed his hand and raised his eyebrows in expectation of a response.

“Then what?” asked Peter.

“What?”

“I just say 'hey'?”

Davis shrugged. “Yeah. S'all you need to say.”

“I'm not sure what that gives the woman to work with,” said Peter.

Davis shook his head pityingly at Peter's ignorance. “It's a proven formula for getting a lady's attention. I'm telling you, it's science.”

“No, you're telling me to grab a woman by the shoulder and make weird, heavy eye contact.”

“No—geez, man—you have to kind of smolder it. Women love a smolder.” Davis took a seat on the couch and raised a finger like a lecturer. “You got the tools. I'm just saying, the shoulder touch, when done right, has an eighty percent acceptance rate of your dinner invite.”

“What you're saying is you've almost definitely seen Legally Blonde more than once.”

“Unless you wanna do the Bend and Snap,” said Davis impatiently, not denying it, “this is what dudes have got to work with. I guess your 'aw shucks' bumbling must've worked well enough the first time but it doesn't age cute.”
“Bumbling?” Despite Peter's exasperation, he couldn't suppress a smile. For some reason he suspected Davis was distracting him from the discomfort that must have been more noticeable to observers than he'd thought. Peter didn't mention the tremors were growing worse with a speed that unnerved him.

“Ready,” said MJ, striding back into the room. She wore no jewelry save for the bangle she'd had on already and a very simple, sleeveless black dress that went to midway down her calves, with plain black heels. It was perfectly appropriate for most press which were expected to fade into the background at these events, yet only served to achieve the opposite effect on MJ; if anything, her beauty stood out even more in contrast to the plain cut. Were her eyes always that blue?

Smugly, Davis reached over to flick Peter on the side of his head, startling him out of a slackjawed trance. Peter swatted his hand away with an irritated smack that made MJ glance over her shoulder in the act of pulling on her pea coat and checking the camera's charge.

Peter made slightly heavy weather of getting up from the chair. Then abruptly, he sagged back down. Both MJ and Davis paused on their way to the door. Before either could make a move, Peter was back on his feet and ushering them out to the car.

“Will you be able to hang on?” MJ asked him in a low tone when they reached her practical little Civic across the street.

He didn't have a choice. Nonetheless, Peter tried to sound reassuring. “Sure. It looks worse than it is.”

She met his eyes across the car's roof. “Peter, I know that's not true.”

Rankled, Peter took shotgun. He felt cheated of the reunion with MJ he'd really hoped for. It was maddening having her there, right in front of him, and being unable to say everything he'd wanted. Convulsing before his ex like his cells were getting bad reception was not a substitute for a proper reconciliation.

Once they got moving Peter relaxed a hair, relieved at some kind of physical progress. Traffic was no worse than usual on a Thursday evening and the imminent snow was thankfully holding off.

“This universe is a little more parallel than I thought it would be,” Davis commented as they crossed into Manhattan, looking with interest out the window at the passing stores. “Like somebody up and redecorated my New York. You know those cookie-cutter neighborhoods on TV, where there's like one main house model and people just paint it different shades of greige and flip the garage to the other side? You're like the neighbor but with tacky lawn ornaments.”

“Tacky?” said Peter defensively, twisting in his seat to give Davis a stink eye. “Hey, I've seen your universe, pal. If aliens wanted to take over your New York they'd have to fight the hipsters for it first.”

“If you two don't stop I'm turning this car around,” said MJ when Davis opened his mouth to retort. She twiddled the wheel to turn left on Fifth Avenue. When Peter began fussing over the B.A.R.F. glasses again she eyed them and asked curiously, “So you have to scan someone every time you want to make a hologram?”

“If you want to fool someone past the first glance,” Peter said, checking the tiny battery with a frown. “B.A.R.F. stands for Binarily Augmented Retro-Framing. An implant on the glasses connects to the user's hippocampus, kind of like a Bluetooth device for your brain. You could construct a hologram of an event from memory, but it depends on your memory. There's only so much detail it can draw from your subconscious and I didn't know Vanessa and Richard well. If I tried to recreate
them from my memory alone it'd be like a freaky 16-bit version of how I remember them from several years ago.”

“Wow—did you work on this?”

“Uh, no,” Peter said with a high-pitched attempt at nonchalance. “I um, borrowed it from Tony Stark.”

MJ's eyebrows shot up. Davis leaned forward from the back seat and stuck his head between her and Peter with a Puckish expression. “Is it still borrowing if he doesn't know and definitely didn't give you permission?”

“You stole from Tony Stark?” MJ demanded.

“Borrowed! I borrowed from Tony Stark. Geez! I'm gonna give it back! And the car, and the—”

“You stole his car?”

Davis said eagerly, “What model?”

Peter hemmed and hawed. “Actually, it was Captain America's car.”

Two heads swiveled silently to look at him. “I went for manual locks!” he said crossly. “I didn't have time to hack whatever Nightrider AI Stark's got on his stupid sports cars.”

MJ braked behind a cab. “They're all going to kill you.”

“It's easier to ask forgiveness than permission.”

“Were you going to ask forgiveness?”

“As if.”

MJ couldn't help a snort. Peter glanced at her from the corner of his eye. Her clear gaze was focused on the traffic ahead. He snapped the B.A.R.F. case shut again and suppressed a sigh. Truth be told, those glasses weren't the only thing he'd 'borrowed' from Stark. Not to mention he'd broken the fish tank. Well, too late to worry about it. Good thing he'd have one hell of a peace offering, if all this worked.

Ahead lay the museum, brightly lit against the night and brimming with glitzy, well-heeled people sailing through the front door. MJ pulled over to a spare inch of curb and they all got out.

“Stay close,” Peter told Davis as he went around the car to take the wheel, staring down an impatient driver behind them who'd dared to blare his horn.

“Oh, I'm not leavin' this party,” said Davis as he steered away, still accessible through their transmitters.

MJ smirked at Peter. “He's fun.”

“Give him a chance,” muttered Peter.

They moved along the path that skirted the back of the museum, preparatory to entering Central Park. By now Peter was braced constantly against glitching but sporadic spasms got past his defenses every few minutes. MJ caught him wincing and he pretended not to notice her concern while he kept an eye out for bystanders.
Christmas lovebirds were strolling arm-in-arm across the street, taking in the pretty Central Park snow and paying no notice to the man who appeared, from a distance, to suddenly blur into angular swatches of colors. If the pair took any notice of them at all, they would only see a fellow couple walking toward the park. “Think we're good,” Peter grunted. “I didn't realize it'd gotten so close to Christmas.” Hanukkah had come and gone during his dimension-hopping.

“Welcome back,” said MJ, sticking her hands in her coat pockets. “It's weird to think you actually did drop off the face of the planet for a while.”

He'd sort of dropped off its face even before getting sucked into another dimension. He regretted that now.

Two museum employees were taking a smoke break outside a side entrance. Neither one noticed that the door took longer than usual to fall shut when they'd gone back in.

Inside the cavernous wing hosting the reception, purple and blue lights drew harsh lines on the featured sculptures, recasting even the most benign marble figures into a semblance of wrath and adding a layer of menace that did little for Peter's mood. Otherwise it was dimly lit, a small mercy. He did not want anyone remembering either him or MJ. Tinkling music drifted over the hum of high-brow conversation.

Peter removed the B.A.R.F. glasses and handed them to MJ, who gave him her coat. Aside from actually sneaking in, it was better not to use the holographic projector for concealment lest they drain the small battery, which Peter recalled Stark saying had a lifespan of only an hour. He didn't know how long he'd have to keep up the holograms back in Parker's universe.

Drawing to a shadowy side, MJ put on the spectacles. Naturally, they actually looked stylish on her. Peter just looked like the after-hours help who'd snuck in to the ball.

“How do I look?”

“Like six hundred and eleven million bucks.”

“Like how much?” MJ hissed, her hand flying protectively to the frames. “You'd better get these back to Stark in one piece! Is it one of a kind?”

“Well, if they broke into monocles they'd be two of a kind.”

More seriously, she dropped her hand and said, “You're kind of playing fast and loose with their patience, Peter. I hope they care about this other you. And this you,” she added, poking his chest, “because you still need them.”

Peter searched the milling crowd without really registering it. “They do,” he said eventually. “I think. About Parker, anyway. Listen, MJ...” He looked back to her. “I know I'm playing this one close to the chest. But I can't let Kingpin ruin that kid's life.”

The way Peter had almost ruined his own, when pressured to unmask in public before the Accords had gotten bloody.

MJ knew the history of that conviction. She met his eyes, and, making sure he knew she meant it, nodded. Peter was suddenly aware of how closely they were standing.

“OK, let's go chase down Vanessa,” MJ said. She drew out the digital camera from its case, which she kept dangling by a wrist. It wasn't professional-grade, but no one would bother to check. “What will you do if she didn't drag Richard here?”
“One of them will be better than coming empty-handed,” said Peter. “I just need to get face-to-face with Fisk.” He blew out his breath. “I was really hoping not to involve them in this at all.”

“You won’t,” MJ promised. “They won’t even know.”

They split up, Peter skulking around dark corners and hoping security wouldn’t tag him, MJ striding into the thick of the crowd wearing her modified press pass, bearing a false name.

“You guys in?” came Davis's voice over the communicator.

“Yeah,” Peter whispered, earning a strange look from a passing caterer. He glanced over his shoulder at where security stood with watchful gazes. “Where are you?”

“Close. Snuck into a line of Uber drivers.”

“We'll give you a heads up soon as we're done.”

He couldn't shake the nagging feeling this was going too easily. Not the overall plan; that was proceeding with typical early promise sure to spiral eventually into chaos.

No, it was going too easily with MJ. Urgency of the moment was denying her any right to be reserved toward him.

After all, they were together this evening not so he could beg her forgiveness as he'd wanted, but because he needed her help. It had to be a letdown for her and he tried to think of something he could say to make her understand that he would come back to her, and by choice.

Peter wiped his brow, which was starting to sweat from the strain of holding his cells together. His hand started fracturing into familiar shards and, unable to divert energy this time to stop it, he shoved his forearm inside his coat and held it against his ribs. Should he have stayed in the car?

He checked his watch. They still had some time. The meeting point where Wong was opening the portal back wasn't far; fortunately they’d decided on Central Park close to the Upper East Side. A low, charged stinging was welling up under his skin, as though he were hooked up to something electrifying he couldn't see.

“Spotted them,” came MJ's voice over the transmitter.

Thank God. Now fully alert, Peter scanned the crowd and spotted MJ's red hair. He moved closer.

Vanessa and Richard were chatting with fellow donors about thirty yards from where Peter stood, peering around the shoulders of bespoke suits and Gucci dresses. If Vanessa was older in this universe she hardly looked it; a gray streak running through her dark hair only lent distinction to her handsome face and fine bearing. Richard stood at her side with the polite vacancy of a normal kid who would rather be elsewhere but was humoring his mother.

“Wine, sir?” asked a suited waiter at Peter's shoulder, making him jump.

“Oh ah, no, thank you,” Peter told him, wondering how men could get away with dressing down for something like this when stilettos and jewelry seemed to be required for the women attending.

Pausing as he'd started to move on, the caterer peered closer at Peter, who leaned back uncomfortably. “Are you all right, sir? You don't look well.”

Hearing MJ start to speak, Peter waved him on. “Yeah, I'm fine, thanks.”
He retreated further back through the hall, where no one else was lingering.

MJ kept her transmitter on as she marched boldly up to Vanessa and Richard. “Ms Mariana!” she said warmly, sidling up during a break in conversation. “You look absolutely stunning tonight. Is that Givenchy?”

“Oh—yes, it is,” said Vanessa with a gratified smile.

“Would you mind terribly taking a photo for the society pages? You'll be the envy of the book club,” MJ said with conspiratorial charm.

Vanessa laughed and acquiesced, striking a modest pose for the press photographer who touched her hand to her glasses before holding up her camera. “Wonderful,” MJ effused. “Oh, and let's get Richard in there, too. Isn't this your handsome son?”

Addressed by the beautiful, red-haired woman, Richard went red-faced and stammered something Peter couldn't hear over the transmitter. “Oh, come here Rich,” said Vanessa, smiling and drawing him in. MJ beamed and took more photos of the pair, all the while scanning them with the B.A.R.F. glasses.

For some reason it made him smile to see Vanessa and Richard standing there, cheesing for the camera. Though they didn't know it, he counted them a victory.

Pretending to check her camera while circling around them, MJ said, “I think that should do it, thanks very much. Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

When she took her leave of them and emerged from the crowd at the reception's center, her expression heading Peter's way was sanguine.

“That was fast,” he commented with admiration into the transmitter.

“Sometimes you have to call a blitz,” she said back smugly, eyes on him.

He raised an imaginary glass of wine to her in haughty imitation of the museum patrons. Peter saw her eyes roll, then widen at him.

She surged forward and Peter was confused until he realized he couldn't breathe. “What—” he said distractedly, seeing his entire body spasming before the pain hit him, like sound traveling after a blast.

His knees buckled and he fought against an untimely collapse. In a second MJ was there. She looked around, saw an empty side gallery with some primitive-era carvings and steered him into it, half-bearing his weight.

Peter was just able to take out the cameras with his invented spot EMPs, which had the added trick of forcing the camera footage into a continuous loop, an idea he'd gotten from Ocean's Eleven.

“Easy, Tiger,” MJ murmured, her hand a comforting presence on his back. “Sit down for a minute.”

Maneuvering him to an elaborate stone bench, she sat him down. He sank on it gratefully, breathing hard and putting a hand on his chest like he was experiencing heart trouble. It really, really hurt. He was used to hurt, the aches and pains of being Spider-Man, but this was something else. It was a grindstone that inexorably wore him down.

