Fighting Crime, Spinning Webs
by thebandragoness

Summary

Following the death of the Green Goblin, our favorite Wall-Crawler's had a little break from fighting supervillains, though he's had no such luck freeing Gwen from Harry's slimy, Green-addicted hands. Will this newfound era of peace last, or will more diabolical villains crawl out of the woodwork to make life tough for old Web-Head? Tune in to find out! Excelsior!
Dramatic Irony

Chapter Notes

Hi, welcome to the undisputedly most popular Spec Spidey fanfic on the internet! If you can’t get enough of me, you can keep up with me on my Tumblr, where I’m currently drawing the start of this fic in comic form (just for fun. I’m not the greatest artist in the world). I’m called “thebandragoness” over there, too, so it should be easy to find. Also, please note that most reviews for this fic are discussing an older draft, so please don’t skim the reviews assuming it’ll give you any idea of what actually happens in this fic. It’ll be totally inaccurate.

Anyways, hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lesson 1: Literary Studies 101

Face front, true believers! Today we bring you another scintillating tale, guaranteed to be packed with non-stop action and heart-racing drama for our favorite web-slinger! Excelsior!

The man behind the counter gave him a dry stare. “Kid, look, I'm not stupid. I know what's going on here.”

The kid shifted in place, pulling his hoodie tighter over his face. “What are you talking about? Nothing's going on here. I just want to buy this stuff.” He held out the bag in his hand.

“Yeah,” said the man – “Bruce,” according to his name tag. “And you've wanted to buy that stuff every time you've come in here since last summer. The exact same chemicals in the exact same quantities every single freakin' time.” He leaned in closer, eyes narrowing. “The only thing I don't get is what kinda drugs you could possibly be making that need a twenty-pound sack of liquid cement.”

The boy looked to the sack resting by his foot. “Uh, no, it's nothing like that!” he said quickly. “See, I, uh, I'm a science geek, and I use the chemicals and stuff for a... a science fair project.”

The man raised an eyebrow. “A science fair project that's been going on nonstop all school year?”

There was a prolonged silence.

“Yes,” said the boy.

“I can't believe he bought that! Sheesh, that's the last time I shop at Campbell's Chemistry Emporium.”
Peter breathed a sigh of relief as he set the supplies down at his basement workstation. “Man, I bet it's crazy expensive everywhere else, though. Wonder if I could swipe some chemicals from the ESU lab...?” As he spoke, Peter set to work pouring vials of multicolored liquid together into a mixing bowl (Aunt May was out with Mrs. Watson. He'd have it washed and put back in no time). “Well, okay, I wouldn't steal if it was from the Connors, but they left town, and that Warren guy's a creep. He deserves to have a few chemicals stolen, doesn't he?” Next came time to pour the liquid cement. “Ah, what are you saying, Pete? You're better than that.”

Then came the eggbeaters for stirring (He'd wash those, too). “Can he cook? He can bake. He makes radioactive cake. Look out... here comes the Spider-Chef!”

Now for the hard part. Getting all that fluid into the tiny little capsules was tricky, but Peter had had plenty of practice.

“And... voila! Now all that's left is to give it a test run.” The shooter snapped around his wrist with a pleasant click. Peter's eyes fell on an empty Coke can on the far side of the basement.

Thwip. Said can was now in his hand.

“And we've got webs.” The dryer abruptly stopped humming. “Oh, and the costume's ready. We're in business.”

Peter ran for the laundry basket, tossing the web-shooters back on his work-table. “Webs, check. Costume, check. Witty repertoire, check. Finally, the fun part of the day can start. I'll stop some petty thieves, get crucified by the media, fight for my life with animal-themed supervillains... It'll be a hoot!” Peter couldn't help but grin as he dug his mask out from the gigantic pile of identical blue t-shirts in the machine.

“Note to self, stop monologing out loud every time you're alone. It's starting to get weird.”

Thwip. Thwip.

A “Wahoo!” escaped Spidey's mouth as he came off the arc of his swing. This was the best. The pleasant March air, the wind in his spandex... It felt like he belonged up here, dancing between buildings, rushing past rooftops-

Ah, there we go. Now he was monologing in his head like he was supposed to.

Spidey stuck himself to a skyscraper so he could get a better look at the streets below. Hmm... No crime as far as he could see. Definitely not any thematically appropriate mega-criminals swearing vengeance on him. In fact, the streets were cleaner than they'd ever been. With the feds still breathing down Tombstone's neck, the Big Man's whole operation was frozen with fear, and there hadn't really been any more supervillains since Gobby blew himself up.

So the head of Oscorp dies, and suddenly all the mysterious new supervillains stop appearing? Probably just a coincidence. Yeah.

Well, it'd been twenty minutes and the Lizard hadn't burst out of nowhere to eat everyone. This was boring. Spidey was hanging up the costume for the morning.

Wait, was that a purse snatcher? No, no, he was just helping that lady cross the street. Ugh. Was it wrong that Spider-Man was starting to miss Doctor Octopus?
Getting to Midtown Magnet early in the morning was like stepping onto an alien homeworld. Where maddening swarms of shouting, shoving students normally roamed, there were clean, empty hallways. It was downright tranquil.

Or so Peter had heard.

“Ow! Watch it!” Peter hissed as he failed to navigate a shouting, shoving swarm. One of these days, he was getting here more than five minutes before the bell. One of these days…

Just when the throbbing of Peter’s head was starting to fade into more of a lingering ache, a nasally voice by his ear said, “Why don’t you just crawl over ’em all on the ceiling?”

“Oh my god, Seymour.” With a great effort, Peter mustered the strength to turn to the scrawny, curly-haired, glasses-wearing mess known as Seymour O’Reilly, who was currently hovering over his shoulder. “It was a Halloween carnival. We’ve been over this.”

“That’s not what this guy thinks.” The next instant, Peter found a phone shoved in his face. Onscreen was a blurry video of Peter’s favorite slimy black supervillain waving at the camera and yelling, “Hey, reporters, over here! We’ve got some breaking news for you. Peter Parker is Spider-Man!”

“Oh,” said Peter, “well, if the Lovecraftian horror says so…”

“You’ve got a huge following on the internet.” Seymour thumbed through the phone, ignoring him. “That Venom video's all over Youtube. Here, someone did a ten minute dance remix-”

“Look, I can prove I'm not Spider-Man.” Before Seymour’s thumb had time to hit play, Peter shoved his wrists in the guy’s face, then pressed his ring and middle fingers against his palms. Nothing. “There. If I was Spidey, you'd be covered in webs right now.”

That one seemed to stump the guy, allowing Peter to finally, mercifully vanish into the anonymity of the crowd.

Phew, that’d been a close one. Good thing the general public had no idea Peter's webs weren't organic. Which was great because that’d be gross. But also a lot cheaper... Okay, organic webshooters wouldn't be so bad.

Once he was a safe distance away, Peter leaned against a locker to check his phone. It was an older model, the nicest the Parker family fortune could afford. Well, actually, he did have one of those newfangled Osberries, but Peter had left that buried in his closet somewhere seeing as it had Norman-germs all over it. As a rule of thumb, superheroes shouldn't use any gadgets that were given to them by their arch-nemeses.

Peter strained to read his phone’s cracked screen. To the surprise of no one, Gwen hadn't returned his texts. No word from her since the funeral. And their internships had turned into a contest to see who could go the longest without breaking the dead silence. Great. You confess your love for someone who can't break up with her boyfriend out of pity, and suddenly everything's all awkward between you. Relationship drama? Just another Thursday in the life of Peter Parker, teen heartthrob.

The light turned green, opening the floodgates for New York’s regular storm of high-speed traffic. Any sane person would’ve noticed the change and stopped at the edge of the crosswalk.
But six-year-olds weren’t the sanest people ever.

Honk honk. “Ahh-!”

Thwip. An elastic strand of sticky goodness sent the little girl flying back to the sidewalk.

“Hey!” A red-and-blue-clad hero landed at the girl's side. “You okay?”

“Thank you, Mr. Spider-Man!” Immediately, the girl threw her arms around his waist.

“Please, Mr. Spider-Man is my dad. Call me Spidey.” Spider-Man knelt to put a hand on her shoulder. “Didn't your mom ever tell you to look both ways before crossing the street?”

The girl stayed quiet, eyes on her shoes.

“Actually…” Spidey glanced around. There were plenty of onlookers, but none were running forward to claim the kid. “…where is your-?”

“Get your hands off my daughter.” She was, naturally, right behind him. The woman looked like a slightly younger Aunt May, only about a gazillion times less endearing.

“Hey, there you are,” said Spider-Man. “Your kid was all alone-”

“I know all about you!” snapped the woman. “I read the Bugle!”

“Oh, well, then, clearly you're an enlightened individual.”

“Get your hands off my daughter!”

“I’m going, I’m going!” Spidey swung off without another word.

Thsizzastckp,” the man muttered.

“What?” asked the girl behind the counter.

The man sighed and poked his gun further out his jacket pocket. “This is a stickup,” he said slower. “Gimme all your money. But, err, don't make a scene or nothin’.”

“Y-Yes, sir!” The girl wasted no time emptying the contents of her cash register. The robber stuffed it in his jacket, then did his best to look casual as he exited the drug store.

Thwip. “Ah, trying to do a stealth robbery, are we?” said a brightly-colored man dangling upside-down off a nearby lamp post. “That seems to be a popular Spidey-evasion method with the crooks these days. Well, sorry to tell you this, but you've gotta get up pretty early in the morning to pull a fast one on your friendly neighborhood-”

Unfortunately, Spidey couldn't finish the quip because the thug made a run for it. Ugh, he hated when that happened. All that A-material wasted.

“Heavens to Betsy!” said Spider-Man, hopping after him. “The Sinister Six, I can handle, but I might have met my match with Generic Drug Store Robber Man.” He smashed his middle and ring fingers into his palms.

A little too hard, apparently. There wasn't just a thwip – There was an ear-splitting KER-SPLOOSH.
The dust cleared to reveal what looked like ground zero of a web fluid asteroid impact. There was webbing over the sidewalk, the shop windows… Heck, it’d even trapped a few cars at the edge of the road. In fact, it’d trapped just about everything except the fleeing thug.

“What the-?” You couldn’t really tell with the mask on, but Peter’s jaw was hanging open. “No. I must’ve mixed up the formula wrong.” That’s when he spotted the misshapen lumps under his gloves. “And now my web-shooters are broken.”

Great, he’d have to catch the thug the boring way. Spider-Man sprinted after the guy… only to watch his target drop into an open manhole in the street.

“Aw, dude, come on!” Spidey knelt over it, peering at the murky goop below. “I just washed these tights! You really gonna make me chase you down there? Okay, y’know what, I’m done. I’m tattling on you to the cops. Pretty sure covering themselves in sewage is demanded by their Oath of Honor.”

“Spider-Man!” Speak of the devil. Spidey spun to find a pair of officers racing towards him, though they couldn't get too close unless they wanted their feet glued to the pavement by the mess Spider-Man had left behind. They were a weasel-faced man and a short-haired, darker-skinned woman who Spidey recognized as Sergeants Carter and DeWolff.


“Shut up.”

DeWolff, however, was less enthused. “Isn't stopping petty thieves beneath you?” she spat. “The police could've handled this. You didn't have to use this much webbing.”

“My web-shooters broke.”


“No, they're- Look, it's not important.” Spidey buried his palm in his forehead. “Just let me clean up my mess.”

“If you’re going to stick around, why not come with us to the station so we can ask you a few questions?” DeWolff stepped towards him.

“Oh, darn, I forgot to water my plants!” Spidey pounced into the air and fired a web... and then smacked into the pavement. Oh. Right.

Slowly, Spidey turned back to the officers. “No one. Say. Anything.” He jumped on to the wall, sprinted up a building, and vanished over the rooftop.

Spider-Man wasn’t hiding. He was just… loitering a bit until those cops left. Spidey dangled his legs over the edge of the rooftop, gazing up at the sunset over the Hudson.

“I’m not pathetic,” he said. “I bet lots of other superheroes have problems getting around.”

Whoosh. He was lucky he didn’t go blind – Out of nowhere, a brilliant orange streak shot across the sky.

“Huh? What?” Spidey sprang back, rubbing his eyes.
The cheers from below told all he needed to hear:

“It’s HIM!”

“Ohmigod, ohmigod, JOHNNY STORM just flew past me!”

The whole street had gone berserk, filling the air with phones and white flashes. People were no doubt hoping to spice up their timelines with some blurry pics of the legendary Human Torch, fire-spewing hero extraordinaire, before he vanished on the horizon.

Yeah, that’s right, Spider-Man wasn’t the only superhero in Manhattan. He was just the only one who happened to be a poor person. See, ever since World War II, when technology had advanced to the point where gaining superpowers went from science fiction to science fact, throwing on a brightly-colored costume to fight crime had become something of a tradition among the superhuman community. Yes, yes, Spider-Man admitted it, he was riding the coattails of a fad. Well, his had originally been a wrestling costume, but he’d repurposed it once he’d learned what came with great power.*

*On the “Ask Greg” section of the Station Eight Gargoyles fan site, Greg Weisman revealed that the Fantastic Four do indeed exist in the Spec Spidey universe and “probably made their debut in November of Pete’s sophomore year,” but they only fight large-scale and/or cosmic threats. – Ed

Spidey watched the orange streak draw near one of the taller structures in Manhattan’s skyline. The giant, three-dimensional “4” carved into the top made it pretty hard to mistake it for anything but the Baxter Building, home of the Fantastic Four, the superhero team of which Torch was member number… three? Two? Kinda hard to keep that straight when they all had the same number printed on their costumes. Spider-Man wouldn’t be caught dead in that getup.

Actually, one of the Web-Head’s very first actions last summer had been to pay the Baxter Building a visit, but the Four had somehow gotten the impression that Spider-Man was some kind of creep. Human Torch may or may not have tried to light Spider-Man on fire, and a gratuitous fight scene may or may not have broken out, but eventually, Mister Fantastic (A.K.A. Reed Richards), the leader, had used his living-Stretch Armstrong powers to block Spidey’s path and interrogate him, and then Spider-Man had said he wanted on their payroll, and then Invisible Girl (A.K.A. Susan Storm) had politely explained that the Fantastic Four was a non-profit organization, and then the Thing (A.K.A. Ben Grimm) had told him to get lost.

Hmph. The Four had apparently gained their superpowers when mysterious cosmic rays hit their spaceship… which Spidey could only assume had also fried their brains.

Spider-Man’s eyes traveled to the misshapen, tumor-like lumps on his wrists beneath the spandex. What was he doing, lounging around grumbling about the veteran superheroes? It wasn’t like they’d ever helped him a day in his life. The FF had debuted months before that fateful spider bite, but apparently all the brand new supervillains rampaging around the streets of Manhattan were beneath their notice. The Fantastic Four, as they liked to explain on every late-night talk show, were primarily focused on “cosmic” threats – though they seemed more than happy to let Spider-Man deal with Venom (cough cough CHARLATANS cough).

Well, who needed ’em? The Web-Head could manage perfectly fine on his own, thank you very much. What was all their money good for, anyways? Saving lives didn’t cost anything!

Spider-Man stood, turned towards the Queensboro Bridge in the distance, fired a web-shooter… and then listened to the pathetic little spurt it made.
“Oh. Right.”

The man had been pretty invested in reading the newspaper, but his attention was torn away when he noticed the person in the seat next to him was wearing a skintight red and blue suit.

“Hey! Are you the real Spider-Man?”

“Uh huh,” said the real Spider-Man.

“What’re ya takin’ the subway for? Why aren’t you, y’know, web-swinging to wherever you wanna-?”

“This is so unfair!” Spidey threw his arms in the air. “I bet Human Torch never run out of fire…”

“You ran outta webs?” His fellow passenger looked thoughtful. “Maybe you should see a doctor-?”

“THEY'RE NOT ORGANIC.”

“Back so soon?” Bruce gave Peter another one of his dry stares. “Either you made a big sale, or you just couldn't help yourself and smoked the entire-”

“I'M NOT MAKING DRUGS.”

“Ugh.” The door creaked shut behind Peter. The last traces of daylight had faded by now, so the only illumination in here came from the living room’s reading lamps. All these shadows no doubt elevated Peter’s facial expression from scowling to bloodthirsty.

“Peter! Welcome back,” said a voice from the opposite doorway. Aunt May was standing by her bedroom door in her nightgown, and no amount of shadows could make her face look anything but heartwarming. “Always good to see you here before curfew. How’s your day been?”

Peter stood in place a moment. “Good. It was- It was, y’know, it was fine.” He probably should’ve told her about how he’d run around all day being happy and productive and well-adjusted, but his brain was in no condition to be making crap up.

“Well, now that you’re back, I need to be off to bed.” Aunt May gave one last smile before drifting away into her room. Yeah, somehow Peter’s answer had failed to grab her interest.

The moment she was gone, Peter collapsed onto the sofa. His eyes squeezed shut.

“Truth is, Aunt May, today’s been kinda stressful. I saved a little girl from getting squished in traffic, and as a reward, her mom chewed me out, and then I broke my web-shooters for the first time since I built them, so who knows how long it’s gonna take to fix ’em? Oh, and then a crook got away and the cop was real snippy with me. See, because when I save people’s lives, it’s wrong because I can’t afford a fancy tower headquarters, not like the illustrious Johnny Storm, see, because he can cash in on his heroism because he doesn’t have to wear a mask because I guess he doesn’t have an aunt with a weak heart or a best friend who’d go all Inigo Montoya if he learned the truth, and he can probably get whatever girl he wants just by telling her his name. Oh yeah, have I ever mentioned that before, Aunt May? Have I ever mentioned that I spend my free time dressing in a campy costume to fight crime? No? Well, gosh, I hope that doesn’t stress you out or anything.”
Peter forced himself to exhale as he sank into the cushions. What’d happened to him? Last summer, swinging and punching and wise-cracking had been the most fun things ever. The loneliness part had really crept up on him, hadn’t it? It was surreal – Sometimes, Peter would swear the illusion was true, that Peter Parker and Spider-Man really were two different people.

He guessed he couldn’t blame himself. Peter had literally never spoken to a soul about his masked exploits since the spider bite. Okay, besides Eddie Brock. Yeah, he'd make a great therapist for Peter.

Peter shook his head, causing the grizzled face of Captain Stacy to flash through it. Well, Peter didn't know for a fact if Gwen's dad knew his secret, but... come on. Come onnnn. But what was Peter supposed to do, go up to him after criminology and say, “Excuse me, Captain Stacy, I'm constantly battling supervillains and it's traumatized me. Can I cry on your shoulder?”

Peter buried his head in his hands. And on top of everything else, now he wasn't just broke, he was double broke because his stupid shooters had busted and he'd wasted all his web-fluid. And right after he’d had to buy a new camera, too. That shouldn’t have been such a surprise, really. Those poor web-shooters had been working overtime since summer. They were bound to give way eventually, and really, better it happen against a random mook than a supervillain, right? And at least, with so little crime to fight lately, the web-explosion had made for some pictures Jameson would eat up. Peter could see the headlines already: “SPIDEY WEBS HIS PANTS.”

Peter wondered if it’d be worth it to let the symbiote possess his brain just so he'd have unlimited webs.

“...believe it or not, the singer's baby was found driving the car for a fourth time. And now we bring you to an exclusive interview with the head of the Daily Bugle, Mr. J. Jonah Jameson.”

Peter's attention was turned to the TV, which had been left on with the volume low. The face of the greatest human being in the whole world was plastered across the screen.

“So tell me, Mr. Jameson,” said the news anchor, “why the vendetta against Spider-Man in particular?”

“The answer's simple, Trilby,” said Jameson, looking quite pleased with himself. “The Wall-Crawler wears a mask. What's he got to hide, huh? The people don't need to worship some vigilante who doesn't answer to anyone but himself. What New York needs is a higher caliber of hero. Someone selfless and brave. Someone like – picking at total random here – Colonel Jupiter. Now there was a superhero!” He glared into the camera, as if he was staring at Peter himself, and added, “At least until Spider-Man ruined him.”

“That's it.” Peter grabbed the remote and smashed the power button. “You're welcome for saving your son from alien spores, you-” He proceeded to use a word the Comics Code wouldn’t have approved.

Peter buried his head in the couch cushions. This royally sucked. He had no (ANGST WARNING) money, no girlfriend, no- no uncle. His best friends were both insane and hated either Peter or Spider-Man or both. The public hated Spider-Man when he had done literally nothing but save lives his entire career. The Parker household was still paying the bills from Aunt May's heart attack. The Connors had moved away, meaning Peter's internship at ESU was now being handled by that skeevy Warren guy. And thanks to Venom, Spider-Man's secret identity was all over the internet. In auto-tuned dance remix videos!

Peter groaned and rolled over on the couch cushions. Yay. Being Spider-Man was so much fun.
Had Peter kept the TV on, he would have caught the part where the news anchor said, “And here in the studio for our second exclusive interview, we have the little girl who, as seen in this dramatic phone footage, was almost abducted by Spider-Man until her mother scared the Wall-Crawler off.”

The camera zoomed in on the girl's unfathomably innocent face.

“See? What I tell you?” came Jameson's voice from offscreen. “How much more proof do you need he's a menace?”

“How did it feel?” asked the anchor. “Were you scared?”

“No,” the little girl said simply. “Spider-Man didn't try to a-duck me. I didn't look both ways before crossing the street, and I was gonna get hit by a car, and then Spider-Man saved me.”

“Hubba-wha?” came Jameson’s voice again.

The little girl smiled into the camera, revealing a few missing teeth. “Thank you, Mr. Spider-Man.”

No matter how the man’s lungs screamed, he didn’t dare slow his pace. He’d just been- and Spider-Man was- and there’d been webbing everywhere. It’d exploded! He didn’t know Spider-Man’s webs could do that!

Mind racing, the thug dived into the only available hiding spot – an open manhole. It was rancid in here, but surprisingly spacious.

“Aw, dude, come on!” came his pursuer’s voice from the surface. “I just washed these tights! You really gonna make me chase you down there? Okay, y’know what, I’m done. I’m tattling on you to the cops.” His voice grew fainter and fainter.

“Pretty sure covering themselves in sewage is demanded by their Oath of Honor...”

But even with Spider-Man gone, still the man did not relax. He continued his trek through the sewers in silence, doing his best not to think about all those stories of alligators living down here… or the pictures of the giant lizard monster he’d seen in the paper that one time.

The man rounded the corner- “Gahl!” -and was met with something big and green staring at him. The man fell on his butt, getting his only good jeans soaked.

After a horrifying second, though, he realized this wasn’t the face of a lizard. It was… a mask. One of several green masks spread out on some kinda work bench, along with purple hoods. And beside them were metallic racks containing rows of round, orange thingies, like miniature basket balls. And on the ground beside them were these, like, giant robot bats.

Wait. The man had seen pictures of these in the paper, too.

“See, boss, it’s all right where I said it was!” The man ushered a second man into the hideout, one wearing a heavy (but highly fashionable) overcoat. “This must be, like, the Green Goblin’s secret lair or somethin’.”

“Yes,” said the second man. “There’s no question of that. You’ve done well.”

“Aw, gee, thanks, boss.”
The second man inspected one of the metal racks. “Hmm. This little find will have to remain between the two of us.”

“You don’t gotta worry ’bout that, boss. I won’t tell nobody.

“Yes,” said the second man. “I know you won’t.”

The last thing the first man saw was something round and orange flying at his face. The last thing he heard was an explosion that sounded like laughter.

Chapter End Notes

Besides the Fantastic Four, Greg Weisman has revealed the whereabouts of several other Spectacular Spider-Man universe versions of classic Marvel heroes. As of the show’s final episode…

The Sub-Mariner is “still a bum,” having gotten amnesia sometime after WWII.

Captain America is “still frozen.”

Ant-Man is “operating under the radar (pun intended).”

Hulk is “jumping around the American Southwest, more legend than anything.”

Tony Stark hasn’t yet gotten his injury to become Iron Man.

Thor is currently stuck as Donald Blake and hasn’t gone to Norway or gotten his hammer back yet.

Xavier is “just beginning to set up his school with his first couple of students (Cyclops and Beast),” and the general public doesn’t know about the existence of mutants.

Doctor Strange is “probably still in Tibet.”

Matt Murdock hasn’t yet become Daredevil.

Hawkeye is still a mere carnival performer.

Black Widow is still a Russian spy.

Frank Castle’s family hasn’t yet been killed.

Marc Spector hasn’t yet become Moon Knight.

Many of these heroes, though, will begin operating sometime during this story!
Foreshadowing

Chapter Summary

Certain scenes from chapters 2 to 6 are adapted from Greg Weisman’s non-canon Spectacular Spider-Man / Gargoyles crossover script, only without the Gargoyles characters. I did try to put my own spin on the dialogue and such so I wouldn’t just be lazily copy-pasting large passages of his, but still, credit where credit’s due.

You could always tell when Peter and Gwen were near each other by the radius the crowd made. They’d just about emptied the whole hallway this time – The both of them in such close proximity generated far more nerdiness than the other students could handle.

“…maybe if you’d actually studied for longer than five minutes,” Gwen was saying.

“Hey!” Peter held out his hands, innocent. “It’s not my fault English is, like, my worst subject. It’s all so subjective, and-”

A scoff escaped Gwen’s mouth. “Peter, you wrote that Lord of the Flies was ‘an uplifting tale of children overcoming adversity.’”

“Yeah, I only read the first chapter.”

The remark brought a laugh from her. Which had been Peter’s intention. Obviously. But really, he’d take any words he could get from Gwen, no matter how disparaging. Anything beat that days-long silence they’d finally managed to break.

As the pair journeyed down the hall, shoulder to shoulder, Peter’s eyes drifted to his phone. The internet was still aflame over the bomb the Daily Bugle had dropped this morning – Norman Osborn was the Green Goblin. Aunt May had still been skeptical, but apparently, the Bugle had gathered enough eyewitness accounts and cell phone footage of the Web-Head’s midair duel with Gobby to confirm it. About time.

But Peter clicked his phone screen off before Gwen could glance at it. At the moment, they were scrambling to talk about literally anything else. No need to let Gwen dwell on that nightmare.

“So, uh…” Peter cleared his throat. “…how’s Harry been?”

Gwen’s eyes were fixed dead ahead. “Good. He’s been good.”

“Good,” said Peter.

“Yeah, good.”

There was silence.

“Did you get my texts?” asked Peter (Said texts included, “When R U breaking up w/ Harry?”, “R we still an item? :( ”, and “On a scale of 1 to 10, how devastated would Harry be if you broke up with him right now?”).
“I... did get them, actually,” Gwen said. “But Peter, the thing is, I-”

“What have we here?” Harry chose that exact nanosecond to teleport between them. “My best bud chatting it up with my girlfriend. What’re you guys up to, planning my surprise party?”

The remark caused a cold, dead silence to emanate. Well… they’d planned a surprise for him.

“I-I was just asking about the English exam.” Gwen shrank under her boyfriend’s gaze.

Whoa, what the heck? Peter had seen Gwen stand up to Flash, but now Harry was pushing her around? That set off all kinds of red flags.

“Uh, you okay, Hare?” Peter’s eyes traveled over the guy. Harry had always been kind of a sickly kid, but now his skin was downright spongy, and his usual sweater vest was soaked in perspiration.

“Oh, I’m good.” Harry said with a sudden, mysterious air. “Nothing a little R and R can’t fix.” The mystery was short-lived, though – The next second, he’d whipped out a pair of rectangular paper cards, one for each of them.

Gwen was the first to accept. “You are cordially invited,” she read aloud, “to spend spring break traveling by private jet to Miami Beach for an all-expenses-paid stay at the Osborn Winter Compound.”

“A vacation?” Peter did a double take. Wow. He’d swear he’d been getting, like, vaguely sinister vibes from Harry ever since the funeral, but he guessed Harry was still cool with him after all. “W-Wow, thanks, bro. That sounds great. The three of us hanging out. Just like old times.”

But that remark made something like amusement cross Harry’s face. “Uh, not quite…” He pointed a thumb at three more oncomers – MJ and Kong with Flash bringing up the rear (His cast may finally have been removed, but his leg was still a bit on the stiff side). And in each oncomer’s hand was an identical slip of unnecessarily glossy paper.

“Osborn, dude, you rock!” Kong called out, waggling his invitation around.

“Well,” Mary Jane said with one of those self-satisfied little smirks of hers, “if you’re gonna throw your money around, can’t say I mind you tossing some in my direction…”

Flash was the last to reach his new vacation host. “Before you get any ideas, Osborn-” His head titled downwards to meet Harry’s eyes. “-this does not make us even for the football thing.”

Harry cocked a brow. “So you’re not going?”

“I didn’t say that!”

This called for a triple take. Okay, y’know what, inviting MJ to the beach, that made sense. There was a discernible motive there. But Flash and Kong? Really? Flash and-? Oh, wait, Peter knew. Harry was still doing that thing where he sold his soul in exchange for high school popularity.

“Oh. My. Gawd.” Speak of the devil, a sudden noise threatened to rupture Peter’s eardrums. That’d be Sally. Her voice could pierce the Rhino’s hull. “Harry!” She ran towards him, waving an invitation of her own. “I just found dis in my locka, and all I have to say is… you can be my super-dweeb sugar daddy anytime you want!”

Harry looked like he wouldn’t have minded accepting a hug from her, but the football player standing guard of Sally changed his tune “You okay with that, Rand?”
But Rand, of course, merely replied with the customary shrug of his oversized shoulders. “S’cool. You can be my super-dweeb sugar daddy, too.”

Peter fought down the resulting mental image. “Exactly how many people did you invite?”

“Just a handful,” said Harry, turning back to him. “It’s a couples thing. Kenny and Glory, Flash and Sha Shan, Rand and Sally, Hobie and Mindy, me and Gwen, oh, and you and Liz, of course.”

“They broke up, actually.” The words came a bit too quickly from Gwen’s mouth.

“You did?” It was Harry’s turn to give Peter a double take. “Aw, I’m sorry, bro, I had no idea. Guess I’ve been…” He faltered. “…distracted lately.”

On sheer impulse, Peter placed a hand on his shoulder. “It’s cool, dude. I get it.”

Harry gave a slow nod. “That’s what the trip’s for. To clear my head, y’know?” He paused, then glanced back at Liz. “Man, though, you two were great together. What happened?”

There came a silence, during which time Peter fought with all his might not to let his eyes dart to Gwen. “It just… didn’t work out, I guess.”

“Don’t suppose there’s any chance you could start over with her-?”

“Nope, sorry, window’s closed forever.” Sally seized the chance to butt in between them, and for once, Peter was kinda glad.

Beside Sally, Liz nodded. Her eyes fell on Peter just long enough to send a shudder down his spine. “It’s way too late for that,” she said. “I’m wiiith… Jason now.” A sudden tug on the arm sent Jason Ionella flying towards Liz’s side.

Interesting how her boyfriend just so happened to be the first guy who’d walked past her down the hall while she was talking. Jason didn’t exactly seem to protest, though. He was flustered, sure. But he didn’t protest.

“We totally fell in love doing the play together,” said Liz, hands on Jason’s shoulders. “You don’t mind if I bring him instead of Petey, do you?”

It took Harry a moment to reply. That might’ve had something to do with the rate at which Liz’s eyelashes were fluttering. “Sure. The more the merrier.”

“Thanks! You’re the best!” Liz surprised Harry with a hug, then scurried off down the hall. After a second, a distinctly disoriented-looking Jason followed suit.

“Yeah.” Come to think of it, Harry was a bit disoriented-looking, himself. “I am the best.” But soon enough, he’d turned back to Peter. “So, uh, anyways, Pete, if you burned bridges with Liz, you could always ask MJ instead.”

“Y-Yeah, guess I could.” Peter’s gaze returned to Gwen. Her eyeballs were manning their battle stations. “But doesn’t she already have a boyfriend, though?”

“Well, she did,” said Harry, “but he’s in jail now, isn’t he?”

“Thanks,” spoke up MJ from the sidelines. “I hadn’t been reminded in the last five minutes.”

“Sorry, sorry,” Harry said hurriedly, wincing. “It’s just, you know, you and Pete kinda blew us all away at the Fall Formal.” He glanced to his girlfriend. “Remember that, Gwen?”
“Oh, I remember,” said Gwen in a voice that wouldn’t have been out of place in the mouth of a horror movie villain.

Peter glanced at Gwen again. Then he glanced at Mary Jane. Somehow, that glance ended up lasting a tad longer. “I… guess we could go together. As friends! Just as friends.”

At this, Mary Jane opened her mouth… only to be drowned out by the bell.

“Agh, gonna be late…” Harry was forced to run off without another word.

MJ was, too, but not before shooting Peter a look. “Meet me tomorrow after class, Tiger. You and me gotta talk.”

“Sure.” Peter paused. “Wait, like, a good talk or a bad talk?”

“I’ll leave you in suspense.”

And with that, Peter and Gwen were alone in the hallway.

Peter gave her a look of apology. “Soooo… what does happen in Lord of the Flies?”

Gwen’s look was, uh, less apologetic. “All the kids go crazy and murder each other.”

“Ah ha ha ha… Wow. That’s- That’s kinda far-fetched.”

“Yes, though?”

Thwip, thwip.

Even a backflip through the frisky nighttime air failed to clear Spider-Man’s head. And neither did a loop-de-loop around a flagpole.

If Peter didn’t know any better, he’d think Harry was trying to torture him and Gwen. Yeah. How dare he try and hook Peter up with the fun, foxy redhead with the creamy skin and the perfectly-shaped lips and the seductive voice and the-?

No, bad Spider-Man! Very, very bad! What was wrong with him? He was in love with Gwen. Gwen. Gwendolyn Maxine Stacy. They just had to power through the next few weeks until Harry was in a better place, and then Peter and Gwen could-

“Gah!” Peter nearly smacked his head against a concrete wall before he managed to fire his next web-line. Stupid duct tape made the trigger less sensitive…

“Peter Parker is, Peter Parker is SPIDER-MAN! Peter Parker is, Peter Parker is SPIDER-MAN!”

The footage was looped backwards and forwards to make it look like Venom was dancing.


Peter stared at the computer screen for a solid minute. He wondered if it was possible to hang himself with his own webs.

“What’s that, Parker?”
“Nothing! Nothing!” Peter closed out the tab before Mr. Robertson could get near. “I was just, uh...”

Mr. Robertson barely concealed a smirk. “Don’t tell me you're using the Bugle's computers to look at things you shouldn't be?”

Peter fought the urge to make a quip about Venom's sexy dance moves.

Of course, what he’d really been doing was making the discovery that the internet’s memory was somewhat longer than the mainstream media’s. Peter even had a bustling cult- sorry, fan community on a little old website by the moniker of the ‘Peter Parker is Spider-Man’ forum. Its founder and top moderator went by the username “Guess Who?” (though he hadn’t logged in since January).

“Say, though, are you good with computers?” asked Mr. Robertson, taking a sip of his coffee. “I know things have been slow around here lately. If selling pictures isn't enough to cut it, we've been looking for a new web designer.”

“Thanks, I'll think about it,” Peter said, rising from computer chair. “So is the Jolly One here yet?”

“He just went into his office.”

“Thanks.” Peter braced himself, then marched his way across the newsroom.

En route he crossed the Bugle’s newest employee, a withered old glasses-wearing dude with a scraggly beard named Ben Urich (The man, Peter meant. Not the beard. The beard didn’t have a name). Currently, the guy was going on to anyone who’d listen about Daredevil, the supposed new vigilante who’d started operating in Hell’s Kitchen a few weeks back. Daredevil was basically the same as Spider-Man, except instead of a spider motif, he had a devil motif, and instead of webbing people, he bonked them on the head with a pair of billy clubs.

But Peter pushed past Urich, instead heading straight for the open the office door. Instantly, his ears were inundated with: “-and if you don’t bring me my blood pressure medicine in four-point-eight seconds, you’re FIRED!”

“E-Excuse me, Mr. Jameson?” Peter nearly tripped over a fleeing Benny-the-copy-boy on his way inside.

Jameson spun in his desk, his mustache quivering with barely-restrained rage. Peter handed him a feeble stack of photos.

Jameson stared at them like they were diseased. “What's this s’posed to be?” He worked his way through the pile in seconds, tossing photos every which way. “Crap, crap, giant crap, crap, crap-Hey.” Finally, he reached the very last photo in the stack (Its placement had been deliberate, for the record). “This one.” He held the picture out to Peter, a slimy grin on his face.

Reluctantly, Peter looked at it – the one photo in the batch that was of a web-filled sidewalk, complete with Dewolff making an angry face at Spider-Man.

“Looks like the Web-Head had a little accident.” Jameson cackled to himself. “The headline writes itself. Spidey Webs His Pants! Guess the freak can't control his powers as well as he thinks he can.”

“Maybe his web-shooters just malfunctioned,” muttered Peter.
“What are you talking about, Parker?” Jameson snorted. “Spider-Man's webs are organic. Everyone knows that. Now get out of my office! I'm a busy man!”

“Yes, sir.” Peter reached for the doorknob, but then he stopped himself. “Wait a minute, I'm not just handing over that picture for free!”

“Geez, kid, it's just one picture,” said Jameson, leaning back in his chair. “How much do you want from me?”

“Well…” Peter's eyes met his shoes. “Aunt May and I have been stretched thin lately. A little extra wouldn't hurt.”

He already knew the answer before it flew out of Jameson's mouth alongside all the spittle. “Do I look like I'm made of money, Parker? You want extra? Then how about you take some pictures of that Oscorp ceremony thingy that's going on today?”

“The one for Harry’s mom?” said Peter. “I was already planning on going.”

“You come back from it with pictures of the supervillain that attacks it, and then we'll see about getting you ‘a little extra.’”

“Sure thing, JJ-” Peter did a double-take. “Wait, how do you know a supervillain will attack it?”

“Oh please, I know the drill by now,” said Jameson. “It's a fancy party for a shady company. Some bad guy in a stupid costume will attack it for whatever reason, and then Spider-Man will show up, probably collaborating with him, and you need to be there to take pictures of it.”

“Come on, we don't get supervillains that often.”

“Hand over your money or face the wrath of THE GRIZZLY!”

Pedestrians were sent fleeing through the streets as a gigantic man tugged on a lady's purse. He was actually in incredibly good shape, and his eyes were a striking emerald color, but these qualities were somewhat overshadowed by the fact that he was dressed from head to toe in a brown bear costume, with his head inside the bear's mouth like it was eating him.

“Lemme guess-” Thwip. “-the grizzly bear's your spirit animal?”

A strand of gray goop hit the Grizzly in the back of the neck. He spun to snarl at the costumed do-gooder hanging on a nearby building. “Spider-Man! How dare you interfere? I will rip the marrow from your bones-”

“No, wait, I've got it.” Spidey sprang off the building and over the Grizzly's head. He landed behind him and delivered a sweeping kick to the guy’s legs, his mouth running the whole time. “You missed your convention, so you got mad and decided to snatch a purse?”

“YOU THINK YOU CAN DEFEAT ME?”

Spidey ducked a claw-swipe. “Hey, does a bear? Well, I’m sure you’d know the answer to that one.” He fired his webs... only to hear a click instead of a thwip. Oh yeah, Spidey's web-shooters were currently being held together with duct tape, and consequently, they jammed every third time. Spider-Man remembered this fact right in time to receive a full-on Grizzly tackle.

“I really hope you wash this thing regularly,” said Spidey, yanking his face out of the Grizzly's
fuzzy chest.  

“I want nothing more than to taste your flesh!” The Grizzly wrapped his arms around Spidey and squeezed.  

“How 'bout a taste of spider-punch?”  

_Crack._ Spidey slammed his fist into the Grizzly's gut. The Grizzly roared with pain, releasing Spider-Man and tumbling backwards.  

“Wait, didn't Chameleon use that line once?” said Spider-Man. “Eww, now I feel dirty. Dirtier than from wrestling with you, I mean.”  

The Grizzly, however, didn't seem to have heard him. He was too busy rolling around on the sidewalk. “AGH! You broke my freakin' ribs!”  

“Really?” Under the mask, Spider-Man blinked. “I mean, I didn't pull my punch, but don't you have super strength or something?”  

“No! Oh God, I need a hospital...”  

“So... So you're telling me...” Spidey's voice shook. “...you don't have any superpowers at all? You're seriously just a regular dude in a bear costume?”  

Grizzly gave a feeble nod.  

Spidey snickered. Then he burst into hysterics.  

“It's not funny!”  

“Yeah, yeah, okay.” Without further ado, Spidey webbed the Grizzly up and slung him over his shoulder. “So, uh, if it doesn't give you powers, why the bear costume? You weren't actually on your way to a furry convention, were you?”  

“I don't have to answer that.”  

Okay, if _that_ was the most fearsome supervillain Spider-Man had faced since Norman's death, he couldn't say he shared Jameson's optimism about the Oscorp ceremony getting attacked. Which was a good thing, really. Supervillains attacking people was bad. In fact, Peter was kind of hoping his web-slinging career would be smooth sailing from here on out. Heck, he'd already rounded up the last of the Pumpkin-Heads, seeing as without Gobby to direct them, they were less an elite army and more a bunch of misguided teenagers.  

The only problem was a lack of supervillains didn't sell many pictures. Ah, well, maybe Peter would take Robbie up on that web designer job after all. Frig, he was gonna have to learn HTML, wasn’t he?  

“Pete! Glad you could make it.”  

Peter was shaken from his thoughts by the door swinging open. Out stepped Harry, who ushered Peter into his bedroom. The two of them had their hair brushed all tidy and were decked out in their nicest suits. One's suit was a bit nicer than the other's, though. No points for guessing whose.  

Peter took a look around the bedroom. This place had been Harry's, Gwen's, and his old haunt for years. It had everything – shelves lined with books and comics, a gigantic bed, and an even bigger
TV surrounded by every video game console known to man. A separate shelf held Harry's extensive video game library, every last one of which had been played to 100% by Harry and Peter. Harry's favorites were the Ratchet & Clank games, though Peter had always been more of a Spyro guy himself.

“I saw your balcony,” said Peter. “It looks really, uh...”

“Not exploded?” offered Harry.

“Yeah. That.”

“Mom wanted everything fixed up as soon as possible,” said Harry. “So there wouldn't be too many, y'know...” His eyes darted away. “...reminders.”

There was silence.

Peter took a breath. “Harry, listen, Spider-Man's one of the good guys. He's saved Liz, he's saved Gwen, he even saved your dad from the Vulture. Even at its worst, the Bugle's never accused the guy of murder. I'm sure Spider-Man didn't want your dad dead.”


Of course, Peter's first impulse was to say no way José, but he couldn't help but sense the urgency in Harry's voice. “I'll see what I can do.”

The smile returned. “Thanks, bro.”

Peter glanced back to the doorway, where he could hear the faint hum of conversation from outside. “Almost time for your mom’s ceremony to start. How you feeling?”

“Good,” Harry said immediately. “Bad. I don't know.” He sighed. “I mean, don't get me wrong, I almost can't believe my dad really left me the company once I'm eighteen.” And until then, his mom would be running things for him, hence her inaugural ceremony here. “But it's gonna be beyond stressful, y'know?.”

“Harry?” Just then, Harry's mom stuck her head through the doorway. “Honey, it's time to start.”

“Coming, Mom.”