At the beginning of this mess each glitching was a wincing annoyance but nothing he couldn't
handle. Now, each fit sent a thousand sharp needles through him.

And he'd thought he'd known what tired was.

“This wasn't how I imagined the atom was split,” he joked to the tiled floor.

MJ shook her head with a sigh, but her hand remained on his back. It felt stabilizing.

“Stupid,” Peter panted, “never should have gone in myself. Should've just let you handle it.”

He didn't like her seeing him like this, tainting the first steps of his intended great redemption with the pity she had to feel, witnessing him in this state. It felt cheap, like an emotional manipulation Peter hadn't intended.

It didn't seem fair to let the glitching get him off the hook of getting up his courage to ask her forgiveness.

“You know,” he said, with a forcedly conversational tone once his breathing had evened out, “this sort of screws up the grand gesture I had planned once I finally got back to this universe.”

MJ turned her eyes to him. Their faces were close. “What grand gesture was that?”

“Turning up on your doorstep with flowers and informing you I'm a total bonehead.”

Lowering her eyelashes at him she said dryly, “Then it's lucky I was already aware.” In her face, however, he he saw a flicker of surprise and—something else? Hope? Expectation?

“Yeah, but I thought you might like to hear me say it,” said Peter.

The ghost of a smile turned up the corner of her mouth. “So say it now.”

“When I'm like this?” He gestured to himself, where his chest gave a traitorous flicker. “Isn't that cheating?”

“Why, are you worried your sexy atom trauma might give you unfair leverage?” MJ said with a sardonic note.

Taken aback by her uncanny insight, Peter said: “Uh...no?”

She raised her eyebrows at him and drummed her fingers on his back. “You think I'm going too easy on you.”

Defensively, Peter slouched further down on the bench and muttered, “Maybe. I just didn't want to—you know, do it this way.”

“That's sweet, but right now I'm just glad I'm here,” MJ said wryly, and looked amused when he started to splutter that of course he was glad, too. “I know it's not how you imagined your grand gesture, but for what it's worth,” she said, eyes falling on the empty gallery doorway before pinning him with a critical look, “as far as grand gestures go, I might prefer this one.”

“Spazzing in front of you?” grumbled Peter.

“No,” said MJ, “I mean asking for my help.”

Peter had no answer for that.
Shecockedherheadwithasmallsmile.“You'veneverdonethatbefore,Tiger.”

Why hadn't he?

He'd always refuse, as much as possible, to let her share in the danger he faced, but she'd never asked to fight alongside him. Even Parker had a guy in the chair, and how invaluable had Ned proven to be; how invaluable was MJ proving to be now? Yet he'd completely benched her for the better part of their marriage. Worse, he'd treated her as something fragile, to be protected on a shelf with all the china he was too afraid to touch, lest it break: the same place to which he'd relegated the idea of children. Kids would have forced him to depend on her help, and reliance on anyone had always felt a failure on his part.

But that wasn't fair.

Maybe he'd simply taken Uncle Ben's words too literally to heart: that with great power came great responsibility, which he'd taken to mean the great responsibility was his alone.

“I'm sorry,” he said.

MJ smiled at him, and he knew he was forgiven whether he wanted to be yet or not. Then her smile grew a little sad, and her hand found the back of his neck. Its presence had the cooling effect of a washcloth on a burning forehead and Peter's gaze fell back to the floor. “One day you're going to have to stop punishing yourself,” she murmured.

He'd never thought of it that way. “In a way,” he said after a hesitation, “I guess that's what I'd resolved to do.”

“Good,” she said gently. “You can start now.”

Was it dumb he kind of wanted to cry? He'd done enough of that in his bathtub.

A wave of glitching sent his head between his knees, like he was seasick.

“Aaron, we've got the scan,” MJ said. “Can you meet us out back? Leave the car if you have to. Peter's not feeling well.”

Whatever Davis was thinking, he didn't say. “Be there soon,” came his voice over the communicator.

“I can get up,” Peter mumbled, not moving.

Some of the pain started receding back from the shore and he was able to look back up—right into the horrified faces of two high-rollers who'd stepped away for an illicit makeout session down the side gallery. The man's suit bore a wine splash and his blonde companion's hair was askew from its updo. Their giggling cut off short and they swayed, staring at Peter and MJ.

Peter noticed only one of them wore a wedding ring. Suddenly angry, he snapped: “Sorry, this Makeout Point is taken. Go find the back of another convertible.”

The man, who was definitely a little drunk, raised a shaking finger. “What—what the hell?” He was pointing at the glitches that rippled over Peter in spastic, sharp waves.

“You're all out of focus!” his companion said too loudly, still clutching a glass of wine in one hand.

“Quiet!” MJ said sharply, standing.

“What's wrong with him?”
“He can hear you,” Peter said under his breath.

“He’s, ah—” MJ glanced at him, then her face lit up— “He's a hologram! Yeah, he's not real! This was a test of Tony Stark's new tech—it's a new AI projection.” She gave them a reassuring smile they were too tipsy to take in.

The man came forward wonderingly, leaning over and poking Peter, who slapped his finger away. “It feels real.”

“Part of the technology uses binarily augmented retro-framing to convince a viewer's brain the hologram feels real,” said MJ as though from recitation. Flicking her eyes at Peter, she added with a sly note, “It's like a Bluetooth device for your brain.”

“I knew they were padding out these events,” the blonde declared. “And they say it's exclusive!”

“Were you really going to make out with a hologram?” the man asked MJ fuzzily.

Peter felt a migraine building behind his eyes.

“This is what I've been driven to. There's just no good men anymore,” said MJ. The blonde nodded sagely, oblivious to the dim outrage it prompted from her companion.

“Well, I say there's no substitute for flesh and blood!” the man announced drunkenly, waving his wine around.

“Who're you calling a substitute?” Peter groused. Would they just leave?

Frowning, the man peered more closely at him and possibly wondered what that meant.

“It's all part of his AI programming. He doesn't know he's a hologram,” MJ explained.

“I—I'm a what?” Peter affected a horrified voice and glitched some more. “I thought I was a real boy!”

“Oh my God,” moaned the man, backing away, “he's become self-aware.”

The blonde's expression became fearful. “I'm not sticking around for this!” she shrieked. “I've seen Blade Runner!”

The two of them started for the doorway at the same time, crashing together in their haste. The woman grabbed the man by his lapels and threw him back with a force made all the more impressive for balancing in four-inch heels, then darted out in the direction of the larger hall screaming hysterically about sentient holograms. The man wasn't far behind her, leaving a bewildered MJ and Peter in their wake.

MJ stared after them. “That may have been a miscalculation on our part.”

“Or a fundamental ignorance of technological singularity on theirs. On the bright side, I think you've invented a great new dating service,” said Peter.

“We have to get you out of here before security comes,” said MJ worriedly.

Instinctively Peter looked for a vent. Just typical there wasn't one big enough.

“Davis, we need a distraction,” Peter hissed for the transmitter.
“What kind?”

“The kind that happens right now,” said MJ as she grabbed her coat, drawing to the doorway and sticking her head out. “I see them talking to security!”

“Oh, that may have been a miscalculation on our part,” he told MJ.

Heaving to his feet, Peter approached the doorway and peeked around the corner. Two security guards were being tugged along by the woman, who was gabbling with a drunken abandon they didn’t seem disposed to taking seriously, but were nonetheless obliging her panic. There was a short hallway but, catching the direction of his gaze, MJ told him it was a dead-end into another small gallery. There was nowhere to run without being seen.

“You disabled cameras with your Volt Bolt, right?” Davis said as though he’d read Peter’s mind.

“Yeah, I—wait! You used my word! Is that a vote for Volt Bolt?”

“I sure ain’t calling it the AnVoid,” came the response over the transmitter, which was worryingly punctuated by the screech of an alarm.

Peter scowled. MJ patted his shoulder comforting and reassured him, “I get it, Peter.” To Davis she said, “Aaron, where are you? What was that alarm?”

“Coming up on your six,” was the brisk response.

They simultaneously looked back toward the hall. Just at the mouth of the short hallway leading to them, they saw the security guards stop and whirl around, heedless to the fruitless tugging of the woman on their arms.

Ahead, Aaron Davis ran by in full Prowler getup and Peter just had time to register a painting of some ballerinas tucked under one arm before he was gone in a whoosh of cape to the collective shock of all the guests.

It was almost funny how that gave Peter a jolt of energy which stopped a glitch in its tracks. “Was that a painting? Does he have a painting?” he demanded, pulse racing.

Blaring alarms erupting around the hall answered his question.

“Oh God,” he moaned, drowned out by the sirens. “He stole a Degas.”

The security backpedaled lickity split in pursuit of the thief. “I think that’s our cue,” said MJ.

Better recovered now, Peter jogged behind her as they reentered the massive hall. The crowd swarmed like a school of fish to see the madman who raced further through the museum, reminding Peter uncannily of a retriever refusing to give up its bone until everyone chased it to the dog’s satisfaction. Many people were shouting, a few were screaming with unnecessary terror, and Peter could have sworn he heard someone clapping.

Several security officers ran by them in a herd. They couldn’t have looked any more from a Looney Toon if they’d been waving truncheons over their heads. He felt his migraine build.

No one stopped them from leaving. He could have stolen another painting and it probably wouldn’t have added much to the chaos.
They exited past an excited elderly couple waving animatedly back at the galleries. “Charles,” they could hear the woman say to her husband, “we'll donate our Degas in its place! Oh, what I wouldn't give to knock Patricia's plaque off the wall...”

“You'd think art lovers would love art more,” commented MJ as they escaped to Central Park and the dark trees. She spotted a bored-looking man cycling with an empty passenger cart, braving the winter night in search of tourists to pedal around, determinedly oblivious to the commotion a short distance away. “Sir! Hey, can you take us a few blocks north?”

When they were seated on the moving cart and Peter had stopped hyperventilating with fury, MJ put the B.A.R.F. glasses carefully in their case and handed it back to him.

“How are we on time?”

“We're okay,” said Peter, trying to refocus. “I'm gonna kill him. If there's a scratch on that Degas I'm gonna kill him.”

Ahead, the cyclist pedaled serenely.

“Here's fine,” said MJ once Peter had indicated with a rough nod at where they were to meet Wong. She paid the cyclist and he went off in search for more riders.

The area was suitably dense with trees and shrubbery. Not isolated, not completely, but remote enough that in the dark Peter wasn't terribly worried about witnesses.

He'd thought he was breathing hard from the adrenaline but once it wore off he found he was still breathless. Without the distraction of shock, the pain was worming its way back to the forefront. Peter was about to take a seat on a nearby rock when Davis popped up through the shrubbery.

“What's up?” he said in a manner uncannily reminiscent of his nephew. “How much time we got?”

Peter shot back to his feet, wagging an impotent finger at the unrepentant Davis. “Don't talk to me right now. I'm a criminal by association.”

“Oh yeah, like you haven't been using the five-finger discount the last couple of days,” scoffed the Prowler. “What else was I gonna do? You said you needed a distraction.”

“You're wearing a cape! Which is literally distracting me right now! All you had to do was walk by!” Peter screeched. “I told you to cause a diversion, not GO PLAY CARMEN SANDIEGO!”

He was maybe a little hysterical.

“Keep your hair on, I left it in the Lost and Found.”

“Oh my God.”

“If I found it and gave it back, is that a charitable donation?” asked MJ brightly.

“This is why I work alone.”

“Come on, s'not like I swiped a Vermeer or something. Some tourist's gonna find that painting and be the hero when Spider-Man coulda made a sweet pick six in front of all the Richie Riches. It's your own fault you're not wearing your suit.”

“I am wearing a suit! The point was to avoid an incident!” Peter pointed toward the sounds of police sirens coming from in front of the Met. “That! Is not! Avoided!”
“What suit?” Davis demanded, eyeing him over. “I don't see any suit.”

Any withering response Peter had planned was abruptly cut off when MJ checked his watch and said, “Five minutes.”

Suddenly he forgot what he was going to say. Five minutes? That was all? He drew breath like he'd stopped in the middle of a full run and stared at MJ.

“Time flies,” she said with a wistful little smile.

Davis strolled away pointedly, mostly out of earshot. MJ's lashes lowered and Peter was seized by uncertainty he'd largely forgotten about over the past couple of hours, along with an awful dread. Five minutes wasn't enough. He'd been preparing to jump universes again since he'd broken out of the quantum tank, yet still the moment seemed to come up and surprise him.

“I, uh...” he stammered. “I'll come back when I—you know. I'll come see you.”

That was entirely inadequate, yet in the dark he saw her smile. “I'll be waiting. Be careful, Peter.”

Somehow that made him feel even more desperate. “MJ, I—” he paused, unable to think of what to say.

“I know,” she said.

She knew, yes, but he would still tell her everything soon, when he was healthy and home, for the same reason you told someone you loved them: not so they’d know they were loved, but so they would feel like it.

Feverishly, his brain searched for something to both prolong the moment and take his mind off it. Pain was scrambling his brain.

Then he remembered something. “Did Stark tell you he tried to get hold of me before I...” he gestured at his glitching. “You know.”

“He mentioned it,” MJ said neutrally. “He asked me to pass it along, and I told him if you were interested in talking to him you'd pick up the phone.”

Peter gave her a pained smile, grateful for her loyalty even after all this time.

“Did he say what he wanted?”

“Not really. But if I had to hazard a guess, I think he and Rogers are experiencing some regret. After letting it percolate for almost ten years,” she added with a trace of irony.

“What should I do?” he asked her.

“What do you want to do?”

Peter shrugged helplessly. He still couldn't say he especially wanted to talk to them. He could have gone another ten years without ever feeling the need or desire to reach out. But now that they'd asked, he found he would have a hard time saying no.

“You know that I think you're well within your rights to tell them all to go to hell,” she murmured. “If I were you, Tiger, maybe I would. But I'm not sure your heart would be in it.” She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. “Your heart has better things to do.”
This time, Peter did cry a little.

What if he really didn't come back? How could he leave her again?

He tried to talk and found he couldn't speak around the lump in his throat. Now that he was really trying to spill out all the things that had been swimming in his head, he couldn't. Instead he ran his hand up the side of his face.

MJ pulled him into a hug and this time he wrapped his hands around her back, sniffling into her shoulder. For the first time, so close to the end, he was scared.

“'I'm sorry I wasn't there for you,” he said hoarsely. “I will be. I promise.” It wasn’t everything he’d wanted to say, but for now it would have to do.

Whatever she’d started to say was interrupted by the sizzling sound of the portal opening behind them. Almost as if he’d been caught, Peter fumbled for the B.A.R.F. glasses and, after hurriedly wiping his eyes, put them on.

“How do I look?” he asked MJ.

“Like six hundred and eleven million bucks,” she said. Her smile was mingled sadness and pride.

Davis trotted back, pulling on his hood. “Showtime,” he muttered. “You ready?”

In response Peter touched the glasses and the scared visages of Vanessa and Richard appeared, looking as real as if the wife and son themselves were standing there.

“Let's go.”

MJ's face was the last thing he looked at before he stepped through the portal.

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Ten minutes later

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Fisk's eyes turned to flint. “No one betrays me,” he snarled, “and lives.”

As he fired at the Prowler, Peter moved.

Wong couldn't reach him in time, but Peter could, and he did.

Davis flinched in anticipation of the shot, but it never reached him. When he opened his eyes, it was to see Peter in front, arm raised.

Where a bullet should have been lodged in his arm, nanites were spreading.

Chapter End Notes

sorry about the wait! tried to write this carefully.
thanks for your thoughts :)

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Where a bullet should have been lodged in Peter's arm, nanites were spreading.

More followed suit, blooming over his arm and racing toward his chest. The barrel of Fisk's gun sank as he stared, almost entranced, while the nanites appeared to overrun the man before him.

In the space of a couple seconds they had swallowed Peter up entirely until he straightened again, sheathed in the Iron Spider.

There was a comical beat of silence.

Then: “Surprise!” said Peter, firing a web at Kingpin's gun and yanking it from his grip before the stunned giant could recover from his shock. The weapon flew to Peter's hand and he emptied its chambers without further preamble. “No cheating,” he tutted, unconsciously echoing Miles's words from another universe.

“Where the hell did that come from?” demanded Davis from behind him.

“Told you I was wearing a suit,” Peter said over his shoulder. To Fisk he added, “This will go a lot easier if you surrender and come with me quietly.”

Peter didn't really expect Fisk would surrender and come with him quietly. They never did. Supervillain Trope Number One, just ahead of monologuing.

Frozen rain battered the penthouse windows, marring the skyline outside into streaks of color.

In another universe, thanks to the efforts of Ned Leeds while Peter was busy sneaking into—and, regrettably, busting out of—the Met, S.H.I.E.L.D would be waiting.

Everything clicked for the Kingpin. “You're Spider-Man,” Fisk said, eyes narrowing. “You're Peter Parker.”

“The one and only—in my universe, anyway,” Peter affirmed, rotating his shoulders to get used to the nanite suit. Part of him had admittedly been afraid there wouldn't be enough nanites to go around.

“So...that's why you did all this? Think if this dimension's figured you out, yours will too?” The industrialist's hands were clenched in shaking fists and Peter was struck by the man's utter obliviousness to decency, that he could first leap to a contrived, far-fetched theory of self-preservation as the motive behind Peter's actions, rather than the simple truth.

“No,” Peter told him, “We did all this because you're done ruining people. You're done.”

Peter shot webs at those ham-sized fists intending to pin them to the floor, but Fisk surprised him by immediately yanking forward. It was a common retort villains often tried in a fight but it was the strength behind it that surprised Peter, pulling him forward off his feet. He tripped forward and gracelessly regained his footing, spasming throughout, but by then Fisk was already barreling toward him.

Peter launched to the ceiling and webbed Kingpin's back before the industrialist's momentum could
carry him to Davis. Yanking, Kingpin was pulled back in his tracks like an enraged dog stopped short by its harness.

Wong was moving before Peter even shouted for him. Another sizzling gold portal opened up, throwing sparks. Fixing it in midair, red glowing bands snaked from Wong's hands, whipping toward Fisk. All pretense had been abandoned and the only objective now was forcing Kingpin through that portal.

But Kingpin hadn't run out of Chitauri tech yet. Taking a page out of Wong's ancient tome, and shockingly fast, he whipped out a device that threw four glowing points in the air, stretching an iridescent blue window between them. Wong's Bands of Cyttorak passed through it and Fisk snapped the window shut, cutting off the Bands. They vanished in a flash of light.

“Matter Phase Shifter,” cautioned Davis.

Peter knew. It'd been a migraine clearing all Toomes's Chitauri tech from the streets in his own universe; Parker had his work cut out in this one.

With a venomous snarl Kingpin threw the points at the floor, creating another window, and jumped through it. Peter yelled and leaped for it, but glitching froze him halfway and he stumbled to a knee. Davis dived for the portal but it snapped shut just short of taking his head off.

“Shit,” Davis swore, slamming his knuckles to the ground. “Shit. He can't escape!”

“He can only go one floor at a time,” Peter said, quickly regaining his feet. “I'll take the outside, you guys stay indoors and try to herd him toward the windows.”

He didn't wait for their assent and hurtled toward the penthouse windows, which stretched ceiling to floor. One kick shattered the glass and he leaped out, twisting midair to reach for the skyscraper's sides.

Frozen rain pelted the Iron Spider with a metallic rhythm. Sleet slicked the tower's glassy exterior, and it became almost immediately apparent he wouldn't manage this with his usual panache. Over the years the act of controlling the molecular bond between himself and any surface he touched, the means by which he could stick to anything, had become as mindless as breathing.

Well, breathing wasn't mindless anymore. Every act demanded considerable effort now and he found himself having to devote more concentration than he'd ever had to climbing down the glass, energy sorely needed to marshal his atoms for the final charge.

This division of his attention resulted in a spastic bout of glitching and a heart-stopping slide down several feet of glass. Suddenly he became aware of just how very high up he was. New York City sprawled before him, bright even in the night-time, the neon signs of Times Square glowing like a lighthouse beacon on the distant shore.

His webs didn't stick as well to slick, icy surfaces and he didn't know if the nanites had packed a parachute. The suit's waldoes would only shatter the glass; there were no other surfaces on this godforsaken modern structure for them to find a purchase. If his ability to stick failed him, he was most likely toast.

“Okay, you've had better ideas,” he muttered to himself, carefully navigating down the glass side while keeping his atoms from spilling all over the place.

On the bright side, he'd certainly had worse.
The suit was equipped with a radar system he activated now. His viewscreen switched to a heat zone image, rendering everything in density-sliced pseudo color. Infrared alone didn't give him a clear view through the sleet-frosted glass, resulting in a visual feed difficult to interpret. Well, if something big and red barreled for him, that was warning enough.

His breath frosted the glass and created puffs of steam. Kingpin couldn't have traveled far, a few stories at most, but Peter was maneuvering too gingerly to keep up. Against his better judgement, Peter released his electrical grip on the windows and free-fell a few stories. He slammed his hands and feet back on the glass after a couple seconds, sliding another ten feet before he found a firm hold.

“Woah!” he yelped when the window above his head exploded into fragments.

Glass glanced off his suit as he dropped another two stories. Shards cut shallow swathes through the nanites which were quickly repaired, but his bigger concern was the Chitauri weapons now poking out of the hole in the building's side, aiming at him. Three hired grunts were firing deadly blasts of energy at his head.

“Kill him!” one screeched. “Kill Spider-Man!”

Peter actually took comfort from this. “You have no idea how happy I am to hear that,” he called back through the roar of the sleet. Kingpin hadn't thought to blurt out his real name when ordering his men to fire at Spider-Man.

If he escaped, though, he'd have all the time in the world.

Peter shot his remaining Volt Bolt at one of the guns, disabling it. Another narrowly missed and he had to make a bloodcurdling sideways leap to avoid the third, like a lunatic rock climber jumping from one stone handhold to another. One hand and both feet slipped, leaving him to swing from the three fingers which had managed to stick to the windows.

“Holy crap!” he shouted shakily, scrabbling at the glass. “Knock that off!”

They didn't. He planted his feet firmly on the glass and fired webs that claimed one of the other guns, but the third goon pulled back just in time. Then he leaned out the window again, firing once more.

Peter shot a web that finally found the third weapon and drew back to yank it from the man's grasp.

Instead, the stubborn jackass tumbled out of the window with it. Peter's eyes widened in horror as he saw the man drop in freefall, now screaming.

In an eyeblink the man hurtled past Peter. He wrenched one hand away from his precarious hold and fired a web that caught the grunt's back, stopping his downward flight a couple stories down and swinging him into the tower's glass side.

The man stopped screaming at falling from seventy stories up and started screaming at being suspended from seventy stories up.

“It's not a picnic for me either, pal,” Peter snapped at the guy.

His chest burned. He was using too much energy. He could feel it, like a racehorse breaking too fast around the last turn and saving nothing for the final stretch.

A pinging alert notified him of an incoming call, which was piped in through the Iron Spider's internal audio system.
“Well, well, my prodigal suit returns to its reality,” came Stark's sarcastic greeting. If Peter's viewscreen had not switched to infrared he would have been treated to Stark's irate face.

“Not a good time,” panted Peter, peering at shadows through the glass.

“You won't get a good time. Not after you *robbed me blind!***”

“Overstatement,” Peter objected. “I needed a suit—”

“You have a suit!”

“I had to give it to Wong! No—shut up for a second—I'm at Fisk Tower, this is almost over. Prowler's bailed on Kingpin, I have S.H.I.E.L.D waiting, I just need to detain Fisk long enough for Wong to get to him!”

This was enough to stall Stark mid-yell.

Peter glanced down at the jerk he'd saved, who had subsided into high-pitched whimpering. He didn't dare remove another hand to hoist the man up.

“You know that suit has an override,” Stark said in a flat voice.

“Yeah,” said Peter. “And you know I haven't had time to program a bypass.”

There was a long, baited moment. Peter tensed, wondering if he should try to shed the nanite suit depending on the next syllable Stark said. He was about to explain his delicate position at the moment when Iron Man spoke.

“Fisk Tower?” he said shortly.

“Yeah. I gotta go, I'm playing King Kong with Fisk. And no, I don't know which of us is Kong.” Glitching mangled his words and he slid down a yard. The hanging grunt shrieked at the sudden, sharp drop. Peter made to end the call but more seizing prevented the intuitive suit from interpreting his command right away and he froze against the building.

Stark didn't miss this and said: “Your shot clock's winding down. Make it fast—”

A hand crashed through the window directly before Peter's face. Peter yelled in surprise as the fist wrapped around his neck, suspending him eight hundred feet in the air, then dragged him close to the broken glass.

Fisk's face loomed through the gaping cavity, wild-eyed with fury. Rendered in infrared, he appeared a demon.

Helpless before the glitching, Peter struggled pathetically against the fingers gripping his throat. His strength was draining fast. Every last reserve was now focused solely on keeping his atoms from tearing themselves apart.

“Pete?” Stark demanded unexpectedly, still connected.

Peter ended the call. “Sorry,” he gasped, “wrong number. Damn sales calls—”

“Look at you,” breathed Fisk through bared teeth. “You're falling apart.”

“OK, ow, way harsh,” Peter panted. He'd found Fisk—yay—and hopefully Wong would show up any second. All he had to do was stall. “That's kind of your fault, you know.”
Kingpin pulled him inside and threw him bodily to the floor. Still connected to the dangling henchman outside, he was just able to transfer the lifeline to the ceiling before Fisk wrapped his giant hand around the back of Peter's neck.

Peter activated the waldoes, which struck Fisk in his face and chest, throwing him backwards. “Wong!” Peter hissed over his communicator as Kingpin lurched back to his feet. “I found Fisk. We're on...crap, I don't know what floor we're on. Maybe twenty down from the penthouse.”

“On my way,” said Wong crisply.

This was about the only reassurance Peter had as Fisk charged like an angry bull. There was a matador gag in that somewhere. By this point in most fights, he'd usually made way more dumb jokes but he was in too much pain to come up with a punchline. Automatically, his viewscreen reverted from infrared mode to normal, which did not make Fisk look any less demonic.

He didn't even have time to appreciate that they seemed to be in a kind of ballroom resembling the party they'd crashed in Miles's dimension, floored in expensive shining hardwood. He skittered back on the waldoes, which then retreated into the suit to let him crouch and fire a web at Fisk's face, blinding him.

Panting, Peter leaped with barely enough energy to clear Kingpin's head, grabbing his shoulders and throwing him into the floor in a Lucha Libre move Fisk could probably appreciate. He had no more mustard to put on it, however, and the hit wasn't forceful enough to knock the giant out. Howling in rage, Fisk's hand shot out in uncanny reckoning of Peter's location and grabbed his skull.

Somewhere he'd gotten another Glock. Blindly, he put it against Peter's head and emptied the clip into it.

The Iron Spider was bulletproof. However, the shock of seven bullets fired repeatedly in one spot, point-blank, thinned the nanites until Peter was left with a ringing headache. He threw a right hook solidly into Kingpin's chest, winding him without doing much else. Peter was no longer capable of much else.

Fisk did not lose grip of Peter's head. If not for the suit, he would have crushed Spider-Man's skull in his fingers.