After that, Peter left Harry's room and slipped into the humongous crowd filling up the penthouse. The top floor looked like it’d never seen a pumpkin bomb eruption, and it was packed to the brim with nothing but old dudes in suits... with one important exception.

Peter caught sight of a certain blonde. He’d recognize that dress anywhere – It was the same one Gwen had worn last Valentine's Day (courtesy of one Mary Jane Watson). Peter waved at her, but Gwen just frowned. He'd have loved to have a few words, but the ceremony chose that moment to start.

At the head of the crowd, a ginger man adjusted his glasses, then cleared his throat into the mic. Peter recognized him as Donald Menken, A.K.A. Mr. Green-Goblin-Red-Herring.

“It is my deep honor,” he began, deadpan as always, “to usher in a new era for Oscorp. An era heralded by a new mind brimming with potential. The mind of none other than Oscorp's new CEO, Mrs. Emily Osborn.”
Harry’s mom stepped up to the stage amid applause.

Aaaaand that was the last interesting thing to happen for the entire rest of the ceremony. Sheesh, Peter wished Jameson had been right. A supervillain attack would've at least livened things up. After approximately an eternity and a half, the long-winded speeches finally died down and the partygoers were allowed to mingle.

Peter, of course, jumped at the chance to dive headfirst into awkwardness. “Gwen!”

She turned and gave a strained smile. Her cheeks were already reddening. “Hi, Peter.”

“Hi.” Peter creased his hair, smearing gel all over his fingers. “So…”

“So.”

“So.”

“Talking with Pete, are we?” Even that exchange had been enough to make Harry's envy-sense tingle. He promptly inserted himself between the other two.

“Wh- Why wouldn't I talk to Peter?” Gwen shrank under his gaze.

“Harry, Harry!” But before Harry could reply, his mom ran up to the group. “Stand up straight and smile, honey. I want you to meet someone.”

“Really?” Harry corrected his posture, though his hand remained firmly stuck to Gwen's. “Who?”

“An incredibly wealthy philanthropist,” said Harry's mom, blinding them with her teeth. “Gives more to charity than everyone else in his income bracket combined. He's won the Nobel Peace Prize twice. And-” She whispered this next part: “I think he wants to invest in Oscorp, so be nice.” She held out her arms towards the man walking towards them. “It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say this is the greatest, most selfless human being in New York. I want you to meet... Wilson Fisk.”

Peter had to stop his jaw from dropping. The man who approached them was... How could Peter put this? He was a bald guy in a white suit. Only it'd be more accurate to say he was ten bald guys in a white suit. Peter's first impulse was to run to the buffet table and grab food while there was still some left. Before this moment, he hadn't known human beings came in XL. Or more like XXXXXXXXXXXXL. What on earth had happened to this man? Had he been bit by a genetically-altered whale?

…Okay, time to reign in the wisecracks. Something told Peter the Peace Prize-winning philanthropist didn’t deserve them.

“It's a pleasure to meet you, young man.” Fisk extended a beefy hand for Harry – complete with fingers the size of fire hydrants. “I see much potential in you, Mr. Osborn.”

“Oh no, the pleasure's all mine, sir.” Harry accepted the shake, a move Peter didn’t envy. Poor guy’s fingers were gonan get crushed into powder. “I hear you do great things.”

“I think of myself as more of a middleman,” said Fisk. “I merely give resources to others so they can do great things. It's companies such as Oscorp that truly advance the world.”

“Companies with your resources?”
Fisk smiled. “Perhaps.”

“Mr. Fisk?” Out of nowhere, a calm, deep, distressingly familiar voice hit Peter's ears. With a growing sense of dread, Peter turned to see yet another man in a suit approaching them. This one, while not as big as Wilson Fisk (not even remotely), wasn't exactly tiny, and with that balls-on-the-floor voice of his, he was the absolute blackest white guy Peter had ever met who was actually a black guy.

“L. Thompson Lincoln.” Tombstone extended an albino hand to shake. “It's an honor to finally make your acquaintance.”

Ugh, if Fisk accepted that handshake, Peter was gonna hurl. Tombstone filed his teeth down to points! How did the whole world not instantly know he was evil?

Fisk's hands remained firmly at his sides. “I have nothing to say to you.” He turned away.

Okay, score some respect points for the fat guy.

“Well, I'm sorry you feel that way.” Tombstone retracted his hand like an embarrassed cat. “I can't imagine why you would.”

“Gee-” The words flew out Peter's mouth before he could stop them. “-maybe it's got something to do with that criminal empire you run in your free time?”

Gwen audibly gasped. The eyes of Tombstone, Fisk, Harry, and Harry's mom all snapped towards him.

“You seem familiar.” Tombstone's eyes narrowed. “I know who you are.”

Peter went even paler than him.

“That Daily Bugle photographer,” said Tombstone. “The one who takes pictures of Spider-Man. I suppose it makes sense that you'd think the worst of me, given your place of work.” He turned back to Fisk. “But I assure you, what the Daily Bugle printed about me was nothing short of slander. My involvement in the Valentine's Day brawl was an unfortunate accident, which Frederick Foswell capitalized on. The man is desperate to regain the glory of his Silvermane expose. And as any of the many, many criminals recently put away by Spider-Man will attest to, the 'Big Man' of crime was the late Green Goblin.”

“Those words might be better spent on that federal agent tailing you.” Fisk pointed to a man at the edge of the crowd, who immediately made an effort to look like he hadn't been eavesdropping.

Tombstone snorted, straightened his suit, and walked away.

Behind his back, Peter mouthed, “Oh SNAP.” He turned to Gwen, grinning like a maniac. “Looks like Wilson Fisk eats a lot of things, but Tombstone's BS isn't one of them.”

Gwen was gaping at him. “Wh-What? Why do you care so much about that Lincoln guy?”

“Oh, uh...” Peter's eyes wandered towards the ceiling. “Guess with all the effort the Bugle's put into flushing his name down the toilet, it's kinda hard not to.”

Just as Fisk was beginning to walk away, Peter scurried over to his side. “Excuse me, Mr. Fisk, sir?” Fisk took an idle glance at him. “I just wanted to say, sir, it's nice to have a rich guy around here who isn't corrupt. Tombstone could learn a thing or two from you.”
Fisk smiled at him. “I wholeheartedly agree with that sentiment.” And with that, he walked off.

Well, Peter didn't have time to kiss Fisk's butt (The universe would have its heat death before he’d finished). He walked back towards Harry and Gwen… but before he could get near, his spider-sense blared like mad. “What the-?”

There was the sound of shattered glass, followed by screams from the partygoers. Something round and orange landed at Harry's feet.

“Get down-” Peter’s feet moved before his brain even realized it.

The bomb made a distressingly familiar shrieking sound as it exploded.
Unreliable Narrator

When the pea-green smoke cleared, Harry, Peter, and Gwen were lying several feet from the blast radius. And Peter, incidentally, was face-down on top of the face-up Gwen, who he’d tackled to the floor. Peter wasn’t sure if Gwen looked more terrified because of the bomb or… y’know.

“Get away-” Harry yanked Peter off by the arm.

“Hey, I saved her!” snapped Peter. “This is no time to get jealous-“

“Not from Gwen – from that.” Harry pointed to the wall-sized window leading out to the balcony – the recently repaired one that was now nothing but shards of glass.

But the more pressing issue was the thing above the shards – namely, the gargoyle-themed glider hovering in the air. And most pressing of all was… its rider. He had the same grin. The same crazed look in the eyes of his skintight mask. Even the same outfit – The only difference was that the purple and green color scheme had been swapped for orange and blue, and the hat had been traded for a hood, complete with a cape that billowed in the glider’s updraft. The man’s skin was pale yellow, his eyes blood red.

“Holy moly,” Peter breathed. “Jameson was right on the money. I can't believe I just said that.”

The next second, the flood of bodies was racing for the fire escapes.

“Gwen, c'mon!” Peter helped her to her feet, and then the party of him, Gwen, Harry, and his mom ran for the nearest exit.

“Leaving already, Osborn?” Unfortunately, the exit was soon blocked by a crazy person dressed as a goblin. “But I haven't even given you your commemoration present!” He lobbed another pumpkin bomb.

“Harry-!” cried a feminine voice.

Everyone dived out of the way yet again, but the blast left them scattered.

“Mom, wait!” Harry’s mom had started towards him, but she froze at Harry's words. “You guys take the other exits. I-I think he's after me.”

“Interesting theory you’ve got there.” The Goblin retrieved another bomb as he circled the room. “How’d you like some more evidence?”

“Harry-!” Gwen started towards him, but Peter grabbed her arm.

“No time to argue! Down the stairs!” Peter didn't stop until he and Gwen were outside on the fire escape. “Geez louise, how many goblins are there?”

“Is- Is that Harry’s dad?” Gwen asked breathlessly.

“He survived a point-blank explosion and then decided to murder his own son?” said Peter. “Uh-uh. It's a copycat.” With that, he dashed back up the fire escape.

“What are you doing?” But his progress was halted by a hand on his arm.

“My- My boss asked me to take pictures if anything like this happened.” Technically, that wasn’t a
lie.

Gwen said nothing. Did nothing.

Peter ended up having to wrench himself free of her grasp. “Call the cops.”


Emily Osborn wasn’t about to win any mother of the year awards. Before her husband died, she’d hardly given Harry the time of day. But to her credit, when a bomb-throwing maniac came out of nowhere to kill him, she stayed with her son, arms around him, the two of them huddling together in the emptied penthouse.

“I've gotta thank you two for staying in one convenient place like this,” said the goblin, bouncing the next pumpkin in his palm. “You wouldn’t believe the price of bombs in this economy. Who knew crippling fear could be so cost-efficient?” He hurled the bomb.

*Thwip.* But then it changed flight paths, instead detonating over the balcony. “Oh man, Gobbie, don't look now, but you're wearing *orange.*”

The goblin spun his glider in midair to find a certain arachnid stuck to the wall above a fire escape.

“Don't worry, it's cool, man, I get it – I went out in a *pink* costume once.” In one swift motion, Spidey bounded over the goblin's head, landing between him and the Osborns. “Friendly advice, try the detergents without bleach—”

“Ah, Spider-Man, I was hoping you’d turn up.” The goblin reached into his cloak… “Now I can polish off the Osborn lineage, Big Man, aspiring Big Man, and you all in one fell swoop!” …and retrieved two more bombs to hurl.

“Oh, you wanna kill Tombstone and usurp his empire?” Spidey ducked, then dived out of the way of the resulting shrapnel. “Yawn. Seen it. So you’re, what, the Green Goblin reboot no one asked for?”

Next, the goblin tried firing some lasers from his fingertips… which Spider-Man also effortlessly dodged. “The name's Hobgoblin. Nice to meet you.” In a blink, the glider shot towards Spidey like a battering ram. Even with his spider-sense, he took a direct hit to the gut.


The next thing he knew, Spidey was outside the penthouse and miles above the cold, hard street.

“I'll have to make this quick.” Hobgoblin wiggled his glider, shaking the limp Web-Head off. “Wouldn't want my prey to escape, now would I?” With that, he flew back to the balcony, leaving Spidey to fall to his death.

Ha, dummy! Looked like he’d forgot about Spider-Man's web-shooters. *Thwip.* Spidey swung towards the Osborn penthouse, releasing his web at the peak of its arc and firing another one.

*Click.* Oh, right. Duct tape. “Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh-!”

Harry's mom was already halfway down the stairs, but Harry had only just put his foot in the fire escape when the Hobgoblin made his triumphant return to the penthouse.
“You're not getting off that easy, Osbrat.” Hobgoblin prepared to fire a finger-laser...

“Ta da!” But he wasn't expecting to be bear-hugged from behind. “Guess whose web-shooters decided to work in the nick of time?”

“I thought they were organic?” muttered Hobgoblin.

“Okay, just for that, you're getting a smack in the face.”

“Well, aren't you a persistent one?” Hobgoblin struggled to escape his grasp.

“Yeah, that's what makes me so lovable.” Spider-Man freed an arm so he could sock Hobgoblin right in the head. Hobbie went tumbling off his glider, and then Spidey sprang off, too. With no one left to work its pedals, the glider sailed out the window and off into the sunset, Western-style.

“You have officially gotten on my nerves.” Hobbie spun around on the floor, firing more finger-lasers, but Spidey flipped over each and every one.

In one smooth motion, Spidey turned the dodge into an attack, smacking Hobgoblin’s noggin once again – this time with his feet. There was an audible crack, and then the Hobgoblin crumbled to the floor, limp.

Spider-Man landed across from him, blinking. “I did it? Already? Huh.” Spidey brought his hands to his hips. So at the end of the day, the Hobgoblin was just a powerless poser in a stupid costume? Weird, that was the second one Spider-Man had fought today.

“I can't wait to see what creative new bad guys I face down next.” Spidey skipped towards the unconscious goblin. “The Buzzard, Zappo, the Iguana, the Surpriser, Dirtman, and let's not forget THE HIPPO.”

Spider-Man reached for the Hobgoblin's mask... and that's when his spider-sense tingled. “What the-?”

Blam. Spidey dodged a bullet by millimeters. Like, a literal bullet.

“Where-?” He turned towards the fire escape – where a pistol was being held in trembling hands. “Harry?”

“You killed my dad.” Harry fired off another couple shots, but none came close to hitting their mark.

“Harry, I-”

“Surprise!” The next split-second, the Hobgoblin sprang up to lob another bomb at Harry’s head.

“No-!” Thwip. The shooter didn't jam this time, thank god, meaning the pumpkin bomb was yanked away and detonated a safe distance from Harry's face. That screaming sound the bomb made as it blew up actually articulated Spider-Man's thoughts pretty well right about now.

“Go back to sleep, you!” Spidey gave the Hobgoblin another blow to the head, which seemed to knock him out completely. Then Spider-Man turned to Harry.

Harry dropped the gun to the ground. It fired into a wall.

It didn’t trigger his spider-sense, but that didn’t keep Spidey from flinching. “Have you lost it?”
Harry did, in fact, appear to have lost it. He was breathing heavily, eyes bulging.

“Ugh, whatever, I don't have time for this.” Spidey webbed Harry to the wall, then knelt to tug off the Hobgoblin's mask. “And the monster is... Old Man Withers!”

Actually, the Hobgoblin seemed to be a pretty young guy with red hair.

“Donald Menken?” Harry said from his spot on the wall.

“Oh yeah, that guy.” Spidey leaned in to examine the goblin closer. “Almost didn't recognize him without his glasses.”

“Makes sense,” said Harry, panting. “He was the only other person who knew about the Globulin Green. Not a stretch to think he found some spare equipment somehow.”

“Ohhhh, so he was a goblin, just not the Green Goblin. Of course. Now I feel silly.”

Hmm. Maybe no one else could tell, but Spider-Man had been holding back when he’d knocked out the Hobgoblin. Would the guy really have gone down so easy if he was on the Green? Something didn’t add up here… but Spidey would have to redo his math some other time.

He gave Menken a little web-fluid bath in case he woke up again. “Any clue why he'd want to kill you?”

“Probably jealous my dad left Oscorp to me and not him,” said Harry.

“You're welcome for saving your life, by the way.” Spider-Man turned for the balcony. “Funny way you've got of saying thank you.”

“I thought you'd knocked the guy out. I-I was shooting to wound. You're both criminals.”

“Yeah, well, next time a supervillain attacks you, you'd better hope Daredevil’s in town.” Spider-Man hopped off the balcony and swung off without another word.

_I just want to talk, he says._ Since when had Peter's best friend become a total creep? How was it that Harry had seemed _more_ sane when Peter had thought he was Green Goblin? How much longer was Gwen gonna let Harry step all over her? And what was with Harry's irrational hatred of Spider-Man? Was irrational hatred of Spider-Man in vogue this season? Because that’d explain a whole friggin’ lot.

_Thwip. Thwip. Click._ It was as Spider-Man plummeted towards the pavement that he realized he hadn't taken a single picture all day.

“I told you, I don't know where I got the costume! I blacked out after my speech. And why would I want to murder the CEO of Oscorp, anyways? What would I gain from that?”

“Uh huh. Right.” Sergeant Carter gave Menken a shove as he led him away.

By now, the Osborn penthouse had traded its partygoers for police officers. The only other people remaining were Harry, Gwen, and his mom. Gwen squeezed Harry's hand. He could hardly keep himself from scowling at Menken's back.

Harry was torn. On one hand, Menken was no doubt a victim of the Green, no different from Harry and his dad. On the other hand, thanks to Menken, the night had ended with Harry being peeled off the wall by the police. His suit still had bits of webbing stuck to it
“Harry, Gwen!” The door swung open and Peter emerged from the stairwell, sporting a suit covered in wrinkles and skin covered in bruises.

“Peter, did you-? You're hurt.” Gwen all but shoved Harry aside in her rush to the doorway.

“I'm okay,” said Peter, rubbing the brown blotch on his forehead. “One of those pumpkin bombs blasted me out a window, that’s all. I would've been a goner if it wasn't for Spidey.” Harry could swear Peter looked smug. “I spent the last twenty minutes dangling off a web.” He turned to Harry. “Hey, bro, I told Spider-Man you wanted to talk to him, but he won’t do it. He, err, says you tried to shoot him.”

“What?” Gwen gawked at Harry. “Is that why he webbed you to the wall?”

Harry’s fists clenched. “Don't you read the Bugle? Spider-Man's a criminal.”

“Yeah, a criminal who saved my life a gazillion times-”

“And who rings Pete's cell every time he wants his pic in the paper. Gee, what a selfless hero.”

Harry scoffed. “And, like, he really thinks he can get away with crimes just by switching to a black costume?”

Gwen's eyes narrowed. “That black monster is not Spider-Man. I got a great look at the two of them together when I was dangling from a balloon.”

“I was almost blown up by a lunatic today!” spat Harry. “Do you really have to argue with me?”

That seemed to knock the wind from Gwen's sails. “O-Of course not, Harry. I'm sorry.”

As if sensing her distress, Captain Stacy approached them, putting his hands on Gwen's shoulders from behind. “I think we can all agree Spider-Man saved lives today. Now, I'd say it's time Peter and Gwen got home. They’ve been through enough for one night.”

After that, everything seemed to pass by quickly. The police asked a lot of questions, confiscated the Hobgoblin's equipment, and then ran off to look for his glider's crash site. Then, despite Harry's protests, his mom convinced him to go to his room to rest while she handled the reporters.

If there was one silver lining from the loss of Harry's father, it was that his mother was closer to him than she'd ever been. A couple months ago, she hadn't batted an eyelash when Harry joined the football team, and now she was fussing over him every time he flinched.

Harry shut the bedroom door behind him, then took a deep breath. So a maniac dressed like a goblin had tried to kill him. No big deal. Harry was the CEO of Oscorp now. This was the world he lived in. His father had been attacked by a maniac dressed like a vulture, and had he folded under pressure? Cowboy up.

“Well, you certainly kept me waiting.”

“What the-?” Harry spun around. There was a man in his bedroom. “How did you get in here?” His voice had cracked. “Security! Sec-”

“Uh-uh-uh.” The man leaned back in his seat. He sounded British and didn't look much older than Harry. Maybe in his twenties. Though the guy was trying to look even older, judging by that ill-fitting penguin suit he had on. What really set him apart, though, was his chair. It was something metallic and expensive-looking that hovered a foot off the ground. “You might want to keep quiet,
little Osborn.” As he spoke, the man fished something out of his pockets – three silver orbs the size of golf balls. “I’d hate to think what would happen if we made a scene.”

In seconds, little metal legs unfolded from each orb, allowing them to spring from the man's hands and scurried towards Harry's feet like bugs. Before Harry could even react, the top of each orb unfolded, and out emerged miniature turrets. All three aimed at Harry's face.

“Isn’t modern technology something?” said the man. “Everything’s getting smaller these days. Phones, televisions, instant death lasers…”

*Cowboy up.* “What do you want?” Despite his best efforts, Harry’s voice shook. “Are you with the Hobgoblin?”

“Please, don’t insult me.” The man chuckled to himself. “Your father sent me.”

That did nothing to help the trembling. “My father's dead.”

“Yes, he is,” said the man, “but despite his affinity for dressing as a mythological creature and lobbing bombs at people, Norman Osborn wasn't crazy. He knew being the Big Man was a high-turnover job.” The man’s hoverchair moved in closer. “That's why, in the event of his untimely demise, Normie had a contingency plan in place.” He extended a hand. “My name is Alistair Smythe, and I'm the plan.”

Every last one of Peter's joints ached. The sidewalk had done more damage to him than Hobgoblin ever could. For not the first time, Peter gave a prayer of thanks that he healed fast. He needed to get home and fix his web-shooters. Really, it'd been stupid and dangerous to not fix them right away.

But unfortunately, there was one other item on the agenda before Peter could do that. He took a deep breath before opening the office door. He savored it – It could be his last.

“Mr. Jameson...”

Immediately, old picklepuss turned Peter's way.

“Good news and bad news, sir,” said Peter, bowing his head. “Good news is, you were right, there was a supervillain at the Oscorp ceremony. Bad news is, I couldn't get any pictures.”

“Ceremony? What ceremony? What are you doing in my office? I don't need your stupid pictures - I've already got the perfect front page right here!” Jameson held up a two-page spread.

“SPIDER-MAN HATES FURRIES,” proclaimed the headline. Beneath it was a picture of a man in a bear costume rolling on the ground, clutching his ribs in agony while Spider-Man pointed and laughed.

“What?” Peter's jaw dropped. “But that's not what- I mean, that's probably not what happened!”

“Shows how much you know.” Jameson snorted, shooting smoke through the air. “The Wall-Crawler sent this guy to the hospital. Maxwell Markham's just an average Joe who wanted to wear a bear suit. Why should superhumans be the only ones allowed to wear stupid costumes?”

“But- But-”

“Besides, it’s not like Spider-Man's one to be pointing fingers. What kinda spider’s bright red and
blue? The guy looks like a jackass every time he goes out in public."

“That does it. You don’t need my stupid pictures? Then fine, I’m done taking them.” With that, Peter stormed out the office, slamming the door behind him.


In the central news room, Mr. Robertson gave Peter a look. “Everything alright, Parker?”

“Uh…” Peter's cheeks reddened. “How hard can HTML be, right?”

Harry stared at the hand hovering before him. “What do you want from me?”

“Well, I'd have thought that was obvious,” said Smythe. “Your father worked so hard to build up his empire. You really think he'd hand it over to some teenager and watch it crumble?”

“I can take care of Oscorp.” Harry could feel his throat tightening.

“Oh, I’m sure you could, except that would be a little difficult considering you don’t even know what the point of Oscorp is.”

And now his fists were trembling. “And what would that be?”

Smythe laughed. “Where do you think all of Manhattan’s colorful crooks have been coming from? You think it's a coincidence that the last few months have seen the city's supervillainy spike a good six hundred percent?”

“I…” Harry's face fell. “I knew my dad was doing business with Hammerhead, but I never thought….”

“Norman had a good thing going,” said Smythe. “The Big Man commissioned super-mercenaries to distract Spider-Man, Oscorp built the prisons to contain said mercenaries… and then Norman decided to cut out the middleman and become the Big Man himself. The problem is, his death’s screwed the whole project up.” He counted off on his fingers. “Sandman's dead, the Rhino and Molten Man are locked up in the Vault, and Spider-Man’s alive and well.”

“You want me to use Oscorp to… make supervillains?”

Smythe laughed again. “Personally, I'd have kept doing it behind your back. No, Harry, your father wanted you to use Oscorp to make supervillains. Said you had 'potential' or something. A trifle optimistic if you ask me. Ah, well, family has a way of blindsiding you. Lord knows I wouldn't be where I am today if my own daddy hadn't played favorites.”

“No.” Harry started to raise his voice, but then he took another wary glance towards the robots at his feet. “I-I mean, my dad was sick. He was out of his mind from the Globulin Green. I know what that stuff does to-”

“Wrong, junkie.” Smythe leaned back in his chair, snickering. “Norman took a gaseous form of the stuff in smaller doses than you. All the upsides, none of the downsides. You really think someone drugged out of their mind could run a criminal empire?”

“Wait.” For a moment, Harry's eyes glazed over. “There's a way to take the Green with no blackouts?” But then he caught himself. “You're- You're saying my dad was the Goblin on purpose?”
“Ugh.” Smythe brought a palm to his forehead. “He warned me you'd be a baby about this. Yes, your father wasn't the most law-abiding citizen ever.”

“Liar.” The word escaped Harry’s mouth all on its own.

“Well, you don't have to take my word for it,” said Smythe. “Here, he left you a little something.” He pressed a button on his armrest.

Instantly, a rectangle of light projected from the hoverchair, creating a floating screen in midair alongside some accompanying audio:

“When Captain America throws his mighty shield,
All those who chose to oppose his shield must yield!”

“What,” said Harry. It was more a statement than a question.

Within the holographic screen was grainy black and white footage of a star-spangled man fake-punching a man dressed as Hitler in the jaw. Harry knew that star-spangled man’s name on sight. You’d be hard-pressed to find a person in the country who didn’t know the name Steve Rogers.

“If he’s lead to a fight and a duel is due,
Then the red and the white and the blue’ll come through.
When Captain America throws his mighty shield!”

No sooner had the song ended than the screen cut to a shot that made Harry’s pulse quicken – his dad in a dark room, glaring into the camera, hair and suit and voice and posture no different than the day before Spider-Man had blown him up.

“When my history professor showed my class this old propaganda video,” he said, “I saw something none of the other students could. I saw the future. I saw an army of Captain Americas replacing our military, all fueled by the Super-Soldier Formula. Think. It would be so much...” The video cut to footage of Hiroshima. “…cleaner.” When it cut back, Norman had folded his fingers together. “As far as I was concerned, the loss of that formula was the greatest tragedy ever to befall America, followed closely by the loss of Rogers himself. After that, the government abandoned its efforts to create superhumans in favor of... messier alternatives. So much wasted potential.”

Behind him appeared more black and white footage of a team of musclebound men in an array of skintight costumes: Captain America, the Whizzer, the Sub-Mariner, and the Human Torch – the original android one, not his human, pretty boy successor on the Fantastic Four. Every person in the country knew these men. They were, after all, the world’s first superheroes. Sure, it wasn’t so impressive in today’s climate of weekly supervillain attacks, but at the time, the public had been enamored. Super strength, super speed, power over water, over fire… And it didn’t hurt that the Human Torch had killed Hitler. By the present day, though, the Whizzer had failed to outrun old age, the Sub-Mariner had vanished (back to his home of Atlantis, if you were one of those weirdos who actually believed his claims), and the android Human Torch had long since broken down.

“But the future isn't predicted by standing around and wishing.” Norman’s eyes traveled straight through the camera. Straight through Harry. “You have to make it happen.” He paused.

“Unfortunately, I was far from the only one to reach this conclusion. Ever since Rogers’s time, American corporations have sought to recreate him. After all, the government’s proven so very incapable of doing so since the loss of their precious Formula. But what these corporations have to offer is something very different from what our government ever could – We want not soldiers of
the U.S. military, but private mercenaries hired out to the highest bidder. And thus, for the past several decades, Manhattan has become a battleground for businesses and aspiring crime lords all vying for their own super-mercenary army. And I shouldn’t have to tell you,” he added sternly, “which corporation will be standing at the forefront. One day soon, the United States will usher in a new era, and Oscorp will be leading the charge.”

His eyes shut. “I realize I've done things others would call questionable, but mark my words, nobody's ever accomplished anything by being 'ethical.' The people who used Steve Rogers as a guinea pig certainly weren't. If you're watching this, it means you're already aware of the truth about the Green Goblin – and that I'm no longer alive. But just because I've failed doesn't mean my future has. I don't know what age you'll be or what circumstances you'll be in when you watch this. Maybe you'll be too young to understand. But someday you, too, will reach your full potential, son. And when that happens, I want you to continue my work.”

Norman smiled into the camera. Harry didn't think he'd actually seen his father do that before. “Don't let me down... Peter.” The hologram winked away.

Harry stared at the empty air.

“Oops.” Smythe's lips curled upwards. “Wrong contingency video. Hmm…” He skimmed through his armrest's buttons. “I'm sure yours is around here somewhere…”

“No, no.” Harry’s voice was hollow. “I get the idea. You want to make supervillains, right? To kill Spider-Man?”

“That's the gist of it, yes.”

Harry took a breath. “When do we start?”
“Well, I guess you've finally learned my dark secret.” Gwen stared at the saxophone in her hands. “I'm a band geek.”

“No, no, it's cool.” Eddie watched the balloons drift by overhead. Despite the freezing November air, all he wore was a black t-shirt. Gwen, on the other hand, was decked out in the Midtown marching band uniform. It made her look like a complete nerd, but then, that line had been crossed a long time ago. “You look cute.” Eddie placed a hand on her shoulder, and then the two of them wordlessly walked out of the crowd.

“So where's Pete?” he took a glance behind them. “Didn't bother showing up? Guess that's not a surprise.”

“He's probably still visiting his aunt in the hospital,” said Gwen. “It's fine. Anyways, I'm glad you're here. At least someone's thinking of me.”

“Well, if it's any consolation, Pete likes you a lot more than he realizes.”

“Yeah.” Gwen fiddled with her glasses. “It'd just be nice if someone had a conscious crush on me for once.”

Silence.

“Eddie?” She turned around. No one there. “Where'd-?”

Thwip. Something black and slimy hit her mouth. The saxophone clattered to the pavement.

Thwip, thwip, thwip. More slime wrapped around her torso, then tightened. Gwen tried to scream, but it came out muffled. The rest of the band didn't even glance her way.

There was something on the alleyway wall. Something big and black. The milky white blotches on its head – eyes? – pointed right at her. It opened its mouth, revealing a set of jagged teeth. A long, slobbery tongue laggged out.

Gwen struggled with all her might, but that only made the slime tighter. It felt like she was bound by cords.

The creature laughed. It sounded totally alien and uncannily human all at once. “We can't wait to see him cradling your broken corpse.”

“Gwen? Gwen?”

The next thing she knew, Gwen’s dad was looming over her in the darkness, shaking her shoulders. Gwen sat up in on her mattress, rubbing her eyes. Her nightgown was drenched with sweat.

“The nightmare again?” Her dad gave a patient sigh. He was still in uniform – probably just got back from work, meaning it was late. “Do you need me to call your therapist?”

“No, no, I'm alright, Dad.” Gwen forced herself to take some deep breaths. “I'm fine.”

“If you're sure.” He kissed her forehead. “Get some rest, Gwen. I love you.” With that, her dad left, shutting the door behind him. The bedroom was cast into total darkness.
Gwen rolled over under the covers. She'd been normal these last few days, but clearly, the Hobgoblin's attack had set her off again. What kind of world were they living in where Gwen couldn't go a week without running from her life from giant lizards and electricity-people and creeps with tentacle-arms? Only in Manhattan. She'd have moved in with her relatives in England ages ago if not for her father's career. And Peter. Oh, and Harry.

As her heartbeat grew slower, Gwen's eyelids grew heavier. And she couldn't forget Eddie. He was still her friend. The fact that he'd been right behind her when that monster attacked was pure coincidence. And the fact that Eddie went missing immediately afterward? He was upset about being forced to drop out of college, that was all. And the fact that MJ had warned Gwen that Eddie wanted to hurt Peter? So he was ticked at Peter. Didn't mean anything. And the fact that Eddie was last seen being carted out of Midtown High in a stretcher right after the black monster attacked the school, shrieking “We're Venom!” at the top of his lungs?

Coincidence. Yeah.

Y’know, Spider-Man really needed to vary his web-swinging routes. If he took the same path to school every morning, it got super predictable and resulted in crowds of loving fans waiting on the streets below to shout their praise as he swooped by overhead.

“Get bent, menace!”

“I love you, too, buddy!” Spidey called back down.

Problem was, being twenty minutes late made it hard to take any route but the fastest one to Midtown. Yeah, punctuality wasn’t one of his superpowers.

“Spider-Man? Spider-Man?”

He was used to that name hitting his ears on his way past First Avenue, but what Spidey wasn’t used to was hearing it from a high, soft, unbearably adorable voice.

“Gw- G-Girlie?” Spidey had to deepen his voice mid-syllable. He perched himself on the wall of a shop a couple feet above his cat-caller, then turned so his legs were closer to the sky and his hands closer to the ground, cocking his head down at her.

Yep, there was no mistaking that telltale, salmon-colored headband – though truth be told, Peter sometimes had trouble recognizing the post-makeover Gwen without it. She was standing there on the sidewalk with her book bag dangling from her hand. When those sea blue eyes gazed up at him, Peter thanked his lucky stars there was a mask to shield them from his radiant cheeks.

“Hi, Spider-Man.” Gwen, however, had no such shield. Wow, Peter hadn’t pegged her for the Spidey fangirl type. “Remember me? I intern at the ESU lab. I used to wear glasses, and my hair used to be more, uh, unruly.” She hesitated before adding, “You’ve saved my life more times than I can even remember off the top of my head. Guess I’m something of a damsel in distress...”

“Blonde? Glasses? Damsel in distress?” Spidey brought a palm to his chest, though that required him to shift his weight lest he slip and tumble to the pavement below. “Gee, I wanna say you’re Captain Stacy’s daughter, except I don’t remember her being a damsel in distress at all. She was actually this hero who piloted the escape pod out the Master Planner’s collapsing lair. If anything, I should be thanking her for saving my life.” He descended the wall, closing the distance between them.

Gwen replied with anxious laughter. Was it Spider-Man’s imagination, or was she a little, err, fond
of his skintight spandex? Gwen had sure as heck never stolen glances at Peter Parker’s chest like this, but then, Peter had gotten in the habit of hiding said chest beneath a baggy blue t-shirt.

“W-Well, I kinda had my own self-interest at heart there, too...” Gwen tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Actually, I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Oh?” Don’t tell Peter he was now competing for Gwen’s heart with his own alter-ego?

“About… Venom.”

*Oh. Okay, now Spidey was wishing she had been hitting on him. “Tall, dark, and slimy? What about him?”*

“Is he still out there?” Even putting that to words was clearly making the poor girl’s pulse pound. “I mean, he attacked our school, and then he just disappeared.”

Spider-Man sighed in spite of himself. More than anything, he wanted to tell her no, that Venom was gone forever. That she didn’t have to look over her shoulder everywhere she went. “I fed him that gene cleanser we used on Lizard. It destroys all non-human DNA, so that should’ve killed him, but- but he escaped, so I don’t know for sure.”

Gwen inhaled. “I was afraid you’d say that...”

All Spidey could do was shake his head. “But I think if he was in town again, the first thing he’d do would be to let me know. Dude never could resist the urge to gloat.”

“What- What *is* Venom?” Gwen stammered for a second. “I’ve gotten close enough to know he’s not a guy in a costume.”

A moment passed. “Sorry, that’s, err, classified. Just, uh, if you see any black slime, run the other way.”

But that wasn’t nearly enough to sate Gwen. “Is he Eddie Brock?”

Spider-Man’s wince was more telling than he’d have liked. “Venom uses people as puppets, and... Eddie was one of them.”

Gwen’s eyes had started to quiver. “He did something to Eddie’s head, didn’t he?”

“L-Listen, I’m really sorry, Miss Stacy.” Spider-Man found himself creeping backwards up the bricks. “I wish I could help your friend, but I’m honestly just a guy who can stick to walls and punch things real good.”

“But-”

“I gotta go! My- My spider-sense is tingling! Duty calls! Nice talking to you!” *Thwip.* A second later, Spider-Man was sailing off on a web-line. “*Oh, but stay away from Brock!*” he called back. “*I promise the best thing you can do right now is stay far, far away!*”

Even when he was soaring through the sky, Spider-Man felt like a lead weight. Not even a midair backflip improved his mood. *Ugh,* he hated hiding the truth from Gwen. The last time Eddie had returned, he’d waltzed right up and put his arms around her, and Gwen had been so pleasantly oblivious... It *still* made Peter’s stomach churn.

Obviously, the moment he’d learned the symbiote had escaped the cement, Peter had wanted to
warn Gwen. He and MJ had tried to tell her that Eddie had become a creep, but Gwen had brushed them off. She’d thought Eddie’s grudge was solely against Peter, and she’d have been right… if you didn’t factor in the murderous alien symbiote. Problem was, mild-mannered Peter Parker wasn’t supposed to know the first thing about symbiotes. He could’ve paid Gwen a visit as Spider-Man to warn her Venom was back, except that as far as Gwen knew, Venom had grabbed her at total random last Thanksgiving. There was no reason for her to think Venom would target her again. If Spidey had singled her out like that, it could’ve jeopardized his secret ID, especially at a time when “Peter Parker is Spider-Man” had been the media’s favorite talking point.

Then again, would Gwen learning the truth be the worst thing in the world? Peter really might have come clean to her back then, but then he’d happened to free Eddie from the symbiote’s grasp again, and the ooze had fled into the sewers, and- and it just hadn’t seemed so pressing anymore.

Besides, at the time, Peter had been worried Gwen would tattle to her dad and then a SWAT team would turn up on the Parker family doorstep. But it’d been forever since Gwen’s dad had taken Peter aside for that telltale little lecture about masks, and there’d been no SWAT teams yet.

Gwen’s dad understood where Peter was coming from. Like he’d said, Peter wore a mask to keep people safe.

But when it came to hiding his face from Gwen… which person was being kept safe, exactly?

Brrrrng. Finally, the bell. Gwen felt like she’d been trapped at school forever, and that was counting the fact that she’d been late getting here after flagging down Spider-Man. To be honest, she’d been hoping that conversation would reassure her, not… do the opposite.

Even after Professor Warren dismissed class, Gwen lingered behind. She was taking an especially long time to pack her books into her bag.

“Hey, girlfriend.” Which was all the opportunity Mary Jane needed to corner her. “You free to hang this afternoon before we head to the airport?”

Gwen’s physics textbook shook the earth as it plopped into her backpack. “I’ve told you, MJ, I’ve got an internship.” She made for the door, but MJ followed at her heels.

“You okay?” For once, MJ wore a facial expression that didn’t scream “bubbly happy party fun time.” “You’re not ticked at me, are you?”

“No, it’s just…” Gwen bowed her head as they passed the lockers. In a voice only MJ could hear, she said, “Do you have to go to the mall alone with Peter today? Don’t you get how that comes across to-?”

“Girl, we’ve had this conversation. Tiger knows it’s strictly platonic between us.” MJ shrugged. “I’ll just tell him I’ve already got a date for Miami – first guy who walked past me in class today – and then I’m gonna, y’know, do some reconnaissance for you. See how your one-and-only’s holding together while he waits for you to end things with Harry.”

“Well, I appreciate the thought, but...” Gwen’s eyes traveled to the navy blue shawl draped over MJ’s shoulders. God, look at the way it gripped her torso. MJ had been enrolled here for months now, and she still turned heads when she strutted down the hall.

And yes, some of MJ’s magic had rubbed off on Gwen, but with every passing day since Valentine’s, that magic faded. Specifically, Gwen’s hair got messier and messier and her makeup got sloppier and sloppier. She’d actually had to chase MJ down and beg her to refresh Gwen’s
appearance the night before Harry’s ceremony, as if begging for MJ to give her a makeover the first time hadn’t been humiliating enough.

“...the thing is, MJ, you’re not good at- at talking to guys without coming off like, um...” Oh gosh, how could Gwen put this?

“...like I’m trying to seduce them?” finished MJ.

Gwen couldn’t help but flinch. “Yeah. That.”

A sigh escaped Mary Jane’s perfectly formed lips. “Sorry, girlfriend. It’s force of habit, I guess.” Frankly, MJ sometimes encountered a similar issue when talking to girls, too.

“I know you’re not doing it on purpose, but, like, even being in Peter’s radius is enough to...” Gwen trailed off. “I mean, after Thanksgiving, y’know, the first time I told Peter how I felt-”

“Didn’t sound like you did much talking, the way you described it to me,” MJ said with a smirk.

“-we ended up avoiding each other, and then a prettier girl made eyes at Peter, and...” Gwen took a breath. “I’m just worried history’s gonna repeat itself.”

“Girl.” In a sudden movement, a hand took her arm. The walk past the lockers was halted a moment. “This is so not a repeat of the ‘Liz Incident.’ First off, Tiger actually said he liked you back this time.”

“He probably said that to Liz, too, at first...”

“Second off, he broke up with Liz to be with you.”

“Not like I’ve returned the favor...”

“Third off, I am not a ‘prettier girl’ than-”

“Oh, don’t even finish that one.” Gwen laughed in spite of herself.

“I mean it, Gwen.” MJ failed to meet her eyes. “You’re gorgeous. The only reason I’ve got a leg up on you’s cuz I spend half the day in front of a mirror while you spend half the day interning at big-name science labs.”

“I guess it is hard to worry about hair and makeup when my schedule’s so packed...” What Gwen neglected to say was that male attention from anyone but Peter terrified her, and so sometimes worrying about hair and makeup was a matter of bravery.

“And fourth off, I’m- I’m not even single anymore.” MJ winced at her own words. “Ohh, saying that out loud felt weird.”

“Wait.” Gwen gave a start. “You’re not still with Mark, are you?”

No response.

“MJ, he almost burned you to death.”

“No on purpose! I know Mark fell in with a bad crowd, but-”

“Please don’t tell me you’re one of those ‘I can change him’ girls.” Gwen couldn’t help but roll her eyes.
This time, there was even less of a response.

“MJ…”

“But…” MJ’s eyes were planted firmly on the floor. “…don’t you think, even if someone’s a bad person, it is possible for them to…?”

Okay, this called for The Look. Wait, dang it, The Look wasn’t nearly as powerful without the glasses. Gwen had totally forgot.

“I care about Mark,” MJ stammered. “I can’t just flip that off like a switch.”

Gwen sighed. “Well, I care about you. There are times when, y’know…” At this point, neither of them was even trying to meet the other’s eyes. “…if it wasn’t for you, I’d be totally alone… and that means a lot to me.”

“I care about you, too,” MJ said softly. “You know there’s nothing in the world I want more than for my favorite guy to finally hook up with my favorite gal. All that UST’s gonna drive me nuts otherwise.”

“Y-Yep.” Actually, if Gwen wasn’t meeting MJ’s eyes, then how could she know if MJ was meeting hers or not? Gwen couldn’t resist satiating her curiosity. As it turned out, MJ had been thinking the exact same thing. “Unresolved… tension…”

The two of them held that pose for about half a minute.

“Well, wouldn’t wanna make you late to your internship just cuz I’m playing matchmaker.” It took a fraction of that time for MJ to complete her journey down the hall. “Later, girlfriend.”

Gwen watched her go until that mess of red hair had vanished around the corner. She found herself shaking her own, blonde mess. She was being paranoid. MJ was right, Gwen had nothing to worry about.

Soul-crushingly, mind-numbingly hard. That was how hard HTML could be. Peter counted himself lucky he’d hadn’t hurled the Parker household’s paperweight of a computer across his bedroom. Put a book in front of Peter, and he was a super genius, but switch it to a screen and his mind regressed to prehistoric Stone Age Flash Thompson level.

At least the city had continued to stay unnaturally peaceful. Sure, the other shoe was no doubt itching to drop, but Peter intended to enjoy this while he could. Really, the most stressful thing to happen lately was when he’d awoken this morning to learn Aunt May had hosted a conference with the other parents, and they’d decided she, MJ’s aunt, and Harry’s mom would be chaperoning the Miami trip. Yeah, nothing added to the experience of seeing Gwem Jay in a bikini like having his aunt hovering over his-

Had Peter just thought “Gwem Jay?” Ugh, idiot. He’d meant Mary Gwaine- Gwen. Gwen Stacy.