Glitching almost did the work for him. Kingpin's hand clutched at air as Peter's head phased in and out of this universe.

Peter cried out in pain and staggered back with clenched teeth while Kingpin tore at the webbing over his eyes. Nothing would dislodge it save for Spider-Man's solvent.

Wong appeared like a godsend in the far end of the hallway, Davis following close behind. Was it just him, or did they appear out of focus?

Peter tried to web Fisk up again, he really did, but when he raised his hand it fractured into shards of color and so did the rest of him. In the space separating Fisk from Wong and Davis, there wasn't much they could do as the giant heard them coming and grabbed Peter by the scruff of his neck in another wild guess at his bearings, producing the Matter Phase Shifter and holding the device perilously close to Peter's jugular.

“One more step and I'll guillotine him,” Fisk growled lowly.

The Iron Spider was bulletproof, not portal-slicing-through-the-head-proof. It would cut through the
nanites like cheese. Though Wong still approached cautiously, making no noise, Fisk had the upper hand. Davis was tensed, white eyes narrowed in the mask Fisk had given him.

Peter cursed his own swiftly dying strength. He always had strength. That's why being tired was never enough to stop him. Superhuman durability had always robbed him of any excuses.

But he was every kind of tired now.

Fisk backed up, blind to the rapidly closing gap between them and the gaping window, through which sleet was showering. He must have felt it on his back.

Peter strained against the grip. His chest fragmented with each heavy inhale. Every atom was rebelling against this universe. Sensing his difficulty breathing, the nanites receded from his face to give him more air.

“Careful of the edge!” he hissed.

Fisk stopped. “You all get out,” he snarled in Wong and Davis's direction. “Get out before I throw him out!”

He twisted to the side so that Peter's right flank was exposed to the shattered, open window. He felt sleet on his cheek.

“This doesn't have to end with anyone dying,” Wong said calmly, as though to a skittish horse.

“What he said,” grunted Peter.

“It does now,” Fisk said wildly. “That's the only way it ends now. I won't spend my life on the Raft. I will not give up my empire! You will take it,” he roared, “over my dead body or his!”

Peter was forcefully reminded of Olivia Octavius's final abandonment of all reasoning, back at the supercollider, and knew Kingpin had reached the same point. It existed beyond rationale and ended only at an ultimatum of its own feral reckoning. Supervillain Trope Number Fifty-Six.

“If it makes you feel any better, I might die anyway,” he informed Fisk, haughty despite the glitching. “Your leverage isn't that great. I'm Monopoly money.”

Kingpin made an animalistic noise. Shaking Peter roughly, he yelled, “SHUT UP!”

“My enemies tell me that only half as often as my frenemies,” gasped Peter, stalling again for Wong to move closer. “I don't shut up for anybody, pal.”

Abruptly he put every last ounce of strength he could cobble together or invent to duck and get out from under Kingpin's grip, knocking aside the Matter Phase Shifter before Fisk could bring it up to bear. Wong raced forward and moved his hands in the preparatory motions of creating a portal.

Kingpin reached again for Peter's neck right as his bottom half glitched, abruptly throwing Fisk off balance and sending him stumbling toward the window, Peter trapped in his grasp.

Dimly he heard someone shout, “NO!”

It could have been any one of them.

Kingpin and Peter careened out the window and fell.

Rain kept pace as they plunged, down and past the panicked henchman still dangling from a web,
down the endless plain of glass.

Peter struggled to free himself from Kingpin's grasp. The waldoes sprang out and scrabbled at air like a spider's death throes. They tumbled end-over-end in a fatal tangle, pulled inexorably to Earth.

If he could just get loose he might be able to activate something else in the suit to save them, but whether out of panic or rage Kingpin kept a stranglehold on his neck and Peter had just spent his last strength. He couldn't throw him off.

Fisk Tower loomed up and away. The tops of other skyscrapers joined it, rising like imperious judges in Peter's plummeting line of sight.

Desperately he fired webs at the building's sides, but in the sleet they snapped under the pressure of Peter and Kingpin's velocity.

He couldn't survive this fall.

“Let go!” he snarled. “LET GO!”

Kingpin only drew his lips back in a wordless howl, clawing at Peter, the only thing he could reach.

Twisting around, Peter saw the terrifying visage of the street rushing up to meet them. Out of some dormant instinct the mask drew back over Peter's face. Nanites, though, would not save him from shattering against the pavement.

No one braving the frozen rain was looking up; they were huddled beneath umbrellas and would not know of the two men falling from the sky until they smashed against the concrete.

All but one face directly below, turned up to watch them.

Wong?

As he craned his head down to stare, the sorcerer made a motion like he was stirring a pot and a gold portal sizzled open parallel to the ground. Beyond it Peter saw a black sky to match the one he was falling from.

“KEEP STILL!” he bellowed at Kingpin, who miraculously stopped thrashing.

They fell, and fell, and the concrete raced closer, and they crashed down toward it...

And then they kept falling.

All of a sudden the rain vanished, save for the last sleet that escaped the portal above them before it shut. Peter spun and saw they'd reset at the top of Fisk Tower, except it wasn't the same one they'd just left.

The air was clear.

This time Peter lost no time in spinning Kingpin around, wrapping him up in the same cocoon he'd used to trap the three Avengers back at the base. Taken by surprise, Fisk had barely a chance to resist.

Peter quickly fired a web at the far end of the building, allowing them forward momentum to swing without the neck-breaking jerk of a sudden stop.

At the bottom of the Tower, red-and-blue flashing lights reflected off the Tower. Peter let out a
breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Good old Ned. Thank God for Wong's quick thinking.

They descended to the ground again, much more slowly than the first time. This tower wasn't so tall as the one in Parker's universe. It was still kind of a hair-raising drop, made more so by the glitching Peter was unable to bottle up anymore.

He dissolved the webs that covered Fisk's eyes. Peter wanted him to see what was coming.

Blinking once his vision was clear, Kingpin struggled against the webbed straitjacket, craning his head and seeing a distant fleet of S.H.I.E.L.D vehicles waiting for him. “What—what the—”

It didn't take long for him to cotton on. “NOOOO!” he screamed, swinging in his bindings. “NO! I'LL KILL YOU!”

“You brought this on yourself,” Peter told him tiredly. What Kingpin had brought on himself, he'd brought on others too.

At long last they touched ground, twirling gently. Fisk lay bound in the webbing, looking like an unfinished mummy. Peter never thought he'd be so happy to have two feet on solid pavement again. Maybe adrenaline was on his side because he managed to stay upright, though with considerable effort.

S.H.I.E.L.D agents approached with upraised weapons. Against the police lights they were framed in silhouette, dark shapes in the night. Automatically Peter's eyes searched for a familiar face.

Behind them, in the gathered crowd around the police cordon, he saw Ned's beaming grin. Peter gave a little wave and Ned returned it enthusiastically, earning slightly impressed looks from bystanders.

Kingpin was not taking the loss well. His irises were rimmed with white; his nostrils flared, and his chest heaved. “No,” he said again, through his teeth.

“This is a kinder fate than you might have gotten in your universe,” Peter said quietly. “You'll live.”

Fisk's wild eyes found him. “You think you've won?” he sneered, his face twisted and ugly with hate, alternating red and blue before the police lights. “You've just changed places with the boy. I'll tell them all. S.H.I.E.L.D and the FBI and all the rest. They'll all know Spider-Man is Peter Parker!”

Bargaining never crossed the man's mind. Others might have tried to negotiate with Peter or even threaten him, holding their final card above his head, but Fisk took it and slammed it in his face. He would go down taking Peter's name with him.

“Shout it from the rooftops, for all I care,” said Peter.

This wasn't the answer Kingpin was expecting. He lapsed into stumped silence.

“You know, I've been a soloist for a long time,” Peter went on, putting a hand to his chest with dramatic irony. “I dunno how much that will change, but I have learned one thing these past couple of weeks: 'Cheers' was right.”

Fisk stared at him uncomprehendingly.

Peter leaned in. “Sometimes, you just wanna go where everybody knows your name.”

One of the dark silhouettes stepped forward, slighter and shorter than the rest and wearing a black
suit, emblazoned with a bright red spider.

“Hey,” said Peter.

“Hey man,” Miles Morales said with cocky cheer. “Just couldn't stay away, could you?”

Fisk was led away with every security measure known to S.H.I.E.L.D, which was considerably more than any known to everyone else. It was a little like watching a crowd of people maneuver one of the dinosaurs in Jurassic Park. After talking with them in a questionably low timbre Peter suspected he'd adopted for dealing with the police, Miles jogged back over lightly.

"Our universe will take it from here," he said brightly.

Crouched on the ground, hand to his ribs, Peter called hoarsely over to the armed operatives shepherding Fisk away: “Careful, the webs only last a couple hours. Then it's all you.”

A granite-jawed agent nodded at him and turned to pass the information along to her colleagues.

Still refusing to concede defeat, Fisk reared his head back and screamed above their heads: “IT'S PETER PARKER! HE'S SPIDER-MAN! PETER PARKER—”

“Duh,” one of the younger agents said annoyedly while forcing his head through a door, “one of 'em, anyway. You been living under a rock? Knock it off!” The other agents rolled their eyes, and soon the confounded Fisk was stuffed into the back of a heavily fortified S.H.I.E.L.D van.

Miles snickered at the sight. “Someone should introduce him to his doppelganger,” he commented. “Think they'd get along?”

They'd probably bond over a mutual desire to exterminate all known Peter Parkers. “Knowing my luck, I wouldn't press it.”

His giggle turned to ragged coughing. At this point he was glitching more often than he was whole.

Though Miles wore his mask, Peter could read the worry on his face clear as day. “We gotta get you back,” said Miles with a kind of anxious calm. “Ned said they have to stick you in a rock tumbler.”

Ned himself sidled up, casting a sideways glance at agents and police content for the moment to ignore him. Eyes on Peter's constant, shivery oscillating, he said lowly, more to Miles than Peter: “Wong'll be here any second.”

Together they watched Peter heave to one knee, then helped him stand. All the while, Ned craned his head looking for Wong.

“I see you're still in one piece,” Peter rasped to Miles with a lopsided grin.

Miles matched it. “I see you still aren't.”

Head hanging, Peter briefly closed his eyes and laughed. “Good going, kid. Not bad.”

Even though he'd had faith that Miles would take care of things on his end, and had even banked on it, he was really proud of the kid. And, similarly, of Ned. OK, he definitely wanted kids.
Miles caught a look at Ned's shoes, the same he and Parker had admired in the shop window on the way to Bleecker Street. “Sweet kicks, man. Where'd you get those?”

“My dimension. You want a pair? You'd be the only one in this universe with 'em. You can say it's a, like, really limited edition. Like, exclusive.”

The two sniggered and Peter rolled his eyes.


Peter looked in the direction Ned was pointing. “Where?” He couldn't see him.

Ned frowned, looking at Peter and back to where Wong was approaching. “Right there.”

“I can't—” Peter squinted. All he saw beyond Miles and Ned were bright swatches of color and light. Swirling police lights assumed an abstract light show in his vision. He looked back to the boys' faces and realized even those were starting to blur and split. “I think—”

He reeled. The pain hit again like a lightning strike.

Ned shouted something but it was garbled and nonsensical.

Before, it was Peter who had been fracturing but now it was the rest of the world that seemed to fall apart.

Peter lurched and fell.

His vision splintered completely and he convulsed in fragments on the ground, on his side. Indiscriminate noises rose and fell like pulsing static, with no reason or comprehension.

His head was submerged by the blight and it drowned out all else. Overwhelming pain built to a white-hot pitch at which he almost couldn't feel it anymore, as though he'd stuck a hand under scalding-hot water. In the eyeblinks between searing glitches, his side heaved like a dying animal.

Peter couldn't fight it now. He still tried, lame swats at a raging beast, but his atoms had made the decision for him and said no more.

What was everyone doing? He couldn't tell, it was as though he were growing more distant from his own eyes. There were shadows and movement at the other end of the tunnel but he could not see. Everything was color or it exploded into white static; there were no shapes or faces anymore.

You traitors, he wanted to shout at his cells, dumb mindless things that did not understand they were killing themselves, just idiotic lemmings diving off the cliff one after another. I thought you wanted to go home!

He gasped for air but his lungs were heading elsewhere.

What an ugly way to die, some weird grisly voice said from deep within his skull, from the last rapidly shrinking bastion of conscious thought. It didn't feel like it even belonged to him. And there won't be anything left to bury.

MJ was waiting. He'd promised her.

Peter always wanted to go out on a joke. But everything went red, then black, before he got the chance.
Chapter End Notes

...
When he became aware of anything at all again, the first thing he noticed was that all the pain had gone.

Sometimes a chronic burden is most conspicuous by its absence. Now that the pain had vanished, it was shocking to realize what an albatross it had been on his energy. It was amazing he'd held up as long as he had.

But eventually strength runs out, as it had for Peter.

It wasn't like he'd thought he was invincible, not by a long shot. There was a difference, however, between believing you couldn't be killed and believing you shouldn't be killed, not when you could do so much.

Behind his eyelids, red light pulsed the way it had before the world had gone out.

When he opened them, the Green Goblin was staring down at him.

“Yahhh!” Peter yelped, springing to his feet, heart racing and hands held up defensively.

“Woah, dude, stop!” said Osborn, which seemed out of character.

Now that Peter really looked at him, the Goblin's face seemed kind of rubbery. Like a mask. Then he realized it was a mask. “Oh,” he said stupidly. “You're not actually the Green Goblin.”

“Nice mask though, right? Can you move? You're holding up the line.”

Peter looked around and was startled to find himself...at a convention center, nearly identical to the one the Stark Expo was held in. He stared at the crowd, many of whom were wearing costumes patterned after heroes and villains alike. A lot of them wore startlingly familiar faces over their own heads. He was standing at the edge of the food court, currently interrupting the progress of those interested in getting a snack from Cinnabun.