Peter would tell himself he was just sleepy, except he’d actually gotten plenty of shuteye. The streets had been so quiet lately, he’d skipped his morning patrol, just for a change of pace for his last day before spring break. The Wed-Head was even running out of stray Pumpkin-Heads to terrorize. It felt real weird. But what felt even weirder was that he was walking in totally alone. Guess the days of walking in alongside his two best buds, Gwen and Harry, were behind him…

But then, just as the bell rang and Peter tasted his first few seconds of precious, precious freedom,
he crossed paths with a whole new definition of weird. Just as he was passing the courtyard fountain, he bumped into another student. “Oop, sorry-”

He didn’t need to see that cheerleader uniform to recognize her – Peter could tell it was Liz by the sudden chill in the air and the faint sound of violins in the distance. Her eyes were red, her normally-smooth hair had gone frizzy and matted, and her usual amount of makeup was totally absent. It was like Liz had put up a flashing neon sign announcing her misery to the world. Heck, she was probably looking that way on purpose just to make Peter feel bad. Which was a smart move because it worked like a charm.

The two of them stared at each other a moment, then Peter mumbled something he wasn’t sure was coherent and hurried past her.

Peter hung his head as he walked. Was it his imagination, or had his backpack gotten way heavier all of a sudden? Ugh… The truth was, even before his and Gwen’s fateful breakup scheme, there’d been a fundamental problem with Peter’s relationship with Liz. A problem that could swing from a thread and stick to walls. That was the thing about Spider-Man – If you had the audacity to want something, no matter how small, no matter how inconsequential, Spider-Man had a habit of swooping in and going, “Lolnope, you’ve gotta drop what you’re doing to go save a little old lady from getting hit by a car, and if you don’t you’re a monster!” Sure, Liz had taken it like a trooper when Peter had missed her big play, but all that ditching her to be Spider-Man still hadn’t amounted to history’s greatest romance.

So even if Peter did hook up with Gwen, what was stopping the exact same problems from rearing their ugly heads? Well… No, it was different now. The only “supervillains” left in Manhattan were harmless nutjobs like Grizzly and lame copycats like Hobgoblin, right? So if there weren’t any major baddies left to fight, then the Web-Head could hang up the tights. Well, maybe not for good, but he could at least drastically reduce his heroing hours without feeling guilty about it. Couldn’t he?

“You okay there, Tiger?” said a voice from behind. “I could feel the chill from the other side of the school.”

“Gah-! M-MJ!” Peter wasn’t sure if he was more disarmed because Mary Jane had snuck up on him or because of the way that navy blue shawl hugged her body. “I’m good. It’s just, y’know, normal everyday stresses.” Such as bomb-hurling maniacs in goblin costumes.

“Well, I know better than anyone that breakups are rough,” said MJ. “Really?” Peter found himself frowning. “I thought you were a free agent?”

At this, MJ laughed. “Oh, trust me, that ‘free agent’ policy came about through years of honing my craft. I wasn’t always this fun.” She shook her head, smiling. “But speaking of fun, I do believe it’s time for that little talk of ours.”

“Oh yeah. S-Sure, Gw- MJ.” Peter nearly bit his tongue off. If he ever said “Gwem Jay” out loud, he swore he would hate himself forever.

Well, if Gwen had nothing to worry about, then there’d be no harm in her spying on those two as they left school together, would there? After all, there’d be nothing to see…

Once she’d reached the courtyard, Gwen hid herself around the rim of the fountain, peering over through the water for a blurry look at Mary Jane as she approached Peter. MJ said something that
made Peter laugh, and then the two of them walked off together, shoulder to shoulder.

Gwen huffed, then, after a moment, glanced at her phone. She had an unseen text from Harry. Her boyfriend.

She didn’t have to torture herself like this. One text. One text, and Gwen could be with Peter the way she’d been fantasizing about since she still wore braces. All she had to do was crush Harry’s fragile little spirit into dust.

Gwen looked back to her two friends as they made their way past the parking lot, giggling together. Mary Jane’s navy blue shawl hadn’t escaped Peter’s notice, either. In fact, the moment MJ’s attention was elsewhere, Peter’s eyes seized the next couple seconds to examine it in detail.

Well, no, actually, that wasn’t true. It wasn’t the shawl he was examining. And it wasn’t MJ’s undershirt, either.

Luckily, the weather had gotten a bit chillier today, meaning Peter could play it off like his constant shivers were from the biting wind. He pulled his jacket tighter over himself, fighting to act casual as he strolled into the Silver Spoon alongside a girl who turned passerby’s heads.

“Try to understand, Tiger.” Mary Jane let out a sigh as the two joined the back of the line. “Gwen’s been my best friend since I transferred to Midtown. I can’t do that to her.”

“W-Well, yeah, but it’s not like we’d be making out or anything, right?” Peter let slip a telltale pause. “Right?”

MJ gave the slightest hint of a smirk. “Right.”

“We’d just be going as friends. Hanging out when the couples are, y’know, coupling.”

“And that’d be great,” said Mary Jane, talking with her hands, “but you gotta look at it from Gwen’s point of view. She took a huge gamble, and you still wound up with Liz. Didn’t do the girl’s self-esteem any favors. And now we’re gonna treat her to the sight of me, like, hanging off your arm all week while you parade around in your swim trunks?”

“Um-”

“I just- I don’t want Gwen to ever see me as a threat.” MJ caught herself. “Ooh, that sounded less vain in my head.”

A laugh escaped Peter’s mouth. “Looked in any mirrors lately? It’s just fact.”

“Smooth.” He’d earned his shoulder a punch. “But c’mon now, liking me’s, like, the free space in Bingo. Everyone gets to tick that box. But we both know, end of the day, Gwen’s the one who really means something to you.” MJ took a breath. “I know you don’t wanna hurt her, either.”

“Yeah.” For a moment, Peter grew solemn. For a moment. “Wonder if Miss Brant likes Miami-?” Then, in response to MJ’s face: “Kidding, kidding.” He simpered at her. “Wow, that was pretty good. It was practically The Look.”

“Don’t even start with her.” MJ simpered back. “I’ve heard the horror stories from Gwen.”

After that, a brief silence fell over the two as they inched forward in line.

“So you’re just not going?” said Peter.
“You kidding?” MJ scoffed. “It’s forty-eight degrees out and eighty-two in Miami. Already asked Tiny to be my plus one.”

It was a good thing Peter hadn’t gotten his coffee yet because he’d have spit it out all over her. “Tiny McKeever? MJ, he makes Flash look like Stephen Hawking!”

Mary Jane merely shrugged. “He’s cute.”

Peter stifled a groan. “Wish I could skip the whole thing, but Aunt May’s going now, and, y’know, after her heart attack, she could really use some fun in the sun—”

He was cut off by the sound of a clearing throat. “Sorry to interrupt,” said a voice from behind. “Couldn’t help overhearing.”

Both heads turned to find a curly-haired kid standing in line behind them.

“Oh, hey, Seymour,” Peter said with slightly less enthusiasm than was entirely polite.

“Just wanted to point out Harry invited me, too, and I’m totally going stag. I mean, who wants a ball and chain when Miami’s full of hotties, right?” As he spoke, Seymour wiped off snot with the back of his hand.

“Uh,” said Peter.

“Peter, Peter, oh my god.” Sudden fingernails in his shoulder made him flinch. “Seymour’s single, too?” MJ flashed a goofy grin. “You totally just found your date.”

“Ha ha.”

An abandoned police station. Not the kind of place Harry would have guessed contained a secret laboratory, but then, that was the point of it being secret, wasn't it? Harry tried his best not to cower too visibly as he ducked a loose wire overhead. It was but one vine in a jungle of twisted steel and plastic – This place looked distinctly slapped together. Harry couldn’t shake the feeling that one wrong move would make it collapse.

“Little Osborn,” Smythe said as he hovered to the lab’s center, “I want you to meet your new best friend, Miles Warren.”

A man approached Harry. A tall, thin man wearing thick glasses, a white lab coat, and a pedo mustache. “Am I to presume everything’s going as planned?”

Smythe nodded. “We've waited long enough. Let's augment ourselves some humans. Of course, if it was up to me, we’d be building robots, but c'est la vie.”

“So...” Harry shuffled his feet. “Who are we experimenting on, exactly?”

“That'd be me.” Another man stepped out from the lab’s shadows – a burly, bald guy in a trench coat. “Top of your dad's short list of volunteers.”

“Volunteers?” repeated Harry. “You mean you want to turn yourself into a freak?”

The man grinned at him, then fumbled through his coat pockets for a cigarette and lighter. “Freaks are the future, kid. With more and more showin’ up every day, pretty soon I'll have some stiff competition for the... line of work I do. Gotta stay ahead of the curve.”
“Yes, well, without further ado...” Warren held up a briefcase. “I couldn't help but notice the Rhino-suit specs were burning a hole in Oscorp's pocket. The late Mr. Osborn had been auctioning off fake copies so he could make easy money and identify his competitors, but I figured we could put the Rhino-suit to a more... dramatic use.” He opened up the briefcase so he could leaf through the notes within. “And, as always, I couldn't help but make a few improvements. Octavius was wise to base his design off the animal kingdom, but he made one major flaw – His Rhino-suit was much too bulky. Spider-Man is incredibly agile and thus requires an opponent who can match his speed. I've made the suit considerably lighter and faster, and I've even taken the liberty of adding a prehensile weapon.”

“Well, then, what are we waiting for?” said Smythe. “Let's get Mr. Gargan into costume.”
Currently, Peter and MJ were strolling out the Silver Spoon with drinks in their hand.

“I’m, err, not feeling the greatest I could be feeling right now,” Peter said, “but we’ve got our coffee, so what next?”

“Well, if you’ve been down in the dumps lately, you found the right gal to hang with.” Mary Jane sipped her cup. “I’ve got something of a gift for lifting guy’s spirits…”

Wow, she wasn’t kidding. One look from her, and Peter’s troubles had already vanished. “Uh… what did you have in mind?”

Wham. Wham. Wham. The table shook with every impact.

“Almost… got it… in,” Peter said through gritted teeth.

Mary Jane made a halfhearted effort to resist, but she was powerless to stop it from entering.

“Oh my god, you’re amazing at this,” she said, wiping sweat from her brow. “This is the best air hockey I’ve ever played in my life.” With that, she retrieved the puck from the slot below and returned it to the table.

A big old grin had wrenched itself onto Peter’s face, and there wasn’t a thing he could do to stop it. “How long’s this place been hiding here?” He gestured to the surrounding game room with his eyes. It had everything – Ski-Ball, race car simulators, and even an old arcade cabinet with Real Life Celebrity Superheroes vs. Capcom 2.

“I don’t know.” MJ launched the puck again with her round, plastic paddle thingy. “Mark’s the one who found it. Used to take me here all the time.”

Peter knocked it back. “And now… you’re taking me?”

Ding. Point two for Peter. “Hope you’re not getting any ideas, there, Tiger.”

“No, no, I get it.” Peter held up his hands. “We’re just friends. I mean, it’s not like you’d two-time Mark while he’s in, err…”

As it his imagination, or had MJ’s smile gone tighter? “Speaking of our dating lives, how are things between you and Gwen?”  Ding. Point one for Mary Jane.

“Oh, is that why you invited me here?” This time, when the puck came his way, Peter successfully deflected it. “Y’know, I can’t help but question your claim about whether or not you’re the dating police.”

MJ laughed. “Just innocent curiosity, Tiger. I saw how jumpy you two were, like, a week and a half ago. I’ve got a sixth sense about these things.” She narrowly managed to deflect the puck herself and launched it back to Peter. “But I also know Gwen would never dump a dude right after his dad died.”

Crack. Zoom. Pwng. Mary Jane sprang back like a cat, then spun around to gape at the newly-embedded puck in the wall behind her.
“Whoops, w-will ya look at that?” Peter drew back. The blush on his cheeks was the strongest MJ had yet conjured forth. “The magnets must’ve, uh, reacted funny…” He hurriedly shook his sleeve down over his arm. Little too much muscle showing there.

“We should, err, probably get out of here.” Mary Jane gave a wince of apology. “The last thing I need’s to get charged with property damage… again.”

After that, the two crazy kids wasted no time hurrying out the arcade. Luckily, there was a decent turnout to the mall this afternoon, so soon enough they’d blended into the safety of the crowd.

Peter thought the conversation had been killed for good, but on their way up an escalator, Mary Jane suddenly said, “Sorry for bringing all that up.”

“No, no, it’s okay,” said Peter. “You’re Gwen’s best friend. I know you’re just looking out for her.”

“She’s not the only one I’m looking out for.” MJ glanced away. “I know these past few days haven’t been easy for you, Tiger. I mean, there’s this cool person you love hanging out with, and things aren’t serious between you, but the two of you can’t help but, like, make things serious, right? And it should all be so simple, but this weird stuff get in the way because we live in the craziest city on Earth, and then everything’s ruined, and he sets the whole building on fire around you-”

“I’m, uh, not sure that last one applies to me and Gwen.”

“Right, right, sorry.” That seemed to shake MJ back to reality. She looked back to him. Tried and failed to smile.

“Hey, MJ?”

“Yeah?”

“Want me to buy you a slushie?”

This time, she succeeded. “Only if you let me buy you one.” MJ laughed, then turned away.

*Man.* Peter was already getting a brain freeze. She was even gorgeous from behind. Truth was, he knew he’d just made a big love confession to Gwen and everything, but Peter couldn’t help but wonder, if MJ hadn’t been such a free spirit… how might that have factored into his decision?

It was at this point that the two of them reached the top of the escalator… and spotted the man on the second floor, right outside the jewelry store. Well, there were a lot of men on this floor, but not many were dressed from head to toe in a white, skintight onesie. Now, even that wasn’t such an unusual sight in Manhattan, except that this onesie happened to be covered in black splotches. Black splotches that floated off the dude’s body, creating portals through which he could suck the jewelry into his hands from behind the glass displays. The guy cackled to himself as passerby looked on in horror- No, wait, sorry, it was more like bemusement.

Peter nearly tripped on the escalator behind him. “Something tells me that’s not performance art.”

Okay, he couldn’t help but notice that this dude looked, uh, what was the word…? Lame. Lame to a degree of lameness previously thought unattainable by lameologists. Did Peter even need to bother running off to change into costume? Mall security was already running towards this guy. They could probably handle this.
“No way.” But the next thing he knew, a set of nails were digging into Peter’s arm. “A real supervillain! Don’t you need to, y’know…”

“Know what?” The words escaped Peter’s mouth on sheer impulse. “I don’t know anything-!”

“...take pictures?”

“Oh. Right. Pictures. Yeah, I- I got my camera right here.” Peter patted the backpack slung over his shoulder. “Now you’d, uh, better get to safety.”

“Cool. But call me when you’re done.” MJ gave his arm a punch. “I’m sure you’ll have a story to tell.” She scurried off down the escalator without another word.

Peter watched her go a moment, then turned back to the jewelry store. This supervillain still hadn’t gotten him terribly concerned, but the thing was, Peter was so used to using his photography as an excuse to change into costume that it’d feel way too weird not to do it. Eh, might as well.

The good thing about the nut in the black-and-white spandex suit was that he kept shoppers from noticing the orb-shaped robot scurrying across the mall’s ceiling. This bot wasn’t dissimilar from the ones that’d occupied little Osborn’s bedroom yesterday evening, with the operative difference being its mini-turret had been swapped out for a mini-camera.

And on the other side of this camera, back in the abandoned police station's secret lab, Smythe was slouched in his hoverchair, watching the video screens it projected, his face the picture of total boredom.

"Why’d you send all your robots to Midtown?" asked Harry from his side. He glanced at the surrounding hologram-screens, which showed off a couple other Midtown landmarks.

“Statistics,” said Smythe. “This is the region where Spider-Man's most frequently spotted according to all the social media posts I've compiled. If we're lucky, we might even catch him changing into that cute little costume of his. Ever wondered who the guy is? Personally, I think he's one of Norman's experiments gone turncoat.”

Harry made a noncommittal grunt. The only real suspect he could think of was Peter, but then, when the reporters had asked for his dad's opinion on Venom's claim, Harry's dad had shot it down, and who was Harry to say he knew better than his father? Besides, if Pete had had spider-powers, the first thing he'd have done was cash in on them. The Parkers were dirt poor.

“Oh, oh, there's the bugger!” In a blink, Smythe's boredom was replaced with sheer, childlike enthusiasm.

Onscreen, Spider-Man was perched on the wall of a shop, facing down the other weirdo in a skintight suit. “General rule of thumb, Spot,” Spidey was saying, “if it makes a good name for a pet, it makes a lousy name for a supervillain.”

“Laugh all you want, Web-Slinger!” yelled the villain. “Your jokes won't save you from my POWERS OF DISTORTION!”

In the blink of an eye, black globs erupted from the Spot's hands, and, even faster, Spider-Man dodged them, darting to the floor below. The globs followed him, though, and formed into a perfect, inky circle on the ground at Spider-Man's side.

“Though to be fair, I would totally name my hamster ‘Doctor Doom.’”
“PREPARE FOR DEFEAT, SPIDER-MAN!” Another black disc formed on the building next to Spot. His hand darted through it, emerged from the hole by Spider-Man's feet in an attempt to grab his ankle... which Spider-Man also effortlessly dodged.

“Well, that's not the *worst* power you could have,” said Spider-Man. “At first I was scared you were gonna squirt milk at me or something.”

“You DARE make a mockery of me?”

“Hey, Spot, uh, random question – Is this portal-shtick your *only* superpower? Like, you don't have super strength or anything?”

“No,” said the Spot. “Why-?”

*Crack.* Spidey's fist came out his portal and smacked him in the face. It was enough to knock leave the Spot seeing his namesake, but not enough to send him to the hospital.

“The sad thing is, you still put up a better fight than Hobgoblin.” Spidey retracted his hand right before the portals vanished (*That* would've caused quite the scene otherwise). “Sheesh, aren't there any tougher villains left in this city?”

On the other side of the camera, Smythe grinned, then leaned into a microphone on his collar. “Deploy.”

Full disclosure, Peter had totally meant to head straight home after school to fix his web-shooters, but through some mysterious redheaded means, he'd ended up distracted. Ah well, his shooters at least worked well enough to web up Spot for the police and then-

*Spider-sense tingling.* Spidey darted onto a wall just in time to dodge something big enough to leave a crater in the tile floor where his beautiful, beautiful face had been a moment ago. What was that? Some kinda flail? Spidey turned to get a look at his attacker. Oh, no, it wasn't a flail, it was a guy in a mechanical scorpion suit. Now he felt stupid.

“Mornin', Spider-Man.” The armor was dark blue with neon green splotches trailing from the joints, and it looked pretty lightweight. Of course, this wouldn't have been *too* threatening if not for the tail, which was very, very fast and very, very pointy. The guy’s face was the only body part left uncovered, and judging from his snarl, before becoming a supervillain, this guy had been the mookiest mook that ever mooked.

“Whoa, where'd you come from?” asked Spider-Man. “Don't tell me you're in league with the master criminal here?” He pointed a thumb at the Spot.

“Nah, I've just been waiting to ambush you,” said the Scorpion. Spidey was gonna assume his name was “the Scorpion” for the sake of simplicity. “Nothin' personal, there's just a bounty on yer head.”

“A bounty?” Spider-Man gasped. “On *my* head? But I'm beloved by everyone! Who would do such a thing?”

“Sense o’ humor. I like that.” Suddenly, the Scorpion sprang into the air and landed on the wall beside him.

Scorpie's tail took a couple jabs at him, but Spidey ducked and socked him in the chest, sending the guy plummeting to the pavement.

“So, mind telling me who sent you?” Spider-Man asked from his spot on the wall.

“And then monologue my entire evil plan? I'll pass.” The next instant, a jet of neon green goop shot from Scorpion’s tail and melted Spidey's face off. Or at least, it would've if not for his spider-sense.

Spider-Man dropped back to the ground, then took a wary look at the wall behind him. Everywhere the acid had hit had turned mushy and black. “Okay, no more Taco Bell for you.”

*Thwip.* Spidey's webshooters were at least reliable enough to web a nearby garbage disposal. Time to see how tough the Scorpion's armor was.

*Crash.* The trash can smashed into him at full-force. The can was decimated – The Scorpion remained unmoved.

...Pretty darn tough, apparently.

The next thing he knew, Spider-Man was pinned to the ground, just barely dodging each thrash of Scorpion's tail. “Couldn't you at least buy me dinner first?” The Scorpion was just about to try his luck hitting Spidey with his fist, but then Spidey webbed his face and punched him off. Phew, Scorpion had fallen for the oldest trick in the book. “Whoops, got it in your eyes. Sorry, buddy, I shoulda warned you I'm a premature webulater.”

“Cute.” Scorpion stumbled backwards, ripping the webbing off. “I'm gonna enjoy killin' you.”

“Yeah, well I'm gonna enjoy restraining you so you can go to jail!” Spidey bowed his head. “Okay, that didn't sound quite as threatening.” But a second later, he had to tumble out of harm’s way, lest that bowed head of his be reduced to a smear on the tip of a giant scorpion stinger.

*“Hold still-!”*

“Come on, Scorpie, can’t you at least give me a hint about who made you?” Holding still wasn’t Spidey’s strong suit. He tried his best, but he ended up moving extremely quickly. Darn, he was bad at this. “I hope you weren’t born with that tail. For your mom’s sake...”

“What’s it matter to you?”

“Well, I *would* kinda like to figure out who keeps sending all these supervillains to kill me...”

This only made Scorpion laugh. “What, you think it’s just one dude with a mustache and a cat in his lap making all the super-mercenaries in the world? Reality check, kid – Guys like me are the way of the future. Why settle for regular old mercenaries when any crook with a checkbook can give their thugs superpowers?”

“It’s true!” spoke up Spot from his, err, spot on the floor. “Like, I got my superpowers from Tricorp, and they only started making super-mercenaries to compete with Os-”

*“Shut up.”* This earned Spot a smack to the face via scorpion tail.

“Hey, let the man speak- Agh!” The next round of Scorpion’s acid missed Spider-Man by a mile, but it nearly hit a random fleeing citizen. Crud, they had to go somewhere less public. “Come on, Scorpie, can't we arachnids just get along?”
“Don’t you get it?” the Scorpion snapped. “This is the way the world works now. With how advanced science got, the super-mercenary business is booming worldwide. Which means you do-gooders can look forward to infinite numbers of do-badders ready to fight you, each more powerful than the last. My armor was specifically designed to take you down. It’s faster, lighter, and more versatile. Every weakness of the Rhino’s been covered!”

“Now, now, what did we say about monologing?” Spidey did a double-take. “Wait, the Rhino?” He didn’t have time to ponder that because he had to dodge another acid-burst.

Suddenly, Spider-Man fired a web towards a far-off region of the mall. “Hey, let’s play follow the leader.” He swung off above the escalators.

“No thanks. I prefer pin-the-tail-on-the-spider.” Apparently, the Scorpion’s joints were spring-loaded. He bounded into the air and latched onto the ceiling to crawl after Spidey.

Webshooters, don’t fail me now. Luckily, Spider-Man made it to the mall’s front entrance without any hiccups. Once he arrived, Spidey sprung to the ceiling, webbed a panel off the skylight, and smashed it into the Scorpion’s face. That oughtta distract him a minute.

“Everyone out!” Spider-Man descended towards the mall’s center, perched upside-down on a web-line so he could flash his Spider-Signal over the shoppers. “Crazy scorpion-person incoming!”

Most of the shoppers were smart enough to run for it. Most. A handful of them, though, made like deer in headlights. They gawked up at Scorpion, paralyzed with horror… which made them sitting ducks when Scorpion’s tail squirted acid out blindly.

“No!” Spider-Man dived, unthinking, before the crowd. Okay, webshooters, I know I told you not to fail me before, but NOW is actually the time you really don’t need to- Oh thank god, he managed to weave a full-sized web-shield moments before the acid struck. The shield disintegrated instantly, but the small crowd of people behind it sure didn’t.

“Phew!” Spidey made a show of wiping off sweat. “Learned that one from Celebrity Heroes vs. Capcom 2.” He spared the crowd a glance. It almost made his heart stop.

By now, even the most paralyzed of onlookers were running for it, but there was one person who’d stayed behind. A person whose gorgeous green eyes drilled a hole straight through Spidey’s mask. Spider-Man gawked at Mary Jane. For a moment, those green eyes had seemed wide and fearful, but as soon as Spidey’s big white ones met them, MJ returned to factory settings.

“Nice moves,” she said in her foxiest voice yet. “What’s that now, the third time you’ve saved my life?”

“R-Really?” said Spider-Man. “Well, who’s counting? I mean, lots of people nearly get killed by an octopus dude or a flaming gold guy-”

“Oh, you remember me?” Geez, Peter had never seen MJ this delighted. “Guess I left an impression, huh? Or do you remember all the people you save?”

“Just the hot ones.” Look, he was not hitting on her. Peter knew MJ had a boyfriend. It was just that, well, Spider-Man didn’t know that. He was only staying in-character. “I-I mean, the hair kinda makes you stand out… No idea who you are, though. But I guess that’s fair, seeing as you’ve got no idea who I am-”

“I know who you are,” said Mary Jane.
Spider-Man swallowed in spite of himself. “You do?”


“Oh, right, right. That’s me.” A moment passed. “You should probably run for your life now.”

In fact, the Scorpion chose that exact moment to drop the floor with a ground-shaking thud.

“Yeah, good idea.” The next moment, MJ had vanished like a hazy dream.

“You can't escape me, Wall-Crawler!” the Scorpion yelled, clawing at his bloodied face. “I'm more than fast enough to keep up with you!”

That's what I'm counting on, genius. Spider-Man raced through the shopping mall with old Scorpie in hot pursuit. He never thought he'd say this, but Peter was glad Liz had dragged him here so many times. He knew right where to find the sauna room.

The woman at the front desk seemed pleasant enough. Well, she screamed at Spider-Man's arrival, but other than that she was perfectly nice.

“Hi, I'd like to rent a steam room for a Mr. Scorpion,” said Spider-Man, leaning an elbow against the desk. “Armor, acid-spitting tail, a little on the antisocial side... You can't miss him. Seriously, though, you should run.”

Once the lady had gotten to safety, Spidey ducked into one of the steam rooms and set the temperature control to max. Instantly, the steam turned so thick, it looked like the world had been replaced by a sheet of printer paper. Good, good. Now all he had to do was wait.

“You think you can hide in the steam, you idiot? All you've done is put yourself in closed quarters!” Sure enough, a big, scorpion-themed doof came lumbering into the mist.

And now for the fun part of the plan: Lots and lots of dodging. Well, Spidey could at least web up Scorpion's tail so it'd be a bit softer.

Click, click, click. Of course. They picked now to jam.

“Ready to die, Spider-Man?”

“So really, no-” Thwack, thwack, thwack. “Ow, ow, ow!” Okay, dodging a giant scorpion tail in a confined space wasn't as easy as it sounded.

“Whoa, there, Scorpie,” Spider-Man said from his smear on the floor. He clutched a tear in his costume. “I don't know how exactly you control that tail of yours, but it must be pretty exhausting. Your face is a mess.”

“Shut up!” Scorpion wiped his brow, which was growing ever stickier with sweat.

“If it's any consolation-” Next, Spider-Man hopped up to the ceiling. “-the rest of you doesn't look too sweaty at all.”

“I'm gonna... I'm gonna beat you!” Scorpion’s voice was growing a mite gogglier. “I'm the perfect improvement over the Rhino! I got... all of the strengths... none of the... weaknesses...”

“Uh, you sure you covered every weakness there, champ?” Spidey poked Scorpie's nose with a finger. The dude promptly toppled over.
With that done, Spider-Man dropped down onto Scorpion’s chest. “Okay, now will you tell me who sent you?” Nothing. Darn, he was out cold. “Well, I guess I'll just assume it was Jameson, then.”

A couple minutes later, the NYPD found Spider-Man emerging from the steam room with a towel around his waist.

“Evening, officers. My fellow arachnid’s having a little R-and-R in the sauna. It really helps with the stresses of being a freakish scorpion person.”

D’aww, look at Mary Jane. Her face had clearly been wrought with worry, but the moment she saw Peter scurrying out of the mall’s front entrance, she snapped back to being chill as ever. The girl had the pride of a house cat.

“Peter! Dude. You’re, like, the most badass photographer of all time.” MJ thumbed through the pics on Peter’s camera, grinning. “Ooh, here’s one of me with Spider-Man. Could you send that one to my phone?”

“Sure.” Man, now Peter kinda wished MJ did know he was Spider-Man. It’d certainly be more fun than his current setup of moping around the house in solitude after every mission. Seriously, imagine Mary Jane’s reaction if he took her aside right now and spun a web in front of her. She would totally…

“Whoo hoo! Crosswalks are for slowpokes!”

...not take it seriously at all. Peter shook his head, then strolled down the sidewalk, waited for the light to change, and finally traversed the crosswalk to meet MJ on the opposite side. “We oughtta change your nickname to ‘M-Jaywalker…’”

Just before he and MJ rode off into the sunset together, Peter glanced back at the swarm of police vans surrounding the front of the mall. Spot was being led away with some kooky sci-fi power-nullifying collar around his neck, while a whole team of officers was hauling the unconscious Scorpion into a van. Peter hated to admit it, but Scorpion was almost certainly right. – There’d always be more bad guys to fight.

And that meant life could never be fun and games. Not for Spider-Man, at least. Ah, well, a guy could daydream.

After that, Peter ran straight home and fixed his web-shooters. Or at least, that's what he'd have loved to do. In reality, though, right after handling two supervillains back-to-back (Well, okay, maybe more like one-and-a-half supervillains back-to-back), Peter got a text and found himself returning to the Daily Bugle.

“What is it, Mr. Robertson?”

Mr. Robertson smiled at him. “Jameson has something he'd like to say to you.”

With a growing sense of dread, Peter entered the lair of old picklepuss himself. But it was different this time. JJJ didn't look like he was one smart remark away from lobbing something heavy at Peter's head, for one thing.

“Parker,” he began. “No, Peter.” Jameson took a breath. “Earlier today, I received news from Ravencroft that my son's condition is not improving. This... might have affected my behavior...
towards you.” This next part, he said through gritted teeth: “You're not fired after all.”

This was way more surprising than getting attacked by a scorpion-person. Was Jameson acting like an actual human being?

“I'm sorry about John.” Peter gave a sympathetic smile. “That alien that hitched a ride on his shuttle... it hurt a lot of good people.”

Jameson nodded slowly. “Right. Well... NOW THAT YOU'RE NOT FIRED, WHAT ARE YOU STANDING AROUND HERE FOR? I WANT SOME PICTURES OF SPIDER-MAN ON MY DESK IN THE NEXT EIGHT-POINT-NINE SECONDS OR YOU'RE FIRED!”

Harry sat in the abandoned police station, staring at the wall. His mom hadn't even texted him. Wasn't even wondering where he was.

“Well, little Osborn.” Harry caught the hum of a hoverchair coming to rest by his ear. “Looks like Mac's being sent to the Vault. How'd you like your first supervillain creation?”

“This- This is crazy.” The words escaped Harry’s mouth on their own. “Spider-Man’s one thing, but there were innocent people at that mall. You're a monster, and my dad was a monster, and I want no part of this.”

“Mmm... No can do. Norman's orders were clear. You're getting involved in this whole affair, or else I'll, I don't know, send robots to kill your mum or something.”

Harry tensed. “My dad would never have wanted her hurt.”

“No offense, kid, but I’m not sure you knew your dad quite as well as you think you did. He was a great man. A man with a goal I believe in.” Smythe paused, then added, “Still a monster, though. No one's denying that.”

Harry bowed his head. “Maybe it'd be better to wash my hands of this. Let you kill me. That's the braver way out, isn't it?”

Smythe looked thoughtful. “Yes, I suppose that's always on option... Oh, on a completely unrelated note, the police raided Menken's apartment. They found quite the payload of stolen Oscorp property, which Oscorp has of course reclaimed. Menken had cooked up a massive amount of Globulin Green. Strange he didn't actually use any of it before throwing on that goblin suit and trying to kill you, but, hey, more for Oscorp to take back, right?” Smythe knelt down to pat Harry's shoulder. “But I'm sure that's of no interest to you.”

Harry caught the hum of a hoverchair moving away, leaving him alone to stare at the wall.
Gwen stared into the flames of the Bunsen burner. She could hardly lift the beaker without her hands trembling.

“You seem troubled, Miss Stacy.”

Gwen spun around to find Dr. Warren standing there, arms folded behind his back.

“Where's your fellow intern?” asked Warren. “Mr. Parker?”

Probably out drooling over his latest crush. “Probably taking pictures for the Bugle.”

“Ah. Not too reliable, is he?” Warren shook his head. “I'm starting to see why Connors fired him.”

“He's a good guy.” Gwen let out a weary sigh. “He can just be an idiot sometimes.”

Warren frowned. “Are you alright? If there's anything I can do for you...”

“Nothing you need to worry about, sir,” said Gwen. “Just high school drama.

Warren gave a warm smile. “I like high school drama.”

Gwen laughed, but her heart wasn't in it. “You know that feeling when you love someone, but they can't be with you, not because of anything to do with how they feel, but just because the... the circumstances get in the way?”

Warren nodded. “I know it all too well.”

“And I'm not talking about some silly crush. I mean... someone that makes you feel a little less worthless every time you're around them.”

Warren pulled up a chair next to her. “I'm guessing you're the introverted type? You don't make many friends, but the ones you do make are close friends?”

Gwen found herself smiling the tiniest amount. “You hit the nail on the head.”

“That's our burden as people of science.” Slowly, gingerly, Warren placed a hand on her back. “Our interests will always fall into a niche... One most people won't accept, won't understand. But you can't let that stop you from pursuing what you love.”

“Yeah...” Gwen shut her eyes. “Thanks for the kind words.” Well, how about that? Mrs. Connors hadn't seemed to like Dr. Warren too much, but it turned out he wasn't such a bad guy after all.

Dr. Warren wet his lips. “It's my pleasure, little lady.”

It was at that moment that the door burst open and one Peter Parker made his dramatic entrance into the lab.

“S-Sorry I'm late!” He hurried towards the other two, finger-combing his hair. “I was held up!”

Oh, Gwen bet.

“Don’t let it happen again, Mr. Parker. Now if you’ll excuse me...” Before Peter could get near,
Warren vanished into his office, leaving the two kids alone. Perfect.

“So, uh… what’s our assignment today?” Peter sat down across from Gwen, taking out another Bunsen burner from the box in the center of the table. “Or, uh, are we still doing that thing where we give each other the silent treatment?”

*Deep breath, Gwen.* There were honestly more important things to worry about right now.

“Peter…” Her eyes shut. “I spoke to Spider-Man before school today.”

“Really? Cool.” Gwen wasn’t sure if Peter was reacting too much or too little. “I didn’t think the guy was much for conversation, but then, maybe that’s just cuz I’m not a cute girl.”

Gwen nearly lit her hair on fire. Wait, *huh*? Why was she so happy all of a sudden? Hadn’t she just been furious at him a second ago?

“He… He confirmed something I’ve suspected for a while now.” But the subject at hand dampened Gwen’s enthusiasm pretty quickly. “You know how Eddie was screaming, ‘We’re Venom’ as he was carted off to Ravencroft?”

“Y-Yeah. Dude had a total break from reality. Venom’s, like, twice his-”

“I think Venom was controlling him,” said Gwen. “That monster… whatever it is… did something to Eddie’s head. He was right behind me before Venom grabbed me, and then when Venom showed up, Eddie was gone. And Peter, when I saw Venom up close, he looked slimy and black.” She hesitated, fighting down some lingering nightmares from the morning. “Just like the alien stolen from the Connors’ lab.”

“What are you saying?” Peter, meanwhile, looked to be fighting down his fight or flight reflex. “That Eddie got mind-jacked like something out of Invasion of the Body-Snatchers?”

Gwen shook her head. “I know it sounds nuts, but Spider-Man had a black outfit just like Venom’s right before Venom first showed up… and my dad says that when the black-suit Spider-Man fought the Sinister Six, he started doing crazy stuff like growing tentacles out his body.” She shrugged. “Maybe it’s some kind of military bio-weapon and the alien story’s a cover-up or something?”

“Wouldn’t be the weirdest thing to crop up in Manhattan…”

“The point is, *this* is why Venom’s been going after you.” Without meaning to, Gwen squeezed Peter’s arm. “Why he told the press you’re Spider-Man. Why he tried to kill me – Eddie knows I’m your best friend.” Yep. Best friend. That was why. No other reason possibly sprang to mind. “Right before Venom showed up, Eddie was, like, beyond ticked at you, and he was beyond ticked at Spider-Man for stealing the alien, and when the alien made him go crazy, Eddie must’ve, y’know, conflated those things.”

“Just my luck.” Peter glanced away, looking sour. “Seymour still calls me Spider-Man half the time…”

“And Spider-Man told me Venom could still be out there!” Gwen’s grip on Peter’s arm went even tighter. “Peter, we’re in danger. This thing could- could pop up and kill us at any moment.” Her head sank. “God, our life’s become a horror movie…”

Honestly, Peter had been squirming in Gwen’s grasp, but now, his expression softened. “Gwen… I promise you, everything’s gonna be okay.” Oh lord in heaven now his arms were around her. “I-I know Manhattan’s been overrun with supervillains lately, and it sucks, but the cops and Spider-
Man can handle it. If Venom shows up again, Spidey’ll be there to knock him back down. I really believe that.”

Gwen managed a nod. “Ravencroft called me earlier. They’re allowing visitation for Eddie now. He’s, uh, slipping in and out of lucidness.”

“Oh. That’s- That’s great.”

Gwen found herself nestling her head in the crevice between his shoulder and neck. “I know he hates your guts, but I’d feel a lot better if you went there with me after we’re done here. He deserves some company before we run off to Miami for a week.”

At this, Peter took a breath. “Well, it’ll definitely be an… interesting visit.”

“I have to warn you, your friend was moved to the intensive care wing. It’s… a bit disturbing in there.”

Dr. Kafka was a lot prettier and a lot less male than Gwen had been expecting. The name had made Gwen think of a stereotypical German mad scientist, but Kafka was actually a friendly-looking Asian woman. She led Gwen and Peter through the halls of Ravencroft, glancing down at her clipboard as she spoke.

“His condition hasn’t significantly improved since he arrived. My leading theory is that an outside agent chemically altered his brain activity.” Kafka gave the kids a piteous look. “I just want you to manage your expectations. This isn't the friend you knew.”

Gwen tried her best to look like she wasn't coming apart at the seams. “I’ve been close to him for years. I need to see him.”

As the three of them passed the lounge area, a voice from a nearby sofa called out, “Miss Stacy? I-I'm glad to see you're doing well.”

Gwen drew closer to Peter. “I'm sure you're so concerned for my well-being.”

The short, chubby man simply smirked at her. The light reflecting off his square glasses made his eyes look pure white.

“Don’t be afraid,” Dr. Kafka whispered to Gwen. “He's never shown any violent behavior. At least not with his current set of limbs…”

“I do apologize, Miss Stacy, for any harm that befell you due to my unfortunate b-b-breakdown.” The man took a sip from his coffee mug, which had the words “EVIL GENIUS” proudly emblazoned across it.

After that, Dr. Kafka led Gwen and Peter down into the intensive care wing. Unlike the floor above, this wing was less of a cozy lounge area and more of a stark, barren hallway filled with reinforced doors. On the far side of the hall, a man was being led away, screaming, “You don't understand! I'm not a human! I'm a grizzly bear!”

Gwen forced herself to keep her eyes on Dr. Kafka and not on the patients' living quarters, which looked distressingly similar to prison cells. Christ, and she’d thought her granny’s nursing home had been bad.

But Gwen couldn’t help herself when she spotted the patient in the green containment suit. “M-?”
“Don’t use the M-word,” Kafka said in a harsh whisper. “He will get upset. Call him ’Electro.’”

“E-Electro,” Gwen hurriedly corrected herself as she and Peter gathered outside his door.

“I remember you.” Through the slit in the door, Gwen could see that Max had risen off his cot. “The lab interns.”

“H-Hi, Electro,” Gwen said in the steadiest voice she could muster. “I’m sure the Connors are still hard at work on that cure-”

But this, too, had been the wrong thing to say, evidently, at least judging by the reaction it got: “The Connors left me in here to rot.” Suddenly, Electro was slamming himself against the door, screaming for all he was worth. “Well, I don't care anymore. I don't want a cure. I like having power. I'm Electro now! ELECTRO.”

It was at this point that Dr. Kafka hurried Gwen away from the cell.

“I'm sorry about that,” she said, “but please bear in mind his condition is causing him constant pain. He’s handled it remarkably well, all things considered.”

“If you say so...” Gwen did feel sorry for Max, but there was only so much sympathy she could have for someone who’d helped hold her hostage as part of a plan to hijack government computers.

“Dr. Connors actually stopped by from Florida just yesterday,” Kafka said with a sigh. “He’s made some real progress on a cure for Max. We believe we have a way to heal him now... except that the procedure could be dangerous, and Max refuses to consent to it. Connors left all the machinery here, but there’s not much else we can do for now.”

On that note, the three of them stopped outside another door. Here they were.

“I'm glad you've come to visit him.” Kafka gave Gwen a strained smile. “The poor man has no living relatives. Seeing a familiar face should help his recovery.”

“Thanks,” Gwen said dully.

“Will you be okay if I wait out here, Gwen?” Peter gave a look of apology. “Sorry, I don’t want to ditch you, but I’m sure I’m the last person Eddie wants to see right now.”

Gwen gave a slow nod.

“Oh, and Gwen? Uh... Eddie’s still not quite in touch with- with reality, y’know?” Peter cleared this throat. “So if he says anything about me...”

“I know.” With that, Gwen took a deep breath. “Well, here goes nothing.” She pushed the door open, leaving Peter and Dr. Kafka behind in the hall.

Gwen had known coming in that this was going to be hard to watch. Seeing someone in a straightjacket was never easy, especially if you knew them back when they were a sane, well-adjusted person. What Gwen hadn't been ready for was that... that look in his eyes. Like he’d murder her given half a chance.

Spider-Man had asked her to stay away from here. Gwen sure as heck hadn’t forgotten that. The thing was, the dread – the creeping sense of unknown horror – had nearly eaten Gwen alive. She had to silence it. Had to silence her nightmares.
The first thing out of Eddie's mouth was, “Do you have it? Give it back! I need it.”

Or this visit could make her nightmares ten times worse. One or the other.

Gwen had wanted to give him a reassuring smile, but it was quickly becoming apparent that wasn't gonna happen. “H-Hi, Eddie.”

“I need it. It loves me! It loves me!”

Gwen pulled up a chair and seated herself at his bedside. “What do you need, Eddie?”

“The alien. Do you have it? Is it in your clothes?”

Great. Whatever that slime was, it’d basically turned him into Gollum. “No, Eddie, I don't.” Thank god. The thought of that stuff touching her made Gwen break out into a cold sweat.

“Please, please, you have to give it to me.” This seemed to drive Eddie into a frenzy. He thrashed even harder against his restraints.

“Eddie...” Gwen brought a hand to his cheek. “You almost lost your job because of that alien, didn't you?”

Eddie's face contorted into a snarl. “Because of Spider-Man.”

“I know... The Daily Bugle said he stole it.” But then, the Daily Bugle said a lot of things about Spider-Man. Gwen was willing to bet he'd been trying to stop that cat burglar, not working with her. “That's why you had to drop out of college, isn't it?”

“Give it to me! It doesn't love you, it loves me.”

“Eddie, are... are you that black monster?” asked Gwen. “Are you Venom?”

Eddie's face lit up. “Yes! We're Venom. And we're going to ruin Spider-Man's life! He'll pay for rejecting us!”

Gwen sprang from her chair. “You tried to kill me!”

“Yes.” Eddie giggled to himself. “We know who he loves the most...”

*Deep breaths, deep breaths.* The alien wasn't here right now. Clearly, it was the monster, not Eddie.

“Loves the most?” said Gwen. “What's that supposed to mean?”

“Heh heh heh...” At this, Eddie grinned. “Peter Parker is Spider-Man.” Right. Peter had been afraid he’d still be raving about that.

Gwen knelt down, touching Eddie’s arm through the jacket. “How do you know that, exactly?”

“It told me,” said Eddie. “The alien told me.”

“Eddie, c-c’mom, try and think rationally here. Science is, like, your whole life. You know better than to jump to conclusions without any real evi-”

“It showed me his memories.” Eddie was back to struggling against his restraints. “The- The field trip. The spiders.” Field trip? Spiders? Was he just saying random-?
The pieces made an almost audible click in Gwen’s head. The ESU lab. She had to clean the glass on those darn spider exhibits, like, every other day. The spiders that had Dr. Connors’ serums incubating inside them. The early drafts of what would eventually help him regrow his arm… by transferring the properties of animals into humans.

For a frenzied second, Gwen had the urge to call up Mrs. Connors and be all like, “I TOLD YOU! I TOLD YOU THERE WAS A SPIDER MISSING! IN YOUR FACE!”

“So how was Eddie?” Peter asked as he and Gwen made their way out Ravencroft’s front entrance. “Still not making any sense?”

“Yes,” said Gwen. “No sense at all…”

“C’mon, I think the subway station’s just over-” As they reached the sidewalk, Peter paused, then turned back to frown at her. “You okay?”

“I’m fine. Just doing some intense thinking.”

The two of them continued their march to the subway.

“How were you so good at football all of a sudden?” Gwen blurted out.

She might as well have just smashed a defibrillator on Peter’s chest. “What? I hit the gym over the summer. I-I was sick of being a scrawny nerd. That’s why I swapped my glasses for contacts. I mean, it’s not like you didn’t have the same idea.” He nodded to her own, glasses-less face. “Why are you-? Is Eddie still saying I’m the Web-Head? Gwen, you know he’s having delusions-”

“Sorry, sorry.” The next second, Gwen was burying her forehead in her hand. “I know you’re not. If you’d gotten spider-powers, I’d be the first person you’d tell.”

Silence. Cold, dead, silence.

“Yeah,” said Peter. “You would be.”

After that, the subject was dropped, and neither of them had the courage to pick it back up again.

Mary Jane wished she’d worn a thicker jacket. No, not because of the weather – because of the look on Liz’s face when she’d opened the door to discover Mary Jane on her apartment’s welcome mat. The truth was, while Liz was kind of sort of exactly correct in her guess that MJ had plotted to hook Peter up with Gwen, Peter’s and Liz’s breakup actually had nothing to do with MJ at all.

MJ didn’t particularly feel like debating the point, though. She was only here to grab some of her stuff. Really, there were some things MJ would’ve rather left in Mark’s possession, but at this point, it wasn’t looking like Mark would be returning home anytime soon.

And that’s how Mary Jane ended up trying to navigate the apartment complex’s stairs with a big, heavy cardboard box in her dainty little arms.

She was getting dangerously close to spilling personal possessions all over the stairway when a velvety voice said, “I certainly hope you don’t take this the wrong way, ma’am, but you have exceptionally beautiful features.”

One more remark like that, and this box was crushing MJ’s foot to death. “Uh… thanks?” She
managed to lower it enough to get a look at her flatterer here. He was a middle-aged, broad-shouldered, gray-haired guy in a white business suit. MJ must’ve blocked his path up.

“Did I see you leaving Mr. Allan’s apartment?” the guy asked. “Friend of his daughter?”

“…Sure.”

“I was about to discuss a business venture regarding one of his hotels, but I suppose I couldn’t help but notice you.” For a second, MJ’s creep detector started to buzz, but then the guy surprised her by saying, “Have you ever considered modeling? I actually have a not inconsiderable amount of sway in the fashion industry.” As he spoke, the man fished a business card from that pearly suit of his. “If you’re interested, all you need to do is submit a portfolio. Tell them Roderick sent you.”

“O-Okay. Cool.” With a bit of straining, MJ managed to hold the box with her wrist so she could grab the card.

Long after the guy had politely pushed past her, Mary Jane stayed frozen in place. She blinked. Had… Had she just been discovered? Like, Marilyn Monroe style?

Thump. “Ow, my foot!”

Wow, Manhattan hadn’t looked this tiny even from the top of the Empire State Building. Peter had to admit, if he was gonna ride in a plane for the first time in his life, this was how to do it (He, err, might have had a childhood fear of flying).

This thing made first class look like, uh, twenty-eighth class or something. It was like someone had chopped out the Osborn family’s penthouse living room and plopped it in the middle of an airplane. The jet even had multiple rooms to it, meaning Peter didn’t have to spend the next few hours locked in with Flash and Kong. Hallelujah.

Of course, the bigger upside of riding private was that your luggage didn’t get nearly the same level of scrutiny, meaning Peter had managed to smuggle in his costume and web-shooters without having to make up some wacky excuse. On the other hand, with how much Gwen was scrutinizing him now, Peter had a feeling that Spider-Man turning up in Florida to stop muggers might be a little too hard for her to swallow. Still, couldn’t hurt to be prepared.

Man… Peter’s eyes went to the cute blonde napping a few seats back. She’d almost got him with that spontaneous game of twenty questions. Peter usually did such a good job keeping a lid on the whole secret ID thing, but was it really his fault that he hadn’t anticipated an alien symbiote spilling the beans? Either way, though, now he wasn’t just lying to Gwen by omission – He was lying through his teeth right to her face.

Peter leaned back on his headrest, shutting his eyes. Maybe she deserved to know. Heck, her dad already knew, and that wasn’t the end of the world. Maybe Peter ought to bite the bullet and come clean to her. What’s the worst that could happen?

Peter found his eyes reopening. His gaze went first to Aunt May chatting with Anna Watson a couple seats up, then to Harry’s mom reading a novel in the corner, quiet as ever, and then finally back to the ever-shrinking view of Manhattan out the window.

Would the city even last a week without its local spandex-clad hero? Peter had thought things had finally calmed down right until Scorpion showed up. Maybe Norman hadn’t been the one behind all the supervillains after all? Or maybe he had been, but now one of his fanboys was following in his footsteps? Either way, Scorpion had only wanted to kill Spider-Man, so if Spidey just, y’know,
made himself scarce for a while, the city would be totally safe, right? Right?

Well… unless the baddies started attacking innocent people to try and draw Spider-Man out. And, come to think of it, it might be a teeny bit suspicious to Gwen if Spider-Man vanished during the week Peter just so happened to be on vacation and then reappeared as soon as Peter got back home. Even once the trip was over, Peter probably needed to hang up his webs for a while just to keep things from getting too obvious.

“Pete! Help!”

“Whuh?” Peter was torn from his fretting by a somewhat raspy, somewhat seductive, extremely panicked voice. “MJ? What’s wrong?”

The girl made sure to lock the door behind her before plopping down in the adjacent seat. “Tiny McKeever.” She leaned in to whisper, “It’s like talking to a tree stump.”

Peter didn’t even try to hide his “told-you-so” smirk. “Tried to warn you.”

A hand touched his arm. “Just say we’ll spend the week as a threesome, okay, Tiger?”

“Sure!”

The grip tightened. “Not that kind of threesome.”

The two shared a laugh, but even after it died down, the hand remained on his arm. “Uh… MJ?”

“Peeeter,” Mary Jane said in a voice that dried his throat. “You wouldn’t happen to have packed that fancy camera of yours, would you?”

“Y-Yeah.” He’d just got a shiny new replacement after the Enforcers blew up the old one, in fact.

Was it Peter’s imagination, or were MJ’s eyelashes fluttering? “And you are a professional photographer, right?”

“Well, I do get paid to take pictures, so technically yes.”

“But you know about lighting and composition and all that jazz?”

Peter gave a slow nod. “But I’ve really only ever done pics of the Web-Head.”

“Wellllll…” MJ gave a dramatic pause. “…how’d you like to photograph a different subject in a skintight outfit?”

Oh. So all that blood rushing to Peter’s cheeks hadn’t been for nothing. “Um-”

“I’ll tell it you straight, Tiger – I’m trying to break into modeling.” Slowly, Mary Jane met his eyes. “If you’d sacrifice some vacation time to help me build a portfolio, I’d really, really appreciate it.”

Peter had to force himself to blink. “Of course. That sounds gr- I mean, I’d love to.”

“Aww, Tiger.” Geez, she needed to warn Peter before hugging him like that. Nearly gave the poor boy a heart attack. “You’re perfect. I mean that.”

“What’s this about taking pictures?” spoke a third voice.
“Oh, Gwen-!” In unison, Peter and MJ spun around to find Gwen sitting up in her seat, rubbing her eyes. Peter guessed that exchange had set off her alarm bells.

“I- I wanna start modeling, and I thought Pete could help me out cuz, y’know, photographer.” It took MJ a moment to realize she probably ought to remove her hand from Peter’s arm. “I mean, I’m not trying to- This is strictly career stuff. You don’t mind, do you, girlfriend?” She shot her friend a worried look.

Gwen opened her mouth-

“Mind?” -only for Harry to perform his teleporting trick again. “What would my girlfriend mind?” Turns out he’d slipped in from the back entrance while they were talking.

“Nothing, nothing!” the other three said hurriedly.

After that, Harry stayed by Gwen’s side the rest of the flight, just daring them to raise the subject again. Like a camper in an MMO.

Peter’s neck returned to his headrest. This was shaping up to be a fun vacation already.
No matter how he tried, Peter couldn’t shake the feeling that this beach was fixing to come alive and attack him any moment. Ugh. Being a superhero had done things to him…

On the other hand, though, Miami Beach was undoubtedly a step up from Rockaway. It was like someone had cranked up the color saturation on life – Peter had never seen so much sky blue and golden brown. In one direction was a gorgeous view of the waves, and in all other directions was warm sand. The place must’ve had hundreds of beachgoers, and there was still elbow room to spare.

Peter’s eyes soaked in his new surroundings. Huge as this place was, the Midtown High group hadn’t yet fully dispersed. Peter’s and MJ’s aunts were chatting together on a beach towel, Harry’s mom was still absorbed in her novel beneath the shade of an umbrella, and the teens were making their gradual way to the water together, save for Kong, who was trying his hardest to ogle bikini-wearing passerby without Glory noticing, Tiny, who was wandering around asking if anyone had seen where Mary Jane had gone, and Flash, who seemed perfectly happy to sit out on the sand with Sha Shan.

Well, everyone seemed preoccupied doing their own thing, so Peter guessed there wasn’t any harm in exiting the safety of the umbrella’s shadow. He took his first step into the sunlight.

“Yo, Parker!” Instantly, Rand’s voice rang out across the dunes. “No homo, but… damn.”

Naturally, the eyes of every last Midtown kid (and a handful of other beachgoers) were now firmly planted on Peter. Specifically, on his abdominal region.

Great. Now Peter was fighting the urge to shield his perfectly-chiseled chest with his arms. Though maybe looking like a shrinking violet would be preferable to jeopardizing his ID like this. Ugh, why had he opted to go shirtless again?

“Whoa…” From off to the side, whispers hit Peter’s ears. A not inconsiderable number of bikini-wearers had started pointing and whispering and shooting furtive glances his way.

Oh yeah. That was why.

Even Liz and Sally were joining in on the glances, though with a healthy dose of reluctance and self-loathing involved. Meanwhile, in the water, Glory looked to Peter’s chest, then back to Kong (whose swim trunks were hidden behind his gut). Then back to Peter, then back to Kong.

After a moment’s hesitation, Peter gathered his resolve and made his way towards the ocean. Halfway there, though, he crossed the path of a couple girls his age, all of them hard at work on an impressively large sandcastle. “Hey, there.” One of their soft, tittering voices halted his path.

“H-Hey.” Peter gave the faintest of waves.

“Wanna help with our castle?” asked another girl.

“Yeah, guess- guess I could.” Peter took a tentative step towards them.

Crrsh. But then the sound of scattering sand sent all heads turning. The castle’s entire west quadrant was now a shapeless pile of mush.
And Gwen Stacy happened to be standing before it. The other girls stared at her.

Gwen stared back. “The tide came in.”

“Uh… s’cuse me.” Peter thought it best to ditch the other girls in favor of hurrying off with Gwen.

As soon as they’d found their own private little patch of beach, Gwen said, “When you said you hit the gym over the summer, you meant it.”

“Yeah, I, uh, guess I’m turning into a meathead.” Peter’s smile came out more wavering than he’d meant. “You just gotta get a steady workout routine-”

Gwen was having none of it. “Peter, you promise me this isn’t a spider-powers thing?” Even without her glasses, The Look was a force to be reckoned with. “Because there are genetically-altered spiders in ESU’s lab, and I just-” She faltered. “I don’t want this to turn into another Lizard incident.”

No matter how carefully Peter had to tread here, his face couldn’t help but soften. “Gwen… I promise.”

“And you’re not taking Globulin Green?”

At this, he almost laughed. “What? No! I don’t even know where Harry got that stuff. Look, it’s really not that hard to get in shape, Gwen. The only crazy sci-fi serum I took was that chicken and protein powder mix I made in Aunt May’s blender.”

“Oh no. Gwen looked so cute right now, Peter had forgot how precariously her self-esteem was stacked. Adorable as her getup was (and as rare as it was to see her forsake her trademark headband), Gwen’s swimsuit did have a lot of frills and laces to droop over her body, hiding it from judgmental eyes.

Gwen,” Peter said softly, “you look gr-”

“You look great, babe.” Naturally, Harry chose that exact moment to teleported between them. “Wish I had that kinda commitment.” She pinched her tummy to demonstrate, squeezing fat between her fingers.

Oh no. Gwen shot one last longing glance Peter’s way before allowing her boyfriend to drag her off by the arm. Harry was pretty ripped, himself, and something told Peter that hadn’t come from chicken and protein powder, either. Well, Peter supposed, even now that Harry was off the Green, it’d given him a little keepsake.

Alone again, Peter let loose a sigh. He guessed he could always head back to help that giggling gaggle of girls repair their sandcastle, but he doubted his heart would be in it anymore.

On his trudge down the sand, Peter happened to cross paths with Flash and a couple Midtown High girls.

“Oh yeah?” Flash was saying. “Well, if you think Puny Parker’s jacked, wait till you get a load o’ DESE PUPPIES!” He struck a dramatic pose in his trunks, flexing his arms.
A moment passed.

“Meh,” said Mary Jane.

The dramatic pose promptly deflated itself.

“Aww, don’t worry, Flash,” Sha Shan said with only a hint of a smirk. “I think you’re jacked.”

The head of every last guy (and a couple gals) on the beach was turning. On the highway in the distance, one car rear ended another. And in the ocean, knee-deep in the waves, Mary Jane Watson just so happened to be in perfect view of that highway as she posed for the camera.

This shot was a tricky one to get – It was hard to press the button when Peter’s finger was trembling so much. Currently, MJ’s personal photography boy was merely ankle-deep in the drink, and that fancy camera of his was safely tucked into a waterproof case hanging off his neck. Though Peter wasn’t worried about the water ruining his camera so much as the sheer heat from his photo subject.

“How’d that one turn out?” Dear lord, Mary Jane was sloshing right towards him.

And what’s more, Peter was allowed to exam her photos in detail without it making him a creeper? “Oh, I don’t think you’ll have too much trouble landing that modeling gig…” He stole another glance at MJ’s bikini. In the photo. The bikini in the photo. Because MJ had asked him to. “But you don’t think you’re a little young for them?”

“At seventeen?” said Mary Jane. “That’s a little old for them, actually.”

“Still, I, err, wonder if we should tell all these beachgoers you’re underage?”

That only made MJ’s grin wider. “Oh, you’re one to talk, walking around without a shirt like that. You trying to get some poor lady arrested?”

“Ha ha… ha…”

She’d gotten close enough to touch him. “Seriously, is there an ounce of fat on your body? Guess those weren’t fake muscles on your Halloween costume.”

“Well, so long as we’re both ogling each other…” Peter cleared his throat. “You know, I’ve, uh, got a ton of pictures of you on my camera now. I should probably be a gentlemen about that and give you the SD card.”

MJ held out a palm. “Nah, just email me copies. You can keep the originals if you want.”

“Really? But-”

“If all goes well, my face is gonna be plastered in magazines for all the world to see, anyways. I’m not exactly shy here. Keep ’em.” With half-lidded eyes, MJ added, “Not a terrible reward for helping me out, is it, Tiger?”

Peter’s face must’ve been the weirdest mixture of pale white and bright red right about now. “Um, well…”

“Or delete ’em if you want. I’m not your mom.”

Before Peter could reply, his eyes caught something off in the distance. Something blonde and
scowling. Seemed Gwen was still out in the depths with Harry, but the photography session had…

caught her eye.

Peter gave his most apologetic look, but Gwen merely glanced away.

“Oh, crap, Gwen, I totally forgot.” And apparently, Peter wasn’t the only one to spot the blonde. “Sorry, sorry, not trying to drive a wedge between you two. C’mon, you guys know I’m your number one shipper.” Mary Jane paused, then gave Peter a look. “What?”


Peter’s smirk hadn’t gotten any smaller. “That’s gonna get you in trouble someday.”

“Ohhh, I think it already has…” With a wince, MJ pointed behind him.

Peter followed her finger… to discover Harry out in the deep water, making out with his girlfriend beneath the sunset.

Midway through the display, Gwen opened her eyes so she could give Peter her most apologetic look.

Peter wrenched his eyes away. “MJ…” Deep breath. Even the icy water on his toes was doing little to cool him down. “…I really think I’m in love with Gwen. I think I have been for a while now. I was just too stupid to realize it.”

“I enthusiastically second that notion,” said Mary Jane, admiring her nails.

“Mary Jane, if…” Deeper breath. “…you really love someone like that, is it okay to- to keep big secrets from them? I mean, if you’re scared it could be, I don’t know, too much for them to take?”

For a moment, the only response Peter received was a gut-wrenching silence. He risked a glance MJ’s way – The goofy smirk on her face had all but vanished. Even if she had no clue what he was getting at, Peter guessed his question’s gravity had still brought her down.

But finally, Mary Jane said, her voice barely louder than the waves, “Well, I guess you can’t expect someone to love you if they don’t really know you.”

After that, Mary Jane sloshed her way towards the beach, keeping her back to Peter. A moment later, Peter followed suit.

From the beach towel where their aunts were conferring, Peter caught Mrs. Watson murmuring, “…just how she deals with things, I suppose.”

Then Peter’s attention returned to Mary Jane a couple feet away. She’d already found another cute boy to chat it up with.

Liz gave the ketchup packet a halfhearted squeeze, spreading red goop onto a pile of lukewarm potato mush. A rush of air fled her mouth. “Petey used to love putting ketchup on his food…”

“Oh my gawd, Liz, you just broke up with him. He’s not dead!” At the other end of their table, Sally’s eyes lolled in her skull. “Look, I know you’re baskin’ in shame at the horrible lapse in judgement dat led you to ever even give a nerd like Parker the time o’ day, and dat’s totally
understandable. I mean, if *I* was you, I’d be drownin’ in shame and misary the rest o’ my life, neva able to shake off dat horrible feelin’ o’ regret naggin’ away at me, but...” Sally trailed off, then blinked a couple times. “What was I sayin’ again?”

“Thanks, Sally,” said Liz. “You always know how to make me feel better.”

Sally patted her shoulders. “Dat’s what friends are for.”

“I mean...” Liz made a halfhearted effort to raise a fry to her teeth, but it failed. “...you’re right. Petey-Peter. He- He was never worth my time. Stupid nerd cared more about his precious photography career than he ever did about me.”

“Parker wouldn’t know a hot girl if she kissed ’im on the mouth. Dating you was the closest he’s eva gonna get to an actual, like, quality date.” Just then, Sally’s eyes flitted from the beach cafe to the plain old beach. “Unless ya count the Midtown bicycle ova there.”

Liz followed Sally’s eyes to find an ever-growing horde of cute boys forming around a certain, unmissable redhead. Those boys must’ve been real wits because Mary Jane was laughing at every single one of their jokes.

“What, Mary Jane?” Liz frowned. “Doesn’t seem like the *worst* he could do...”

Sally snorted. “Yeah, well, Watson’s not the worst *anyone* could do, if ya know what I’m sayin’.”

“What, like, she’s the lowest common denominator of dating options?”

“What? No, I’m sayin’ she’s a skank.” Sally took a particularly angry sip of her soda. “Even Glory’s startin’ to see it. Y’know I saw Watson and Parker at the mall the otha day? It’s bad enough she was his pity date to the Fall Formal, but now she’s gotta be his rebound, too?”

“But MJ’s still with my brother-”

“Yeah, I’m sure she’s countin’ down the years till he’s outta jail.” Sally caught herself. “Uh, no offense.”

“None taken,” Liz said dryly.

With Sally’s words bouncing around her skull, though, Liz couldn’t help but spy on MJ for the next couple minutes. The girl’s attitude did come off as distinctly exaggerated. At one point, while MJ was out swimming with all her new guy friends, a stray wave even just-so-happened to hit her in the chest.

“My top!” MJ cried out in her loudest possible voice, giggling like mad.

About a dozen chivalrous gentleman promptly scrambled to retrieve it while MJ hid herself beneath the water. And the lucky guy to actually salvage the item from the waves was... Hobie Brown. Mary Jane graciously accepted the gift, and then Hobie opened his mouth – only to be silenced by a scowl from Mindy McPherson over on the beach. After that, Hobie had to hurry off to tend to his date.

Okay, Peter had to admit, this grimy, grungy back alley was something of a step down from Miami Beach. Though admittedly, anywhere outside Manhattan felt like an alien planet to him. The building were so short here. He didn’t trust short buildings.
Peter couldn’t help but feel out of place in his swim trunks, especially when Harry and Gwen had actually bothered changing back to their normal clothes. But honestly, throwing his trademark blue t-shirt back on had been about as much effort as Peter had been willing to put into his appearance.

“This should be the place,” Gwen said, glancing back down at her phone’s GPS.

Harry looked at the building before them like he thought it was a plate of day-old caviar. “We, uh, sure the country’s top biogeneticist works here?”

“Yep.” Gwen glanced away to mutter, “And we have your dad to thank for it…”

Before Harry had time to reply, Peter cleared his throat. “K-Kind of a cool coincidence that we’re vacationing right near the Connors’s place, huh?”

“Oh, yeah, huge coincidence,” Harry said with a roll of his eyes, “because I never try to do nice things for my girlfriend.”

“This was very thoughtful of you, Harry.” Gwen patted his shoulder, though even that small gesture of affection came with a great deal of reluctance.

To be perfectly honest, Peter could’ve done without Harry inviting himself along for this visit, but then, Peter supposed it was too much to hope Harry would give him and Gwen even a second of alone time together (Mary Jane, on the other hand, had been given plenty of alone time to suffer with Tiny).

The door was answered by an older, wearier version of Martha Connors. “Peter, Gwen, come in! And you must be Harry.”

Next thing they knew, the trio were being given a tour of the Connors’s new lab. Not that there was much to tour. This room was so cramped, it’d have passed for the workplace of a high school chemistry class.

But more interesting than the rundown Bunsen burners and cracked beakers were the people here. There was Billy lurking at the lab’s far end, blasting Space Wackos on a box-sized computer, though its fans whirred as loud as a jet engine. And speaking of relics, the trio was introduced to the Connors’s new lab assistant, Vincent, an utter fossil of a man. Vincent didn’t strike Peter as much of a conversationalist (think Treebeard), but Gwen was right in the middle of a bold and valiant effort to make small talk with him when something big and fuzzy scurried across the table.

“Eeeeigh!” Gwen stumbled back, shrieking, and Harry was instantly at her side to soothe her… except Peter had got there first.

“Oh, don’t mind him,” said a high, bouncy, somewhat scratchy voice. “That’s just Hungry Joe. Sneaks in whenever Billy leaves crumbs everywhere.”

As it turned out, the creature was a raccoon, and it turned back to hiss at them before scampering off through an open window.

“Sorry,” said Billy, eyes glued to his monitor.

With the raccoon long gone, Peter, Gwen, and Harry turned their attention the last remaining unfamiliar face in here. The somewhat scratchy voice belonged to a goatee-wearing guy who looked to be in his mid-thirties, thin as a pole and sporting pasty white skin beneath his baggy t-shirt. If the dude’s hair had been brown instead of jet black, Peter would’ve expected him to start begging for Scooby Snacks.
The guy offered out his hand for each of them to shake. “Mike.”

The trio accepted the shake in turn.

“Harry.”
“Gwen.”
“Peter.”

At this last one, Mike paused. “Parker?”

“Y-Yeah.”

His face promptly lit up. “Dude, when did you quit wearing diapers?”

“Um…”

“I was a friend of your dad’s, man. He was one of my professors back in college.” The way Mike was grinning and vibrating in place, you’d think he was still that age. “There’s no way you’d remember me, though. But it’s cool to see you’re following in his footsteps.”

“Y-Yep. He was a great guy.” Well, Peter wasn’t following the exact same footsteps as his dad…

“Maybe someday you could finish that super adhesive formula he was always working on,” Mike added.

Organic. Everyone thinks your webs are organic. Your secret ID’s not at risk for once. “Yeah, someday, maybe. Can’t really make heads or tails of it right now, though.” Peter supposed busting out his web-shooters and showing everyone the fluid inside might strain credulity just the tiniest bit.

Mike pursed his lips. “That’s too bad. Your dad always wanted that adhesive to be, like, the next big thing.” But in the seconds, the lips curled shamelessly upwards. “He never could make it stick, though.”

No sooner were the words out his mouth than a wave of groans swept across the lab. “Miiiiike.”

“That was horrible,” Curt muttered, clutching his forehead.

But while the rest of the lab’s occupants were groaning, Mike was laughing. In fact, he laughed and laughed until it became a coughing fit, one bad enough for him to whip a hanky out his khakis’s pocket to catch airborne flecks of phlegm.

“You okay-?” Gwen started. But her question was answered when she caught sight of the handkerchief. “Is that blood?”

All at once, Peter and Harry jolted while Mr. and Mrs. Connors winced. Even Billy was torn away from his gaming session to give Mike a look of discomfort.

“It’s nothing-” Martha began, but she was stopped by a hand on her shoulder.

“It’s okay, Marth.” The sudden solemnness in Mike’s voice made Peter shudder. Made the dude sound like a whole different person. “We can tell ’em.”

After a slow nod, Curt began, “Mike has an extremely rare, extremely severe form of anemia.”
“It’s not that bad,” Mike said immediately. “I’d been meaning to lose some weight.”

“We’re doing everything we can to help him,” Martha continued, “but… without all of ESU’s resources…” She trailed off, eyes on the floor.

Silence emanated through the lab.

“It’s really not that big a deal.” Mike let out the smallest of chuckles. “I mean, I kinda wish I could take up surfing again, but sunlight makes it, like, a million times worse…” He trailed off a moment. “A-Anyways, I don’t want you guys worrying about me, okay?” Despite his pale skin, he still managed a warm smile. “You’ve got a vacation to get back to.”

Gwen lay belly-up on her hotel bed, staring at the ceiling. It was easily the most comfortable sleeping arrangements she’d ever had in her life, and yet it failed to phase her.

“Whataya MEAN I can’t room with Rand?” Outside, an ear-bleeding voice echoed down the halls. “He’s MY MAN!”

Gwen rolled over on her shoulder, groaning.

“Need some earmuffs?” said a considerably more pleasant voice.

Gwen sat up to find Mary Jane looming over her bed. Wow, even the girl’s PJs were the height of fashion.

“Thanks.” Gwen accepted the muffs without hesitation.

But even once the muffs had been taken, MJ remained in place. “Hey, girlfriend? There are no hard feelings over me, err, making Pete my personal photographer for the week, are there?” MJ glanced away, clutching her arm. “Hope that didn’t rub you the wrong way. It’s just for the good of my career, I swear.”

Gwen took this in for a moment, then said, “You promise you don’t have feelings for him?”

There was silence. Then a scoff. “Phht. If I like Tiger so much, why didn’t I hook up with him after the Fall Formal? Poor guy was practically salivating over me.”

“Oh yeah, good point.” Gwen drew back at this, cheeks growing hot. “Sorry, guess I’m being paranoid.”

“I’d say you’ve earned that privilege.” MJ pointed a thumb through the door to the adjacent guest room. Specifically, to Liz’s bed, which was as far away from theirs as physically possible. “Now c’mon, you know Pete only notices me the way he notices the girls on magazines covers. You’re his one-and-only, end of story.” Mary Jane met her eyes. “You’re my best friend, Gwen, and we’d never let something dumb as a guy come between that. Right?” She offered out her knuckles.

“…Right.” After a second, Gwen accepted the fist bump.

Harry lay belly-up on his hotel bed, staring at the ceiling. He’d helped himself to his own private room while sticking Peter with Flash and Kong, and he wasn’t going to pretend he didn’t get a sick delight out of that.

“So how was the beach?” asked a voice from the wall. “Make any sand-angels?”
On sheer reflex, Harry sprang up to find another one of Smythe’s robots perched there, staring at him with its camera, pensive.

“What’s the deal with the Connors?” Harry asked with a calmness that surprised even himself.

At this, the robot cocked its camera “face.” Smythe’s voice emanated from it. “Those guys? Not much to say. Your dear old dad figured having the country’s top biogeneticist in his pocket might be helpful to his super-mercenary production. Pretty simple con – Your dad funded their work, got his mitts on all the Connors’ research, then found some excuse to give them the boot and set up his lackey, Warren, in their place. It was your dad’s guiding hand that got the Connors way in over their heads with projects they couldn’t even begin to grasp the ramifications of, which led to all sorts of fun. Just look at Electro! I’d say your dad’s scheme was a smashing success.”

Harry’s face was tightening. “So now that Mike guy’s gonna die of his blood disease because Oscorp cut off the Connors’ funding?”

“Yep,” said Smythe. “Isn’t that the funniest thing you’ve ever heard?”

“Hilarious.”

Even after the laboratory lights were shut off, Curt, Martha, and Vincent lingered in the doorway. They glanced back, waiting for Mike to catch up to them.

“You guys head out without me,” Mike said, batting a hand at them from his seat at the lab table. “I’m gonna keep working a while longer.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Curt said, “Alright. Just be sure to lock up after yourself, Michael.”

“You got it, Doc.”

And with that, Michael was left alone in the shadow-draped laboratory.
Everyone was here. Flash, Kong, Mary Jane, even Peter’s aunt. Every last vacationer stood at the slope of the artificially snowy mountain, preparing to ski to the bottom. All except the two who mattered most.

They weren’t even answering their phones. Harry shouldn’t have been surprised. He should’ve known Peter and Gwen would sneak off to make out with each other first chance they got.

Peter and Gwen sat shoulder to shoulder, about three feet apart, fiddling tirelessly with vials and chemicals as they hunched over the grungy laboratory table.

“You kids really don’t have to do this,” said a frowning Martha from behind them.

“We’re not just going to goof off all week while Mike gets worse and worse,” Gwen replied, eyes on her work. “I helped make the gene cleanser. I can help with this, too.”

“Young Peter nodded, “and this is the least I can do after those Lizard pics ended up in the Bugle…” Of course, the other reason Peter was helping out was that, to be honest, going a whole week without doing something heroic made his hair stand on end. Even if he couldn’t change into Spider-Man, he could still do some good as plain old Peter Parker.

“Well, we do appreciate you pitching in,” said Curt, who was likewise hunched over the table, “especially since Vincent seems to have skipped work today…” Billy wasn’t here, either, judging by the telltale silence where the whirring of a computer fan would normally reside.

“But- But we don’t want you kids to get your hopes up,” Martha added, shoulders slouched. “Curt and I have been working with Mike for days now, and we still haven’t-”

“Huh-Hey, what’s with all the long faces?” It was at this point that Mike himself burst in from the back room, smiling from ear to ear and strolling towards them – though his path was somewhat circuitous. “Guys, c’mon, relax, I’m probably gonna be… gonna be… fine.”

“Mike?” Luckily, Curt managed to catch Mike in his hands – sorry, hand – before he face-planted. “You’re getting whoozy. You should lie down until-”

“Pht. Come on.” Mike batted a trembling hand at him. “It’ll take more than a little blood thing to stop… to stop… Mike M… Morb… Hrrgh.”

“Michael?” Martha called out.

Now Peter and Gwen were on their feet, too, swapping worried looks. Peter would’ve thought Mike was about to throw up – or even drop dead on the spot. Except… neither of those would’ve made his spider-sense start blaring like a siren.

“Gwen, get back.” Peter tackled Gwen to the tile floor just as it started to happen.

Just as Mike’s arms started to snap and stretch. As thick brown fur started to sprout from his pores. As his face grew scrunched up and distorted… while his teeth twisted into a pair of fangs.

Mike’s last word, spoken mid-transformation, became an animalistic shriek: “Morrrrrrrrbbius.” But after that, the creature dropped the English language in favor of spitting and hissing. With a
lumbering first step, Morbius prowled forward on all fours. With the brown, hairy skin running from his forearms to his torso, he was a dead ringer for a vampire bat.

And here’s the thing – Peter might’ve had his own built-in alarm system, but Curt wasn’t so lucky. He’d been caught completely off guard… meaning he was helpless to stop the beast from pinning him to the ground and helping itself to all the blood in its neck.

From within Peter’s arms, Gwen let out a shriek of her own. “It’s happening again.” The words were high and fast. “It’s happening again.”

And across them in the lab, Martha seemed to be in a similar state. Peter was the only one here not panicking. Made sense, seeing as he’d had the most experience with danger – and at least with the Lizard, the others had had some kind of prior notice. Mike had transformed out of friggin’ nowhere.

“Michael! What did you d-?” Too late. Morbius’s fangs had already sunken deep into Connors’s neck. The creature drank long and deep before finally releasing Connors, splattering crimson flecks on the grimy tile floor.

“No. This- This can’t-” A chill had gone over Dr. Connors’s entire body.

“M-Mr. Connors?” Gwen swallowed. That hungry stare Morbius was giving her likely wasn’t helping her nerves.

“His venom,” Curt stammered out. “It could have mutagenic properties.”

Peter couldn’t help but flinch. Mutagenic venom? Like the one from a certain genetically-altered spider? If the Connors had pieced that together… what else had they figured out?

“It has no effect on most people, but if someone has non-human DNA lying dormant inside them…” Curt couldn’t finish that thought. He was too busy howling in agony as the stub that was once his arm twisted and stretched. There was a piercing howl, and the next thing the others knew, they were stare down a massive, dark green reptile in a tattered lab coat.

But the Lizard, to his credit, took one look around the lab, hissed, and pounced right for Count Chocula over there. Great. The lab had turned into a black and white film serial, and for once, Peter was actually rooting for the Lizard.

Bang. But Peter’s thoughts were broken by an earsplitting sound. All heads, monsters’ included, shot towards one Martha Connors. While the beasts had been busy naked mud wrestling, Martha had, evidently, whipped out a pistol in one hand and as many vials of yellow liquid as she could carry in the other. Gene cleanser.

“We were afraid this day would come,” Martha stammered out, glancing back at the teens. “But not like this. We- I-” She fired a couple more rounds, aiming for the creatures’ eyes, but with how much the things moved around, the most the bullets did was bounce harmlessly off their hide. Great. It wasn’t enough for them to be giant monsters, they had to be super strong, genetically-altered giant monsters.

All Martha managed to do was goad the Lizard into smacking her across the room with his tail.

“No-!” Gwen at least had the fortitude to cover her mouth before her scream could carry too far.

This wasn’t as big a deal as it seemed. Spider-Man had taken on the whole Sinister Six by his onesie last Christmas Eve. He could do this without breaking a sweat. Only downside was he
didn’t exactly have all the time in the world to slip off and change into costume.

Okay, Peter knew this was screwed up, but… that fact made him hesitate.

“Peter.” The hesitation lasted long enough for Gwen to grab his arm and yank with all her might. The monsters had gone back to tossing each other into tables and sending splinters raining down, meaning Gwen had plenty of time to drag herself and Peter into a janitorial closet and slam the door shut. “I- I think we’re safe in here,” she whispered.

“Yes-” Peter nodded to the door handle. “unless the Lizard’s seen Jurassic Park.”

“What?”

“Sorry, I joke when I’m scared.”

“Okay. Okay, I think if- if we just keep quiet, they might kill each other or… I don’t know.” Gwen’s voice broke. The only light in here came from the crack beneath the door, but it was enough for Peter to tell what was trickling down Gwen’s eyes.

“But Gwen… shh… It’s gonna be okay.” Peter leaned forward to stroke her hair, though he nearly smacked into a mop handle.

But Gwen shook her head. “No. No, it is not going to be okay.” Her words were gaining speed. “I thought it was just in Manhattan, but- but this is the way the world is now, Peter. It’s never going to stop.”

A moment passed, during which the only sounds came from her heaving chest and the battle outside.

“Gwen…” Peter forced himself to inhale. “I have to go back out there.”

“What?” Gwen looked torn between wanting to kiss him and strangle him. “But you-! I-! Don’t you dare tell me you need to take pictures.”

“You don’t underst-” Peter tried to rise to his feet, but she yanked him back down.

“Please, just- just stay with me.” Her forehead touched his. “I love you, Peter. I’ve loved you since seventh grade. I know I told you that already, but I don’t want you to think I’ve just got some childish crush.” Their faces hadn’t been terribly far apart to begin with, but now they were even less so. “I love you with all my heart-” Before Peter had time to blink, Gwen was going a million words a second. “-and I want to spend the rest of my life with you and I can’t stand Harry &*$% him he’s an asshole and you’re literally the only person I’ve ever had sex fantasies about besides Daniel Radcliffe and I’m sorry I waited all these years to tell you I’ve been so scared I didn’t think you’d want me and when you said you’d dump Liz to be with me I…” She’d finally run out of steam.

Gwen flinched – A palm had touched the back of her hand.

“I love you, too,” said Peter. “Even if I was too stupid to realize it till recently.”


A second passed. Then Peter’s hand left hers. His t-shirt and long-sleeved undershirt were removed in one smooth motion, revealing the red spandex beneath. Gwen stared at the spider-logo a
moment, then shut her eyes. She nodded. Then Peter slipped on his mask, rose, and then gently opened the door, exited the closet, and shut it back behind himself.

A hurricane had swept through the lab before him, reducing all the tables and equipment to rubble. A hurricane made of fur and fangs and scales. On the upside, the two clashing titans were still in here, meaning they hadn’t escaped to terrorize the college campus outside (which was considerably smaller than the ESU campus, but still). On the downside, Martha was unconscious in the corner with a pretty nasty welt on her forehead. As soon as one beast killed the other, there was no question who their attention would turn towards next.

Or would’ve turned towards next if Spider-Man hadn’t called out, “Uh, Mike, don’t look now, but you might wanna be sitting down next time you check the mirror. Assuming anything even shows up, I mean.”

In synch, both creatures’ heads snapped towards him. In unison, they prowled forth. Aww, look at that, they’d formed a temporary truce. How heartwarming.

Morbius was the first to lunge- “Y’know, if you’re thirsty, you could always just try the Red Cross.” - only to have Spidey flip over him, web his squished-up face, and then swing him into Lizard like a bludgeon. “I swear, vampires have no common sense…” Good, good, the duct tape on Spidey’s web-shooters was holding for now.

Neither eight-foot-tall monster seemed to appreciate that much, but they were at least distracted long enough for Spider-Man to sprint for Martha. A buncha yellow vials had tumbled out her lab coat, which Spidey snatched up from afar with a quickly-spun web-line. He couldn’t blame the Connors for mass producing gene cleanser. If Spidey was Curt, he’d chug a bottle of cleanser a day. And also hard liquor.

“H-Hey, Mikey.” Right as the monsters recovered and got back on their clawed feet, Spider-Man stepped forward. He held up a vial. “Here, eat a Snickers. You turn into a living vampire when you’re hungry-”

“Ragh!” Morbius lunged, and Spidey’s sense tingled. Unfortunately, Spider-Man chose to deal with that tingling by flying onto the ceiling. This was unfortunate because, as it turned out, Morbius was every bit as flighty as him. Those bat wings weren’t just for show after all.

“Hey- Agh!” Which meant the next second, Spider-Man was being dragged downwards via a pair of fangs in his heck. Almost instantly, he kicked Morbius off him, but even that little nibble had been too much. Peter could feel his insides moving. “No. No, that can’t-”

Agony. White, hot agony seared through his body, sending him spasming on the ground. So if Curt’s dormant, non-human DNA turned him into the Lizard again, what would Peter’s…?

He didn’t have to wait long for an answer. There was one last scream, followed by the riiiip of the spandex around Peter’s torso. Peter brought a hand to his mouth. Then, purely on muscle memory, he brought a second hand to his mouth.

And then a third hand. And then a fourth, and a fifth, and a sixth.

“It’s official,” he said, dazed. “My life’s written by Kafka.” Remember what he’d just told Gwen about joking when he was scared? Yeah. This was, without a shadow of a doubt, the most surreal sensation he’d ever experienced. Peter wiggled all thirty of his fingers at once. He wasn’t sure if it made him want to faint or throw up. Probably both.
The sight of all the new wiggling appendages, though, only drew the monsters’ attention. Lizard lunged for him, but Spider-Man sprang onto the ceiling, causing Lizzy to instead dive into a rack of particularly fragile lab equipment. He hardly had time to hiss in displeasure before Spider-Man dropped down on him, swinging all six of his fists.

Phew, that’d been a close one. Lizard had almost chomped off one of his arms. Though at least now Spider-Man had some redundancies…

Spidey was just about to swing another three or four fists when the tune of the Itsy-Bitsy Spider sounded from his utility belt. Actually, come to think of it, answering his phone and swinging multiple fists were no longer mutually exclusive actions. “Hello?”

“Pete.” MJ’s voice. “Look, I don’t want to be a bitch about it, but you did promise to get some pics of me in the snow, and you totally hung me out to dry here.”

“Oh… would you believe I’ve got a really, really good excuse?”

“Oh, I know why you did it.” There came laughter from the speaker. “I get these last few days have been frustrating, Tiger. It’s not that I blame you for sneaking off with Gwen. I mean, I’m sure you two are having fun-”

Peter almost missed that part because he had to duck a swipe of the Lizard’s claws.