Automatically he stepped out of line, slowly turning. Everywhere he looked he saw familiar faces, molded from plastic and rubber. A large red-and-blue banner welcomed him to Comic-Con. Every once in a while, the place was flooded by red light that appeared to emanate from everywhere at once.

This...wasn't yet another dimension, was it? He felt, strangely, as he had when he'd landed in Miles's New York City. Everything seemed familiar, but not expected.

The same could be said of swiveling again to stare directly at Peter Parker, blond and blue-eyed and the last Peter had checked, very dead. He was holding a Slurpee.

Peter boggled at him.

“I'm dead, right?” he said.

“You don't look dead.”
“You're here, so I'm definitely dead.”

Blond Peter raised his weirdly blond eyebrows and took a slurp of his raspberry icee. “Just which hemisphere of eternity are you thinking this is?”

A massive, very realistic-looking Thanos lumbered past them, headed for the pizza counter. Peter stared after him.

“Jury's still out,” he said.

Though there was no apparent danger and on second look Thanos's Infinity Guantlet was made of shiny gold plastic, Peter was quietly and with great composure freaking out a little.

"Would you just tell me if I'm dead or not?” he demanded, though he didn't really want to hear the answer.

“Either you're dead or you're in, like, a coma or something,” Blond Peter said unhelpfully. "Either way, I don't think hysterics will do you much good. Relax, man."

“Either you're dead or you're a figment of my imagination,” grumbled Peter, gazing across the crowd. “Is this like the King's Cross bit at the end of Harry Potter? Are you just like, some projection of my subconscious?”

“If so...a comic book convention?” Blond Peter took a drag on his drink and looked around. “This is what the cat drags out of your subconscious? It's kind of on the nose. Not exactly Shakespearian.”

“I am watching you literally hose down that giant Slurpee.”

“I wasn't complaining.” Blond Peter looked around and spied a gladiator-style half moon of carpeted risers facing a large marble fountain, into which convention-goers were throwing pennies. He ambled over to climb a few risers and plop down with his feet stretched out. After a moment of hesitation Peter followed suit for lack of anywhere else to go, settling on the same riser a couple feet away.

Milling costumed people were striking cheerful poses for admirers' cameras. There were a lot of Spider-Man outfits. Some of the costumes, Batman and Superman and Harley Quinn, were from actual comics while others referenced real life heroes, like the Avengers.

If his head really was calling the shots, maybe his psyche had just assumed a convention was the most natural place for a couple of Spider-Man iterations to hang out. His suspension of disbelief served him well here, where it made no sense to be.

“I didn't think your dimension had Comic-Con,” said Peter, resting his elbows on his knees.

“We call it Funny Fest. You know, for the funny pages.”

Peter made a face.

“Well, at the very least I can tell you these aren't the pearly gates. Next hall over,” Blond Peter added slyly. He leaned one elbow on the riser to his back. "But maybe it's a little of both. I might be your Al. Like from Angels in the Outfield. Maybe I'm real, and your mind is filling in the rest of this place.”

“Wouldn't you know?”
Blond Peter smiled. “Guess I would.”

Not-Blond Peter sighed and rolled his eyes. “Whatever. How long am I stuck here for?”

“Can't say. Time isn't relative here.”

“What is this, Inception?”

“Your atoms just scattered like buckshot. Things could be worse.”

“And you're here...why? We never met,” said Peter, frowning. If his subconscious were to conjure up a ghost, it'd be Ben or May Parker. If he was truly dead, he wanted to see them first. Neither possibility allowed for the guy who'd had his chest caved in by the Wilson Fisk of another universe.

Blond Peter set his Slurpee down on the riser. “Honestly? I just thought you might like some company.”

Maybe he did. Maybe seeing Uncle Ben or Aunt May would be too great a temptation to linger.

They watched a kid totter by with a cardboard Captain America shield. A pair of older youths excitedly compared loot they'd purchased from comic vendors. There was a kind of happy hubbub throughout the hall that was oddly peaceful. No one was arguing which of his suits looked the best. Sometimes that took over a whole panel.

“So you know about Miles, right?” said Peter, still leaning forward.

Blond Peter smiled. “Yeah. How great is that? I'm proud of him. Wish I could have stuck around to help. You and I both know that's not fun to figure out alone.”

He'd wanted to mentor Miles, Peter remembered. He'd offered. Peter had had to be guilt-tripped into half-assing the job.

“I didn't really want to fill the vacancy,” he admitted, taking his elbows off his knees and crossing his arms, leaning back against the riser.

“Yeah, I know.”

Was he mad about it? Peter gave the Slurpee-sipping Parker a side glance.

Blond Peter returned it. With a shrug, he said: “Maybe if I were in your mismatched shoes, I wouldn't have been super enthusiastic about it either. But you still came through.”

“I tied him to a chair.”

“You did more than that, Mr. Self Deprecation, but yeah, you tied him to a chair and he had to bust out of it. I said I'd help him, not that I'd make it smooth sailing. No one can. There's always gonna be that point of...I don't know, reckoning? That first time you have to go beyond what you think you can do. Because if you don't, people will die.” He took another slurp. “Miles didn't break out to save New York, you were gonna do that. He didn't do it to spare the other Spider-Things, you were gonna do that. He did it to save you.”

Peter hadn't thought of it that way. Spider-Man did not get saved. He saved himself or died. Like the guy who was now contentedly draining an icede drink that never seemed to diminish.

“You're pretty well adjusted to being dead,” Peter observed.
“Comes from a lifetime of adjusting.”

He sounded sad. He'd had an MJ too, an intact marriage he couldn't return to. His aunt was still alive. He'd been happy and beloved.

It wasn't fair.

As though he'd read Peter's mind, Blond Peter slanted a look that seemed, for the first time, genuinely annoyed. “You think it would be more fair if our places were reversed?”

“I don't know if there's anything to reverse.”

“You know there is, jackass. You can feel it. You know this is a holding pattern. Maybe if you truly gave up, you'd join me. But you haven't, so you're sitting there feeling guilty. That's asinine.”

“Easy for you to say!” Peter said defensively, slouching. Now he had to feel sorry for feeling sorry? “You got to jettison all your survivor's guilt once you weren't a survivor anymore. If we're anything alike, pal, and you were sitting in my place, you'd feel the same way.”

“Well, maybe,” conceded Blond Peter, the anger quickly fading, “but now I've got the grand gift of hindsight, and I can tell you: don't waste time on this. You deserve to go home as much as I did.”

At some point the convention crowd had begun to thin out. Peter watched a group of people chatting animatedly on their way to another hall. Thanos finished his slice of pizza and left.

Eyes following them he said, “You haven't made the mistakes I've made.”

Blond Peter shrugged. “I never got the chance. I might have. The Accords haven't happened in my universe—yet. Who's to say I wouldn't have done everything the same? You're putting me on a pedestal because I'm blond and dead. No one talks about the stupid music video I seriously regret or my tooth-rotting cereal or that weird popsicle, because I went down fighting.”

“Glory to the fallen.”

“Uh-huh. I think you think there's a big difference between us and there's not.”

“Dumb music videos aren't a big deal. It's not like you let people down.”

“I died,” said Blond Peter, sadly. “That was a letdown. You think I was a better Spider-Man than you? Maybe I didn't get around to making your mistakes yet. But I also didn't save as many people. I didn't stop as many monsters. Everything I could do wasn't enough. And despite what you think, I made mistakes too. Real ones. Honestly...I'm kind of jealous of you. Maybe it wasn't pretty, but you always got things done.”

Peter was stunned. Blond Peter, jealous of him? “It's not like you could help dying. That was on Kingpin. You did your best.”

“Yeah, but you know us. We blame ourselves more than anybody else does. All the goodwill in the world wouldn't make me feel like less of a failure.”

“I was going to die, too, in your dimension,” Peter reminded him, so maybe he wouldn't feel like the only one. “And it was my call.”

“But you didn't. Almost giving up isn't giving up.”

“No, that's where you're wrong. I did give up. Miles...just didn't let me.”
His alternate self smiled. "And you let him not let you. No, stop—oh for God's sake, would you let
yourself off the hook for once?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Peter said irritably, although he then recalled MJ's words, from the
Met: One day you're going to have to stop punishing yourself...

"With great power comes great responsibility," quoted Blond Peter, picking his Slurpee back up.
"But sometimes, I wonder—if he'd known how much power we really had, if Uncle Ben would
have thought...that our power was too much, that it created too much responsibility. When you can
do more things than you can't do, the things you can't do seem like..."

"Like you're not trying hard enough," mumbled Peter.

"There is such a thing as too much responsibility." Seeing Peter glance at him, Blond Peter raised his
shoulders. "Don't look so impressed, I'm not Gandalf. A lot of this I've only figured out since I died."

"Great." Peter grimaced.

"Something for you to look forward to."

"Shut up."

The intermittent red pulsing seemed to have mostly stopped. By now most of the convention goers
were gone. The hall seemed a little lonelier. The Peters sat for a while, watching people leave. One
last girl tossed a penny in the fountain and walked to join her friends.

"You can go, if you want," murmured Peter. Though, weirdly, he didn't want him to.

"Nah, I'll stick around til the end." Blond Peter played with his straw.

The kid with the Captain America shield left with her parents. Watching employees close up shop in
the food court, shutting grates over counters and stacking the chairs on tables, Peter felt an odd dread.

Blond Peter didn't move yet. "It wouldn't get any easier, you know, just because you got new moxie
or whatever."

"Yeah, I know."

"It's not like baddies would go, like, 'oh, Spidey's groove is back, guess I won't stress him out any
more' and not rob the Federal Reserve."

"I could ask politely."

"Ye won't receive. I'm serious, though...nothing's changed except your resolve. You would still be
tired."

"Are you asking if I can handle that?"

"I guess. Can you?"

It was a question Peter had asked himself already, back in the fish tank. He'd known it wasn't enough
just to claw his way back to MJ; there would have to be steps that followed, precautions against
falling into the same rut. Especially when it came to kids.

Going home didn't mean he'd never have another bad day. There'd be slobberknocker fights and
crimes he wasn't around to stop and times when he would be sick of every jerk who put on a mask
and set out to wreck someone's day. He'd still get stressed and bruised and exhausted. So why did he feel more prepared for it now?

Maybe...because he'd stopped feeling like he had to do it alone.

Peter put his chin on his fist. “I'll be fine,” he said with a small smile.

“I thought so.” Blond Peter shook his icee and peered down the straw. “Nice going with Davis, by the by.”

“You do know he stole a Degas?”

“I know he put it back.”

“In the Lost and Found.”

“Well, that's what it's for.” Blond Peter grinned. “I'm dead, Pete, that stuff is just funny now.”

Though he rolled his eyes, Peter smiled. In truth, he was glad Davis had taken the chance to do better. It was easy sticking your neck out for innocent people, that's why so many others did it. Reaching the ones who were thought too far gone...that was hard, and for every fifty times Spider-Man tried it, maybe once would it almost work.

By now nearly everyone had gone. There was a sense of profound loneliness about the empty hall. He felt bad for leaving Blond Peter, who looked wistful lingering there on the riser, toying with his icee cup.

“I'm sure Miles will keep an eye on your MJ and Aunt May,” Peter told him.

“Yeah.” Blond Peter set his Slurpee down, and Peter saw it was empty at last. “Wish I could.”

“I know.”

They were alone now. Even though he wasn't afraid, exactly, Peter again felt that sense of dread—he still did not know what was coming, only that this...place had been a momentary comfort. Would he be in pain again? Well, if so, he'd handle it. He'd get back up.

So did Blond Peter. Rising, Peter shook his proffered hand.

“Well, good chat,” said Blond Peter.

“You did a good job, you know,” Peter told him seriously. Blond Peter looked surprised. “I mean it. You helped a lot of people.”

Blond Peter smiled. “Thanks. Go help some more.”

Peter gazed around the convention center, struck by the sensation of being in such a vacuum of sound. There was no place in the New York he knew where he'd ever be so alone again. When he looked back, his alternate self was gone. So was the Slurpee cup.

“Very on the nose,” he said aloud, closing his eyes. "No points for subtlety."
As in the indiscriminate suspension of sleep, things were dark for an undefinable time longer. When he regained some kind of consciousness and opened his eyes, it was to a surprise no more welcome than the Green Goblin.

He was in a coffin. A metal coffin! Oh shit, had they buried him after all?

“What the—lemme out! Let me out!” He began pounding on the barrier, trying to draw his fist back enough to get a solid hit.

“Hey—hey STOP!” A voice he recognized as Stark's yelled. “PETE, STOP!”

“Stark? Where the hell am I?” Peter yelled back, his voice slamming short against the barrier.

“Well, obviously I buried you alive!” snapped the unseen Stark.

“Don't joke about that, it happened once! What is this thing?”

“What? When were you—?”

“Stark!”

“You're in the rock tumbler, for God's sake! Would you leave me with one intact piece of machinery please, or should I just turn you loose to wreck the whole base? Stay still!”

Breathing hard, Peter did as he was bid. It wasn't easy; he hated tight spaces like this.

He was alive. Alive! How? In the convention center it'd been easier to dismiss the sheer absurdity of making it back to any living dimension in one literal piece. His pulse was still going wild. Where was MJ? MJ, he remembered, was waiting for him.

“Hey, Peter,” came another, calmer voice, which he placed as Banner's. “Listen, think of it like an MRI machine. We need you to stay still for a while and let the particle accelerator do its work.”

“It's not on now, is it?” Peter asked, trying not to move his mouth too much. “How did I get here?”