“-but you’ve gotta understand, I- I know I’m not exactly an open book when it comes to my life, but this modeling thing is a big deal to me. And besides that, you guys are being, like, legit rude to Harry. I mean, way to ruin his vacation.”

“Oh, his vacation is ruined…?”

“What was that?”

“Nothing.” At this point, Peter had to toss the phone from his middle right hand to his bottom left hand, thus freeing the middle right one to sucker punch Morbius in the jaw. “But look, MJ, me and Gwen aren’t- Hnnnnngh.” Suddenly, five out of six arms were clutching Peter’s chest.

“Uhhhh… Tiger?”

The best reply Peter could muster was a moan, followed by the thump, thump of Lizard and Morbius smacking into him.

From Mary Jane’s end, there came a moment of silence. “Oooookay, I’m gonna hang up now. Hope you’re being safe…”

Whatever other comments Mary Jane might have made, though, were cut off. Peter’s phone had just been smashed by a giant, hairy leg. One of eight such legs, in fact.

This wasn’t real. This wasn’t real this wasn’t real this wasn’t real. Even in Gwen’s nightmares, there hadn’t been three giant, man-eating monsters. Yet there they were – a giant lizard, a giant vampire bat, and now a giant, black spider, too, like a man-sized version of the genetically-altered ones from the ESU lab.

Gwen nearly gave herself away by creaking open the closet door an inch too far, but thankfully, the monsters were too busy tearing into each other to notice her.
“Reeeeeeeearg!” Spider-Man’s costume had been ripped to shreds, sending web-shooter and utility-belt shards raining down. Or maybe it’d be more correct to say it was Man-Spider’s costume. The sight of the big, black creature’s drooling pincers nearly made Gwen lose her lunch. Christ, she’d wanted to know for sure if Peter was really Spider-Man, but not like this. Why couldn’t he have been bit by a genetically-altered bunny?

But Gwen couldn’t just sit here gaping. She had to do something. If she didn’t, Mrs. Connors could be next. Wait, speaking of Mrs. Connors, her gun and gene cleanser vials were all still lying out on the floor. Gwen had already seen how effective the gun was against the monsters themselves, but... this gave her an idea.

Right as Man-Spider was getting the upper hand against the Lizard and Morbius (Seemed Spidey kicked ass no matter what form he was in), Gwen took one last, steadying breath, and then sprinted out the closet. She dived for the gun, gave a prayer of thanks for all those times her dad had dragged her to the shooting range, and then aimed the weapon at her target...

“Sorry, Hungry Joe.” Bang. Where a second ago, the poor raccoon had been cowering under a table, there was now a crumpled pile of blood and meat.

The tradeoff, though, was that the noise had drawn all three creatures’ attentions. Before they could move towards her, Gwen steadied herself, held her breath to keep from getting too nauseous, and poured out the contents of as many gene cleanser vials as she could on the raccoon meat... before tossing it to the beasts.

The three of them started fighting over and tearing into the meal like a pack of dogs.

Her work finished, Gwen allowed herself to collapse to the ground, panting. There, she’d done it. She’d outsmarted them. Well, that or this wasn’t going to work and now Gwen was about to get ripped apart by horrible monsters. One or the other.

Two hands stroked Gwen’s hair while two more rubbed her shoulders and the remaining two wrapped around her torso.

“Oh, Gwenda,” said Peter, “you don’t know how relieved I am that you still love me even though I have to live the rest of my life with six arms.”

“Of course I love you, Peter,” Gwen said, giggling. “I love you almost as much as I love my boyfriend Harry.”

“Oh...”

But suddenly, Gwen’s face grew concerned. “Peter? Peter? Peter?”

“Huh? Whuh?” Peter’s eyes shot open to reveal he was lying belly up in the Connors’ lab. Or what was left of it, anyways. “Ugh...” He clutched his throbbing forehead. “The heck happened?” And to be clear, he was clutching it with one of his two hands. No more, no less.

Gwen – the real one, not the dream one – let out a relieved laugh as her own pair of exactly two arms wrapped around him. “I’ll be honest,” she said with a furtive smile, “this is not at all how I pictured my first time seeing you naked.”

The two of them burst out laughing, though Peter had to stop pretty quickly to throw up chunks of raccoon.
Sometime later, Peter found himself dressed in some of Curt’s spare (and a teeny bit oversized) clothes while he, Gwen, and the Connors gathered around what had once been the lab’s central table and what was now a couple shards of table with the occasional claw mark in them. Mike had been politely asked to wait in the back office, Vincent was still MIA, and Billy had never come into the lab today – His school system wasn’t on spring break, thank God.

“…swear you won’t tell my aunt about this,” Peter was saying. “I worry about her heart enough as it is.”

“Well, we can understand that Peter,” Martha said, arms folded, “and to be perfectly honest, Curt and I’ve suspected this ever since Venom’s little news announcement, but…”

“…what we don’t understand is why you do any of this,” Curt finished.

“Why am I Spider-Man?” At this question, Peter buried his palm in his forehead for the umpteenth time that day. “Hoo boy, we could spend all night on that topic alone, but… I’m sorry, I’m worn out, and- and I think that’s enough questions for today. I got turned into a giant spider-monster – I need a nap.” At this, Gwen gave him a concerned frown, but Peter ignored her.

“Well, I guess I can’t begrudge you your choices in light of-” Curt’s head bowed. “-our own. You should go.” He turned away. “We’ve done enough damage to you kids.”

“Dr. Connors-” Gwen began.

“Our carelessness led to Electro and that spider-bite and- and-” Curt forced himself to take a breath. “I should’ve anticipated that Michael might be desperate enough to break into my off-limits research. I suppose he realized vampire bats have a natural immunity to his blood disease, and he figured it’d be analogous to my research with reptiles…”

“That’s on his shoulders, not yours,” Peter said softly. “And the rest were all accidents. I don’t hold anything against you guys.”

“Well, maybe you should.” Curt let out a scoff. “We do seem to cause an awful lot of accidents. And now, thanks to us, your DNA’s forever stained… just like mine.”

In fact, the “stain” ran so deep that even after that gene cleanser had cured Peter of being the Man-Spider, it still hadn’t cured him of being plain old Spider-Man. Heck, Peter had opted to have this whole conversation from the ceiling just to make sure his powers weren’t fading on him.

“Well, that Lizard research is all getting destroyed,” said Martha. “We promise you that, so this will never happen again. Should’ve done it a long time ago…” She faltered. “I just don’t understand why Michael kept what he did from us. If he’d just told us, we could’ve put a stop to this before…” She held her husband tighter.

Peter gave a slow nod. “I guess, even if you think you’re doing good…” His eyes went to Gwen. “…there are some things you shouldn’t keep from the people you care about.”

The dimly lit back alley leading to the Connors’ lab sure did have an echo. It made the howling wind sound extra spooky. Peter sat side by side with Gwen on the lab’s front steps, listening to that wind as they watched the sun grow smaller and smaller beneath the horizon.

“So.” Peter’s but scooted towards hers. “Daniel Radcliffe, huh?”

“Oh, like you’ve never thought about Daniel Radcliffe.”
There was a moment of silence. Then a much longer moment of riotous laughter.

It took a minute for the two to collect themselves. Finally, Gwen returned to her feet, wiping her eyes. “Wow. This has been a day. You’re really-?” She looked back up at Peter. “I watched you change into costume, and I still don’t believe it.”

“What, you think I wear that thing under my clothes at all times just to mess with you?” More laughter.

“I don’t know, anything’s possible.” Good, good, Gwen’s lips were back in the curled-upwards position where they belonged. “Maybe I need to see some proo-?”

*Thwip*. A strand of webbing yanked her forward. She almost tumbled to the pavement. Good thing a superhero was there to catch her. The two of them held that pose, Peter gazing into her big, sea blue eyes, and Gwen gazing into his even bigger white ones. “Don’t tell Aunt May. She’ll ground me until the end of time.”

“My lips are sealed.” There was a giggle. “Metaphorically speaking...”

“G-Gwen...” Her lips were drawing nearer to his. Peter had a dim recollection of someone doing that to him before, but he was honestly having trouble thinking of any girl right now who wasn’t blonde with a headband. “What about Harry?”

“Who?” asked a breathless Gwen.

Peter had always wanted to try his hand at The Look.

“I-I didn’t wanna to break up with him over text – the mean way – but I swear I’ll do it.” Those sea blue eyes of hers weren’t growing any smaller. “In a second...” In fact, they were growing bigger... bigger...

“Gwen?” said a third voice.

“Harry!”

Luckily, by the time Harry rounded the corner, Peter and Gwen were on opposite ends of the alleyway, and that strand of webbing was safely tucked inside Gwen’s jacket.

“Sorry for not answering our phones.” Gwen gave a hug of apology. “We let ourselves get distracted.”

But that didn’t stop Harry from giving them a sour look. “Really? Why, having too much fun together?”

“We were helping out with Mike’s illness,” Gwen said immediately. “Ask the Connors if you don’t believe us.”

After that, Harry didn’t press the issue... though he sure looked like he wanted to.

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Despite everything, Peter and Gwen ended up encouraging Mike to see them off at the airport.

“Guys,” he began, hoarse, “I know there’s no forgiving what I did, but...”

Peter silenced him with a hand on the shoulder. “It’s okay, man. You didn’t know. And I mean,
hey, look on the bright side – At least you didn’t sparkle.”

That only made Mike look even more lost. “Sparkle?”

“Y’know what, I’m not explaining it. You’ve been through enough already.”

“Actually, though, speaking of you in the sunlight–” Gwen shot Mike a concerned glance. “-are you sure you want to be outside this much? I thought that made your anemia worse?”

Mike took a moment to reply. “It does,” he said slowly, “but at this point, it doesn’t exactly make much of a difference. Truth is, I’d rather spend a few good days in the sun than a handful more in the shade.”

“I see.” Gwen took this is in silently. Her nose was twitching the way it always did when she was lost in thought.

Eventually, Mike left, and Peter and Gwen had a merciful few seconds to themselves before Harry tracked them down like a bloodhound.

“I can’t keep waiting, Peter,” Gwen admitted, brushing hair from her eyes. “God, I was in love with you enough before I knew you’d saved my life a bazillion times over…”

“A-All in a day’s work.” Peter was stunned. Was his karma finally kicking in?

“I promise you, I’m breaking up with Harry.” Gwen paused. “Just as soon as we get back home and he’s had time to settle down.”

“Right, right.” Peter forced himself to nod. “Wouldn’t want to ruin his vacation. He doesn’t deserve that.” As they walked, he glanced over her shoulder. “Oop, there’s the private jet up ahead. Better not walk too close together…” Before reaching the other Midtown High kids, though, there was at least time for one last hug.

Peter almost wished he’d kept the extra arms, if only so he could hug her even tighter.

Even this private jet wasn’t private enough for Gwen’s liking, but she and Mary Jane at least managed to slip away from the other passengers long enough for a little chat.

“So, um–” Gwen’s eyes flitted to where Glory and Sha Shan were conferring a couple seats up. “-what did you need to talk with me about, MJ?"

Mary Jane smirked at her, shoulder on the armrest. “Just wanna make sure you realize everyone here knows what’s up with you and Tiger, and sooner or later you’re gonna get busted.”

“What?” Gwen’s heart was thumping faster for a whole multitude of reasons. “What do you mean, ‘what’s up’ with me and T-?” She nearly bit her tongue off. “With me and Peter?”

That only made the smirk bigger. “Please, don’t act like I didn’t see you two being all whispery and giggly outside the jet. I mean, you’re holding yourself totally different around him now. Pretty obvious, really.”

“Oh.” All of a sudden, Gwen’s eyes were rolling.

“You guys had better have the most airtight alibi of all time.” MJ pointed out the jet’s two elderly women a couple seats behind them. “Why do you think me and Pete’s aunts insisted on tagging along? Mrs. Parker’s gonna tell your dad, and then you’ll never see the light of day again–”
“We were at the Connors’ place.” The words came a bit sharper than Gwen had meant. “They’ll vouch for us.”

MJ’s eyes went wide. “Seriously? Whoa, I didn’t think those guys were so cool.”

“Oh, that is not what I-”

“Nice.” Mj showed off her perfect white teeth. “Niiiiice.”

“Em Jaaaaay…”

“Okay, okay, I’ll drop it.” Mary Jane held her hands out, innocent. “I mean, you know I’m your wingwoman, though, so if you ever wanna do girl talk, I am THERE.”

“Yeah, thanks, I get the pict-”

“I mean, seriously, did you SEE Tiger on the beach? You keep that boy, Gwen. Just… high five. You’ve earned it- *Not The Look, not The Look!*”

Elsewhere in the skies flew a different jet. One containing a withered old man. He held a phone to his droopy ear.

“Did you get it?” asked a voice from the receiver.

“Oh, my, yes.” The man touched the jump drive-shaped lump in his dress pants’ pocket. “Those saps never suspected little old Vincent.” He chuckled to himself. “You won’t believe everything I’ve found, Mr. Kingsley. Particularly the bits regarding reptiles…”

“Thank you kindly,” said the voice. “You’ve been a great help to Tricorp, Dr. Stegron.”
Rising Action

Rockaway Beach wasn't the most exciting place in a city full of super-people duking it out on a daily basis. Nevertheless, the little girl came here as often as she could, improving her sandcastle skills and periodically taking a wistful glance at the dunes, as if she was expecting them to come alive any moment now.

Actually, that’s exactly what she was expecting.

Rockaway Beach wasn't the most exciting place in New York, but it was worth the wait to finally see your castle quadruple in size before your eyes.

“Hey, kid.” A face formed on one of the turrets, compete with googly white cartoon eyes (made of colored sand, of course).

“You're back!” The girl threw her arms around the turret, cuddling up against its face.

“Yeah, yeah, just, uh... don't tell anyone you saw me here, alright?”

“Okay, Sandman.”

The next couple hours were spent making sandcastles and sanddragons and sandunicorns, and then Sandman buried the girl up to her neck, and then she tried to bury him up to his neck (which didn't really work), and then she made sand angels, and then...

It wasn't until sunset that the girl's parents finally called out, “Come on! Time to go!” Once they were safely out of sight, Sandman shifted back into human-shape so the girl could give him a goodbye hug.

The girl yawned. “You made me tired.”

“Nah, that's the other Sandman.”

“What?”

“Nevermind... G'bye, kid.”

The girl wrapped her hand around his thumb. “Can't you come home with me? You can live in my bedroom and I'll find plenty of sand to feed you and-”

“Sorry, kid.” Sandman shook his head, scattering grains everywhere. “Your folks wouldn't want me around.”

“Because you're a criminal?”

“Was a criminal,” said Sandman. “I don't do that no more.”

“Then why do you always have to hide?”

Sandman's eyes drifted towards the horizon. “I... I don't know.”

“Hey, Aunt May!” Peter caught his aunt halfway to the laundry room with a basket in her hands. “Notice anything different about me?”
May's face was a perfect blank. “You got a haircut?”

Peter’s face, by contrast, went sour. “I shaved.”

“Oh, yes, of course!” May immediately nodded in agreement. “I see it now. Your chin looks completely transformed.”

“Thanks, Aunt May. You always know how to boost my self-esteem.”

“Why are you getting all dressed up, anyhow?” May took another look over Peter. He was wearing a clean t-shirt, a jacket, and jeans, which was about as dressed up as Peter ever got.

“I'm, uh...” Peter's eyes drifted towards the ceiling. “...going out with a friend.”

Aunt May raised a white eyebrow. “This wouldn't happen to be a female friend, would it?”

“She might be of the feminine persuasion, yes.”

“Well, I hope she’s not feminine enough to make you forget curfew’s at ten.”

“Of course!” Peter's face was the picture of innocence. “Why would I ever stay out with a girl past curfew?”

May laughed in spite of herself. Peter was about to exit their idyllic Forest Hills home, but she caught his arm. “Oh, and Peter? No hanky panky.”

“Don't worry,” said Peter. “My hanky is a panky-free zone.”

“Peter.”

“I mean, yes ma'am. I’ll be a perfect gentleman to Gwen, promise.”

But at this, May frowned. “Gwen? Did she break up with Harry?”

“Um… About that…” At this, Peter shrank. “The thing is, Gwen and I were going to go out, but we were both dating other people, so we signed a Satanic pact in our own blood that said we’d each break up with them and hook up with each other. I did my part, but then Harry’s dad died, and Gwen didn't have the heart to…”

Aunt May's The Look could give Gwen's The Look a run for its money. “Peter Benjamin Parker.”

“Gwen’s breaking up with Hare any day now!” Peter said hurriedly. “And, I mean, just because me and Gwen are hanging out together doesn’t make it a date or anything. We were friends for years before all this romance stuff entered the equation anyways, right? We hang out all the time.”

“I suppose you’re right.” May let out a sigh. “Just try not to break too many hearts, dear.”

“Hey, c’mon, you know me.” Slowly, Peter turned back for the door. “Honesty’s my middle name.”

Wow, that was his funniest joke yet.

“It’s funny.” Gwen leaned over the bridge railing, gazing down into one of Central Park’s many lakes. “Ever since our fateful little vacation, I- I see you so differently. But it’s not like the old Peter went away. More like the camera panned back on you, I guess.”
Peter’s only reply was a grunt. To be perfectly honest, Gwen’s face had ended up sucking him in moreso than her words. She’d made a considerably stronger effort than him to look nice, judging from the sky blue dress she had on. Coupled with her pink headband, it gave her kind of a light pastel, “cotton candy” look. It was hard to put into words, exactly, but Gwen was attractive in, like, the exact opposite way as Black Cat or MJ. Gwen didn’t speak in a perpetually seductive voice or wear skintight black outfits – not that either trait would pair badly with her, but… but…

Aaaand now he was picturing Gwen with red hair and a catsuit. Dang it, Parker, this is NOT the time or place for those thoughts. Think of something unsexy, think of something unsexy…

“You okay?” asked Gwen. “You’ve got kind of a far-off look in your eyes.”

Doctor Octopus in a speedo. Yes, that would do.

“Just… uh… thinking about my old supervillains, I guess.” That was one way to put it. “I mean…” Peter hung his head. “…you’ve crossed paths with an awful lot of ’em.”

“It’s okay,” Gwen said softly. “Horrifying as spring break got, it was worth it in the end.”

“Still…” Peter forced a deep breath. “You know the city’s supervillain spike didn’t happen at random. Most of ’em were custom made to fight Spider-Man.”

“And every time, Spider-Man’s been there to stop them before anyone gets hurt,” Gwen countered.

“Sure, but… let’s not forget who saved the Web-Head when he turned into Man-Spider.” Peter managed a smile. “Between that and the Master Planner thing, that’s, what, twice now you’ve saved my life?”

“Still a ways to go to break your record, though.” It seemed Gwen was every bit as lost in his eyes as he was in hers.

“Yeah, well…” Peter exhaled. “At first, I thought being Spidey was the coolest thing ever, but lately, it feels like when my friends aren’t turning into supervillains, I’m getting chewed out by the people I save or- or breaking my web-shooters and embarrassing myself...” He trailed off. “Wow. I’ve never been able to complain about this stuff to another person before. It feels kinda…”

“Good?” offered Gwen.

“I was gonna say ‘weird.’”

The two of them stood in silence for a moment, watching the ducks drift through the water.

“So,” said Peter, “wanna go get hotdogs?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll buy.”

Gwen folded her arms. “I can pay for my own hotdog.”

“Oh thank God. I don't actually have any money.

Gwen looked like she had a quite a retort, but just as she opened her mouth, a police car sped by the edge of the park, sirens blaring. Gwen gave Peter a quizzical look.

“He’s probably just handing out a speeding ticket,” said Peter.
Another police car sped past.

“I’m sure it’s nothing the cops can’t-”

Followed by another five.

“I’d better go.”

After that, Gwen followed Peter out the park to watch him duck into a back alley. She even acted as his lookout while he changed into costume. Right before tugging on his mask, Peter slid his newly-rebuilt web-shooters onto his wrists. A problem arose, however, when it came time for Spider-Man to swing into action. See, the novelty hadn’t gotten close to wearing off, and so Gwen ended up staring at Peter so longingly, in such awe, like he was her favorite rock star… that the next thing Peter knew, his mask was rolling back over his chin, and her lips were way closer all of a sudden, and…

“Gwendolyn.”

“Dad!” Gwen’s head pivoted towards the grizzled, white-haired police chief standing at the alley entrance. There was plenty of room for her head to do that, seeing as it was a good three feet away from Spider-Man’s. “We were just-!”

“I thought I saw you duck in here.” Gwen’s dad peered at the two of them, folding his arms. “It’s a relief to see you’re… in good hands.”

“No broken teeth, Miss Stacy!” Spidey promptly sprang onto the alley wall. “Th-That’s good.” He looked down at Gwen’s dad. “You keep her out of trouble, sir! I have to save this girl from danger all the time. Such as from- from getting elbowed in the face by a mugger just now.” It occurred to him that he should roll his mask back down over his chin. “I was also elbowed in the face. We- We were checking each other at the same time. More efficient that way.”

He looked to Gwen. She was screaming at him with her eyes.

“I should go! Who knows how many other citizens need their teeth checked?” Thwip. Spider-Man was gone.

Gwen’s brain had burned out a long time ago, so now she was merely slouched in the passenger seat of her dad’s cop car. She was dangerously close to drooling.

“So,” said her father, eyes on the road, hands on the steering wheel, “how were Spider-Man’s teeth?”

“Dad!” If there was any remark capable of waking Gwen from her vegetative state, it was that one.

“It’s alright, Gwen.” A soft chuckle escaped his throat. “I’d been wondering when you’d figure it out.”

Gwen’s seat belt went tight. “Figure what out?”

Another chuckle. “Well, I certainly hope you weren’t inspecting the teeth of a total stranger…”

Gwen’s only reply was to blush even harder. Always the detective, wasn’t he?

Checking her phone was about a billion times easier than looking her dad in the eyes right now. Currently, there was nothing on Gwen’s phone but the wallpaper of her mom. Guess Gwen would
have to get used to that.

Man, though, Gwen couldn't even begin to fathom how much stress Peter was under. Constantly putting his life on the line, being attacked by supervillains every other day... It must’ve been a nightmare.

“Whoohoo!” Spider-Man sailed through the skies of New York City via his newly-repaired webshooters (Yeah, he’d finally gotten around to fixing them), then landed in the middle of the street, right across from a broken shop window and screeching alarm. Before him stood a man in a monkey costume holding a plasma screen TV box.

“You've finally met your match, Spider-Man!” The guy pulled himself to his full height. “I... am... THE GIBBON!” (Said height was about five feet tall.)

Spidey held out his hands. “You... are... the perfect target practice for my shiny new webshooters!” Thwip.

From inside his cocoon, the Gibbon muttered, “I thought they were organic...”

Peter was really Spider-Man. Just thinking it made Gwen's head spin. Peter Parker was the one who’d saved her life from lizard-people and electricity-people and octopus-people and slimy alien-people and probably some other types of people she was forgetting. In one fell swoop, Peter had gone from being the cowardly-but-cute guy who fled from the villains and took pics from a safe distance to… to Mr. Skintight Spandex.

Suddenly, the phone's screen winked on. Gwen almost cried out in delight. Until she actually read it.

Come over NOW. Found more of the Green. I need you.

Gwen’s cry wasn’t as delighted as she’d have hoped. “Dad! Dad!”

An armored truck barreled down Park Avenue. It was about twice as big and twice as fast as any truck was allowed to be.

“Yeah!” screamed the goombah behind the wheel.

“What are you so happy about?” snapped his partner in the passenger's seat. “Did you see how many police cars are on our tail?”

“So what?” said the goombah as he ran a red light. “We stole a whole arsenal of Stark tech! No one can beat us now! The world's our oyster! Besides, can you imagine the look on Silver Sable's face when I hand her all these guns? She'll have enough fire power to storm Ryker's and free her dad! She'll be so grateful to me, maybe she'll even-”

He was cut off by his partner's hideous laughter. “You seriously think you've got a chance with Sable? YOU?”

“Hey,” said a third voice, “if she'll date a dude who looks like Hammerhead-”

“Spider-Man!” The goombah swerved wildly, but Spidey was stuck tight to the truck's hood.

“You know my name? I'm honored! Here, let me in so I can shake your hand.” Spidey smashed his
fist into the windshield, but it remained distinctly un-shattered. “Huh. Someone sprung for the reinforced glass.”

“Take the wheel! Take the wheel! I got him!”

“What? No, you idiot-!”

The goombah released the steering wheel so he could grab a fancy-looking laser-rifle from the floorboard (TM Stark Industries all rights reserved). Then he rolled down the window and aimed for a certain friendly neighborhood fella.

“Watch it, Ralphie, you'll shoot your eye out!” The next thing he knew, Spidey was ducking plasma blasts. Stupid Tony Stark guy pumping all these weapons into the world… Were there any rich people who weren’t corrupt?

Suddenly, the goombah's partner shrieked and Spider-Man got maximum strength spider-sense tingles. He managed to hop onto a nearby wall in time, but the truck wasn't so lucky. With a screech of tires and an ear-splitting crash, it smacked into something in the middle of the street. Some kind of brownish dust was sent scattering everywhere.

“What the-? Oh no.” Spider-Man groaned. Now the “brown dust” was taking the shape of hands and holding the truck down. Next up, sand seeped through the cracks of the truck and engulfed the passengers.

By the time Sandman solidified in the middle of the road, complete with his trademark striped green shirt, he was surrounded by every last squad car in the district.

“Marko? You're alive?” Spidey hopped down, landing between him and the police. “Well, this is awkward. We've already deleted your Facebook, sold all your stuff on Craigslist-”

“What, you really thought gettin' turned to glass was enough to stop the Sandman?” Sandman puffed out his chest. ‘Evenin', officers. Got a little somthin' for ya.” He threw a big pile of sand their way, and resting in the center was a duo of criminal masterminds.

“I wonder if there are any hot chicks in prison?” said the goombah.

“Yeah,” said his partner, “I'm sure Ryker's Men's Prison is crawling with babes.”

Every last officer aimed their guns and/or tasers at Sandman.

“I've turned over a new leaf,” Sandman told the crowd. “I'm a hero now.”

“Are you joking?” yelled Sergeant Carter. “Do you know how many laws you've broken just by existing, you freak?”

Sergeant DeWolff, on the other hand, put away her weapon. “Carter, if you've got a way to arrest a man made out of living sand, be my guest. As for the rest of you,” she called out to her fellow officers, “if the Sandman's not currently a threat to public safety, I suggest we don't antagonize him.”

Sandman turned to Spider-Man. “Hey, Web-Head, can I talk to you in private?”

You couldn't tell with the mask on, but Spider-Man looked highly skeptical. “The last time you said you wanted to be a hero, you called me gullible and then punched me in the face.”
Sandman held up his hands. “No tricks, I swear. From now on, I'm goin' straight.”

“Aww, but you and O'Hirn were so cute together.”

“Ha ha.”

Spider-Man and Sandman adjourned to a nearby rooftop. When the old spider-sense failed to tingle, Spidey cautiously seated himself, letting his legs hang over the building. Beside him, Sandman simply let his legs turn to mush, which seemed to be his way of relaxing his muscles – or, uh, silicate particles.

“So,” Spidey began, “what made you change your mind about becoming a hero?”

“I guess it all started with that oil tanker...” Sandman's eyes wandered towards the ocean on the horizon. “I was so reckless, I nearly killed a boatload of people. All I ever wanted was the big score – I never wanted to rack up a body count. It made me realize something. With my powers, I can pretty much do whatever I want and nobody can stop me-”

“Well, I like to think I never failed to stop you...”

“Those were flukes,” huffed Sandman. “The point is, I'm really, really powerful, but I realized that also means I gotta be really, really, uh...”

“Responsible?”

“Nah, that sounds dumb. I'll think of a catchier way o' wordin' it later.”

Spider-Man folded his arms and grumbled something under his breath.

“Anyways,” Sandman continued, “the explosion turned me to glass, but it didn't turn all o' me to glass. What was left o’ me escaped and ate some more raw silicates, but then I thought, hey, I might not have been dead, but everyone thought I was dead. It was a chance to leave Manhattan and, y'know, look for the big score somewhere else.”

Spidey leaned back, kicking up his feet against the building's railing. “Somewhere with less arachnid-themed heroes to foil your plans?”

“Exactly. Without any superheroes around, bein’ a crook was easy pickins. All I had to do was lay low and not make a scene every time I stole somethin', and I could pretty much get away with anything,” Sandman bowed his head. “And that's when – Well, I never checked in with a therapist or nothin', but I think I got some pretty bad depression. Back when I was just Flint Marko, I was never really on good terms with my family, and I'd be on even worse terms with 'em if they knew I was a freak now. The only friend I ever made was O'Hirn – He'll probably laugh at me for goin' soft, but whatever. And if you hadn't noticed, I'm made o' sand, so I can't taste food or do drugs or pick up hookers. Not for lack of trying-”

“Too much information, dude.”

“I realized that even if I got my big score, I'd have nothin' to spend it on.” Sandman scowled to himself. “I mean, what, I'd buy a nice house so I could lounge around all day playin' video games and watchin' Netflix? I've done more than enough of that already, let me tell ya.” He shook his head, sending flecks of sand through the air. “Heck, I even started gettin' all existential. Like, am I ever gonna grow old? Am I ever gonna die? Can I die?” He sighed. “I was a lab accident – I bet not even the jerks at Oscorp know for sure. So, like I said, I got depressed.”
Sandman shut his eyes again. A tranquility seemed to be overtaking his face. “Then I remembered the oil tanker... how good it felt to save all those people... and I remembered what you said to me.”

Gwen raced into the penthouse to find Harry hunched over on his living room couch, staring out the window.

“I'm here, Harry! What happened?”

“There- There was- They raided Menken's apartment,” Harry stammered. “They found so much Green. It's all downstairs. It would’ve been so easy to just… slip down there and...” His voice broke.

“Harry...” Gwen seated herself and wrapped her arms around him. “I will never let you go back on the Green.”

“I know, Gwen... I know...” Harry’s face became buried in her shoulder.

“We need to tell your mom.” Gwen placed a hand over his. “Something’s bothering you, Harry. Ever since that Hobgoblin guy attacked you… Please, you have to tell me what’s really going on with-”

“Nothing’s ‘really’ going on, Gwen, I swear.” Harry was trembling. “All you need to know is that I love you, and when I’m with you, everything is okay.” His face was growing closer. “I love you so much. You know that, don't you? You’re my savior.”

For the umpteenth time today, Gwen’s cheeks grew hot. “Harry, that's-”

She couldn’t get five words in before his lips were on hers.
Sandman grinned at Spider-Man. From this altitude, the wind was blowing a couple grains from his cheeks. “So here I am, bein’ a hero like you wanted. Yeah, Hammerhead and the Big Man are gonna be ticked, but what's the worst they can do to me, right?”

“Actually, the feds are shoving themselves up Tombstone's nose right now, so you're probably in the clear,” said Spider-Man.

“Even better.”

Spider-Man brought a hand to his forehead. “Alright, alright... Look, Marko, believe me, I'm glad to hear you're joining the side of the angels and all, and I want you to be happy, but you've gotta realize, being a superhero's not exactly a walk in the park. I'd take video games and Netflix over having a different supervillain for every day of the week. I don't do this because it makes me happy – I do it because it's my responsibility. Understand?”

“Yeah, yeah, sure.” Sandman's eyes were glazed over. “Hey, people will like me a lot better now that I'm a superhero, right? Maybe I could meet someone, make a new life for myself?”

Spider-Man rose to his feet. “I hope so, Marko. You're a good guy. But I should warn you, the Daily Bugle's gonna drag your name through the mud.”

“I love Sandman!” Jameson held up tomorrow’s front page. “SANDMAN FOILS THE KANGAROO,” it read, complete with a big picture of a man in a kangaroo costume buried from the neck-down in sand. “Finally, New York gets a nice, respectable hero who doesn't hide behind a mask! Everyone knows he's, uh...” He turned to his secretary.

“Flint Marko,” said Betty Brant without looking up from her computer.

“Right, Flint Marko. And the best part is, he's so good at stopping crooks, he makes Spider-Man look like a total loser!”

“But Mr. Jameson,” spoke up Peter from behind his own computer, “Sandman used to be a criminal! Maybe we should be keeping an eye out in case he, y'know, relapses?”

“I know he was a criminal,” said Jameson. “That's the best part. Everyone loves a redemption story!”

“So if Spider-Man renounced his 'criminal ways' and gave up his secret identity, would you suddenly trust him?”

“Don't confuse the issue, Parker!” Jameson turned to a man waiting in the corner of the Bugle – a long-haired, bearded, glasses-wearing kinda guy. “You! Urich! Drop whatever investigation you were doing on that D-list vigilante of yours and write a piece on Sandman instead.”

Urich rolled his eyes. “Whatever you say, Mr. Jameson.”

“You!” Jameson turned to Ned Lee, who was hovering as always by Betty's desk. “Stop making goo-goo eyes at my secretary and drop that stupid Spider-Man secret identity report! The Web-Slinger's old hat now.”
"What?" Lee was disarmed. "But what do you want me to do instead?"

"I dunno, go investigate that shady perfume factory or something."

Lee sighed. "Yes, Mr. Jameson."

"And you!" Jameson pointed at Peter. "If you're so good at taking pictures of Spider-Man, you should be great at taking pictures of Sandman! I want more on my desk pronto. NOW EVERYONE, GET TO WORK!"

Thwip. Spidey barely paid attention to where he was going as he swung away from the Bugle building. Don't get him wrong, Spider-Man was thrilled to have the extra help, but, as much as he hated to admit it, Spidey couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy towards old Sandy. Ah well, Spidey wasn't a superhero for the glory. Who cared if Sandman was more popular?

But then... if Sandman was so much better at being a hero than Spider-Man – and with those sand-powers of his, it was pretty tough to beat him – well, didn't that... didn't that make Spider-Man obsolete? Maybe the Web-Head wasn't needed anymore?

"Boys, we have a problem on our hands."

Smythe had gathered Harry and Dr. Warren down in the deepest regions of the abandoned police station. It was a place filled with glowing, whirring machinery and plenty of robots with guns pointed at Harry's face at all times. Harry was visibly sweating.

"And that problem is named Sandman." Smythe pressed a button, causing his hoverchair to project holographic footage of Sandman foiling a bank heist. "Considering we can't even beat a kid in spandex, Sandman poses an enormous threat to our operations."

Warren shook his head. "Once again, I find myself cleaning up after Octavius's mistakes. Why am I not surprised? Lucky for us, Oscorp created Sandman, and that means Oscorp can un-create him."

"S-So we're going to kill him?" said Harry. "But this Sandman guy hasn't gone after us yet."

"The criminal underworld is an integral part of Oscrop's rise to power," said Smythe. "The longer we let Marko roam free, the greater a risk he poses to it."

"But if he's so powerful, how are we supposed to beat him?"

"First, we need to understand how he works." Warren held out his clipboard, which was crammed full of notes.

"Yeah, how does Sandman work?" asked Harry. "How the heck can a person be made out of sand?"

"Two words," said Smythe. "Nanomachines, son."

"Octavius built a self-replicating machine," said Warren, eyes glued to his notes. "Then Flint Marko's brain was scanned by one of my own devices, and an exact copy of his consciousness was stored onto that self-replicating machine. Then it was only a matter of using stolen Pym particles to shrink the machine to microscopic size. At that point, it was designed to then bond with silicone granules, take on their properties, and then replicate, effectively creating a 'sand hive mind.'"
Smythe made a show of rolling his eyes. “It's beyond me why you'd want a human mind in charge when you've already got perfectly serviceable robots.”

“The AI would've been too complex to program,” said Warren.

“Yes, and the brain of Flint Marko is such a better alternative…”

“Next, the subject was infused with the nanomachine-silicone granules. The idea was to give him subdermal armor that could be mentally controlled, such as the Scorpion’s tail. The problem is, the method in which Octavius introduced the subdermal particles went haywire, and instead of giving him armor beneath his skin, Flint Marko's entire body was replaced. The granules lost the ability to hold their shape properly, giving Sandman his versatile shapeshifting abilities.”

“So Sandman is like a robot with a human brain?” said Harry.

“Did you think the guy made of pure sand was organic?” Smythe deadpanned.

“There are some striking parallels to natural organisms,” said Warren. “As I always say, biology is the most advanced robotics. Sandman can only control sand connected to his central body. Eventually, the nanobots' lifespans run out, and the sand grains they're bonded to fall out of the hive mind. Sandman can't infest the same grain with a nanobot twice, which is why he must periodically 'eat' raw silicates so that the nanobots can self-replicate and bond the new machines to the sand grains.”

“Where do they get the power source to self-replicate indefinitely like that?” asked Harry.

Smythe patted his shoulder. “That's complicated grown-up stuff. You wouldn't understand.”

“There seems to be no upper limit to how much sand can join the hive mind at once.” Warren flipped his clipboard around to show them a photo of an enormous Sandman towering over an oil tanker. “In theory, Sandman will run out of energy and die once he's fused with all available raw silicates in the universe.”

“Yes, well, I'd rather not deal with a planet-sized Sandman, if it's all the same to you” said Smythe.

“Giving armor to super-mercenaries is one thing, but turning a person into sand seems so…” Harry faltered. “…unethical.”

“I know.” Smythe grinned. “Isn't it great? And now we're going to do it again!”

Harry gave a start. “What? You want to make another Sandman on purpose?”

“Gotta fight fire with fire.” Smythe turned to Warren. “Is the subject ready?”

“Right over here.” Warren pressed a button on the wall, causing a screen to wink on. The monitor displayed a man strapped to some sort of machinery, struggling against his restraints.

“Hello?” the man called out. “Is anyone there? Where am I?”

Harry was trembling. “That guy's not a volunteer like Mac Gargan, is he?”

“Nope. This is Norman's old demolitions expert, Morris Bench,” said Smythe. “He racked up quite a debt, and this is how he's paying it off.”

“Oh God.” Now Harry looked more than a little ill.
“Well, if he didn't want to be mutated into a freak of nature, he shouldn't have associated with Oscorp in the first place.”

“Don't worry,” said Warren. “We won't make the same mistakes as Octavius. We'll be sure to include a way to control this one. I've already had some success with the subdermal armor concept. For Molten Man, I added additional nanobots whose job it was to hold the armor's shape, allowing the particles to be evenly distributed. This time, however, we'll be making the subject a shapeshifter on purpose.”

“But how will making another Sandman help kill the first one?” asked Harry.

“Oh, don't worry, little Osborn.” Smythe looked pleased with himself. “I've got that covered. Now, then, Dr. Warren, without further ado…”

“Yes.” Warren took one last glance over his clipboard. “Oh, I hope you don't mind, but as per usual, I improved Octavius's designs. If we're not specifically trying to make subdermal armor this time, silicone granules seem like an odd choice for the nanobots to bond to. I've programmed ours to bond to molecules that are a bit more... fluid.”

“SANDMAN! PREPARE FOR YOUR DEMISE!”

There was a man in a kangaroo costume standing in the middle of Brooklyn, shrieking his head off and waving around a sack of stolen cash. Huh, that was the second one this week.

“You'll pay for humiliating my idol, Frank Oliver! I am the new Kangaroo, and I will make you suffer my HIPPITY-HOP OF DOOM-”

_Thwoof._ A burst of sand sent the Kangaroo flying backwards.

“Man, bein’ a superhero is easy.” Sandman took shape on the sidewalk.

As the police led the Kangaroo away, a brown-haired boy in a blue t-shirt approached the green-shirted superhero.

“Excuse me, Sandman, sir?” Peter held out his camera. “Peter Parker, Daily Bugle photographer. Would you pose for some pictures?”

Sandman grinned. “Sure, kid. Just be sure to get my good side.”

This felt weird. It went against every bone in Peter's body not to web his camera to the wall, change into costume, and then beat up Sandman in front of it. He wouldn't even be telling a white lie when he handed Jameson the pictures. Peter wasn't sure he could handle that.

But as it turned out, before Peter could snap a single photo, a nearby fire hydrant exploded.

_Spider-sense tingling._ Around the time the torrent of water formed into a humanoid shape, Peter made the call to duck into an alleyway and change into costume. He even made sure to web his camera to the wall – looked like he'd spoken too soon.

By the time Spider-Man jumped back into the scene, Sandman had already morphed himself to about double his usual size and turned his hands into sledgehammers. Across from him, the water gushing from the hydrant had almost solidified. This new supervillain seemed, for all intents and purposes, like a watery Sandman – kind of an average-looking blonde guy with a dark blue t-shirt. Or at least, that's probably what he'd looked like prior to the whole, y'know, water-powers thing.
Now he looked more like a bunch of colored water in the shape of an average-looking guy.

“You know, when I told Hobgoblin I wanted more cheap knock-off villains, I was being sarcastic.” Spider-Man looked from Sandman to the new guy. “Hmm, let me guess, your name's Aquam- No, taken. Okay, you're Bubblem- Hmm, no, too 'Robot Master.' Wait, I've got it, you're Hydro-Man!”

Hydro-Man's reaction to his christening was to launch a jet stream at Sandman. Sandman had the common sense to make a hole in his chest, meaning the water punched a hole in the wall behind him. Holy cow, that was some tough water.

“Where'd you come from, pal?” asked Sandman. “What do you want with me?”

“I have- have to kill you!” From his slurred sentences and heavy panting, Hydro-Man didn't come across as the most stable of individuals. “Or else th-they... won't... let me... die...”

Sandman traded glances with Spider-Man. “Sounds like whatever happened to this guy, he didn't take it as well as me. His brain's turned to mush.”

“Any plans to beat a dude made of water?” asked Spider-Man.

“You... can't!” A miniature tidal wave erupted from Hydro-Man's chest. Spidey immediately webbed up some bystanders and swung them to higher ground while Sandman morphed into a wall to take the impact.

Once the flood was past and the pedestrians were safely on a rooftop, Spidey jumped back into the fray. “So we've got Sandman, Molten Man, and now Hydro-Man. Now all we need are Windman and Heartman, and you'll be able to let your powers comb-”

“Shut up!” Another jet of water punched a whole in the wall mere inches from Spidey's beautiful, beautiful face. “Don't you see what's happened to us?” Hydro-Man launched his entire self at Sandman, but Sandman sidestepped him. “We're freaks of nature! We have to die!”

“Dude, chill for a minute!” yelled Sandman, dodging swipes of Hydro-Man's watery arms. “If you keep spazzing out like this, you'll drown innocent people!”

Hydro-Man seemed too preoccupied with flailing around like a maniac to care.

“Sandman!” yelled Spidey. “I think he's after you. Let's take the fight somewhere with less people around!”

“You got it, Web-Head.” Sandman obediently slithered towards the nearby beach, and Hydro-Man followed suit.

Wait, Hydro-Man was headed towards the ocean? Spider-Man was no expert on mutated water-people, but something told him that was a bad thing. “Sandman, wait!” He swung after them, but by the time he arrived at Rockaway Beach, it was too late.

Sandman had merged himself with the beach, while Hydro-Man dived into the ocean and vanished. And the next instant, well... picture a Japanese monster movie. Any Japanese monster movie. Twin behemoths, one of sand and one of water, towered over the skyline.

“Okay,” Spider-Man said aloud, “I think our friendly neighborhood Spider-Man is officially outclassed with this one. If only I had a giant robot...”