“We turn it on in cycles. Best not to let it run for too long, but we kind of pushed it when you got here. I'll switch it back on in a minute. Wanda got to you just in time, at the Tower,” he added.

The pulsing red, before the black. That had been Maximoff, enveloping him in red energy and saving his life. The Avengers had gotten to the Tower.

Now he heard Shuri's welcome voice. She sounded sure and positive. “When we turn the accelerator back on, you will likely see flashes of light. You should not be experiencing any pain from it. Tell us if you are.”

Peter was awfully sore but he didn't think that was from the fix-it. “OK,” he mumbled, and closed his eyes. He trusted they knew what they were doing but his memory uncomfortably recalled Anatoli Burgorski and what had happened when he'd gotten caught headfirst in a particle accelerator. In hindsight it was a miracle Ock's collider hadn't paralyzed them all.

“How long have I been in here?” he suddenly thought to ask.

Stark answered through the speaker. “Two days, on and off.”
Peter's eyes snapped open. “Two days?” he demanded, shooting up and knocking his forehead against the container. “Ow!”

“Lay back down, moron! You were kind of in pieces, you know! Putting Humpty Dumpty back together again required a little more delicacy than gorilla glue. Wanda got you here, but you were still in bad shape. To be honest,” Stark said with some strain, “I really thought it was too late. We couldn't run the tumbler too long without killing you, but you were practically dead already.”

“All of which we can discuss later,” Shuri said firmly. “For now, please, be still.”

Practically dead already? Peter shut his eyes again and the convention center resurfaced in his head, looking as it had when he'd left it. He was too tired to examine what seemed suspended between dream and memory.

“You look like him, too,” said Stark, emerging through a side door in the pristine white lab. “After this I'm converting this thing into a tanning bed.”

“Actually, Humpty, you came together very well,” said Banner. “Two days?” he demanded, shooting up and knocking his forehead against the container. “Ow!”

“Lay back down, moron! You were kind of in pieces, you know! Putting Humpty Dumpty back together again required a little more delicacy than gorilla glue. Wanda got you here, but you were still in bad shape. To be honest,” Stark said with some strain, “I really thought it was too late. We couldn't run the tumbler too long without killing you, but you were practically dead already.”

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“You will not,” Shuri said placidly, striding from behind him and walking up to Peter, wrist already raised. The beads scanned him from the top of his head down and Peter tiredly scanned its readouts backwards. Shuri was pleased by the results. “You are coming along very well,” she said with a bright smile. “I think another day and you will be well cooked.”

“Keep me a little pink inside,” Peter joked, though he felt raw.

Then he paused, frowning and putting a hand to his side. He lifted a corner of his thin t-shirt to reveal a scar where he was pretty sure a right kidney used to be.

“Not every cell made it back,” Banner said meaningfully, bringing up the rear of the group. “Including that kidney. And your gall bladder. Sorry. Had to remove the pieces. Wanda kept you together as best she could.”

“Well, I hope those atoms are happy polluting some other universe,” said Peter, though he was very unnerved by the revelation. Thank God Wanda had had the sense to preserve the organs he couldn't toss. “Think I lost any brain cells?” Before Stark could make the joke first he added, “Not like I had a ton to spare.”

“I'll say,” Stark muttered.

“Actually, Humpty, you came together very well,” said Banner. “You were pretty scarred up yesterday. Your recovery factor's very impressive. I'm sure it helped.”
Peter glanced at the machine he'd emerged from and was truly stunned by what they'd managed to put together in such a short amount of time. The three of them had practically rewritten Olivia Octavius's rewrite of string theory.

Being pulled back from the brink of literal disintegration required some adjustment after weeks of bracing against it, and a small voice in the back of Peter's head was going *you've been gone two more days and MJ's waiting*—

“Walk around a little,” Shuri suggested.

Peter lowered to the floor. He was a little wobbly, but he stayed upright. “I'm ready for World of Dance,” he announced once he'd gone the length of the room and back.

He was grinning at Shuri's eye roll when a glitch of his fingers sent him a foot in the air. “What—?” he gasped.

“Well, that is why you must cook some more,” Shuri said with her hands on her hips. “The process is more gradual than Octavius's machine, because we are doing this correctly.” Peter detected a hint of professional disdain. Clearly, the princess considered Octavius to have breached the strictest code of scientific ethics by rushing her machine.

Peter swiveled the hand before his eyes, examining the minute glitching closely. “It doesn't hurt the same.” Was he really fixed? Having lived with the universe's weirdest chronic condition for a while now, its cure, even a gradual one, seemed as much a feat of magic as science.

“The cells are still a little unsettled, but they're not trying to make a break for it anymore,” said Banner, lowering his digital display and leaning forward to peer. He didn't seem unduly concerned. “At least, the attempt's halfhearted.”

“Aww. My homesick little runaways.”

“Home for a hot meal. Speaking of which, why don't we get you one?” said Banner.

Peter's stomach answered for him, making Shuri giggle. “Thanks,” he said, and then, a little embarrassedly: “Um—thanks for all this. For figuring it out.”

Shuri beamed at him, then she and Banner began to exit the lab while discussing what meal he might best keep down. Peter called after them: “Nothing *too* healthy, thanks.”

Their footsteps faded and he was left alone with Tony Stark. Iron Man stood with his chin in one hand, contemplating the collider.

“Not bad, for a paper mache volcano thrown together the night before the science fair,” he mused, turning away and strolling down the machine's length. “Maybe I won't turn it into a tanning bed after all.”

Peter recognized his classic stalling tactic and waited it out.

Part of him wanted to pelt Stark with a million questions—where was Parker? He hadn't unmasked prematurely, had he? How much did Peter owe Stark for the—well, everything? Where were Miles and Davis?

Then a thought struck him. “Oh, crap,” he said aloud. “Did Rogers's car get towed? That was three-hour parking.”
Stark's hand fell from his chin and he turned to Peter incredulously. “The Volkswagen? That's what you're worried about?”

“Ah, well—the damage was otherwise done,” Peter admitted, feeling his jaw. It was scratchy after a couple of days without shaving.

“No kidding,” Stark said in a flat voice. “If you paid me a million every month for, oh, sixty years, you might settle up the cost of what you broke.”

Those B.A.R.F. glasses were worth only a fraction of the research that had gone into making them, but Peter wasn't disposed to argue. The fish tank was rather harder to replace. “You got the suit back, right?”

“Yes, I got the suit back,” Tony said waspishly. “Is there anything else you swiped? Should I check the silverware?”

For some reason his pique made Peter grin, in part because he could tell Stark's heart wasn't totally in it. “You tell me how much there's supposed to be and I'll tell you how much there is.”

Stark huffed and crossed his arms, finally dropping into a chair beside the door to the control room.

Peter absently rubbed at his wrists. He still hurt all over, but it was different from the pain that had dogged him for what seemed a long time now—maybe because of the promise of relief. “Can you tell me what's going on?” he asked at last.

Stark threw him a dark look but answered. “Nothing whatsoever,” he said. “FBI's crawling all over Fisk Tower, but Wilson Fisk seems to be in the wind, somehow.”

“That so?”

Exasperated, Stark said: “Blurring dimensional purview, are we?”

“Are you seriously worried about jurisdiction?”

“Oh, a little! We can't just dump our problems into the laps of other universes, you know. What if they spit him back?”

“What're they gonna do, FedEx him?” Peter waved a hand. “They wouldn't know where to start. I'm not being cavalier about this, Stark. Even if they could return Fisk to sender, I don't think they would. I'm pretty sure their S.H.I.E.L.D's gonna stamp 'MATTER OF NATIONAL SECURITY' in fat red letters on his forehead and pass a lot of paperwork along. Peter Parker left a lot of goodwill behind in that universe.”

“Little in the gray area for you, isn't it?”

“For me? Yeah, maybe.” Peter was rankled. He was always held to a different standard! “Coming from anyone else, it'd be called merciful. He's alive, isn't he? No one died.”

“You almost died! Which is what Parker didn't want!” Stark stabbed a finger at him. “Don't you remember him saying he didn't want anyone getting killed over this? It wouldn't have mattered how well the rest of that plan carried off, if you'd gone down with it! He still wouldn't have thought it was worth it. He didn't even want anything to happen to Fisk, let alone you!”

“I'm not a kid, Stark,” Peter snapped, flushing. “I knew what I was doing.”
“And you knew it'd make that kid feel like shit the rest of his life if you'd died. He still feels like shit.”

“It was a shitty situation. Either he feels bad for exposing people to danger because he's unmasked, or he feels bad because someone exposed themselves first to prevent that. Listen, I get it,” he said when Stark began to interrupt, “I've got my own remorse. Peter Parkers don't like when others stick their necks out for us—we've always felt that's our job. We live between the rock and the hard place. Spider-Men fight over guilt like it's a bone, 'cause we'd feel guilty if the other got it. I'm done letting it run my life and I hope Parker figures that out before I did.”

He was on his feet, pacing animatedly, waving his hands.

“I didn't do this to save him from more guilt. I didn't do it to save me from more guilt, though God knows I felt bad enough. I did it because I saw a chance to help people. That's all. I didn't just do it for him. It was also for everyone who ever crossed Peter Parker's path or ever will. I'm not going to apologize and if Parker even starts to try to apologize I will lose it.”

Stark's jaw worked.

Peter stared him down. “I'm glad you care about the kid. But he's going to have to deal with this. It's not easy, it never is. Too bad.”

However some apology was, in fact, owed. Peter had too much respect for science and Tony Stark's abilities in the field not to appreciate the value of what he'd destroyed. “But I am sorry about breaking your stuff.”

“Not for stealing it?”

“You're not even sorry I stole it. I know when you're genuinely mad, Tony, and this is just Oscar bait.”

Stark rolled his eyes but appeared mollified. “Fine. It's not like I can say I'm not relieved. And between you and me, I love when stuff breaks. It means I get to make new stuff and Pepper can't complain.”

“Your wedding playlist needs some work,” Peter told him, “unless you're just that into Hanson.”

Stark's eyebrows shot up and he sat back in his chair. “Hanson? No, that's getting thrown out the window. Vanessa Carlton and the heavy metal can stay. 'Let the Bodies Hit the Floor' can get the dancing started.”

Peter huffed a small laugh and sat down on the floor. It was pleasantly chill. He leaned his head back against the machine. “Where's, ah—”

“Your interesting new bestie, the Prowler?”

“To start with,” Peter said carefully. "Though I wouldn't say we're karaoke-level friends yet.”

“Not really sure, but the FBI seemed awfully excited about an anonymous new source when we chatted yesterday.” Stark shot him a critical look which Peter ignored. “I'm guessing you won't say how that one came about.”

Peter couldn't, not without compromising several identities. “Sorry. What about the skinny Spider-Man in the black suit?”
“The one still reeking of spray paint fumes? He's around, talking to Parker and Ned. Once you were out of the woods I shooed them away and they began eating their way through my pantry.”

Peter laughed. “Sounds like Comic-Con started up in your kitchen. Guess I should say hi.” His stomach growled. "I mean, after I eat.”

"Yeah." Stark paused, seeming on the verge of saying something else. Peter waited, oddly apprehensive.

Then with a minute sigh, Tony said, arms still crossed: "Thank you."

Peter smiled.

"I mean, imagine feeding that kid all the time."

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Chapter End Notes

the 'buried alive' bit was a reference to the comics, in which Peter actually was buried alive by Kraven.

I liked the idea of the Peters getting to chat, and I wanted an 'interlude' between the last chapter and waking up. I thought about making just one long, final chapter but it seemed abrupt. These last few weeks have been very busy, thanks for your patience!

Thanks for all your thoughts :}
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

At some point Wong had brought Peter's suit back to the compound. His decision to wear it around the base seemed quickly justified when he happened upon Clint Barton on his way to the kitchen. The Avenger sat with an array of arrows, strings and tools fanned out around him in the sunniest spot of a large, glass-walled common area. Morning sunshine flooded the room with light.

Seated on a spartan, low-slung divan bench, he was carefully wiring one of the arrows and glanced up at Spider-Man's approach to give him a lopsided grin. “Hey, rabbit ears,” he greeted.

“You do this in the open?” Peter asked him when he drew even with Barton, surprised he didn't have a lab for the work.

“All the better to see you coming,” Clint said with a wry note. “You seem to swipe anything not nailed down.”

If Peter had a yen to steal those arrows he was more liable to shoot his foot than anything else. “Keep them, William Tell.”

“Good to see you in one piece again.” Clint unstrung his bow and carefully dismantled it. “Can't say the same for the crap you broke, but at least we got Cap's car out of the impound lot. I think all the supervisor wanted was his autograph, but you know Cap—he insisted on paying the fee. We ended up taking a group photo.”

Another bill Peter couldn't pay. He was well beyond the possibility of arrears. It hadn't seemed like a big deal back when he had bigger deals to deal with, but now that the little deals were all that were left he did feel somewhat contrite about Hurricane Peter sweeping through the compound in spite of telling MJ he'd ask neither forgiveness nor permission.

“Wonder what the exchange rate is between dimensions,” he said aloud. “If I said one of my dollars was worth a thousand of yours, would you buy it?”

Smirking, Barton asked, “How come you didn't go for my minivan? Too cool for you?”

“No, I just figured you had to take the soccer team out for burgers,” said Peter.

Clint snickered and inspected an arrow. Something kept Peter standing there, watching him. After a moment the Avenger looked back up to the mask's narrowed, scrutinizing white eyes.

“You do have kids, then?” Peter asked him more seriously. “A family?”

Habitually wary, as though suddenly remembering this Spider-Man was not such a known entity as the one in his own dimension, Clint eventually said: “Yeah.”

“I don't think I knew that. Back in my universe.” Peter had sort of wondered, but he'd never asked and Barton never let on.

“Maybe I don't have a family in your universe.” Clint shrugged and set the arrow in its holding groove. “Or maybe I hid them forever instead of hiding them for a while.”
So he'd hidden them. Events in this dimension had unfolded in such a way that Barton could now carry his family like a badge of honor, their existence openly known to the other Avengers if not the world at large. In a way, they had been his secret identity. Had it surprised the Avengers, too, when they'd found out? Clint was a longtime SHIELD operative and grudgingly private.

“Did SHIELD know?” Peter asked him. “Like, were they on your healthcare plan or something?”

Clint squinted at him with a small, inquiring smile while taking out another arrow. “Why the sudden interest?”

Peter gazed back, arms slack at his sides. “How can you justify a family? With what you do?”

Seeing Barton's brows contract, he added: “I'm not calling you careless. I'm asking you how you sleep at night knowing that there are people in this world who would kill your kids, just because you were their father. You don't even wear a mask.”

Yes, fine, Peter did want kids, but that didn't stop proactive guilt about whatever challenges they might face from creeping up on him.

After a long moment, during which he evidently detected no accusation in the question, Clint set down the arrow. “Asking for a friend?” he said dryly.

Peter didn't respond.

Clint exhaled and leaned back sanguinely. “C'mere, sport.” He patted the spot on the bench next to him, the very picture of an old-timer about to explain the mysteries of life.

Peter shook his head. “You can't see it, but I'm rolling my eyes.”

“So roll them. Sit down.”

Rolling them, Peter sat and crossed his arms. “I know about the birds and the bees,” he said confidentially, leaning sideways.

“Oh good, then I can skip that part,” Clint drawled. Then the smile faded a little. “Listen.” He drummed his fingers on his knee, considering the man opposite him. “Why do you do what you do?”

“You mean swinging like Tarzan, stopping crime?”

“You swing like Tarzan because you committed to a schtick at thirteen. I'm asking why you stop crime. Why do you help people?”

As though he'd been called on in class to answer a basic question, Peter answered monotonously: “I was fifteen, and so the world will suck a little less?”

“OK,” Clint affirmed. “Less sarcastically, you want to make the world a better place. Right?”

“Right,” said Peter slowly, uncertain of where this was headed.

“Well, me too. I got into this gig—SHIELD, and then the Avengers—because I figured I had the chance to do that. But—” and here he scratched his jaw, “there's more to it than beating up invaders of either the home, alien or international variety. Making the world a better place doesn't just mean fighting the bad in it. Which I've learned the roundabout way.” He looked sideways at Peter. “My family makes the world a better place. They make my world better.”

Peter looked away. “And...if that world suddenly got a whole lot worse?”
“You mean if they were killed?” Hawkeye said frankly.

“Yeah.”

“Well, they were.”

Peter turned his head to stare silently.

“They went in the Snap. Every one of them. For being a fifty-fifty chance, the Bartons sure got the shitty end of the stick.” Barton paused in the act of clearing his gear, momentarily lost in memory. From what Peter understood, the battle for the Infinity Stones hadn't been that long ago; the grief was gone, but not forgotten. “Maybe that means someone else didn't lose anybody. I don't know. If you're wondering how I handled it, the answer is ‘poorly.’”

Just the possibility was enough to make Peter's heart skip.

“And yeah, I got them back. Doesn't mean I've forgotten what it was like to lose them. It was...a living nightmare. But—” and he focused on Peter once more— “does that mean I ever regretted, for a moment, having them? No.”

Peter sat and watched Hawkeye placidly wrapping up his work. He knew his fears would never leave him, but they were now joined by the kind of hope he thought he'd forgotten, and the desperation that came from realizing he'd gotten his regrets mixed up.

“Any more questions?” Clint asked at last, snapping a fastener on his quiver. Peter shook his head.

“OK. Good talk, sport.”

“Thanks, dad.”

Barton stood, extending a hand. “I gotta scram. Top secret stuff to do.”

“Uh-huh,” said Peter, standing and taking it. “Go pick up the soccer team.”

Sniggering, Barton took his gear and left, leaving Peter to resume his progress to the kitchen.

When he entered the communal dining room attached to the kitchen he was genuinely touched by the crashing relief which sent the occupants to their feet. First to reach him was Miles, who wrapped him in a bear hug, followed by Ned clapping him on the shoulder.

“You scared us, man!” Miles admonished him.

“Sorry,” said Peter.

Ned said, “I thought we'd have to Hoover you up from like five different dimensions!”

“Sorry,” said Peter.

“Mr. Stark thought you were dead,” Parker said quietly.

Peter hesitated fractionally and said, “Sorry.”

He wasn't sorry he'd done it, but he knew too well what kind of burden his death would have been on the kid's conscience. He could have been another Uncle Ben, and yeah, that he was sorry for.

Though Parker was clearly glad to see him, there was a certain reservation in his mannerism Peter had somewhat anticipated; warm as it was, Parker's greeting was slightly awkward, and his words-
per-minute count clocked low on the scale.

“Can’t believe you pulled it off,” said Ned admiringly, even though he’d been part of the plan. “Do you think you, like, predestined yourself for wacky situations like this the second fifteen-year-old you decided to put on red-and-blue tights and call yourself Spider-Man?”

“Hey,” said Peter, “‘Spider-Man’ is like the least embarrassing name a teenager ever came up with. What’s your Twitter handle, Ned?”

Hastily Ned changed the subject. Parker snorted.

They chatted a while longer at the kitchen table, swapping stories and good naturedly trash-talking each other’s universes. Tired, Peter mostly listened while they began debating which Queens in which dimension was more or less superior to which Brooklyn. Miles got unexpected support when Steve Rogers wandered in, ostensibly for an apple, and after greeting Peter with a wryness that recalled their last meeting pulled up a chair and with rare animation gave them a memory tour of every deli in Red Hook.

When the stylish Shuri entered the kitchen with another data pad the teenagers immediately sat up a little straighter. Rogers caught Peter’s eye and suppressed a grin. Smiling at them all, Shuri told Peter: “Time to tumble some more.”

“Great,” said Peter with forced enthusiasm. The accelerator was saving his life; never mind that it made him feel like he was strapped to a slow rollercoaster going backwards.

He made to rise. So did Miles, who shifted his feet and put one hand self-consciously to the back of his neck. “I gotta go,” he mumbled apologetically to Peter. “I just wanted to make sure you pulled through.”

He had his own dimension, which needed its own Spider-Man.

“Thanks. Humpty Dumpty's together again,” said Peter dryly.

“Could Humpty stay that way?”

“Humpty can try.”

Miles shook his head in mock exasperation. Then he turned to the other boys.

Though Parker and Ned were a couple years older than Miles, they didn’t treat the newest Spider-Man as a junior. The boys parted with a complicated handshake routine between the three of them that involved several fist bumps and clasps.

“See you around, Spider-Man,” said Parker. “Good luck. You know about baby powder in the suit, right?”

“How do you guys already have a handshake?” Peter demanded. “You’ve known each other for like two seconds.”

“Jealous?” said Miles, while Ned smirked.

“Of your pattycake game? No.”

“You can have your own handshake if you want.”

“I have a handshake. I shake hands like a grownup.”
The boys gave Peter a pitying look which he ignored.

Stark suddenly popped up, looking bemusedly around at the Spider-Man infestation in his kitchen. “Geez, where's my bug spray?”

“I'm goin', I'm goin',” said Miles, flapping a hand at him. “Wong here?”

“Yes, and Happy's happy you've all found a chauffeur who isn't him and strongly recommends Wong's services in the future.”

Amused by the archaic concept of an actual chauffeur, Shuri said to Stark: “I can recommend an alternative to a driver.”

“Yeah, but then what would I pay Happy to grumble about?”

Peter winced at a small glitch from his jaw. Catching this Shuri said crisply, “Back to the accelerator, please.”

Obediently Peter selected a bagel from the table and made to follow, nodding when the princess told him he'd have to remove the suit he wore before reentering the tumbler. Part of him had wondered if the suit would even make it back from Wong in one piece before remembering he didn't actually know how magic worked.

Shyly Parker told the Wakandan princess, “It's kind of amazing you pulled everything together so fast.”

Shuri beamed at him. “Where there is incentive, there is inspiration.”

“Speaking of inspiration, maybe you could use a vibranium Spider suit,” Ned said slyly to Parker.

Stark huffed. “His suit's fine!”

Shuri gave a considering look to Parker’s regular suit, which he was wearing now. Peter couldn't stifle a grin at Stark’s sudden tense anticipation and Rogers slowly chewed his apple, eyes flicking from the billionaire to Shuri.

After a moment of silence from the princess, Stark demanded, “Well?”

Parker squirmed under Shuri’s close scrutiny, trying to play it cool.

Shuri paused, then said delicately, “Well, of course it does not need many bells and whistles, given Spider-Man’s natural abilities.”

“I took out the bells and whistles,” Stark grumbled. “I could do bells and whistles if I wanted.”

Parker, on the other hand, seemed rather flattered.

“The Iron Spider is fancier but I don’t wear that a lot,” he said eagerly.

The princess smiled brightly at him. “You should come to Wakanda some time and humble my brother. And I will give you a tour of my lab! I think you would be interested in some of my projects.”

“What kind of lab do you have?” he asked her, and they strolled off chatting, Shuri animatedly gesturing while describing her work. Ned flanked her other side, saying something that made the other two both laugh.
Peter smirked at Stark, who followed them after a moment, looking disgruntled.

He and Miles strode together toward the front of the airy complex where Wong would be waiting to punt him home. The kid was uncharacteristically quiet for a few heartbeats while drumming his hands against his legs. The fumes of the spray paint had finally faded, Peter noted.

“I talked to—to Uncle Aaron,” Miles said eventually, in a voice low enough that only Peter overheard. The kid sounded unsure whether it was traitorous to the memory of his own uncle to address another Aaron Davis that way.

Peter glanced sideways at him. “Sorry for lobbing that grenade at you,” he said.

He expected that speaking to Miles would reinforce, for Aaron, all the things Peter had said to him and perhaps solidify a burgeoning desire to do better for his own nephew. Even so Peter felt sorry for Miles, who was surely not prepared to see his uncle's ghost so soon after his loss, and then waltz back to a universe bereft of him. Just as hard had been leaving Aunt May.

“Naw, I'm glad you did,” said Miles, plucking at the fabric of his suit. “If it means it won't happen again here.”

“Yeah.” Hopefully it'd help keep Davis in line. Of course, Davis's moral compass gave him something of a drunkard's gait when it came to marching along the straight and narrow.

Peter suddenly remembered something. “You'll look after Aunt May and MJ, right?” he said, referring to the bereaved Parkers remaining in Miles's universe. Blond Peter surfaced briefly in his memory, holding his Slurpee cup and looking wistful.

“Yeah, ’course. I mean, MJ doesn't know about us—or I dunno what May's told her, but I'll keep an eye on them. May's invited me over for wheatcakes.”

Peter nodded, missing her wheatcakes.

Wong stood serenely by the wall of windows with hands tucked in his robes. “You look better,” he told Peter with typical dry understatement.

“I don't think I could have looked worse,” Peter admitted. “Thanks for the save.”

Wong nodded at him, and Peter glanced sideways at Miles. In a very short amount of time he'd gone from a confused, scared kid in way over his head to being as truly Spider-Man as the hero whose shoes he'd filled.

"Your Peter Parker would be proud, you know," Peter told him.

Miles seemed surprised by this, but also pleased. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. But next time you spray paint your own suit, maybe don't start wearing it right away."

“Gotta suffer for fashion, man,” said Miles, sticking out his hand in much the same fashion as when he'd dealt with the police. "Well...so long."

“Gee, so formal now?” Peter mocked, pulling him into a one-armed hug. “You gonna use your Intimidation Mode voice on me too?”

“Man, shut up,” Miles sniggered into his shoulder, hugging him back. “Would you just go home this time?”
“Guess I will.”

They parted and Miles tugged his mask back down before saluting him with dramatic irony, then
turned toward the portal. Taking a deep breath, he glanced over his shoulder and stepped through.
Wong made certain he was clear before closing the gate with a sizzle.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said to Peter then, and wove a portal for himself. Through it Peter could
see the Sanctum's foyer, and Stephen Strange beyond it holding some sandwiches delivered fresh
from the deli. He gave Peter a sarcastic twiddle of his fingers before the portal closed.

“Dracula’s back,” said Peter when he returned to the lab. Shuri was giving Parker and Ned a little
demonstration of the collider. Parker had removed his hood and both he and Ned were examining a
superconductor lovingly. Peter was startled to see it was the same megaconductor he'd tried to
shoplift from the Stark Expo.

Wordlessly he caught Stark's eye and pointed at it. The billionaire only said sardonically: “Well, you
got it in the end, didn't you?”

Banner glanced Peter's way with a deceptively mild expression and said, “Someone called for you.
Left this number.” He handed Peter a note with a phone number printed in the doctor's small, spiky
handwriting.

There was no name, but Peter didn't need one. Taking the note he asked, “Can I borrow a phone?”

Banner slid him his. Shuri looked over as Peter made to stride away and said firmly over her
shoulder, “Five minutes, no more.”

“Yes ma'am,” said Peter, and sidled into the hallway.

Davis picked up on the second ring. “You callin' me from this dimension?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I hear they practically had to scrape your atoms off the walls.”

That wasn't far from the truth. He was kind of amused by the concern coming from someone who
not three days ago had tried to kill him, but it wasn't the first time a friendship had progressed in a
similar fashion. He glanced down the hallway, which was clear. “Well, I'm in one piece again.
Mostly held together by spit and duct tape and radiation.”

“Is that even a change of pace?”

“You call just to annoy me?”