Yeah, there wasn't a lot a strong, fast guy who squirted adhesive could do against the gigantic,
living elemental beasts. And that meant Spidey would be focusing on getting civilians out of harm's way while he prayed for the Hulk or the Fantastic Four or Jesus to pop out and save the day.

While Spider-Man swung around like a chicken with its head cut off, the ocean was busy punching the beach in the chest.

“Knock it off!” said Sandman. “If we could just talk things out for a minute-”

“I had a family!” yelled Hydro-Man. “I had a life! And now I'm a monster doomed to die!”

“Doomed to die? What are you? Agh!” Suddenly, the region of sand struck by Hydro-Man's massive fist fell off of Sandman's body. “What did you do to me?”

“We have to die,” said Hydro-Man. “We both have to die.”

“Screw this!” Sandman – or what was left of him – turned into a whirlwind of dust and shot away.

“Sandman, wait!” Spidey yelled after him, but it was no good. Looked like Sandman was heading towards the nearest storm drain. So would Hydro-Man leave the ocean and follow after him, or...

“Wait, wait!” Suddenly, the woman Spider-Man had been ferrying to safety started shrieking her head off. “My daughter!”

No. Spidey turned towards the beach. There was indeed a little girl sitting in the sand. She was staring at the massive water monster spiraling above her, paralyzed with fear. Spidey immediately swung for her, but she was too far away, and a tidal wave was coming in fast. He wasn't gonna make it! He wasn't gonna-

“I got you!” A big, sandy hand scooped the girl up and flung her into Spider-Man's arms.

“Sandman, look out!” The little girl screamed.

The next thing anyone knew, a massive wave of water hit the sand.

Harry stared at the screen. His jaw hung open. The footage from Smythe's spy-robots was of pure pandemonium as beachgoers fled from the eruption of water and sand.

Harry turned to scowl at robots’ owner. “Do you have any idea how many people Bench is about to to kill, you sociopath?”

Smythe threw his hands in the air. “Well, you can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs.”

“Is that supposed to be funny?”

Smythe rolled his eyes. “Calm down, little Osborn. I've got it all under control.”

“Bench got into the ocean!” snapped Harry. “What happens when those nanobots self-replicate and merge with the whole freaking ocean?”

“Hydro-Man will be very, very big,” said Smythe. “Duh.”

“Didn't you and Warren put any limit on how many nanobots there can be? Aren't you worried about gray goo?”

“Actually, I've come hilariously close to starting a gray goo apocalypse on five separate occasions.
Not counting this one.”

Harry's fists were gripped so tightly, his knuckles were turning white.

“Calm down, I know what I'm doing,” said Smythe. “I put a kill-switch into Bench's nanobots. At the push of a button, they'll self-terminate. Better yet, they've got a virus that'll infect Sandman's nanobots with the same programming upon contact. As soon as Sandman's contracted the virus, I press this button here.” He pointed to a panel on his hoverchair's armrest. “-and boom, no more Sandman or Hydro-Man.”

“That... That works.” Harry seemed to ease up the slightest amount. “So you don't want to keep Hydro-Man around, then?”

“Of course not,” snorted Smythe. “These shapeshifter-types are way too hard to control. Norman controlled Molten Man because he could switch his subdermal armor on and off, but Hydro-Man's mutation is irreversible. The only reason I got him to follow orders is because I promised him the sweet release of death.” He glanced back at the screen. “Oh, speak of the devil, I think Sandman's getting the virus now.”

“Sandman! Sandman!” The little girl struggled in vein against her mother's grasp.

“Yeah, I wanna save him, too, kid,” sighed Spider-Man, “but there's nothing we can do.”

How had Spider-Man beaten Sandman before? Cement? Freezing? That probably wasn't gonna work against the entire ocean. So far, Hydro-Man had only fused with the water a couple feet out from the shore, but he was growing by the minute. Pretty soon, this would be a global threat, right? The Fantastic Four had to show up sooner or later. At the very least, you’d think the Sub-Mariner would pop out to yell at Hydro-Man to get off his lawn.

With a deafening boom, Hydro-Man pinned Sandman down against the beach (Well, Sandman technically was the beach, but... you get it). Sandman struggled to escape, but he also happened to be the only thing holding Hydro-Man back from flooding the horde of innocent people scrambling for safety.

Sandman caught the little girl's eyes, then Spider-Man's. “I... I don't do this because it makes me happy.”

Spider-Man nodded.

The next instant, Hydro-Man merged into every last one of Sandman's pores. For a moment, the two of them squished together into some kind of giant-sized Mud-Thing... and then there was a sploosh, and the creature collapsed into a big pile of wet sand.

Spider-Man blinked. “Does anyone else have no clue what just happened, or is it just me?” He ran over to the wreckage of the fight, but both the sand and the water was now totally lifeless. “I guess they canceled each other out somehow.”

He scooped the mud up in his glove. Were they both really gone? Sandman could be hiding again, but Hydro-Man seemed more like the 'attack everything blindly' type. Beneath his mask, Peter shut his eyes. They’d have re-formed by now. “What I said last time... it's really true now. You finally got your big score, Marko.”

The last time Peter had said that, Marko had turned out to still be alive. Peter sincerely hoped that was the case this time, too, but the odds weren't looking great. Peter might not have understood
what the heck was going on here, but he did know one thing – Whoever sent Hydro-Man after Sandman had murdered a good man. Two good men, assuming Hydro-Man was an innocent victim in all this.

Peter watched the sand slip between his gloved fingers. He didn't know for sure who the culprit here was, but between Scorpion and Hydro-Man, he was willing to bet Oscorp was involved. He thought that particular nightmare had been over when Norman died, but it looked like Peter couldn't keep ignoring it and hoping no more supervillains showed up. He had to cut this off at the source.

As the last of the sand slipped away, Peter made a vow. This was the last life Oscorp would ruin. No more Flint Markos. No more Mark Allans. No more Harry Osborns.

The little girl stared at the sand at her feet. Rockaway Beach wasn't the most exciting place in New York, but it was worth the wait. Sometimes you just had to be patient, that was all. Any minute now... Any minute now...
Gwen watched the buildings zoom by. Her head was about to explode. Peter was Spider-Man and her dad already knew and Harry had kissed her and she'd let him and she had a paper due tomorrow that she hadn't even started on.

“Gwen?” From the driver's seat, her dad broke her out of her thoughts. His eyes stayed fixed on the road as he spoke. “I'll be blunt. I know this is the oldest 'dad saying' in the book, but I don't like your boyfriend.”

Gwen tensed. “I'm only trying to help him.”

“That's noble of you, but Harry has a mother and a therapist who probably costs ten times as much as ours. It's their jobs to help him, not yours.”

“The truth is… I don't like Harry, either.” Gwen impulsively touched her nose – force of habit from her glasses-wearing days. “I was about to break up with him, but then his dad... y'know.” She inhaled. “If I leave him, he could get back on the Green.”

“Yes, and he knows it.” At the red light, Gwen's dad hit the breaks a little too hard. “I've seen my share of recovering addicts, Gwen. I know how they think. Why would Harry ever want to get better if it means his girlfriend will leave him? All you're doing is digging yourselves deeper.”

“Oh, okay, okay, you're right.” Gwen glanced at her phone. Still nothing from Peter. “I'm going to break up with him. I just need to find the right moment, that's all.”

Silence filled the car.

“Hey, uh, Dad?” Gwen could feel her cheeks growing hotter. “Random question: How would you feel about your daughter dating a superhero?”

“Depends.” Her father smirked at her through the rear view mirror. “We talking Clark Kent or Bruce Wayne?”

“Well, this one does wear red and blue...”

“I'd say associating with Spider-Man puts you in danger, but being my daughter does that anyways.” Her father let out a sigh. “Octavius is in Ravencroft, and the tech he stole is at the bottom of the ocean, but I wouldn't put it past him to have backups somewhere. And Toomes, Beck, and Kravinoff are still at large. That's half the Sinister Six.”

“The Terrible Three?”

“Sure. The point is, they may want leverage over me again, and...” He took his eyes off the road long enough to smile at her. “…I wouldn’t object if Spider-Man had some added incentive to keep you safe.”

Thwip. Sometimes, when Spidey was really lost in thought, he'd swing circles and circles around Times Square. It got to the point where dozens of webs hung off the same few buildings like a
horde of giant spiders had come through.

Spidey couldn’t help but titter to himself as he looped around a flagpole. Having a girlfriend who knew he was Spider-Man would be all kinds of awesome. Really, it was a good thing Peter had dated Liz before Gwen – It’d been a great proof of concept that secret identities and dating lives didn’t mix. He wouldn't make the same mistake with Gwen. He'd be completely transparent with her. Peter wasn't just infatuated with her because she batted her eyelashes at him – He really loved Gwen. Even when Eddie and Harry had turned into creeps, Gwen had always been there for Peter, had always cared about him. It'd taken Peter a boneheadedly long time to realize it, but Gwen was more than his best friend.

But at the same time, the fact that Eddie was still blurting out Spidey's identity to anyone who'd listen didn't bode well. Weren't Doc Ock and Electro in Ravencroft, too? What if they overheard Eddie's ramblings? Or worse, what if Oscorp found out?

Spider-Man was reasonably sure Oscorp was to blame for his supervillain troubles – He didn't know what other organization in New York had the will and the resources to go after old Web-Head like this. The trouble was, Oscorp was a huge company that employed a whole bunch of people. They couldn't all be in on the conspiracy, could they? It was probably only the higher-ups. Stormin' Norman had obviously known what was up, but he was six feet under now, and Donald Menken was in Ryker's. That was two goblins down. Who did that leave? Harry? No way. Just because he was recovering from goblin-flavored steroid addiction didn't mean he was an amoral monster. But... grr, Spidey couldn't think of any better suspects. Guess he'd be investigating Harry after all. And right when he'd been getting used to not thinking of Harry as the Green Goblin.

Wait. What about Professor Warren? Err, the college professor at Empire State, not his brother at Midtown High. Miles Warren been all buddy-buddy with Norman, hadn't he? Maybe he was continuing the Goblin's work? Spidey wouldn't put it past him – Warren was a total creeper. That settled it. Spider-Man would swing over to Empire State right now and-

Riiiiing. A shop alarm?

This ought to be good. After webbing his camera to a flagpole, Spidey dropped down to the street to find a familiar face in a bear costume running off with a fistful of jewelry.

“Maxwell!” he called out. “It's been too long! Out of Ravencroft, I see. How are the ribs doing?”

“Spider-Man!” The Grizzly made his most ursine snarl. “I will crush your bones in my jaws!”

“The Daily Bugle really raked me over the coals last time, so before I clock you, I want to make it clear that as a total nerd myself, I respect all internet subcultures. I was only kidding before. It's not what you look like on the outside that makes you a complete doof-”

“Raahaaarwr!” Spidey ducked a swipe of the Grizzly's claws.

“Don't worry, I'll be sure to give you a nice soft tap this time.” He smashed his fist into the Grizzly's hairy chest- Clang. - and then fell backwards, clutching his knuckles. “Ow, what the-?”

“Surprised?” The Grizzly grinned. “It's a steel exoskeleton. I took your advice – Now the suit actually does give me super strength.”

“Wow, you're learning.” Spidey backflipped out of range of the Grizzly's claws. “At this rate, maybe you'll finally pass kindergarten.”

Spider-sense. But where-?
A black portal opened by Spidey's head. Crack. Before he realized what was happening, a fist popped out to smack him in the face.

“Hear that, Grizzly?” Out stepped a man in a white, skintight one-piece covered in black polka dots. “Kindergarten, he says.”

“Ohhh, I get it.” The Grizzly cracked his knuckles. “He's saying I ain't passed kindergarten yet because I'm stupid. Ha. Funny.”

From his smear on the pavement, Spidey feigned applause. “Very good, Maxwell.”

Spider-sense again? Spidey tumbled out of the way, narrowly avoiding a third supervillain smashing into the pavement.

“If you wanna patronize someone, why don't you patronize THE GIBBON?” The Gibbon pulled himself to his full stature, which seemed to be a good foot taller than last time.

“Well, if you ins-” And it tingles a third time. Spidey hopped into the air, landing on a flagpole just as the Kangaroo emerged from one of Spot's portals. He took his place beside his comrades.

“Finally, I can get revenge on the man who put my idol, Frank Oliver, behind bars.” The Kangaroo cackled to himself.

“Actually, that was Sandman, remember-?”

“DON'T TRY TO CONFUSE ME WITH YOUR MIND-TRICKS, WALL-CRAWLER!”

The team of Grizzly, Spot, Gibbon, and Kangaroo II approached Spider-Man in unison.

“You've finally met your match, Web-Slinger,” said the Spot. “We are the Spider-Man Revenge Squad!”

“Oh no,” said Spider-Man. “I'm in trouble now. Move over, Sinister Six.”

Whoa, what the-? The next thing Spidey knew, Gibbon and Kangaroo were flying at his face. It took every last drop of his spider-reflexes not to get punched again. Man, they were fast.

“Surprised, Spider-Man?” Kangaroo sneered. “The four of us met in Ravencroft, then escaped together and pooled our money to buy the Tinkerer's finest mechsuits.” He gestured to the angular lumps under their costumes.

“And I've been practicing with my powers, like, a whole bunch!” added Spot. “There are so many applications of my spots I'd never thought of before!” Suddenly, a black circle formed at Spidey's feet.


“Die!” Grizzly tried to body-slam Spidey, but he rolled out of the way at the last second.

“So if Frank Oliver is Kangaroo's idol, who's yours?” asked Spider-Man. “Nic Cage?”

Gah, max-strength spider-sense! Four more portals opened in the air around Spidey's head, and out popped four different fists. Next thing Spidey knew, he was seeing stars.

“We got him!”
“Come on, let's scram before he gets back up!”

The Spider-Man Revenge Squad grabbed as much jewelry as they could carry, then ducked into one of Spot's portals, which promptly vanished, leaving Spider-Man alone on the shattered pavement.

Did... Did that just happen? No. Couldn't have. Spider-Man pulled himself out of his Spider-Man-shaped crater and groaned.

By now, a small crowd of pedestrians had formed around the jewelry store.

“What was that?” they whispered amongst each other.

“Spider-Man lost.”

“He didn't lose. He got creamed.”

“He got smoked.”

“He got chewed up and spit back out.”

“I always thought the Web-Head was cool, but I guess he's really just a little punk.”

“It's not my fault!” Spidey yelled at the crowd. “One of those guys had portal-powers, and- and did you see the size of that bear?”

“Whatever you say, punk.”

_Gah. Peter smashed his forehead against the keyboard. This was _not_ happening. He had _not_ just lost to the Legion of Losers. Ugh, he must have really been knocked off his game ever since Sandman died._

“Peter?” Peter glanced up from his Bugle computer to find Betty Brant standing beside him, looking concerned. “You haven't seen Ned anywhere, have you?”

“No, why?”

“He just...” Betty glanced away. “He stood me up last night, and now he hasn't shown up to work or returned my calls.”

Oh, so Ned Lee and Betty Brant were a thing now. Peter would've felt a pang of jealousy, except his attempt to ask Betty out had been more humiliating than his fight with the Legion of Losers.

“PARKER!” Without warning, the office door burst open and the Jolly One himself stormed into the newsroom. “WHAT IN THE SAM HILL HAPPENED TO THE DAILY BUGLE’S WEBSITE?”

Peter shrank under his glare. “I updated it like Robbie asked. It looked like something from the nineties.”

“I DESIGNED THAT WEBSITE MYSELF!”

“When, twenty years ago?”

“That's beside the point!”
“Here, I know what'll cheer you up.” He was digging his own grave here, but Peter retrieved a stack of photos from his backpack and handed them to Jameson.

The instant Jameson's eyes hit the picture, a diabolical grin spread over his face. “I love it. Looks like the furries got their revenge on the Wall-Crawler! Hmm, what do we got here? A bear, a monkey, a bunny, and a dalmatian. Beautiful!”

“This is so unfair.” Peter folded his arms. “Yeah, Spidey screwed up this time, but that doesn't mean he deserves to be made fun of. How many lives has he saved, exactly? Hasn't he earned a little respect?”

“Oh, please,” scoffed Jameson, “Spider-Man's never done a single heroic thing in his life.”

“Are you for real?”

“Yeah, he stops robbers and supervillains, but there's a reason he wears a brightly colored costume and cracks those stupid jokes of his.” Jameson made for his office. “It's all for attention. Well, if he wants attention, I'll give him attention.” The door slammed behind him.

Peter was seething. Any second now, he was gonna Hulk out and burst into Jameson's office like the Kool-Aid Man.

“Don't take it personally, Parker.” Mr. Robertson appeared behind him, putting a hand on Peter's shoulder. “That's just how Jameson is.”

“Wow, that really speaks volumes,” spat Peter.

Mr. Robertson took a breath. “He has principles. They may not be principles everyone else agrees with, but they're principles.”

Peter exhaled through his nose. “Yeah. Whatever.”

“Congratulations, Peter,” said Gwen. “You're officially the first person in human history to hate their boss.”

“I know, I know,” said Peter. “I'm not mad at Jameson. Not really. It's whoever keeps sending these supervillains after me. Something tells me they're not gonna stop at Scorpion and Hydro-Man. Marko was murdered because of them.”

A solemn silence filled the air. There was something surreal about talking so freely. This might be the longest conversation Peter had had without telling a lie since he was bitten.

“The poor man.” Gwen shut her eyes. “There's no body to bury, just sand. How many people out there are even going to notice or care that he's gone?”

“Marko was this close to making a real life for himself.” Peter put his hand over hers. “But… no use dwelling on it, I guess. Anyways, uh, how’d Harry take the news?”

That knocked the wind from Gwen’s sails. “He- He hasn’t heard yet. Harry almost relapsed last night. It’s not a good time.”

At this, Peter frowned. “But it will be a good time eventually, right?”

Those cold, dead eyes met the pavement.
“Yo, Parker!”

But before Gwen had a chance to open her mouth, the conversation was put on pause as a pair of students approached them – Rand and Sally.

“Rand! Why are you talkin' to the nerd herd?” Sally's voice could wrench a symbiote off its host. “You'll contaminate yourself!”

“Would you shut up a minute?” For once in his life, Rand actually scowled at his girlfriend. Whoa, the dude was usually so mellow. Guess there was a first time for everything.

Sally looked like she'd been slapped in the face, a mental image Peter dwelled on for longer than he’d like to admit. “Oh,” she said faintly. “Yeah. Okay. Whatever you...”

Rand turned back to Peter and Gwen. He grinned – another first for Midtown's most stoic student. “John's coming home.”

“John?” It took a second for the light bulb to click above Peter's head. “Jameson's son? He's leaving Ravencroft?”

“Yeah!” Rand punched Peter's arm. “My dad just called me. We're having a party at his apartment with cake and everything.”

Peter and Gwen traded glances.

“Sorry, Gwen.” Peter gave an apologetic smile. “We'll finish our talk later. There's cake to be eaten.”

Apparently, one of the perks of being an astronaut is a cushy apartment. Peter savored the gigantic living space – It was nicer than anywhere he'd be crashing for the rest of his life. And every inch of it was filled with people. Peter spotted Betty, Foswell, Mr. Robertson, Mrs. Jameson, and, of course, the picklepuss himself. Jameson was smiling, and it wasn't a smug, Spider-Man-schadenfreude smile, either. It was the genuine article. Talk about eerie.

At the head of the room, standing next to a decadent tower of cake, Rand was giving John his tightest bro-hug. John turned to the partgoers, grinning. “You know, I trained for a lot, and I mean a whole lot of situations, even got strapped into a centrifuge, but they never covered alien spores in space camp.” He held up his wineglass. “And I still beat 'em! The doctors say I'm completely normal! Well, as normal as I was before the spores, anyways.” The crowd chuckled politely.

“C'mere, John, give your old man a squeeze!” Jameson threw his arms around him. “Your mom and I got you a little present.” He reached into his pocket and tossed John some car keys.

“Mom, Dad, you didn't have to-”

“No arguments,” said Mrs. Jameson. “It's yours, and we're not letting you pay a cent.”

It was at this point that Gwen slipped away from the crowd, and Peter couldn't help but follow her out to the balcony.

“I got you some cake.” Peter set down a paper plate holding chocolatey goodness on the balcony ledge, but Gwen ignored it.

“Is that what happened to Eddie, too?” she asked softly. “Alien spores got his brain?”
“Gwen...” Peter glanced back inside the apartment. “I swear I'll tell you everything, but can we not have this conversation with a gazillion people in earshot?”

“Okay, okay.” Gwen shut her eyes, her cheeks filling with red. “Look, I promise you I'm going to break up with Harry.” She touched the bridge of her nose. “Just don't let anyone else steal you away before then.”

A goofy grin crept its way over Peter’s face. “Aww, darn, but I really had my eye on Doctor Octopus…”

Back inside the apartment, John was trying to see how much cake he could cram into his mouth at once. “You would not believe how sick I am of hospital food.”

“Now, John, I know a new Cadillac's not as nice as being a superhero,” said Jameson, “but it coulda been worse. Yeah, alien spores are bad, but, hey, at least you didn't turn into a rock monster like that one superhero, uh, whatchamacallit, that thing-”

“The Thing?”

“Yeah, I can’t remember his name, either, but you get the picture.”

“Don't worry, Dad.” Jameson glanced out the window. New York wasn't known for its starry skies, but at the very least, the full moon was out. “You never know. Maybe Colonel Jupiter will rise again someday.”

The full moon didn't quite extend to the ESU lab's windows. It was drowned out by artificial light.

“It's getting late.” Debra Whitman was hunched over a table examining some beakers when Dr. Warren came up behind her. He patted her back. “Don't you think you ought to be heading home, little lady?” Then he patted a bit lower.

Debra stayed silent, her face blank as always. After a moment, she gathered up her things and left. As soon as he was alone, Warren waltzed over to a cabinet and pulled out Connors's notes. Finally, he could do some real work.

The jump from reptiles to mammals had been simple enough, but now Warren was wondering what other corners of the animal kingdom he could cover. Diving right into birds might be too much. Best to start off small. Start with the flying mammals and work his way up.

*Thump.* Warren flinched. What was that? He was the only one here... wasn't he? *Thump.* Slowly, Warren made for the door. *Thump.*

“Hello?” he called out. “Is anyone there?”

No sooner had the words left Warren’s mouth than the door burst open, revealing a large, blond man in a navy blue suit.

“Miles Warren,” he said. “Octavius told me all about the ‘services’ you provided Kraven. Ock gets real talkative when he’s stuck in Ravencroft’s lunch line...”

“Can I help you?” Warren raised an eyebrow. At least there were no jungle cats this time.

“I want power,” said the newcomer. “Enough power to destroy Spider-Man! And you're going to
“Give it to me.”

“Is that so?” said Warren. “And what incentive do I have?” He made a “greased palm” gesture.

The man reached into his coat for his checkbook, scribbled in it with a pen, then tore off a check and handed it to Warren.

Warren glanced at it. “That'll do.” He walked over to his work station and tossed the man a vial of orange liquid, which was attached in one of Connors's old injection devices. “Here, this will make you into one of those superpowered freaks that are all the rage with criminals these days.”

“Yes!” The man grinned to himself. “Power... It's all mine...”

“Don't bother trying to incriminate me if things go awry,” Warren told him. “I have friends in high places. They'll never trace this back to me. Now, if you'll write me another check, I'll give you the rest of the treatment. It'll take several days, but if you don't want to turn into a mindless animal-”

“Days? I want power NOW!” Before Warren had time to flinch, the man strapped the device to his shoulder and injected the serum straight into his arm.

Warren's face twitched the slightest amount. He drew his pistol, but by then, the intruder was already transforming. Darn. Warren was going to need a bigger gun.

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Spidey didn't like web-slinging at night. It wasn't that it was too dark to see – City That Never Sleeps and all that – but given all the weirdos running around (himself included, admittedly), Spidey simply preferred being safe at home under his covers once the clock struck midnight. Well, maybe it was just conditioning from Aunt May's curfew. Tonight, Peter had called to let her know he might be getting home a little late. His excuse had been John Jameson's party, but in actuality, he'd cut out early so he could swing to ESU for a little investigation of Warren. He hadn't even bothered giving Gwen an excuse, but then, he guessed he didn’t need to worry about that anymore.

Spidey swung into the campus and landed on the lab's skylight. He peeked inside, then rubbed his eyes (or, well, the white parts of his mask) and did a double-take.

“Heyyyyy, wait a minute!” Spidey dropped inside the lab, landing between a terrified Dr. Warren and his new buddy. “Didn’t we already do the Halloween episode?”

Said buddy happened to be a bone-chilling Man-Wolf – a big, fuzzy, hulking kinda guy. Most of his clothing had been torn off, but his pants had miraculously survived intact.

The Man-Wolf didn’t seem too interested in the newcomer, though. Instead, he set his beady yellow eyes on Warren, who was huddled in the corner.

“Stay away!” Warren fired a couple rounds of his pistol. They were direct hits, but all they seemed to do make the beast angrier. The Man-Wolf lunged-

-Thwip.

-and was yanked away by the tail. He yipped as Spider-Man swung him into a wall.

Spidey glared at Warren. “Next time, spring for the silver ones.” But before he could make another smark remark, his spider-sense tingled and he dodged another pounce from the Man-Wolf. Wolfie
crashed through a window and dashed off through the moonlit campus. Spidey chased after him outside-

*Spider-sense again.*

-and found himself ducking a flying Cadillac. The car smashed into the pavement where Spider-Man had been standing a second ago. It now had more in common with a crushed can than a luxury vehicle. And that, apparently, had been enough distraction for the Man-Wolf to escape. Spider-Man would go after him, of course, but first things first…

“Hey, pal?” Spider-Man hopped back inside the window to peer at Warren. “I take it the Big Bad Wolf is yours? I always did peg you as the mad scientist type.”

“I didn't make him into that!” snapped Warren. “That maniac barged into my lab and injected himself with one of Connors's serums!”

“Why would Connors have left werewolf juice lying around?”

“The serum used gray wolf DNA. I was only studying it, seeing how it’d react to non-reptile DNA.”

Great. So even if the Connors had destroyed their own Lizard research, Warren had himself a copy. And from what the Connors had told Peter and Gwen, the whole “Lizard” thing was Warren’s number one bargaining chip in his quest to banish the Connors to Florida – which, incidentally, was another in the long list of reasons Peter suspected the guy.

But he couldn’t worry about that right now. Spider-Man darted to the other side of the lab.

Warren frowned. “What are you-?”

“Ta da!” Spidey returned with a big pile of test tubes in his arms, each one containing yellow liquid. “Gene cleanser! The quick and easy cure for the werewolf on the go.” Without further ado, he hopped to the windowsill. “Call the cops and warn them there's a monster loose on campus. Oh yeah, and do you have any clue who that guy was before he wolfed out? Might help me track him.”

Warren scratched his skeevy mustache. “Large, blond man in a blue suit?”

“Hmm, that doesn’t sound like anyone I-“ It hit Spidey like a ton of bricks. “It couldn't be... I'd better go.” He pounced out the window without another word.

Sure enough, Spidey found his favorite wolf lurking around outside the apartment complex of one John Jameson, clawing at the door in a frantic attempt to get inside. Apparently, horrific wolf-creatures didn’t know how to work doors. Spidey also found his favorite picklepuss along with Mrs. Picklepuss huddling behind some cars in the parking lot.

“Hi, there,” he said, landing next to them. “What I miss?”

“Shh! Don't let it hear you, you idiot!” Jameson said in the loudest voice possible. “I knew you were responsible for this!”

“Hey, I'm strictly spiders-powers only,” said Spidey, holding up his hands innocently. “I couldn't turn people into werewolves if I tried.”

“What are you doing talking to us, anyways?” Jameson snorted. “Shouldn't you be fighting that
thing? Aren't you supposed to be a hero?”

Oh, so now Jameson called him a hero. “Don't get your panties in a wad, picklepuss. I'm on it.”

Without further ado, Spidey hopped out into the center of the parking lot. The Man-Wolf had his back turned, apparently preoccupied trying to wrap his head around the whole “door” concept. Spidey put on his best British accent. “And here we have the rare giant-sized lemming, the most majestic of nature's creatures. The Spider-Man will try and catch its attention with the lemming's natural mating call.” he cupped his hands around his mouth. “AWOOO! AWOOO!”

The Man-Wolf spun around. He was foaming at the mouth.

“Hi.” Spider-Man retrieved another vial of gene cleanser from his utility belt. “Want to be friends?”

The Man-Wolf did not. Or at least, that's how Spider-Man interpreted his attempts to slice him to ribbons. Spidey sprung into the air, then webbed the Man-Wolf and shot back towards him, kicking Wolfie right in the spine. The Man-Wolf howled in pain, giving Spidey the perfect window to dump some yummy, yummy cleanser down his throat.

Wolfie yipped, then coughed, and, finally, began to shrink, looking distinctly less wolfish and more... Jamesoney. Good, good, the cleanser was working. It looked like it was the same deal as the Lizard, just to keep the trend of generic knock-off villains going.

“Ugh... Wha-?” Yep, it was John Jameson, alright. It sure was a good thing his pants had survived the journey from man to wolf and back. Spider-Man had seen enough horrors for one night.

“John!” The next second, Mr. and Mrs. Jameson were at John's side, throwing their arms around him. “What happened?”

“I... I don't know.” John brought his hand to his forehead. “I was just taking my new car for a test drive, and I got this craving for power. It felt like... like the spores.”

“Why, those rotten Ravencroft doctors!” Old Triple-J looked more feral than the Man-Wolf. “They said you were cured! I'm gonna give those quacks a piece of my mind!”

“And then, the next thing I knew, I tracked down that biogeneticist and demanded he give me superpowers.” John bowed his head. “What was I thinking?”

His mom kissed his cheek. “We'll get you more therapy, honey. And we'll be sure to keep a closer eye on you from now on.”

“We're not sending you back to Ravencroft, though, I can promise you that,” snorted Jameson. “By the way, where's your Cadillac?”

“Oh, look at the time!” Spidey fired a web-line towards a far-off building.

“Spider-Man, wait!”

Spidey turned back around to give Jameson a confused look (Well, Jameson couldn't really see it under the mask, but whatever).

“You- You can't tell anyone about this!” Jameson pleaded. “If people learn he turned himself into a freak, John's career is over.”
“Yeah, I know.” Spider-Man sighed. “The exact same thing happened to a friend of mine, which is... kinda weird, come to think of it. Trust me, I'm good at keeping secrets.”

“Th-Th-” Jameson struggled to make his mouth form the proper sounds. “Thank-”

“Don't hurt yourself,” said Spider-Man. “You're welcome. This'll come as a shock to you, but I do heroic things all the time. Maybe think about that the next time you print your paper.”

“You don't tell me what to print in my paper!” For some strange reason, Jameson's lips were suddenly a lot looser. “It doesn't matter how many people you save, the bottom line is you're a masked vigilante who answers to no one but himself, and I will never encourage that behavior.”

Spider-Man was this close to swinging off, but he couldn't help himself. He spun around, yelling, “What was I supposed to do, stand around and twiddle my thumbs while your son howled at the moon?”

“I...” Jameson let out a long, heavy breath. “I don't know. We shouldn't have to rely on vigilantes to save us. Police officers, firemen, astronauts... those are the real heroes.”

“Look, I'm sorry I'm not officially government-sanctioned, okay? I'm doing the best I can! Gimme a friggin' break.”

And with that, Spidey swung off, leaving the Jameson family alone in the parking lot.

By the time Peter climbed into his bedroom window and pulled off his mask, he was ready to collapse onto his bed, costume and all. Peter threw himself onto his mattress. At least Aunt May had gone to sleep without waiting up for him, meaning Peter didn't have to explain why he was up so late past curfew. He'd swung all the way back to the ESU lab only to find Warren was long gone, and Peter hadn't stuck around long enough to know if the guy had ever called the police or not. Peter just hadn't had the patience after putting up with Jameson.

Robbie was right, Jameson stuck to his principles, but they were stupid principles. But then, really, didn't that apply to everyone? At one point in his life, Norman Osborn must have changed into his Green Goblin costume for the first time, stocked up on pumpkin bombs, and then looked in the mirror and said with complete sincerity, “Yes. This is the right thing to do.”

But then, if nobody ever questioned their principles, didn't that apply to Peter, too? What if Uncle Ben had been wrong? What if “with great power comes great responsibility” wasn't actually true? Peter rolled over under the covers... which is when he felt some vial-shaped lumps press against his leg. He still had some extra gene cleansers in his utility belt.

Peter groaned, then reluctantly crawled out of bed so he could web the cleansers to the spot beneath his desk. No, this wasn't a moment of weakness. He wasn't tempted to get rid of his powers or anything. It'd just be impractical to throw all this gene cleanser out, that was all. What if more crazy people drank Connors's serums? What if the symbiote found a new host and Peter needed a way to beat it again?

Purely strategic reasons. Yeah.

It was a school day. Uggggggggghhhhhhh. Peter's brain simply did not work on four hours of sleep. In a haze, he poured himself some OJ and sat down at the kitchen table to read the morning news. He nearly spat his juice all over it.
There was an apology. There was an article actually **apologizing** to Spider-Man. Saying that the Bugle's many accusations were inaccurate, and that the Web-Head was most likely not a criminal, but a misguided person trying to do the right thing. No way. That was the closest Peter could reasonably expect the Bugle to get to calling him a hero. It even mentioned that Spidey had saved John Jameson – leaving the details vague, of course. And the author was picklepuss himself!

This was impossible. Peter couldn't believe Jameson had really written this... on page forty-two. In four-point font.

Chapter End Notes

Next Up: Our first fabulous story arc comes to a climax!
Harry awoke in a cold sweat. He sat up, panting, and peeled the covers off himself. He hadn't slept well last night. Or the night before that. Or the night before that.

Harry jolted. For a second, he thought he'd seen something scurry across the carpet like a spider or... or a robot. Smythe was watching. The monster was watching. There wasn't a doubt in Harry's mind now. His dad had been sick, a victim of the Green. Smythe was the monster. That “contingency video” could've been faked with Chameleon. Smythe would do anything to keep Harry in line. Smythe was the one who'd experimented on people! Harry and his dad were innocent!

A sudden bolt of pain made Harry clutch his stomach. He fought to keep his face blank. The future CEO of Oscorp didn't get ulcers. Norman Osborn had never gotten ulcers. Harry's head was pounding. Why wasn't he taking the Green? Harry couldn't think straight unless he was on the Green!

No. No, his therapist had told him about this. Harry's brain was trying to trick him. The Green didn't make his thoughts clearer, it... it... Gwen. Think of Gwen. Gwen was counting on Harry to stay clean. She was the one good thing in his life. She was going to be there for Harry to love him, to prove he wasn't a worthless failure.

Or at least... that's what Harry had thought before he overheard her conspiring with Peter. Harry hadn't been to school these last few days. She and Peter could be making out right this second. Of course Gwen would chose Peter over him. Everyone loved Peter Parker, the science whiz who got all A's without even trying, who Harry's dad would not shut up about, who... who...

Harry abruptly rose out of bed. You know what? He was going to school today.

“Mom?” A moment later, Harry entered the dining hall with his hair combed straight, wearing his nicest suit. The dining table was the length of a football field. At the far end of it, Harry's mother was reading the Daily Globe.

Harry bit his tongue. He wanted to warn her about Smythe and his threat to kill her, but who knew how many of those little robots the penthouse was crawling with? Smythe probably even had the security cameras and guards on his side. The monster had accounted for everything.

“I feel up to going to school,” Harry announced.

His mother failed to look up from her paper. “You can get a tutor any time you want,” she said. “Midtown Magnet's always been a crap school. Do you seriously only go there to see your friends?”

“Well, I... I... I'm gonna go. Bye.” Harry slinked out the door without another word.

Screw her. He didn't need her. She didn't care about him. No one cared about him. Harry slammed the keys into the ignition of his convertible. His convertible. Perfect Peter Parker could barely afford the clothes on his back – There was no way he was happier than Harry.

Something pounced into the passenger seat. Harry screamed and nearly swerved the car into the wall. It was a robot, hardly bigger than the tip of his thumb, with a camera mounted to its back. Harry had been right.
“What do you want from me?” Harry tried to swat it away... and promptly received an electric shock. The robot cocked its camera-turret “head,” looking at Harry like a cat that expects you to pet it right after biting you. Harry swore, then hit the gas. “Fine. You can stay. Spy on me all you want! I'm not even doing anything!”

The convertible screeched out the driveway. Harry wasn't doing anything wrong. He was the victim here. Anyone could see that.

Wearing a green t-shirt felt wrong, somehow. The blue shirt was Peter's trademark! It was as iconic as Gwen's headband or Jameson's Hitler mustache or- or the Osborns' stripy red hair. Still, Peter resigned himself to his green-shirted fate. Aunt May wouldn't hesitate to pinch him.

Hmm, let's see, what was on today's itinerary? They could go to the St. Patty's day parade, except after the last parade she'd been in, Gwen probably wouldn't be too eager for that. Sheesh, why did the big epic supervillains always wait until the holidays to attack? Had Peter had a single holiday since he'd been bitten that was actually, y'know, supervillain-free? He couldn't wait until next Christmas, when he'd no doubt be battling the evil overlord Doctor Doom.

Anyways, the plan was for Peter to go straight to Gwen's house as soon as he was done at the Bugle. By then, Gwen would have broken up with Harry, and then she and Peter would have a long, long, long, long, long talk about the whole Spider-Man thing. And then an even longer make out session.

“Harry! Hey, man.” The moment Peter spotted his bud by the entrance fountain, he hurried towards him. “Good to see you back on... campus.” The words dried up as he caught sight of Harry’s face. That couldn’t be good. Sure, Harry fit the St. Patty’s day criteria with that pale green sleeveless sweater he always wore, but Peter hoped he wasn’t taking the “green” rule too much to heart...

“What?” Looked like Peter had been gawking long enough to cheese Harry off.

“N-Nothing, Hare. You just seem kinda…” Peter tripped over his words a second. “Look, if there’s anything you need to get off your chest... I’ve, uh, learned lately that keeping secrets from your loved ones isn’t always the healthiest-”

“Oh, you and Gwen always want total transparency, don’t you?” Harry made a show of rolling his eyes. “At least, you want total transparency from me. But you two ever stop to consider that maybe sharing big secrets with a friend could really hurt ’em? Heh, what am I saying?” He chuckled to himself. “You guys are already well aware of that, aren’t you?”

Peter blinked. “Dude, I’ve got no idea what you’re-”

“Whatever, Pete.” Harry turned for the school entrance, slinging his backpack over his shoulder. “Go have all the fun you want with Gwen. Maybe you could take her with you while you snap pics of Spider-Man. That way you’ll have both your BFF’s in one convenient place-”

“Is that what this is about?” Peter had to fight back a groan. “For the millionth time, Harry, Spider-Man’s one of the good guys. I’m sure he’d have loved to help your dad if he hadn’t been hurling quite so many bombs at Spidey’s face-”

“Maybe it’s time you were honest with me?” In the blink of an eye, Harry was inside Peter’s personal bubble. “If you knew who Spider-Man was, would you tell me?”
Silence. Dead silence.

“Don’t you understand, Pete? What if someone tried to tell you the guy who killed your Uncle Ben wasn’t all that bad?”

Peter opened his mouth. No sound came out.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” Harry slinked off without another word.

Peter could’ve gone after him. But then… he wouldn’t want to be late to class, would he?

Green. The halls of Midtown High were green, green, green. It was done more out of a sense of self-preservation than tradition. Flash and Kong were lurking the hallways with barely-contained glee, pinching anyone so much as wearing the wrong shade. For her own safety, Gwen had on a mint-colored jacket. Her salmon-colored headband had been replaced with a black one to keep her from looking like a watermelon.

They couldn't really discuss everything in-depth until after school, but Gwen was still anxious to see Peter. She was about to head outside to find him, but the instant she closed her locker, she found someone standing by her.

“Harry?” Gwen gave a start. “Are you okay? I hadn't heard from you since-”

“Since we kissed?” finished Harry. Something about the way he was staring at her unnerved Gwen, but she couldn't put her finger on it. Maybe it was the bags under his eyes. “I needed to see you.” He took a step closer.

“Harry...” And Gwen took a step back. Here we go. Deep breath. “We didn't kiss. You kissed me.”

This didn't exactly make Harry look any less unnerving. “What are you saying?”

“I need to be honest with you.” Gwen steadied herself. She could do this. Rip off the band-aid. “I was going to break up with you, but then your dad died. I thought it was a bad time, but... but pretending to like you out of pity isn't good for either of us.” Her eyes clamped shut. “I swear, I will always be there for you. This doesn't mean I care about your well-being any less. I just don't want to date you anymore. I'm sorry.”

“You're sorry?” Harry almost looked amused. “Yeah, I bet you are. Sorry you couldn't ditch me sooner so you could hook up with Peter.”

Gwen's face hardened. “Don't be like that.”

Harry let out an incredulous laugh. “You think I'm wrong? I heard you two! You were plotting your secret fling right after I told you I was the Green Goblin. Guess I know what your priorities are.”

Gwen gawked at him like he was diseased. “You eavesdropped on us?”

“Oh, like you’ve never done anything behind my back,” spat Harry. “Or any-one, in this case. Just couldn't keep your hands off Peter, could you?”

“Excuse me?” Gwen turned The Look up to maximum strength. “I've barely talked to Peter these last few weeks because I was trying to be fair to you.”

“Oh, I'm sure.” Harry rolled his eyes. “So are you gonna go throw yourself on Pete right now, or
will you wait a few minutes to be 'fair' to me?"

“Screw you.” Gwen turned to walk off down the hall. “You don't get to act like a jerk just because
your dad died.”

The next thing she knew, Gwen was stumbling backwards into the lockers. Her face stung. Gwen
stared at Harry, her mouth hanging open. She looked like she wanted to say something, but no
words came out.

Harry raised another fist. “Don't talk about what you don't understand.”

Gwen winced and shut her eyes... and then opened them to find Harry's arm caught in mid-air.
Mary Jane's fingernails were digging into Harry's wrist so hard, droplets of blood were trickling
out.

“Get out.” Mary Jane released his hand. Harry swore at her, then ran for the nearby fire exit.

“What's going on?” By now, a crowd of students had formed. One of the teachers pushed through,
but by the time he reached the head, Gwen had already bolted.

“You! Why aren't you in class?”

Harry ignored the traffic guard's protests, hopping into his convertible and jamming the keys in the
ignition. He screeched out the parking lot. Harry's heart was racing so fast, he didn't even
remember what was still in the passenger seat.

Smythe could hardly keep from chuckling to himself as he watched the video feed. Now this was
quality reality television.

He brought a phone to his ear. “Alright, Osborn, looks like your little bundle of joy is making a
bee-line for Oscorp Tower. Probably about to binge on Globulin Green.”

“I'll be right over,” said the voice on the other end.

“What are you gonna do, stop him?” asked Smythe.

“No. I'm going to give him the chance to be a man.”

Mary Jane found Gwen in the restroom – or at least, she assumed it was Gwen judging by the
sniffling noises coming from the stall.

“Gwen?” MJ rapped on the stall door. “I can hear you in there. Not to be weird, but can I come in?
Something tells me you're not actually using it.” When she received no response, Mary Jane kicked
the door open.

Gwen was huddled in the corner, hugging her knees. Her backpack was lying beside her in a small
puddle of who-knows-what (Contrary to popular belief, high school girls' restrooms are exactly as
hellish as the boys'). At MJ’s entry, Gwen feebly raised her head.

“First things first—” Mary Jane sat down at her side. “-he's going to come back crying and begging
and going on about how he's soooooo sorry.” She put a hand on Gwen's shoulder. “Don't fall for it.
It's a trap.”
“M-MJ-” Gwen struggled to speak without her voice cracking. “First Eddie, now...”

“I'm sorry to tell you this, but those two are scum. I was right about Eddie, and I'm right about Harry. Stay away from him. Far away. Rule of thumb, anyone who punches you isn't your friend.”

“No, no, you d-don't understand.” Gwen buried her face. “He was on drugs. I was the only thing stopping him from-”

“You mean the football steroid thing?” Mary Jane's eyes widened. “Is that what he's been telling you? That if you don't date him, he'll do drugs again?” MJ called Harry a name, and it wasn't “Tiger.”

“He's right about me.” Gwen's breaths were growing ragged. “I screwed him over so I could get with Peter.”

“You are not blaming yourself.” Mary Jane gently tugged Gwen's hands out of her eyes. “Look at me, girlfriend. You acted like a totally normal human being. Harry's the one who threw a hissy fit. You're not his property – He's not entitled to you.”

“I just… didn't think he'd... he'd...”

“It's okay, Gwen.” Mary Jane leaned in for a hug. “Come on, Harry's nothing but a spoiled rich kid. You've faced down actual supervillains.”

Gwen gave a wry smile. “I cried in the bathroom after that, too.”

“Well, then, you're still a totally normal human being. Life can throw some real curveballs at you, but I promise…” Mary Jane smiled back. “…you might bend, but you'll never break.”

What had he done? What had he done? Was Harry losing his mind? Gwen was the most important person in his life. She was the one he loved. The only one he loved. Harry wasn't thinking straight. He needed the Green. Everything was so much clearer when he was on the Green.

Harry burst through the front doors of Oscorp and marched past the secretary without so much as sparing her a glance. Hardly even aware of himself, he boarded the elevator and mashed the button for the lab. Why was the elevator going so slowly? Couldn't it go any faster?

After an eternity, the doors swung open and Harry ran into the lab. His father's old lab. The Globulin Green was stacked on the wall – racks and racks full of vials. Why were they out in the open like that? Why hadn't Harry destroyed them? It must have been Smythe. Yes, Smythe was the monster. He'd left the Globulin Green out here on purpose, knowing full well Harry was too addicted to resist. This wasn't Harry's fault, it was Smythe's!

Harry retrieved a vial with trembling hands and uncorked it. The smell. The wonderful, chemical smell. Just a waft of it, and already he could feel the high. He brought the Green within inches of his lips.

Gwen.

He wanted Gwen. Gwen, the one person who'd noticed and cared when he was on the Green. If he acted now, maybe Harry could apologize. After all, Gwen couldn't really love Peter more than him. He could get her back. But if he got back on the Green... she might give up on him for good.

Green. Gwen. Green. Gwen. Green-
Harry screamed and threw the vial to the ground. The glass shattered, releasing a noxious fume. Harry screamed and screamed, smashing every last vial off the wall until he was left with nothing. Until he couldn't take the Green unless he lapped it up off the floor like a dog.

Panting, Harry smiled to himself. He'd done it. Now Gwen would want him back. Gwen would-

“I'm proud of you, son.”

Harry cried out and spun around. He couldn’t believe his eyes. Standing in the doorway, wearing a crisp suit as if this was just another day of work, staring at Harry with those cold eyes was... was...

“Mom?” Harry took a step back. “What are you doing here?”

His mother gave him a smile, showing off her straight white teeth. She seemed perfectly calm and collected. The only thing out of the ordinary was her brunette hair, which wasn't quite as tidy as usual.

“I knew you could overcome it,” she said. “I knew you could be a man and not a worthless little junkie.”

“W-What?”

Suddenly, her hands were on his collar. “Don't get me wrong, I respect the initiative you took, but you never used any common sense. You don't drink Globulin Green, dear.”

Harry's feet left the ground. What the-? She was barely a head taller than him! How was she this strong?

“You inhale it.”

Harry sailed through the air and landed in a chamber in the corner of the room. He was so dazed, he was barely back on his feet before the doors slammed shut before him. They seemed to be made of a clear plastic – no matter how hard Hary pounded, they never gave way.

“Mom? I- I don't understand-”

“Don't be afraid, dear.” She smiled at him through the plastic. “Once you've become a man, you're going to help build Norman's future. You have purpose now.”

A hissing noise hit Harry's ears. He looked to his feet and found gas. Sickly green gas.

“Mom, stop it! Let me out! Let me-” Harry pounded and pounded on the door, shrieking at the top of his voice, but his mother only smiled wider.

“Hush, dear, it'll be alright. The chamber's airtight. You'll have to breath it in eventually.” She touched her palm to the plastic. “When you awake, you'll be stronger, smarter... All the upsides of the Green, none of the downsides.”

Harry couldn't hold his breath. His lungs were burning. He had no choice. He had to breath it. Had to...

“Well, actually, it does cause some interesting...” A big, toothy grin spread across his mother's face. “...personality defects.” Harry had never seen her smile so contorted. It looked like someone had cut the face off someone else and stuck it over hers.

But Harry only got a good look at her for a moment. After that, the gas was too thick to see
anything. The last thing Harry heard before blacking out was laughter.

The first thing Harry heard upon waking up was laughter. His eyes shot open to find a goblin smiling at him. No, no, it was just one of the masks on the wall. He was back in the penthouse, lying slouched in an armchair. The instant Harry rose to his feet, the laughter hit his ears again.

Harry jerked his head around the room, searching... and then his eyes fell on the hall mirror. This time, a real goblin smiled at him. It had the same green mask, the same purple hood, the same beady yellow eyes. Every last detail was identical to his dad's costume.

“Well, looky there.” Green Goblin felt up his own chin. “Who's that handsome devil?” He laughed again.

Harry stumbled backwards. “No! I wasn't supposed to take the Green again!”

The Goblin only laughed harder. “Says who? Gwen? Yeah, because we all know the girl who pretended to like you out of pity has your best interests in mind.” You could see him roll his eyes under the mask. “Finally, your thoughts are clear! And the best part is, since you took the Green in gas form, no more blackouts for you! Not counting that little bout of asphyxiation, of course.” He stepped closer to the mirror. “And now that the fog's been lifted, you know just what you have to do. You have to cowboy up – You have to be ten times the man Norman Osborn ever was. But there are people holding you back.” He counted off on his fingers. “Hmm, let's see, there's Gwen, Peter, probably Smythe, and, oh yes, can't forget Spider-Man. Quite the laundry list, but nothing a couple pumpkin-bombs to the face can't fix.” He cackled to himself.

“No.” Harry slammed his fist against the glass. “I'm not a murderer. I'm not my dad. You're not real! You're only in my head!”

The Green Goblin brought a palm to his forehead. “Oh, poor dumb Harry.” He tapped the glass with a bony green finger. “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but you've got it backwards. You're only in my head.”

“What?” Harry's eyes went wide. “No I'm n-”

And then the Green Goblin stopped imagining Harry, which caused him to disappear in a puff of smoke.
Climax

Looked like Peter would be spending St. Patrick's Day hunting down the Legion of Losers. Great, now he was starting to miss the epic holiday supervillain attacks. Peter stared at the article at the top of the Daily Bugle's homepage. According to it, most of their success had been thanks to Spot. Apparently, the Legion of Losers had adopted the brilliant strategy of “portal in, grab valuables, portal out.”

But enough inner-monologing. Peter returned to work on the Bugle website. To be perfectly honest, he might have been doing kind of a rush-job, but he couldn't help it. The sooner he got this done, the sooner he could see Gwen. He hadn't run into her at school today, oddly enough, but she'd texted him with the news that she'd finally broken up with Harry. So all in all, it looked like today was shaping up to be a pretty good-

“Jameson!” Mr. Robertson pounded on the office door. “I think we've got ourselves a new headline. I'm getting calls about a guy dressed as a goblin flying a glider around Roosevelt Island.”

“Another one?” came Jameson's voice from within. “Eh, maybe squeeze in something about it on page three.”

On a completely unrelated note, Peter hopped out of his seat. “Website's done! Gotta go!” He bolted for the elevator.

The office door creaked open, and a Hitler-mustachioed head stuck out. “Where's Parker off to in such a hurry?”

“I think he said he had a date with some girl,” said Mr. Robertson.

Jameson made a face. “Teenagers are disgusting.”

“You should see my son's girlfriend.”

There was indeed a guy dressed as a goblin flying a glider around Roosevelt Island. The problem was the buildings on Roosevelt Island were puny little things, not at all good for web-swinging. Spidey had had to hop on car hoods to get around like some sort of twisted Super Mario / GTA hybrid. Once he finally arrived in the goblin's flight path, he ran up a building to get a good look at the guy. Whoever this poser was, he definitely wasn’t Norman or Menken. Dude could barely steer his glider straight. He looked like a house fly buzzing around in the air.

Thwip. The Goblin's obligatory gargoyle-themed glider was tethered by a strand of web.


Spidey managed to stay on the glider after the punch landed, but only thanks to his wall-crawling powers. The glider had started doing nonstop barrel rolls. Don't throw up in your mask, don't throw up in your mask, don't... Man, it was his eighth birthday at Coney Island all over again.


Spidey ducked a fingertip-laser blast. “I'm confused. Are you the new Green Goblin, or are you just
Hobgoblin getting into the holiday spirit?"

“You don't recognize me? I'm hurt!” The Goblin made an exaggerated frowny face. “It's me, your old pal Green Goblin! I came back from the dead so we could have more fun!” He reached into his pouch and tossed a razor-blade pumpkin. Spidey dodged, obviously, but something seemed off. Gobbie had thrown it overhanded, like he was expecting it to make an arc.

“Hold up, were you trying to throw a bomb and you grabbed the wrong thing?” Spider-Man snickered. “Oh, yeah, you're totally Norman Os--”

Spider-sense. Spidey hopped off the glider just in time to dodge another finger-laser. He landed on a rooftop and spun around to find Gobbie flying off into the sunset.

“Alright, alright, you've figured it out, genius.” The Goblin turned back to leer at Spider-Man. “I'm not the genuine article. You'll have to settle for Goblin Jr. I was hoping to get some practice with the gear first, but now that you've reared your ugly head, I'll have to speed up my timetable.” He zoomed out of earshot. Spidey chased after him, hopping from rooftop to rooftop, but without any skyscrapers to swing from, the glider was way too fast for him.

Wait. Goblin Jr.? Peter's heart sank. It couldn't be... No, no, any idiot could've found Norman's spare costume. Green Goblin II could be anyone. Besides, right now the issue wasn't who was under the mask.

It was the fact that the Goblin was headed straight for Queens.

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Gwen examined herself in the bathroom mirror. There wasn't a bruise, thank God. When he wasn't on the Green, Harry didn't have much in the way of upper body strength. It had been more surprising than painful. Gwen struggled to meet her reflection's eyes. Mary Jane must have thought she was a complete baby.

Still, a weight was lifted off Gwen's shoulders. There were no more obstacles. No more pretending to be just friends, no more being polite to Harry, no more Liz Allan throwing herself at Peter before Gwen could so much as open her mouth. Gwen checked her phone – nothing from Peter. She felt like a little girl wide awake on Christmas Eve. In another hour or so, when he came back from the Bugle, she and Peter would finally, finally be together.

She might not have realized it until seventh grade, but Gwen had always loved Peter. She'd had something with Peter she hadn't had with Eddie or Harry or anyone else on the planet. When she was with Peter, Gwen stopped being a stuttering wallflower and started being bold, witty, snarky... being herself. And also Peter was really, really, really cute. That might have been a contributing factor.

Well, Peter had been cute back when he was a scrawny little boy with Harry Potter glasses, but now he was cute cute. And Gwen had always assumed there was nothing under that baggy blue t-shirt but skin and bones, but Spider-Man clearly had a little something going on beneath his spandex.

Gwen caught herself before she started drooling. Being Spider-Man hadn't just changed the way she looked at Peter physically. Before, she'd thought he was a complete wimp, the kind of person who'd have gotten stuffed into lockers if Gwen, Harry, and Eddie hadn't had his back. Now she knew, for the last school year at least, that had all been an act. The time he'd dodged the first few water balloons but then suddenly been drenched? The time Connors had turned into the Lizard and Peter had run for the hills, only for Spider-Man to show up a minute later?
Honestly, Gwen was shocked Peter was that humble. He never even got any thanks – The Bugle ripped him a new one on a daily basis. What kind of person lived like that? Putting his life on the line day after day, ignoring wealth and fame?

Gwen dabbed on more makeup. She wished she'd been bitten by a genetically-altered spider. Look at her. She was the exact kind of spineless loser Peter was pretending to be. She bet he never had nightmares about supervillain attacks.

*Thump.* A noise from outside. Oh, maybe that was him? He'd probably forgotten to text that he was on the way. Gwen hurriedly straightened her hair. *Be cool, be cool.* She wasn't going to fangirl out. She was going to act like herself. This would be exactly the same as being friends, only with more holding hands and making out and heartfelt declarations of love.

Gwen scurried out the bathroom and into her bedroom on the second floor. “Hello?” She called out. "Peter?” No response. Odd. Maybe her dad was home early? Or maybe-?

The far wall exploded. “Lucy, I'm home!” Through the dust and green smoke, Gwen made out a familiar shape. His hideous laughter was barely audible over the sound of someone screaming – herself, Gwen realized. “And I'm all dressed up for our date!”

She immediately ran for the door, but the glider blocked her path in seconds. The windstorm from its jets sent books tumbling off shelves and the blankets flying off the bed.

“Aren't you excited, honey?” The Goblin grabbed her arm. Gwen struggled with all her might, but he had her in a vice grip. “I'm taking you on a tour of the city... from a bird's-eye view!”

Gwen used her free arm to punch the Green Goblin with all her might. It was an incredibly efficient way to break her hand.

The next instant, the whole world whooshed past her. Gwen was in the open air, holding onto the Goblin for dear life as Queens grew smaller and smaller. “You'll see all New York's most famous landmarks.” The Green Goblin flashed her a wide grin. “The Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, the cold hard asphalt...”

Ah, the suburbs of Queens. Another locale not known for its towering skyscrapers. Spider-Man wasn't halfway there when the Goblin suddenly zoomed over his head in the opposite direction, laughing like a maniac. And Gobbie wasn't the only passenger on the glider.

Peter's breath caught in his throat. No. No no no no no no no no no no. This wasn't happening. This wasn't happening. Spidey did a one-eighty and bolted through the streets. Once he hit the Queensboro Bridge, he could finally get some decent swinging in, and once he reached Manhattan, he went at full speed. Spider-Man chased the Goblin past First Avenue, then Second, then Third... Gobbie finally stopped at Fifth Avenue. Oh look, they were right in time for the parade.

Humans and leprechauns alike broke formation and fled in panic as the glider came to a halt miles above their heads. Spider-Man, meanwhile, landed on a big four-leafed clover balloon directly across from where the glider was hovering. Now that he got a good look at her, Peter's fears were confirmed – the Goblin's hostage was Gwen, which meant it was Harry under that mask. The Goblin held out Gwen, letting her feet dangle over the open air. Looked like he was about to pull a “Venom,” only there weren't any spunky high schoolers ready to catch Gwen this time.

“Harry! Harry! Is that you? Listen to me!” Gwen was fighting to keep from screaming. “You can't let the Green control you! Remember your dad-”
“The Green's not controlling a thing,” cut in Harry. “It's opened my eyes. It's turned me into a man. Whereas you have done nothing but hold me back.”

“Harry, I-” Maybe it was only because of the biting winds, but Gwen's eyes were watering. “I'm sorry.”

Harry smirked at her. “Please, we all know how the Green Goblin feels about apologizing.” He opened his hands. “Whoops. Butterfingers.”

“Gwen!” Peter dived after her. Her screams filled his ears. Peter streamlined himself, making the tightest bullet-shape he could, but it was no good. Gwen was plummeting too fast. He had one chance. Had to use his webs.

“Peter! Peter!” He could see Gwen mouthing the words, but the sound was drowned out by the wind in his ears.

Peter held out his wrist... hovered his fingers over the trigger... Gwen held a hand towards him... and then Peter rammed his other fist into the web-shooter as hard as he could. Once the shooter was nice and crumpled, he fired.

KER-SPLOOSH. Gwen was engulfed in a glob of webbing, giving her a nice, bouncy landing on the street. Spidey landed next to her and dug her face out of the goop.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” she said breathlessly. “A little sticky, but yeah.”

Back in the air, the Green Goblin gave an aside glance. “Ugh, what a cheap cop-out.”

But back on the ground, though, Spider-Man was a bit too busy crushing Gwen with his arms to notice. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry...”

“It’s not your fault,” Gwen murmured.

But the hug-session was ended by the hum of an approaching glider. “Getting a little handsy with the damsel there, aren’t you, Spider-Man? Shame on you! She could have a boyfriend for all you know. Or... actually...” The Goblin gave his pointy chin a scratch. “...maybe you do know that.”

“Give it a rest, Harry!” Spider-Man yelled. “You're not the Green Goblin – You're just a kid who got high on crazy juice. You've barely even had time to learn how to use all your gadgets! You think I can't take you?”

“Well, considering those four Ravencroft escapees kicked your butt-”

“THAT WAS A FLUKE.”

“Keep telling yourself that.” The Goblin held up a pumpkin bomb. “Thanks for webbing my dear Gwendolyn in place, by the way. I do so hate a moving target.”

“Then you’ll LOVE me!” Out of nowhere, something smacked into the Goblin's glider, sending him spinning.

“Oh, this day keeps getting better and better.” Spidey, Gwen, and the handful of parade-goers too stupid to run all gazed up at the sky. There was now a second glider-riding goblin hovering across from the Green Goblin. An oranger, hob-iER goblin.
“Sorry, kid.” The Hobgoblin held up a pumpkin bomb of his own. “This town's not big enough for the both of us, and, frankly, you give the rest of us goblins a bad name.”

“There's more of you?” groaned Spider-Man. But he didn't have time to stand around whining. While the Green Goblin was distracted, Spidey ripped Gwen out of her web-cocoon. “Go! Now!”

Gwen hesitated for a moment, then kissed Peter through the mask before running off into the safety of the crowd. Good, good. Now Peter could breathe.

Spider-Man hopped onto a skyscraper directly beside the patch of sky the goblins were circling. “Hobgoblin, what are you doing here?” he called out. “Tryouts for the Legion of Losers were last week!”

“Sorry, Wall-Crawler, your death will have to wait until I take out this sorry excuse for a goblin.” Hobgoblin started to heave his pumpkin.

“Wait, wait!” The Green Goblin held out his hands. “I propose a temporary truce until we've taken down the Web-Head.”

Hobgoblin lowered his arm. “Hmm... A tempting offer...”

“Hey, wait a minute!” Spidey turned to the Hobgoblin. “Maybe I propose a temporary truce until we've taken down the Green Goblin?”

Green Goblin turned to Spider-Man. “How about you and I have a temporary truce until we've taken down the Hobgoblin?”

“Okay, now I'm confused,” said Spider-Man. “Anyone got a flow chart?”

“I have a better suggestion,” said Hobgoblin. “How about EVERYONE KILLS EVERYONE ELSE?”

Both Spidey and Green Goblin dodged a flood of pumpkin bombs.

“Works for me.” Green Goblin reached into his pouch.

“I hate you guys,” said Spider-Man.

“Well, maybe you'll like my GREEN GOO?” The Green Goblin hurled a canister at Spidey, who hopped off the skyscraper to dodge. The canister hit the window and exploded into slime.

“They're called Gob-webs!” Spider-Man did a backflip, kicked Harry in the face, then fired his one working webshooter and swung to another building. “Sheesh, Norman had way more style than you. Can't you at least speak in rhyme or something?”

Meanwhile, back on the ground, a big black dot formed in the middle of the crowd. “Beware, people of New York!” Out popped the Spot. “The Spider-Man Revenge Squad is here to ruin St. Patrick's-” That's when the Spot spotted the pair of supervillains hurling bombs every which way.

“John?” The Kangaroo stuck his head out the black dot. “What's going-?”

“Back in the portal! Back in the portal!”

Back in the air, the goblins were circling Spidey's spot on the wall. Oh, this was going to end well...
“I’ve had just about enough of both of you.” The Hobgoblin reached into his purse and retrieved a pumpkin bomb the size of a basketball – or an actual pumpkin, come to think of it. The thing was so huge, he needed both hands to heave it over his head. “I’ve been saving this one.”

“Oh, lookie here.” Green Goblin pulled out one of his own. “So have I.”

Hobgoblin rolled his eyes. “Copycat.”

“Hi pot, I’m kettle.”

“Ladies, ladies, please, can’t you both just get along?”

Both goblin heads snapped towards Spider-Man.

The Green Goblin grinned. “If you insist.”

Both bombs went hurtling towards one tiny, spidery target.

“Allez-oop!” In the span of seconds, Spidey sprang into the air, webbed both bombs with one strand, and swung them into the center of the goblins. The bombs burst into green gas with an earsplitting shriek. Both gliders were sent spiraling out of control, crash-landing on the nearest rooftops and flinging their riders onto the pavement.

“Wow, you Norman-wannabees keep finding new and creative ways to utterly fail to impress me.” The moment he touched down on the roof, Spidey wasted no time webbing the unconscious Hobgoblin into a cocoon.

He went for the green one next, but it turned out the guy wasn’t down for the count yet. “I’m afraid you won’t be unmasking me this time, Spider-Man!” He stumbled backwards, firing some finger-laser warning shots.

“Why bother?” said Spidey, effortlessly dodging. “Doesn’t take a rocket scientist to guess you’re Harry Osborn.”

“Well, you’re hardly one to talk, Pete, old buddy, old pal.” The Green Goblin lobbed one last pumpkin bomb.

“Wow, that is, like, the least creative guess you could possibly make.” But a quick web detonated it in midair. “Wanna change it, or is that your final answer?”

“Please, a blind goblin could see how you were hugging Gwenny just now. And frankly, this twist is just too deliciously ironic not to be true.”

“Ooh, here’s some more evidence for you – Do these feel like Peter Parker’s knuckles?” Crack. One burst of spider-speed later, and the second Goblin was down for the count.

Over. It was over. Spider-Man stood hunched over on the roof a minute, hands on his knees, panting. Perfect. Now if he ever mentioned his former best friend who wanted to kill him for being Spider-Man, Peter would have to specify which one. That was… That was just sad, frankly.

“Alright, I’m pretty sure I know who ‘Goblin Jr.’ is.” Spider-Man walked over to the Hobgoblin. “But Donald Menken’s in Ryker’s, so…” He tugged off the mask. “You?” Spidey nearly did a pratfall. The person wearing the Hobgoblin costume this time was a young, confused-looking Asian man. “Ned Lee?”
“Wh-What's going on...?” Ned lifted his head and looked around in a daze. “Where am I?”

Oh man, that’s how Menken had acted right after being unmasked, too. Spidey had assumed it was just his lame excuse to plead innocent, but, come on, there's no way the dorky guy who hit on Betty Brant was a supervillain. Looked like someone was brainwashing people into being Hobgoblins. But who? And why?

The sound of police sirens hit Spider-Man's ears. He gave Ned a sympathetic wince. “I, uh, hope you've got a good lawyer, dude.”

A white-haired man leaned back in his desk chair. He wore a highly fashionable designer suit, and in his hand he clutched a perfume bottle. The man took a deep whiff.

“All wrong.” He handed it back to his terrified-looking secretary. “Start over from scratch.” The secretary obediently scurried off.

“Sir.” As soon as she left, another man in a suit entered the room. “Spider-Man apprehended both goblins – ours and the unidentified one. He left Ned Lee for the police, but he took off with the Green Goblin. We couldn't track him.”

The man at the desk shut his eyes and brought a hand to his temple. “When am I going to learn? If you want something done right...”

This wasn't the first time Harry had been left sprawled across his penthouse sofa in a Green Goblin costume. Peter couldn't help but feel sorry for him. First Harry was Green Goblin, then he wasn’t, and then he was. Poor guy. It was like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Once Gwen dumped him and Harry relapsed on the Green, something in his drug-addled brain must have convinced him this was his destiny.

Maybe it was a little unfair to leave poor brainwashed Ned for the police and bring Harry back home, but on the other hand, Peter didn't know for a fact Ned had been brainwashed. For all he knew, Ned really was a bomb-throwing maniac. Best to leave that one to the legal system. Harry, on the other hand, had been in this situation before.

“Spider-Man.” Mrs. Osborn brought a hand to her eyes. “You've saved my son. I... I can't thank you enough.”

“Don’t mention it.” Spider-Man had perched himself on the back of the couch with his arms and legs folded like a frog’s. When he was in costume, standing normally felt kinda wrong. “But, uh, speaking of not mentioning things... Harry seemed to think his friend Peter Parker was- was me.”

Harry’s mom took this in silently.

“Guess he didn’t read the Bugle’s big front page article debunking all that.” Spidey hung his head. “But, uh, I feel really bad for the Parker kid, y’know? The media’s hounded him enough... It’s like if everyone thought Jimmy Olsen was Superman. So, err, pardon the alliteration, but I pity Peter Parker.” Spider-Man paused. “Man, I wish that experience had taught him to quit following me with that stupid camera, though. I swear, that kid’s such a loser. Err, don’t tell him I said that.”

Harry’s mom gave the faintest hint of a smile. “You don’t have to worry, Spider-Man. The truth is, Harry’s always envied Peter, so I can understand why he’d think that.”

“Oh-Well, Harry’s clearly had a break with reality, so...”
There was a solemn silence as the two of them watched Harry’s chest rise and fall. His mom had given him an anesthetic so he wouldn't hurt himself.

A heavy sigh escaped Mrs. Osborn’s lips. “Looks like it's back to Europe for more therapy from Dr. Hamilton.”

“Yeah, and try and keep a closer eye on him this time.” Spider-Man made for the window. “Any clue where Harry found the suit and the glider and the crazy juice?”

She shook her head. “Norman must have hidden a stash somewhere.”


“Don't you worry,” Mrs. Osborn said, stroking her son's cheek. “I intend to.”
Antagonist

With the goblins of both the Green and Hob variety taken care of, it was finally time for Peter and Gwen to have that long, long, long long, long talk and then make out.

“Alright, Peter.” Captain Stacy loomed behind Gwen, his hands on her shoulders, and gave Peter a look that made his blood run cold. “You owe my daughter and me an explanation.”

Okay, Peter wasn't feeling too optimistic about the “making out” part happening.

He nosily swallowed his cold pizza (courtesy of the Stacy household's fridge). “Can't we just go back to that thing where you know my secret and I know you know my secret, but we both pretend we don't know we know?”

Gwen's dad folded his arms. “That bridge was crossed when one of your rogues gallery blew up the wall of my house.”

Gwen buried her face in her arm. “I'm gonna smell like peanut butter.”

“You kinda already do.” The remark earned him The Look. “Not that there's anything wrong with that!” Peter threw his hands up innocently. “I mean, it's better than cutting off your hair. When I was first making that stuff, I ended up smelling like peanut butter, like, always.”

“Hmm.” Gwen's dad leaned in to examine the mix of gray and brown goop in Gwen's hair. “I'd always thought your webs were organic.”

"Why does everybody think that?" Peter said under his breath. Aloud, he said, “No, no, it's an adhesive formula my dad was working on before the... y'know...” He faltered. “…the plane crash.”

“Must be expensive to make so much.”

“Like you wouldn't believe.” Peter took another look over Gwen. Even her jacket still had traces of webbing on it – though luckily, it’d would come right off in the washer. “I've got a version that dissolves after an hour, but that's for leisure-swinging only. I'm really paranoid I'm gonna web a crook upside down to a lamp post one day, and then the police will take over an hour to get there, and splat.”

Gwen's dad walked around the kitchen table to grab a slice from the box. “But besides the webs, your abilities are innate?”

“Yeah, I, uh...” Peter fidgeted in his seat. “I was bit by a spider, and it gave me spider-powers.”

Gwen's dad stared at him.

“That sounded less stupid in my head,” said Peter.

“Where did this spider... come from?” Something told Peter the man was only humoring him.

“It was a magic spider,” Peter said immediately. “Right before it died, it passed on its totem energy to-”

“You know what? I don't even want to know.” Gwen's dad pressed a palm to his forehead. “Fine, you got spider-powers, and then you decided to run around the city in your pajamas.”
Peter's face stiffened. “It's a wrestling costume.”

“Oh, is *that* why it’s so colorful?” spoke up Gwen.

“I like my costume!”

“All I said was it’s colorful-!”

*The wrestling*, Peter, “came a third, sharper voice.

“Right, right. I, uh, tried to make some money at first-”

“-but then your uncle was murdered and you developed a vendetta against crime,” finished Gwen's dad. “I know, Peter. Walter Hardy was the first criminal Spider-Man ever caught. I put two and two together.”

Peter stayed silent, his eyes fixed firmly on his pizza slice.

“Does your aunt know about this?”

Peter shook his head. “I can't tell her. If she knew I was risking my life every day, all that stress topped with her heart problems...”

“And she'd probably try to make you stop, which you clearly have no intention of doing.” Gwen's dad met Peter's eyes. “Listen, Peter, I would tell you being a vigilante and fighting supervillains is insane and you're going to get yourself killed... if you weren't so good at it. There are more times than I'd like to admit when the NYPD was helpless against opponents Spider-Man took out with ease. I can't in good conscience encourage you to keep doing this, but I doubt there's anything I could do or say to get you to quit.”

Peter shrank in his seat. “And you're not going to tell on me?”

Gwen's dad shook his head. “If Spider-Man's identity got out, an army of supervillains would be at your doorstep waiting to kill your friends, your family... your girlfriend.” He shot Gwen a painfully unsubtle look. “All I can do is pray for the day when Spider-Man isn't needed. The police shouldn't have to rely on a child. It's like nature is pumping out superhumans faster than society can adapt to them.”

Peter's brow creased. “There's nothing natural about it. I don't know for a fact, but I'm, like, ninety-nine percent sure Oscorp's behind all this. I mean, Norman didn't strike me as the most ethical guy ever even before he became a crazy supervillain.”

Gwen's dad nodded. “We'll launch an investigation.” He took a bite of pizza. “I take it everything the Bugle says about you is lies?”

“Oh yes.” Peter scowled. “Jameson lives in a special world where he's always exactly right and other viewpoints don't exist.”

“Then why don't you sell pictures to the Daily Globe instead?” asked Gwen.

“Oh, y'know, exclusive contract, better pay, and it throws off suspicion...”

“Wait.” A smirk crossed Gwen's face. “When the Bugle ran that piece on why you're not Spider-Man, wasn't their damning evidence the fact that Spider-Man wouldn't be stupid enough to dress as himself for Halloween?”
“Exactly.” Peter smirked back. “It was so stupid, it was smart.”

Just then, Captain Stacy patted his shoulder from behind. Peter nearly flinched. “This is umpteenth time you've saved my daughter's life. I owe you more than you can imagine. Gwen's the only family I have left.”

Peter looked to Gwen. “I thought you had relatives in England?”

She glanced away, the humor draining from her face. “On my mom's side. We haven't really seen them since she... yknow....”

Gwen's dad glanced away. "It's getting late. We need to find a hotel."

"You can stay with us," said Peter.

"We wouldn't want to impose-"

"No, no, Aunt May loves company."

Alright! Gwen was staying over! Maybe making out was on the table after all?

There came a rap on the bedroom door. “Peter! What did we say about hanky panky?”

“Aunt May!” Peter and Gwen hurriedly peeled themselves off each other, then scrambled to unlock the door.

Simultaneously, Gwen said, “We were only studying, Mrs. Parker!” and Peter said, “We were only doing the hanky without the panky!”

Gwen’s eyes snapped towards him.

“What?” said Peter.

“No more shenanigans, you two. I'm warning you now, I know about everything that goes on in this household.” Aunt May smiled and shook her head, then turned for the stairs.

“Yeah, Aunt May,” Peter called after her. “Nothing gets past you.”

Gwen snickered. “Peter.”

Peter re-locked his door. “Well, both our legal guardians have lectured us for being alone in a room together, which means by law, we're now officially dating.”

“This is crazy.” Gwen sat herself on Peter's bed. “It’s like I’m dating a rock star.”

“Yeah, just like a rock star.” A smirk crossed Peter’s lips. “Except for the money, the fame.”

“I’m serious. Everyone at school loves you!”

Peter laughed. “Last I checked, it was mostly just Flash. Which is worse than no one loving me.”

Didn’t seem like she’d heard him – Gwen’s eyes were glazed over. “Ooh, ooh, take me web-swinging!”

“What? No!”
“Come on!”

“It’s- It’s dangerous.” Peter glanced aside, then muttered, “You’ve been dropped to your death enough times already...”

“Peter...” Her hand was on his arm. Honestly, Peter had thought there’d be an initial period of awkwardness like he’d had with Liz, but it turned out he and Gwen had gotten used to the physical contact right away. “I promise you I’m alright. There wasn’t one second where I didn’t think you’d catch me.”

“W-Well, I’m glad you’re okay...” A sigh escaped Peter’s mouth. “Speaking of dangerous, we're lucky Aunt May didn't see you when you had web fluid all over your hair.” He sat down next to her and gave Gwen's shiny, clean hair a whiff. “Mmm, peanut butter.”

“Stop it!” Gwen blushed and jerked away, laughing.

“You know what?” Peter put an arm around her. “I've been dating you for, like, five minutes, and it's already so much better than dating Liz.”

“Darn straight.”

“I mean it,” said Peter. “I felt like garbage every minute I was with her. You can't believe how glad I am you found out I'm Spider-Man. For once in my life, I can actually be honest with someone.”

“I do appreciate the honesty.” Gwen smirked. “I never would have guessed you were bitten by a magical spider. But as long as we're being 'honest' with each other, I should probably tell you about my secret love affair with Norman Osborn.”

“Okay, okay, it wasn't really a magic spider-totem.” Peter rolled his eyes. “That'd be stupid. I'm pretty sure Connors made the spiders as part of his cross-species genetics experiments. I just didn't want to mention that to your dad because then, y'know, the next logical question would be, 'Why would Dr. Connors want to give humans the properties of animals?' and then, 'Say, did Dr. Connors ever mutate himself into a horrific lizard person, by any chance?'”

“So what you’re saying is, if I snuck a spider out of its enclosure the next time I’m at the lab and goaded it into biting me...?”

“...you’d probably get, like, a couple ounces more spider venom than I did, and you’d grow pincers or something.” Peter ruffled her hair, turning it a bit closer to how it used to look.

“You know, you still shouldn't have sold those Lizard pics to the Bugle,” said Gwen. “Being Spider-Man doesn't excuse that.”

Peter cringed. “I know, I know, I just... I needed the money, and sometimes that has a way of stopping you from seeing straight.”

“I forgive you.” A distant look overtook Gwen’s eyes. “Guess Eddie doesn’t, though...”

“It’s not his fault. Whatever that alien symbiote thing is, it feeds on negative emotions. Hate is its favorite food.” Peter took a breath. “Anyways, besides selling those pic, I haven't told anyone about the Lizard. I mean, you haven't either, right?”

Gwen fiddled with her nonexistent glasses again. “I told... my therapist.”

Peter raised an eyebrow. “Giant lizard monsters sounds like one of those things they have to break
confidentiality for.”

Gwen went pale. “I left it vague. Didn't mention Connors by name. You're the one who put the Lizard's pictures in the paper! It's not like people didn't know there was a giant reptile running around.”

“It's okay, it's okay.” Peter squeezed her hand. “No one blames you for needing to tell a therapist. Pretty much everyone in New York could use some therapy nowadays. Just, uh, don't mention what I do in my free time, okay? Spider-Man's a suspected criminal. They'd have to report me.”

Gwen brought a palm to his cheek. “You could use one, too.”

Peter gave her a wry smile. “A therapist would be nice, but I'd rather have a phone and electricity.”

“Maybe my dad could-?”

“Sorry, the Parkers don't accept charity. Ben would be rolling in his grave.”

“That's right.” Gwen withdrew her hand, then shut her eyes. “Your uncle. Was my dad right? Is that why you're fighting crime?” Silence. “It's okay if you don’t want to talk about it-”

“No, Gwen…” There was a sharp intake of air. “I don’t want to keep anything from you anymore. Truth is…” Maybe he was a bit awkward about physical contact after all. “…part of the reason I didn’t tell you I was Spider-Man right away was because… Spider-Man did something horrible.”

Concern wrinkled Gwen’s brow.

“When I realized I had spider-powers, the first thing I wanted to do was call you and Harry and show off and stuff, but I was scared that if word got out, I’d be snatched up by a black helicopter or something… and then I found this ad for masked wrestling, and I thought I could make some money without showing my face, but the wrestling guy tricked me and he wouldn’t pay up, and then he got robbed, and I could've stopped the burglar, but I didn't because I was too busy being an angry teenager, and then that same burglar went and killed Uncle Ben for his stupid car. And if Aunt May ever learned that…”

The words came so fast. Peter had never said them aloud before, but he’d gone over them in his head more times than he could count. “So I guess my point is, your dad’s right in saying I wear a mask to protect my loved ones, but- but I also kinda wear it to protect myself.” Out of sheer curiosity, he looked up at Gwen.

She’d have passed for a wax sculpture.

Peter took a breath. “What happened to Uncle Ben is my fault, and… I’ve never told that to another human being before.” See, he’d excluded alien symbiotes, so that was technically true. “Ben had this saying – With great power, there must also come great responsibility. Pretty sure he was talking about puberty, but it applies to superheroes, too.”

One second, there was silence.

“God, Peter.” The next, Gwen’s arms were doing their best boa constrictor impression. “It's okay… It's okay… You made a mistake. That doesn't make it your job to fight every single bad guy in the world. You don’t have to do that to yourself-”

“No, you don't get it!” Peter wrenched himself free. “Even if that burglar hadn't just so happened to kill Uncle Ben, he'd have killed someone else, and I could've easily stopped him. Let's say I hang
up the tights, and then one day I turn on the news to see that some random bystander was squished by the Rhino while I was at home eating Doritos – How am I supposed to live with myself?"

“But-

“Your dad said it himself, Spider-Man can beat bad guys the police can’t. Don’t I have an obligation to-?”

He was cut off by incredulous laughter. “Obligation? You sound exactly like him-” Horror crossed Gwen’s eyes. “Oh my god, what if that’s, like, subconsciously the reason I’m into you?”

Peter managed a laugh. “Probably best not to dwell on that.”

Gwen laughed, too. Then, gently, she brought her palms to his cheeks. “Listen, Peter, I understand where you’re coming from. Better than most people, really. My dad feels the exact same way as you. So if you want to keep throwing yourself headfirst into danger… I’m not going to stop you.”

“If it's any consolation,” said Peter, “the most dangerous criminals at large right now are the Legion of Losers.”

“You mean the furries that kicked your butt?”

“...Yes.”

“I’m teasing, I’m teasing.” Her eyes met the floor. “Seriously, though, Peter, what you’re doing for people is- I mean, the number of lives you’ve saved...” She was at a loss for words. “You’re the best person ever.”

A smile forced itself on Peter’s mouth. “I don’t see how that could be true when you’re standing right here.”

Gwen made a noise between a bird’s coo and a baby’s gurgle. Peter got the impression it was involuntary. “I should warn you, Parker, I happen to be extremely vulnerable to mushy stuff.”

“Oh?” That smile on Peter’s mouth had grown a mite more devious. “Well, isn’t that useful information?”

Gwen laughed again, but then she fell silent. “So you’ve… you’ve seriously never told anyone about your uncle?”

Peter smiled. “No one but you.”

Gwen smiled back, but hers didn't quite reach her eyes. “Well, you don't have to be the only one with guilt on their shoulders. It's my fault Harry snapped. I tried to break up with him, and...” That smile had been on its last legs. “...it didn't go well. If I'd just been more patient with him-”

“Harry's a drug addict who guilt-tripped you into staying with him. That doesn't make you responsible for his- his-” Peter sighed. “I'm sorry, but that's a really stupid thing to feel guilty about.”

“Well, I think yours is a stupid thing to feel guilty about.” Gwen leaned in close. “How about this? I won't let myself drown in angst if you don’t.”

“Sounds fair...” Peter leaned in, too. “Hey, Gwen?”

“Yeah?” she said, barely audible.
“Y’know how you said you like mushy stuff?”

“Yeah. What about i-?”

“I love you.”

Gwen’s laughter was intercut with a few sniffles. “W-Well, guess that’s about as mushy as you can get.” She hurriedly wiped her eyes on her sleeve. “This probably goes without saying at this point, but… I love you, too.”

Their lips were millimeters apart when a rapping came from the other side of the door. “That’s enough for tonight, Casanova!”

“Aunt May!” The lovers promptly toppled over each other. “How do you DO that?”

“No, Ned would never have done something like this! Trust me, I’ve...” Betty Brant’s cheeks reddened the slightest amount. “I’ve been to his apartment. He’s a completely normal guy. He wouldn’t even know where to get a goblin costume.”

“Thank you for your time, ma’am.” Sergeant Dewolff turned her attention to Jameson, who was slouched back in his chair. He seemed more interested in his cigar than the conversation at hand. “And do you have anything to add?”

“Last I heard from ‘em, Lee was gonna investigate some shady perfume factory.”

Dewolff turned to her partner. “Sounds like Kingsley.”

Sergeant Carter snorted and made for the elevator. “You’re grasping at straws. Why is it so hard to accept that this guy snapped, put on a costume, and started killing people?”

“How often does that actually happen?” scoffed Dewolff, following after him.

“It’s not unheard of.”

“Maybe if his family was gunned down by mobsters or something...”

“I think it’s ready.” Peter stood up from the chair at his workstation and proudly held out the fruit of their labors. Between his thumb and forefinger was a red, pea-sized doodad shaped like the logo on Spider-Man's back. “Our combined brainpower's expanding Spidey's arsenal. See, dating you's paying off already.”

“And these things really work?” Gwen was standing on the other side of the basement's table, which was piled with identical spider-shaped doodads. In her hands, Gwen held a modified GPS.

“She’s not that far off the mark.”

“Yeah, just flip the switch, and they emit a frequency that I can track with my powers.” Specifically, the tracers made Peter’s spider-sense tingle harder the closer he got to them, though Peter felt the spider-sense was a bit of an advanced topic to be getting into this early in the relationship. “If I found the one you hid in the toilet bowl, I think I can find these things anywhere in Manhattan.”

Peter set to work stowing the spider-tracers and switch away in his utility belt. The red ones were for sticking on bad guys, while the special blue one was to remain on the Web-Head’s person at all times. If Peter was idle for longer than half an hour anywhere besides at home, school, or work,
it'd set off an alarm on Gwen's modified GPS, which would then broadcast his location to her. Though honestly, they'd made that one more out of Peter's desire to have a more “Batman-like” utility belt rather than any legitimate concerns for his safety.

“Peter!” Right on schedule, there was a rapping on the basement door. “I don't want you to be late to school because you were too busy gazing into your lover's eyes.”