“Naw, that's a perk. Thought I'd tell you I gave MJ the heads up, once you were in the clear.”
Aaron's voice momentarily lost its slickness. “I thought about bringing her over when things looked
bad, but...” He trailed off. “Well, you weren't pretty. It seemed...kinder if she didn't see you looking
like that.”

That was very possibly true, though Peter suspected MJ would have preferred a say in the matter.
Still, what Davis said interested him.
“You said ‘kind,’” Peter said into the phone. “When's the last time you made the choice you felt was kinder?”

“Well, I like MJ.”

“Sure,” Peter agreed. “But what about the people you don't like? Will you still do the kind thing then?”

Aaron didn’t answer right away.

“I did, for you,” Peter said frankly. Unconsciously he'd drifted over to a window overlooking the expansive grounds the Hudson Valley base stood on. Snow blanketed most of it, and more seemed imminent. “That's not vanity talking. It's hard to be kind, you know, especially when you're justified in being harsh. You hadn't earned mercy, not even knowing you'd die for Miles—it could have blown up in my face. It has before. It might blow up in yours, one day. It will almost certainly blow up in Miles's. It's one thing to spare a rotten life, it's another thing to go save it. So what will you do?”

Eventually Aaron said, “I don't know.” He sounded troubled.

Peter hadn't really expected an answer. “Well, at least keep asking yourself. Set a reminder on your phone or something. A conscience isn't a credit score, it's not just about being sort of good enough.”

His own credit history in that (or any) department wasn't stellar as of late, but he had time to improve it.

Aaron said: “Thank you, Dear Abby,” but Peter sensed something more than sarcasm there. “Can't believe I'm snitching to the Feds now.”

“May you snitch long and prosper.”

If an eye roll were audible, Peter would have heard it then. “So what made you think it wouldn't blow up in your face this time?” asked Davis.

“I can sniff out a threat, and you stopped being one. It's spider-sense.” Though Davis couldn't see it, Peter tapped his brow. “Which, apparently, does not alert me to eavesdroppers listening to secret conversations about magic.”

“Parabolic dishes are nothin’ new, man,” Davis told him. “Mine catches sound up to four hundred feet. You gonna know when I’m four hundred feet away?”

Peter muttered, “A little parting gift from crazy Doc Ock?”

Davis’s response was sly. “No, I got it at Best Buy. But it is Stark tech. They should be more careful ‘bout what goes in the clearance bin.”

“I'll let him know,” Peter sighed. “I gotta go. Atoms need more spit.”

“Yeah. See you around, Spider-Man.”

As Peter took the phone from his ear, he was fairly sure he would, in fact, see Davis around. That would be as much trouble as it could be fun, but MJ would tell Peter he'd be a good influence on the newly reformed Prowler. Absolutely no more museums though.
Over the next twenty-four hours Peter went in and out of the particle coffin, dozing to escape the nausea and itching with impatience to get back home. Not that he was ungrateful; the particle accelerator was a marvel and the people who built it more so.

Ned was the next to leave, this time with Happy, who waited reproachfully by the car. He'd been severely neglecting an essay to be finished over winter break, and while inter-dimensional adventures might justify the delay they'd be a little hard to explain to his physics teacher. Peter suspected Parker had been neglecting it too, but the kid just lingered while Ned and Peter said their goodbyes.

“Thanks, Ned,” said Peter. “You're a good guy in the chair.”

Ned beamed. “We gotta have a reunion or something. Get all the different universe Spideys together. Wong suggested a karaoke night.”

“Cool. Steve Rogers is a huge fan of ABBA,” Peter said confidentially.

Happy took the driver's seat and seemed taken aback when Ned took shotgun. Before he closed the door Ned winked at Peter and Parker and confided, “I hijacked the car's Bluetooth. Hope he likes Korean rap.”

When the car was pulling out of the long driveway, Peter threw Parker a sidelong look. “You swinging home?” he asked dryly.

“Wong's gonna open a portal for me after you go,” Parker said.

Making sure Peter actually went, it seemed.

They began trudging up the steps. By now Peter had only one remaining session in the particle collider to go. His cells were happy and stable, giving him some energy back. He felt like he'd woken up after a long night's sleep.

Parker didn't waste much time. When they'd reached the entrance he said, “I wish you would have at least told me about it.”

“The plan?”

“Yeah. I could've helped.”

“You didn't need to. Wong and Ned had it covered, and you couldn't have filled in my part. Besides, if it didn't work you would've needed the time to prepare anyway.”

“So I'm just supposed to let people do all this dangerous stuff for me, and I don't even get a say in it?” Parker demanded, stopping.

Peter stopped too. “Do you let other people have a say when you help them?”

“I'm Spider-Man and they're not,” Parker said stubbornly.

“So am I. Look, we can go around and around about this, but,” Peter shrugged, a hand on the entrance, “it's over and done with. You already know a lot about being Spider-Man, but there's one lesson you'll hopefully learn faster than I did: sometimes you just have to let people help.” He chewed his cheek and glanced to see if the coast was clear; they were not wearing their hoods.

“Too much power, too much responsibility,” he added in a murmur. “So let other people have the
power for once.”

“What?” said Parker, disconcerted by the echoes of what his own Uncle Ben must have told him.

“All I'm saying is you're not alone,” Peter told him, turning back. “And it wouldn't be any better if you were.”

Parker studied him with a somberness he did not seem to exhibit around the other Avengers. His frustration, though not gone, had abated somewhat, and he actually seemed to be mulling over what Peter had said.

Peter pulled the door open to the lab, where Banner was busily typing on a laptop. Rewriting string theory would have made for one hell of an article in the science journals, but Peter suspected he'd keep it under wraps, keen as he might be to show his research had outcomes other than its most famous one. Shuri was chatting with a hologram projected from one of the beads on her wrist. Geez, how much did those bracelets do? They were like a Swiss-Army knife of tech wizardry.

Shuri looked up when Parker approached. “I want to go to Disney World,” she declared. “Is it really the happiest place on Earth?”

Surprised, Parker replied: “I dunno, I've never been.”

“Well, you can help me decide.” Shuri turned back to her hologram. The shaven-headed woman she'd been speaking to raised an eyebrow.

Parker flushed and Peter had to turn his grin away. Right now he figured even the laundromat would be Parker's Happiest Place on Earth if Shuri came with him. Banner's tiny smile betrayed his pretense at not listening.

“Last dunk in the tank,” he said to Peter, who dutifully climbed in the coffin. By now he'd mostly overcome his willies at the tight quarters.

The last session wasn't too bad, probably because most of the work had been done. When it was over Banner and Shuri gave him a final scan and proclaimed the results satisfactory.

“All the same,” said Stark, who'd reentered while Peter was still in the collider, “take this.” He dropped a small communicator into Peter's hand. “The transponder should work between dimensions. If your cells turn into jumping beans again, give us a ring.”

“Will do,” said Peter, pocketing the communicator. He could probably find a way to wire it directly into his suit.

As if reading his mind Stark tossed an identical device to Parker, who caught it with one hand. “Might as well make it standard. You can code that into your suit.”

“No crank calls,” said Peter.

“You should have a hologram projector,” Shuri said brightly.

“Oh, yeah!” Parker was suddenly enthusiastic, then stalled with a glance at Stark as if wondering whether it'd be disrespectful to modify the suit Iron Man had made for him.

Stark rolled his eyes. “Fine. You're programming it yourself.”

Scratching his cheek, Parker turned the communicator over in his hand. “I actually, uh, had some
other ideas too...like, a stealth mode or something...

“Careful, you might turn this into a legitimate internship,” Stark drawled, texting on his phone.
“Okay, kid—I expect a research report on my desk Monday morning. I'm not your personal
Imagineer, you'll be doing your share of the work.”

Briefly his eyes flicked Peter's way.

Parker looked delighted. Peter smiled at the ceiling.

“Wong's coming,” said Stark while checking the phone. “He's gonna land in the foyer. Last time
Happy said he nearly sliced off his nose when he entered in the hallway.”

“That's my stop, then,” said Peter. He scuffed a shoe and reflected he really ought to change out of
someone else's Converse and back into his Converse. “Hey, uh—thanks for all your help,” he said
to the room at large, a little abashed by all the thanks he was unused to giving. With the exception of
them and Miles, most of the people he met in the workplace did still try to kill him. “Sorry for
whatever I broke and or stole and or snuck into your wedding playlist.”

“That's a lot to be sorry for,” Stark said, a hand nonetheless emerging from one pocket to shake his.
“But what's a fish tank between friends?”

“At least the fish is alive,” Banner said from the side.

Peter shook Stark's hand. Maybe it wasn't a substitute for reconciling with the Tony Stark from his
own dimension, but it was a good start. Suddenly he missed this, talking to his old mentor this way.
He couldn't go back in time and change any of the choices either of them had made, but he wasn't
married to the path he thought he'd chosen. If both Tonys were anything alike, the grief this one had
shown over losing Parker once gave Peter some small idea of the regret Stark was experiencing in
his own universe.

Maybe his feelings were reflected on his face, because Tony scrutinized him with dark, serious eyes
before the corner of his mouth tugged up a little.

Peter bade both Shuri and Banner goodbye, wishing he'd gotten to know them better in his own
dimension. “Tell Wanda I said thanks, too. And Cap for the car rental. And Barnes and Wilson for
the exercise.”

Shuri giggled. She'd been the one to untie them, tutting all the while.

Parker tugged his mask down and said, “I'll walk out with you.”

“So long, Spider-Man,” Tony said as the door shut behind them.

Peter pulled his own hood down, which looked kind of odd against his street clothes. The suit he
carried over one arm.

After a few steps Parker said, “Aunt May gets back tomorrow. I'm gonna tell her about the
acceptance letters.”

Soon they'd migrate from his desk drawer to the refrigerator. “Good,” said Peter, smiling under the
mask.

“Um...thank you.” Parker stopped before they got within Wong's hearing range. “For what you did.”
He hesitated. “I wish I could repay you.”
Repayment was not a leverage against guilt or obligation, Peter could have told him, and generosity was not the same as extending a loan against credit. “You're welcome, kid, but remember, people need Spider-Man,” he said instead. “I did it for them too.”

“Yeah. Same goes for your universe, too, you know. They need their Spider-Man.”

So they did. It got tiring, being needed so much, but it kept them going all the same.

They resumed walking toward Wong, who sketched a portal in the air as they drew near. Beyond it Peter saw the drab floor of his apartment building’s hallway and dreaded the mess he’d left behind in his studio box. That pizza would be nowhere near fresh.

“Last stop on the line,” said the sorcerer, as briskly as any train conductor.

“Promise?” asked Peter.

Parker shifted a little, then lifted his mask above his eyes and hugged Peter. Honestly, Peter really forgot they were technically the same person; for a moment, Parker was no different from Ned or Miles or Shuri, just another kid. And maybe, to Parker, he wasn’t so different from Uncle Ben, whether or not Peter felt he’d earned the comparison. “Bye,” said Parker.

Peter laughed and removed his own hood, seeing no one else around. “See you around.”

With a last look at them both, he stepped through the portal and watched as it fizzled shut behind him.

It was tempting to run yammering back to MJ straight away but, with an effort, Peter forced himself to clean up first. The ratty shoes went in the trash with the rattier pizza remains and an hour and a half later he was walking down his old street in Forest Hills, flowers in hand and wearing his only good non-Spider-Man suit.

A large, photocopied poster stapled to a pole stopped him short. It read: “LOST: WEBS” and displayed possibly the most unflattering picture ever taken of Spider-Man above a plea for information regarding the whereabouts of the webslinger, with little tear-out tabs half-torn from the bottom containing the contact information of Deadpool, who'd drawn a crude picture of himself looking disconsolate.

“Oh God,” said Peter.

Whether that phone number actually led to Wade Wilson or a prank hotline was even odds.

Wade was a headache for another day. Under no circumstances were he and Aaron Davis to ever meet.

(As circumstances turned out, they did.)

True to his word, Peter shortly showed up on MJ’s doorstep with flowers. Although he knew she was expecting him to come at some point, as he'd promised, when he webbed her doorbell and blew out his breath he was as nervous as he'd been on their first few dates. A moment later she opened the door and her breath caught at seeing Peter there. He saw her eyes dart over him, automatically searching for glitching, and returning to his face when she found none.
She stepped forward and slid her arms around him silently.

He held her back this time, and hopefully many more times to come.

“Welcome back,” she said into his shoulder.

He exhaled into hers.

After a moment they parted. A woman walking her French bulldog peered nosily at them while her
dog was whizzing on a fire hydrant.

Peering down at the flowers, which were a little crushed now, Peter cleared his throat and held them
out. “Um, these are for you.”

MJ took the flowers and held them to her nose, then her eyes flicked to him slyly and she slid a hand
up his shoulder.

“Hey,” she said huskily, and Peter's knees went all rubbery.

Then a sudden suspicion struck him. “Wait. Did you just 'shoulder touch' me?” he said, squinting
down at her.

MJ's expression turned to one of mirthful innocence. “Aaron seemed to think it'd work better this
way around, and has promised to reexamine his personal biases in the future.”

Peter choked. “You know, he did try to kill me.”

“He admitted as much,” said MJ, “and promised he'd break the habit. But, Tiger, you really should
find another way to make friends.”

“Working on it,” Peter grumbled, but her hand stayed where it was and he wasn't about to protest
that. Maybe he owed Davis one. “But I think I was in the middle of telling you what a bonehead I've
been?”

“Tell me more,” said MJ, and he followed her inside.

Chapter End Notes

the end.

I honestly tried to get this up ahead of Endgame but things got unexpectedly busy again.
Sorry! Hope you enjoyed anyway.

It's been a great deal of fun to write this and thanks very much to everyone for reading,
and for leaving your thoughts, all of which were super encouraging. thank you :)

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