“Coming, Aunt May!” Peter stuffed his costume into his backpack, then took Gwen's hand. “Hey, uh, how much longer till your house is fixed?”

“Well, after the Master Planner fiasco, my dad made sure to get some 'superhero insurance' from those Damage Control guys. They're rebuilding the wall pretty fast, all things considered.” She laughed. “Why? Anxious to get rid of me?”

“Nah, I'm just used to web-swinging to school, but I don't want to ditch you every morning. You know I love having you around to help with my superheroics.”

“Just don't expect me to sew up your costume.”

“Don't worry, I'm good. Not to brag, but I'm kind of an embroidery master.”

“Wow, it gets torn that much?”

“What? No, I could sew before the spider bite.”

“...Why?”

“I think I had this masochistic thing where I was looking for reasons for Flash to give me a wedgie.”

Smythe hummed to himself. It wasn't the loudest humming ever, yet it echoed around the walls of the abandoned police station above. It was deadly quiet in here. Currently, Smythe was lounging around the secret laboratory, rocking his hoverchair back and forth. One of these days, he really needed to install an MP3 player in this thing...

After approximately forever, the phone rang. Smythe answered it with more enthusiasm than he'd expected. “Hello?”

“Are you in position?” The sharp, metallic voice of Emily Osborn assaulted his ears.

“I've been in position for hours,” said Smythe. “Where have you been?”

“My son and I are boarding a flight out of the country.”

Smythe was glad this wasn't a video call. Mrs. Osborn probably wouldn't have appreciated the smugness on his face. “Because your son lost to Spider-Man?”

“Like I ever expected him to win. That was meant as a teaching experience.” For the briefest of moments, the metallic quality was replaced with something bouncier. “You're to continue producing super-mercenaries as normal. We have to be unrelenting – Spider-Man's bound to wear down eventually.”

“So do I have permission to go all-out against the Wall-Crawler, then?”

“As long as there's enough corpse left for Warren to work with, yes.” The phone call abruptly
Smythe grinned from ear to ear. “Finally, we do things my way.” He knew exactly why the dozens of past supervillains had failed to kill Spider-Man – human error. Well, he wouldn't be having any of that. Smythe pressed a button on his armrest. A minute later, a swarm of robots scurried into the lab. These looked about the same as the ones he'd used to threaten Harry, only they had ten times the weaponry and were the size of horses.

Next, Smythe brought up some holographic displays of various web pages. Judging from all the social media sightings Smythe had been logging, Spider-Man was most frequently seen in the region from Midtown to the edge of Queens, and he chiefly operated in very brief intervals of the day. He either had a job with long hours... or he was a high school student with an after-school job and a curfew.

“Hmm...” Smythe glanced at one of the video feeds, which displayed a black monster with a white spider logo on its chest. The video footage was being played backwards and forwards to look like the creature was dancing.

He'd given the matter a great deal of thought, and in the end, Smythe seriously doubted this Parker kid was Spider-Man.

“Spider-Slayers, go to Midtown Manhattan Magnet High School and kill Peter Parker.”

But it couldn't hurt to be thorough.
Falling Action

This would become the stuff of Midtown legend for millennia to come. The day Puny Parker walked into class holding Studious Stacy's hand. The whole room was sent into an uproar of whispers.

“Eww, nerd love!” said Sally in the softest voice she was capable of (which was still audible from the other side of the school).

“Ha! They must really be getting desperate if they're hooking up with each other, am I right?” Kong leaned over in his desk to nudge Flash in the gut.

Flash opened his mouth, but then someone behind him cleared his throat. Sha Shan, Glory, and Rand were all giving their partners dry stares.

“It's, uh, whatever, man,” said Flash stiffly. “None of my business who Puny—” Sha Shan raised an eyebrow. “-I mean Regular, Non-Puny Parker wants to date.”

On the far side of the room, Mary Jane watched Peter and Gwen with a content smile. Across from her, Liz quietly snapped a pencil in half.

“...Well, I don't think the goblins, Man-Wolf, and Morbius are connected, but whoever sent Scorpion and Hydro-Man after me is still out there.” Peter shook his head. Currently, he was seated at one of Midtown High’s outdoor picnic tables, and Gwen was seated in a significantly closer proximity than usual. “But what am I supposed to do, go snooping around Oscorp tower in my bright red and blue spandex?”

“Are we sure it's Oscorp-related?” asked Gwen. “Don't we have any other suspects?”

“Well, Miles Warren is kind of a creep,” said Peter. “He says he didn't want to turn John into Man-Wolf, but I don't know if I believe him. And wasn't Warren recommended to the ESU lab by Norman? He could be in league with Oscorp.”

“I'm not sure.” Gwen's brow furrowed. “He seems like an alright person to me, but then, I wouldn't have pegged Norman as the Green Goblin type, eith—”

“Gwen.” Mid-sentence, Peter grabbed her arm. “Something's wrong.”

Her head spun his way. “What? How do you know?”

“My spider-sense is tingling.”

“Your what is what?”

“I've got precognition. It's one of my spider-powers.”

“That's not a spider-power!”

“It's- Look, that's not important. I might need to change into costume. Let me know when the danger happens so everyone's distracted—”

The schoolyard filled with screams.
“I think that's right now,” said Gwen.

“What's going on?” Every other student was fleeing in the same direction, so, naturally, Peter and Gwen ran the opposite way. What they found were half a dozen killer robots marching towards the school's front doors. Think the Mars Rover mixed with giant, mechanical crabs, only instead of pincers, they had buzzsaws and rocket launchers.

The instant Peter drew near, the camera-turret “head” of each robot shot towards him. His spider-sense blared louder than the school's fire alarms. “Oh poop.”

The next instant, he was tackling Gwen out of the way as a flood of missiles shot towards them. There was a deafening explosion, leaving the far wall in pieces. “Did it-?” Peter looked back, but thankfully no students seemed to have been injured. In fact, the robots were kind of ignoring them.

“I think they're after me.” Peter hissed. “Run!”

Gwen didn't need to be told twice. As soon as she was properly fleeing in terror, Peter ducked behind a back alley. A minute later, on a completely unrelated note, Spider-Man sprang out of a back alley to land in the center of the killer robot swarm.

“Aww man, robots? I had these hilarious quips planned, but they'd be wasted on you.” Spidey backflipped into a robot and rammed his legs through its hull. That seemed to sufficiently break it, so next up he hopped out, then ripped off its buzzsaw arm and hurled it into another bot. “Tsk, tsk, these things are fragile. Mysterio would not be impressed.”

Next up, Spidey webbed a robot and swung it into another one, causing both of them to explode in a sick fireball. The next robot got the bright idea to launch its rockets. In the span of seconds, Spider-Man bounced into the air, webbed the rockets, and returned them to the sender.

Only one robot left. Spider-Man wagged his hands in a “come at me, bro” gesture. The robot spun around, activated a jet in its underbelly, and took off into the air.

“Oh no, it's getting away,” said Spider-Man. “If only I had some way to follow it.”

Smythe watched the holographic monitor, muttering to himself. “Stupid mass production models…”

It was at this point that the last Spider-Slayer limped back into the secret lab. Smythe groaned as he hovered towards it. “At least you got away. Looks like I underestimated Spider-Man's strength. He must've been pulling his punches in all those videos I studied... Wait.” He leaned down to pull something off the Slayer. It was a tiny red spider-shaped doodad stuck to the robot's shell with a dab of webbing.

Smythe stared at it for a solid minute. “Bollocks.”

Wham. “‘Bollocks,' he says!” The front door had quite literally been kicked down, allowed good old Spider-Man to spring into the lab. “I've always wanted to fight an evil Brit! Dude, you should totally team up with Montana. I would die to hear you two having a conversation-”

“Die?” Smythe spun his chair towards him. “That can be arranged.”

“Okay, I walked right into that one.” Spidey ducked the Spider-Slayer's buzzsaw, then punched it from beneath, smashing clear through the steel. “Hey, I gotta thank you for sending robots after me. It's not often I get to wail on someone without worrying about pesky little things like
'hospitals' and 'homicide.'” He drew into a fighting stance. “So I take it you're the one who sent Scorpion and Hydro-Man after me?”

“Bingo. And I take it you really are Peter Parker, then?” Smythe looked bemused. “Or at least you go to his school?”

“Oh, well, since you asked nicely, let me just tell you every last detail about my secret identity.” A thought struck Spider-Man. “Wait, so you weren't positive that Parker kid was me, but you sent robots after him anyways?”

Smythe shrugged. “What's a few extra dead children in the grand scheme of things?”

At this, Peter found his fist clenching. Perfect. So now, thanks to Venom the blabbermouth, Peter had put countless kids in danger just for having the misfortune of attending the same high school as him… just like he'd put everyone in the Daily Bugle in danger from the Rhino just because Peter hadn’t initially thought to have himself credited anonymously for his Spidey pics. Even with the mask on his face, Peter endangered the people he cared about just by putting them in the proximity of Spider-Man.

Time to clean up his mess. “I'm glad you said that. Now I won't feel bad about beating up a cripple.”

“Cripple?” Smythe chuckled to himself. “Is that what you think?”

Spidey brought his hands to his hips. “You're not just sitting in that sci-fi wheelchair for fun, are you?”

“No, my legs are like a pair of cinder blocks.” A sudden earnestness gripped Smythe's voice. “But I suppose I've never seen myself as a cripple. When I was first paralyzed, my dear old dad told me to think of it less like I was losing my legs...” He pressed a button on his armrest. “…and more like I was gaining the opportunity to turn myself into an indestructible cyborg.”

Before Spidey could so much as flinch, the hoverchair transformed. Its pieces unraveled and wrapped themselves around Smythe’s body until every inch of him was metal-plated. For a moment, he remained hovering in the air, but then he slammed into the ground, forming a crater.... and pulled himself out of it on his own two legs.

"Dude," said Spider-Man, "my dad told me the same thing about puberty!"

“Single file, everyone! We need to do a roll call.”

Apparently, the school had decided robot attacks were about the equivalent of a fire drill. As soon as the swarm of bots were gone, students poured out of the building, herded into lines by their teachers. Gwen found herself led away by Professor Warren.

“Dude, c’mon, between this and the Venom thing, it’s so obvious!” Flash was saying to Kong in a delighted whisper from off to the side. “The robots are attacking because Spider-Man goes to our school. And I bet I know who he is!”

It took everything in Gwen’s power to keep her heart from bursting clean out her chest.

Flash leaned in to whisper, “It's Hobie Brown. It's always the quiet one. And, like, I keep catching him sneaking out during lunch, and one time I swear I saw him stuffing his costume in his backpack!”
Oh. False alarm. Gwen’s heart had almost burst for nothing.

Soon enough, the pair of meatheads scurried off to see if they could sneak away to the parking lot in all the confusion, meaning Gwen was alone on the school lawn. Well, okay, not alone – She was surrounded by fellow students. Just friendless.

“Are you okay?” Until a certain redhead threw her arms around her.

“Y-Yeah,” said a dazed Gwen. “I’m fine, Mary Jane. I don’t think the robots are attacking kids.”

At this, MJ drew back, looking as sheepish as the full-time fox was capable of. “I’m not talking about the killer robots, I’m talking about the killer goblin that blew up your house!”

“Oh.” Gwen shrank. “You know about that?”

Actually, it turned out Mary Jane was capable of looking a teeny bit more sheepish. “W-Well, the news said your house was attacked, and it also said that goblin guy abducted a blonde girl, and, y’know, I recognized that designer jacket I gave you.”

“I’m okay.” Gwen hugged her back. “That’s sweet of you to worry, though.” She let out a wry laugh. “Guess I can’t go twenty-four hours anymore without some crazy thing trying to kill me...”

“Hey, at least you got a heck of a consolation prize.” MJ gave Gwen’s arm a sudden punch. “Watching you and Tiger strut down the halls hand-in-hand was beyond cathartic.”

“Y-Yeah, guess I finally had enough near-death experiences to propel him into my arms...”

The remark, however, returned the frown to MJ’s face. “Why would the Green Goblin go out of his way to target you like that?”

“Oh, j-just because I’m the captain’s daughter, same as with the Doctor Octopus thing.” Gwen reply might have been a little too quick and a little too high because now MJ was giving her a look.

After a moment, though, MJ simply shrugged and said, “Guess you’ve got nothing to worry about, though. I’m noticing a trend of Spider-Man snatching you from danger. You could set your clock by how regularly Tiger swoops in to save you.”

A moment passed.

“You mean ‘Tiger’ as in Spider-Man, right? Not-?”

“Y-Yeah! It’s not like I’m only allowed to call one person ‘Tiger.’ It’s a nickname. That’s a thing I do. Nicknaming people.”

Another moment passed.

“I’m gonna go see if Lion is alright.” MJ wasted no time hurrying off through the crowd. “That’s my nickname for Glory. See? Normal thing I do for everyone!”

A mechanical monstrosity lurched towards our lovable hero.

“Well, you’re awfully glib for a dead man.” The eyepieces on Smythe’s helmet glowed yellow. “I hope you’re not harboring the illusion that I’ll go down as easily as those robots. I save all the best weaponry for myself. You could say I’m the Ultimate Spider-Slayer.”
“Ultimate? Hmm, not sure I like the sound of that. Why not try a better adjective, like, say, spectacu-?” Suddenly, a pair of turrets unfolded from Smythe's shoulders, and Spidey found himself dodging gunfire. “Ugh, when did my life become a bad Michael Bay movie?” Spider-Man pounced from one corner of the room to the next, a trail of bullets destroying every last desk, keyboard, and computer monitor in his wake. “And yes, I realize that was redundant.”

**Thwip.** Spidey webbed Smythe's eyes, then punched him in the chest. Unlike the regular Spider-Slayers, the Ultimate Slayer was barely dented.

“Nice try.” Smythe's eyes glowed even brighter, then fired a beam that melted the webs clean off. Spidey sprang up to the ceiling – which was good because the laser left a pretty big hole in the far wall.

“Laser-eyes, huh? Can't beat the classics.” Hmm, if this nut was too tough to crack, maybe Spider-Man could use his weight against him? “But I'm still not feeling 'Ultimate Spider-Slayer.'” Spidey kicked Smythe's legs out from underneath him, knocking him to the floor. Before he could get up, Spidey webbed him in place. “How 'bout 'Third-Rate Silvermane Knockoff?' Or is that too on the nose? Then how about-” Spider-Man raised his fist. “-**murderer?**"

He slammed it into Smythe's face. “**That's** for Flint Marko.”

“Wow, you must be a high schooler. No one else is that naïve.” Smythe was barely webbed down for a second before he ripped his way out. Jets erupted from his back and the bottom of his feet, launching him into the air. “Sandman was a lab accident, a random mistake that disrupted the balance of things, and so he had to die. Sound like any arachnid-themed boy scouts you know?”

His shoulder-turrets fired another found of bullets, but Spidey dodged with blinding speed. “I can do this all day, pal.”

“The only reason you're still alive is dumb luck!” spat Smythe. “You're not some master strategist – You're a stupid brat. Well, here's a reality check, kid – Maybe you found some clever way to beat the Rhino or Scorpion, but the instant I fire every explosive I've got at you, no amount of jumping around and cracking jokes will save you.” His shoulders unfolded to reveal even more missiles-launchers, while his palms began to glow, preparing to fire totally-not-Iron-Man's-repulsor-blasts. Spider-Man reading his dodging muscles. The blast radius might have been too big, but if he could reach the door... Wait, that was weird. His spider-sense wasn't tingling very-

**Clink, clank, clunk.** A canister rolled into the lab through the broken doorframe. Oh, okay, **now** his sense was tingling. **Bam.** The canister exploded, filling the room with gas. Spidey was agile enough to run through the door, but apparently the ultimateeness of the Ultimate Spider-Slayer didn't extend to agility. He toppled over, leaving his weapons safely inactive.

“Sorry for almost gassing you, Spider-Man.” Captain Stacy met Spidey in the hallway right as a SWAT team stormed past them.

“It's cool,” said Spider-Man. “What's a little tear gas between friends?”

“Tranquilizer gas, actually. It's our new procedure for dealing with supervillains.”

“Ah, taking some cues from my victory over Scorpion, are we?” A thought struck Spidey. “But aren't sedatives supposed to be taken in precise amounts? Aren't you worried about overdosing?”

“I'd rather rush a supervillain to the hospital than let him tear up the city.” Captain Stacy shook his head. “It's simple escalation. As the bad guys get more dangerous, so do we.”
“I guess so...”

“Smart of you to call me beforehand.” He gave the slightest smile. “I’d thought you were more the type to jump in all by yourself.”

Spider-Man smiled back. It wasn't really visible because of, y'know, the mask, but it was the thought that counted. “Well, I'm usually paranoid about the police tracking the call and figuring out my secret identity, but I guess something was different this time.” He glanced back at the lab, where the officers were busy wrenching an unconscious Smythe out of his armor. “You're lucky I went in first. This guy had, like, a wheelchair that turned into robot armor. You'd have been caught totally off guard, but I've got spider-sense, so I was good.”

“After the one in the rhino suit, nothing surprises me anymore.”

The instant Peter opened the front door, he was tackled with a hug.

“Oh, Peter, I was so worried-!”

“I’m alright, Aunt May. Sorry, I’d have gotten home sooner, but I was taking pictures of the school’s wreckage...”

Aunt May shook her head. “First rhinoceros-people, now killer robots? Manhattan’s turning into a pulp magazine...”

As the hug ended, Peter glanced around the room. “Where are Gwen and her dad?”

“They went back home.”

“Already? Man, those Damage Control guys work fast.”

A smirk crossed May’s lips. “Why? Don’t tell me you’re eager to see more of Gwen?”

“Well, I, uh, wouldn’t object to it.” Peter drew back, blushing.

The smirk morphed into something more sincere. “She’s a special girl.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I like her.”

It was Peter’s turn to smirk. “What a coincidence, so do I.”

“Considerably more than Liz Allan, truth be told.” May turned away, but not before glancing over her shoulder to add, “You know, your parents met in high school...”

“Yeah, I know.”

And with that, May retired to her room for her afternoon nap, leaving Peter with only the muted TV for company. He flopped over on the couch, grinning like a lunatic.

The grin was, however, soon besmirched by a yawn. Peter could use an afternoon nap, himself. Truth be told, even Peter’s decisive victories left him kinda stressed.

But then he checked his phone, and he remembered the amazing new stress relief method at his disposal. The reminder, in this case, being a text prompting him to call as soon as possible. Peter
double-checked that Aunt May’s bedroom door was shut, then brought his cell to his ear. He had to fight back the urge to retch, though. Peter’s last phone had been smashed by an unholy spider-creature, so now he was forced to use that Osberry Norman had given him. Gross.

“Peter-?”

“Yes, hello, is this the gorgeous babe who gave me her number?”

“This is she.” He was met with giggles from the speaker. The just-started-dating euphoria was far from wearing off. It was like there’d been a wall between them all these years, and Peter hadn’t even known it until it’d suddenly collapsed. “I take it the robots didn’t kill you?”

“As if.” More giggles. “But they, uh, didn’t hurt any students, did they?”

“Not as far as I know. We’re getting out of school for the rest of the week, though.”

“At least something good came of this.” Peter was back to grinning. “Looks like Warren was innocent after all. This dude named Smythe confessed to being the mastermind behind Scorpion and Hydro-Man, and it wouldn’t be a stretch to think he made a good chunk of my original rogues gallery, too.”

“So no more supervillains to worry about?”

“Well, I don’t wanna jinx myself, but here’s hoping…” Peter shook his head. “Gee, though, a whole week with no school and no supervillains? How will we pass the time?”

More giggles. “W-Well, I wouldn’t be opposed to… picking up where we left off yesterday.” But then the giggling came to an end. “I mean, I know I’m not as good at the whole m-making out thing as Liz. Haven’t exactly had as much practice as her…”

Whuh? Why did Gwen sound mopey all of a sudden? Had Peter done something wrong? “It’s not rocket science. You were- You were great.” No response. “I meant what I said before, Gwen. Dating Liz felt horrible. There’s no other way to put it. I was kind of in denial back then, but being with her made me feel so… guilty. And not just because I was keeping my double life from her.”

“I… felt the same way about Harry.” Finally, he’d goaded a reply from her. “So I guess we both screwed up in that department. Not gonna pretend I wasn’t devastated at the time, but, well, in hindsight, I did just randomly kiss you on Thanksgiving and run away and- and then avoided you, and I didn’t even make an effort to look nice until I got with Harry and, y’know-’” Her words were gaining speed. “-his dad made some snippy comment, and I got all worked up like I always do, and I had to swallow my pride and go beg MJ to give me a makeover-”

“Wait, what?”

“-so my- my point is, I don’t blame you for initially going for the cheerleader with the perfect hair and boobs.”

“But that’s not- You’re-” Peter was almost at a loss for words. This was the same girl who’d stood up to the Lizard and- and Flash Thompson’s water balloon barrage. Peter knew she’d said she was seeing a therapist, but still, where had all that confidence gone? In the old days, Peter had never even considered that Gwen might be anything but the snarky science girl.

Peter continued tripping over his tongue for a second before finally blurring out, “Gwen, your boobs are fine.” At least over the phone, neither of them could gauge the color of the other’s cheeks. Small mercies. “I mean, more than fine. Better than Liz’s. Or- Or I imagine they are
because I have no idea what Liz’s look like. I’m not being coy – I mean that. Liz and I never-

“Yeah, but it’s not like you’ve ever seen mine, eith- Oh my god, I am talking about my boobs with you. This can’t be real.” Okay, maybe Peter couldn’t see the color of Gwen’s cheeks, but he could make a darn good educated guess.

“Yeah, funny, we’ve been best friends for years, and I don’t think this has ever been a conversation topic before.” Geez, dating Gwen had already proven itself to be the polar opposite of dating Liz. If anything, Liz had been quite the braggart about hers.

“We’re lucky my dad’s still at work. If you think your rogues gallery is dangerous, you ain’t seen nothing yet.”

“Wait.” Peter blinked. “You’re alone right now?”

The reply took a moment. “Um, y-yeah. That kinda ends up happening a lot, what with Dad always busy.”

“Oh, well, hey, at least you got me to keep you company now.” Peter took a breath. “And Aunt May’s taking a nap, so I’m actually alone right now, too.”

“I should hope you are, talking about my boobs like that...”

“And, uh, Gwen?”

“Yeah?”

“Just to be clear, I don’t care how you dress or whatever. If this makeover isn’t you, y’know, you don’t have to worry about it. Look however you want to look.”

He caught a sharp intake of breath from the phone’s other end. “That’s sweet of you, Peter, but come on, I was basically invisible to you until Valentine’s Day.”

“That’s not true.” Peter’s voice went tighter than he’d intended. “In fact, I actually miss your glasses. Whatever happened to those?”

Silence. “You mean it? You’re not just trying to make me feel better?”

“Well, I’m not just trying to make you feel better.” Peter managed a laugh. “I mean, I wear the same blue t-shirt every day of my life. Since when do I care about appearance, right?”

“Thanks, b… babe? Honey? Ugh, every pet name sounds weird...” There was a bitter laugh. “I bet you never said these kinda pep talks to Liz, though.”

“Maybe not.” As he spoke, Peter sat up on the sofa. “But you know something else I never said to her?”

“What?”

“I love you.”

The giggles made their triumphant return. “You honestly have no idea how happy you make me.”

“Right back at ya. But, hey, Gwen? You don’t have to always compare yourself to Liz. That stuff’s ancient history, okay?” Peter paused. “You’ve got nothing to worry about from my ex.”
Cold. Cold. It was cold.

It slinked through the dank tunnels, feeling, searching... It didn't know how long it had been down here. Long enough for the sickness to grow. It needed... needed... to feed.

*Pitter, patter, pitter, patter.* A little creature scurried towards it down the tunnel. It had never seen such a creature before, but both of its old hosts had. The memories instantly jumped to the forefront of its mind – *rat*. This thing was a rat.

The rat stopped at the edge of the puddle and gave the slime a curious sniff.

*Splurch.* It was instantly enveloped. The rat thrashed and shrieked, but it was soon encased completely.

No, no, this wouldn't do. The rat's mind was too simplistic. There was nothing in here but primordial fear. Where was the anger? Where was the hatred?

A pair of white splotches formed in the inky black ooze... followed by a set of solid fangs. A pink tongue wrapped itself around the rodent's flailing body.

The emotions tasted all wrong, but luckily, the rat could feed it in a different way.

*End of Lesson 1*
Lesson 2: Mathematics 101

“Please, Aunt A! I swear I’ll be on my best behavior!” Mary Jane virtually cornered her aunt before the front door, blocking all escape.

“Oh, Mary Jane…” Aunt Anna’s eyes fell on the bag of luggage in her own hand. It was no doubt considerably easier to look at than MJ’s face right now. “You know how badly I want to say yes…but you made me the exact same promise last time, and it didn’t stop you from throwing one of those awful parties here.”

“M-My friends from my last school were bad influences on me!” MJ remained firmly planted despite Anna’s attempts to push past her. “I would never do that to you again.”

There was a sharp intake of breath, and then, to MJ’s surprise, her aunt did look her in the eyes. Turned out Anna’s face was considerably less warm than usual. “I’m sorry, but…you need to go home.”

After that, MJ trudged onto the front porch, allowing her aunt to lock the door behind them. Mary Jane watched Aunt Anna enter her car, then drive down the streets of Forest Hills and out of sight.

A rush of air escaped MJ’s mouth as she leaned against the porch railing. She hugged herself, helpless as the March breeze washed over her. MJ had on a black jacket, actually, but its primary function was to look fabulous and expensive, with cold-protection being a distant second.

Mary Jane’s eyes fell on her aunt’s front yard. The flowers that weren’t dead, the grass that’d been mowed sometime this century…Guess MJ would have to savor that while she still could.

“Yeah,” she said aloud to no one in particular. “Home. I’ll head straight there.”

“Do not approach walls or door, or tranquilizing gas will be released to immobilize Allan, comma, Mark.”

A chorus of “WE KNOW!” rang out from the adjacent cells. An awful rhinoceros-person and an awful scorpion-person shot envious glares at the cell between them. The door whirred open, and the man inside was led out at gunpoint by a small army of guards. There was no animal-themed armor on this one. Instead, his skin appeared to be solid gold. The only clothing he wore was charred scraps of cloth that might have once been an orange prison jumpsuit.

Mark gave them a questioning look.

“Visitation.” The head guard shoved a barrel in his face. It reeked of the chemical stench of tranq gas. “This is a privilege for good behavior, freak. Try anything and you’ll never leave that cell again.”

Mark’s only reply was a grunt.

The guards led him down the winding halls until they reached a room at the far edge of the Vault. Like every room in here, it was lined with reinforced steel, and the window was no doubt equally indestructible, courtesy of Oscorp craftsmanship. Mark seated himself in a chair, then reached for
the phone on the wall. After a tense couple seconds in which it didn't melt, he brought it to his ear.

“Hey, big guy.” If there was one thing that could’ve made him roar to life, it’d be the head of red
hair waiting for him on the other side of the glass. “Miss me?”

“Mary Jane?” Mark sprang to his feet, an act which caused the ground to shake. “You… You
really wanted to see me like this?”

MJ managed a smile. “Well, it’s not the look I’d have picked out for you…”

A huff escaped Mark’s golden mouth. “I take it they still haven’t found the Goblin’s switch?”

Mary Jane shook her head. “The news said this was probably a different guy in the same costume.”

“Figures. You know, I think the real Goblin left my armor turned on just for kicks.” Mark gave a
dry laugh. “Then the creep had to go and blow himself up. Least I finally burned out a couple days
ago, so I’m not spewing fire anymore.”

MJ’s face lit up. “So they’re moving you to the normal cells?”

“They can’t. I’ve still got super strength. I could bust out.”

“Are they at least any closer to fixing you?”

“I bet.” Mark let out a huff. “It’s a lot easier to just lock me up and throw away the key, but yeah,
I’m sure they’ve got their brightest minds working on that cure.”

Mary Jane brought her fingers to the glass. “Don’t talk like that.”

“Sorry.” Mark’s own fingers strummed against the countertop. “I-I’m glad you came here, MJ. Truth is, I did miss you. More than anything.”

MJ gave a nod. “Feeling’s mutual.”

“I mean, I’ve never met a girl like you before,” said Mark. “One who’s so free… doesn’t sweat the
details…”

But at this, MJ laughed. “Funny how that worked out. We were s’posed to be the couple who
sidestepped all the love drama, so of course we got swept up in about the most intense drama there
could be.” Her fingers traveled to her scalp. “God, the only thing I wanted in the whole world was
to share an apartment with a chill boyfriend. If this modeling gig takes off, I’ll even have the cash
for it. I just wanted one stupid, simple thing…”

“I’m sorry.” Mark leaned forward. His posture had to show the path of his gaze for him now that
his pupils were covered in yellow plasma. “I know I haven’t exactly excelled at being ‘chill.’ Uh,
pun not intended.” He titled his head to show he was glancing away. “Can’t believe I let myself get
turned into this.”

“I wouldn’t even hold that against you if you could just go back to normal.” All MJ had to do to
show she was glancing away was point with her eyes. “My aunt’s taking another trip to New
Hampshire. And you know what that means…”

“Nowhere left for you to escape to.” A steam cloud escaped Mark’s mouth. “MJ, I swear if I could
get out of here, I’d make a home for you. For us. But at this point, I’m not holding my breath.”

“But- But they can’t keep you here forever!” MJ fumbled for words. “What about that- that one-
armed scientist guy? My friend Gwen said he was working on a cure for Electric-Man or whoever. Maybe he could-?

“Don’t you get it?” Mark shot her a sullen look. “I can feel the heat building back up inside me. I’m never getting out.”

“Mark, please, I don’t want us to spend all of visitation drowning in misery-”

“Oh yeah?” He huffed. “Well, you’ll be happy to know we’ll have even less time for that from now on. They’re not gonna let you see me if I start spitting fire again. It’s too big a liability to the prison.”

“I’ll write to you, then,” MJ said tightly.

But Mark merely hung his head. “MJ… stop. Just stop.” He took a breath, sending a cloud of steam into the air. “You shouldn’t have to keep suffering because of my stupid mistake.”

“What are you saying? Of course I-”

“I’m saying I’m dumping you.”

“Oh.” Mary Jane’s eyes widened a moment, then traveled to the visitation room’s tile floor. “Huh. So that’s what that feels like…”

It didn't know how long it'd spent in the darkness. Days? Weeks? The tunnel seemed endless, and for every five feet the symbiote crawled, streams of filthy water always seemed to knock it back six. But fortunately, there were plenty more rats down here.

Eventually, the symbiote gained the strength to reach the sewer's mouth. The way the light emanated from it, it almost looked like the manhole cover led out to heaven itself instead of a grimy city street. With the last reserves of its energy, the symbiote pulled itself onto the concrete. It shouldn't have been this weak. Something was wrong. The sickness was still growing. The symbiote could sense it in every fiber of its being. It was the... the cleanser. The memory burned in the symbiote's mind as brightly as if it'd happened yesterday. Venom had had their enemy right where they'd wanted him, and then... Spider-Man had cheated death. They were supposed to be poison to him, not the other way around!

Host... It needed a... host...

A woman happened to be passing by on the sidewalk. With a scream, she tripped and toppled over – She hadn't expected a black tendril to wrap around her ankle. Though its entire being ached with sickness, the symbiote managed to slither its way onto her face, seeping pieces of itself through her pores and into her brain.

It immediately became clear that this host wouldn't do. She was just some nobody. Her unfulfilled desire for a family was causing the woman some pain, but that caused her depression, not hatred. Nothing to feed off of. What this temporary host did have, however, was memories. She'd watched the news, and even if she'd only half-payed attention, a story about a black monster attacking a high school has a way of sticking with you. Hmm... She didn't remember where Brock had gone after being carted off, though.

On the plus side, the woman had an exceptionally weak will. After only a slight amount of struggling, the symbiote had total control. Not a single passerby batted an eyelash as the woman
pulled herself to her feet. As far as anyone had seen, she'd simply tripped and then taken a minute to right herself. It wasn't like anyone was paying enough attention to notice her jacket was suddenly pitch black.

The symbiote's whole body lurched, sending a ripple through the "clothing." It just barely managed to keep from puking rats all over the pavement. There... There wasn't much time left. The old hosts' memories drifted through its mind. The gene cleanser killed all non-human DNA, Peter had said. Like the noise filter on a cell phone.

But the symbiote hadn't come from this world. It was nothing but non-human DNA.

Mary Jane’s eyes were still trapped on the floor by the end of school the next day.

“Why do I have the urge to down a whole tub of ice cream? Is that normal?” MJ managed to raise her head long enough to give Gwen a quizzical look.

“I mean, I definitely gained a few pounds the day Peter hooked up with Liz...” Gwen smiled back, though it failed to reach her eyes. The girls were walking parallel out of the classroom, as per tradition. “I’m really sorry, MJ. I know how hard you tried to make things work with Mark.”

MJ held out a palm. “Hey, don’t sweat it, girlfriend. You know me. Mary Jane Watson and angst are like oil and water. Trust me, I’ll bounce back from this twice as fun as I was before.”

“I’m glad you’re taking it well,” said Gwen. “Not to be callous, but I’m honestly really relieved Mark dumped you. Now I don’t have to worry about him burning you to death when you kiss...”

“I mean, sure, things got kinda serious between us, but it’s not like Mark’s ‘the only man I’ll ever love,’” MJ said with finger quotes. “Why should I even chain myself down like that, right? I’m sure there are tons of chill, fun-loving guys waiting for me out there. And some fun-loving gals, too, but a lot less, statistically speaking—” She stopped herself when she caught sight of Gwen’s face. “What?”

“Nothing. It’s just... you and Mark have barely been broken up twenty-four hours.” Gwen brought a hand to her shoulder. “Try not to bounce back too fast, okay?”

But MJ shrugged it off. “I can’t help it if I’m bouncy.”

“Yeah, well, I of all people know how badly rebounds can—”

“Oh, Gwen, there you are!” It was at this moment that Peter crossed their paths in the hall of the freshly-repaired school building. He hurried over to the girls, balancing his backpack over his shoulder with one hand while the other remained trapped in his splint. “Thank god. I’ve got a boatload of trig due tomorrow, and my handwriting’s bad enough with my dominant hand...”

Gwen ran to his side, kissed him for as long as she dared in the middle of a school building, then said, “What, you need me to be your personal scribe?”

“I was thinking more like a maidservant—”

“Do you want those wounds to get worse?”

“No, ma’am...”

The two of them carried on like that as they vanished around the corner. Mary Jane watched them,
frozen in place, until they were out of sight.

Even once she was alone in the hall, MJ remained frozen. God, those two were cute together. Hooking them up had been the greatest accomplishment of Mary Jane’s life. That’s why MJ was standing here now with a vacant look on her face. She was paralyzed with happiness.

The paralysis didn’t wear off until a sufficiently cute person finally entered the hallway.

“Heyyyyy, Hobie.” Instantly, MJ pounced. She knew she liked to assign the label to others, but she could be something of a jungle predator herself. “Where have you been hiding yourself? What, you think you can just blow us all away in Midsummer Night’s and then ride off into the sunset, never to be heard from again? Why don’t we ever hang?”

Wow. From Hobie’s face, you’d think a girl had never fluttered her lashes at him before. He’d been stunned speechless.

Flash didn’t for the life of him know how he managed it, but after minutes of struggling, he was able to fit his math book back inside his locker in a way that only caused two or three other books to spill out onto the floor. But that fell within an acceptable margin of error, and so Flash happily shut the locker back.

Doing so revealed a dark-haired girl frowning at him.

“Sh-Sha Shan!” Flash grinned at her, but his trademark hair-curl wilted with anxiety. “What’s up?”

“I didn’t see you at drama club today,” Sha Shan blurted out.

“Oh,” said Flash, “w-well, y’know, guess now that I can go to football practice again—” He gestured to his gloriously non-cast-covered leg. “-I just don’t have time for-”

“Don’t have time?” Sha Shan cut in, her voice growing ever so slightly higher. “But Hobie and Kong were there. We know how to fit the schedule around football.”

Darn, she was good. “Okay, okay, I forgot,” Flash admitted with a shrug. “Sorry.”

That only made Shan Shan’s voice go tight. “Look, Flash, if you don’t want to be in drama club, we’re not forcing you.”

“Really?” A big old sigh of relief escaped Flash’s oversized mouth. “Aww, thanks for understanding, babe. Ooh, and now that you’re here, and I got you a chocolate bunny.” He reached into his backpack to retrieve the delectable critter.

“That’s sweet. Thanks.” Sha Shan gave him an apologetic look as she accepted the chocolate. “I, uh, I forgot this Sunday's Easter. I didn't get you anything.”

“Don’t… Don’t you like drama club?” Uh oh. Sha Shan was getting a look on face just like that time when Flash had doubted Liz’s new dress would fit.

“Well…” Flash fished for words. The truth was there weren’t any good mushy romance parts in this one for him to play alongside Sha Shan, which had killed his interest considerably. “…yeah, of course I do, but, y’know, that last play was, like, funny and stuff, but this new one is…”
boring crap about a used car salesman or something.

“…kind of a downer?” Sha Shan’s head bowed. “Yeah. I understand. It’s just… you'd make a good Biff Loman, that’s all.”

“Sha Shan?” Flash started towards her, but she drew away. “You okay?”

“No, I…” Sha Shan let out a sigh. “Look, Flash, we both know you’re the jock and I’m the nerdy drama girl, so… I mean, if you don’t even like drama club all that much, why'd you ask me out in the first place?” She met his eyes. “Nobody's ever gone out of their way for me like that before.”

“Why'd I ask you out? Uh…” Flash thought fast. “Because you’re cool. And smart. And hot.” He paused before adding, “But not in a shallow way!”

“Oh. Well…” It must’ve been the right answer because a smirk was now playing on Sha Shan’s lips. “…so long as it’s not in a shallow way…”

That was enough for Flash to un-tense himself and carry on down the hall alongside his girlfriend, who nodded her head in time with his incessant stream of blustering.

But what Flash didn’t notice was the way those lips wilted as soon as his back was turned.

“...was so absorbed in the show, I didn't even think about stabbing the nurse until the commercials came on!”

“That's encouraging news, Cletus-” Dr. Kafka gave a patient nod to the man at the far side of the group circle. “-but it was Otto's turn to talk.”

Cletus let out a huff. Of all the patients in today's group therapy, he was by far the scrawniest, and an Easter Bunny ears headband rested over his ginger hair.

“So, Otto...” Kafka smiled at the short, chubby man a couple seats across from Cletus. “...anything you'd like to share? Do you feel you've accomplished anything in your time here?”

“Please.” Otto rolled his eyes beneath his big, square glasses. “The only thing I've accomplished is staving off my mind-numbing boredom from this cesspool of an asylum.”

“Mental care facility,” Kafka said firmly. “Otto, please, you were doing so well last Christmas-”

“For the last time, you insufferable wench, that was an act! It was all part of my master plan!” Otto scowled at his shoes. “But my tolerance of it has finally worn thin. I see no point in hiding my contempt for you anymore.”

“Interesting.” Kafka glanced down at her notes. “So would you say that persona was an 'act' before the accident, too?”

“What are you blathering about?”

“Electro here says he only stopped being Max Dillion after his accident.” Kafka nodded to the one patient wearing a containment suit and inhibitor bracelets instead of the standard blue hospital gown. “Do you feel the same way about yourself?”

“I fail to see what difference it makes,” Otto said stiffly.

“I just find it interesting that you can stop acting like 'Doctor Octopus' and resume acting like mild,
timid Otto Octavius at will, that's all.”

“Ugh, how much longer do we gotta put up with this crap, Doc?” groaned Electro.

Otto scowled at him. “Well, if I had an escape plan, I most certainly wouldn't tell you about it in front of a psychiatrist and a small army of guards, now would I?”

There was, indeed, a small army of guards surrounding the room – sent here straight from the Vault. They kept their guns fixed on the far wall, almost like they were expecting supervillains or tentacle arms to burst through it any second now.

“Nobody's going anywhere,” said Kafka. “Now, Otto, why don't we talk a little about your goals in life? When you were arrested on Valentine's Day, you were trying to become the-'Big Man' of crime?”

“Yes,” said Otto, pushing his glasses up his nose, “but I see now that it was a mistake.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“There's no point wasting so much time and effort on planning if it can all be derailed by one lone do-gooder.” He clenched his fists. “It's obvious that if any of my schemes are ever to come to fruition, first I'll need Spider-Man's head on a pike.”

“I keep telling you!” spoke up another patient from across the room. “Spider-Man is Peter Parker!”

Otto turned to give a dry look to a certain blonde. “Yes, I've heard. Spider-Man just so happens to conveniently be your best friend who you have a grudge against, and you know this for a fact because a space alien told you.”

“You've seen Spider-Man in the black suit!” yelled Eddie. “And- And Peter takes those pictures for the Bugle-”

“Eddie, please, it's not your turn to talk,” cut in Kafka.

“Wait, space alien?” Cletus snapped to alertness. “What space alien?”

“You don't believe me?” Eddie spat, springing out his seat. He wasn't three feet from Otto when the guards tackled him. “It's real! The alien is real! It loves me! WE'RE VENOM! WE'RE-” The screams carried down the hall as he was dragged away.

“He'd been so lucid lately.” Kafka let out a sigh before returning her attention to the group. “Now then, Otto, you were saying?”

Cletus raised his hand in the air like a school student. “Excuse me, but what about the alien?”

“There's no such thing as aliens,” said Kafka. “Eddie was having a delusional episode.”

“There are such things as aliens!” spoke up a random other patient. “I saw one once! It was shiny and it flew around on a surf board!”

Otto buried his face in his hands. “I'm surrounded by idiots.”

A woman in a black jacket stood in the street, gazing wistfully at a house across the sidewalk. The suburbs of Queens were in the memories of both the symbiote's old hosts, as well as this new, temporary host. It and the woman were not Venom – There was no “we.” Their relationship was a
brief thing, born of convenience. The symbiote felt the faintest stirrings of the woman's conscience, but it fought it back down.

After several minutes, the symbiote tore the woman's head away from the house. Right now, its first host would be home from school. Its first love. The symbiote felt its body shiver with sickness once again. It wanted nothing more than to crawl through the window, to ooze over the boy's body as he slept, but... the boy did not love it anymore.

No, worse than that, the boy had pretended to love it, had said he wanted it back, but that had been nothing but a ruse. The emotions had tasted all wrong. Peter Parker... Spider-Man... was a liar, and the symbiote would not let itself succumb to the sickness until he had been punished. But this woman was far too weak for the job.

The symbiote needed its Other. It needed its Eddie.

Funny, Peter had spent all of school today complaining about his aunt doting on him, but now that he and Gwen were roaming the empty halls after Gwen’s band practice, suddenly doting wasn’t so bad anymore.

“Aw, no, I’m fine, really. I heal quick-” Peter’s protests grew silent once Gwen’s fingers entered his hair.

“Your little adventure this morning,” she said in an awed whisper, “was the coolest thing I have ever seen in my life. I saw you on the news on- on my phone-”

“In the middle of class?” Peter grinned. “Shame on you.”

“-and you were doing all those flips and sucker-punching that grizzly bear guy, and- God, I’ve got the best boyfriend of all time and I can’t tell a soul about it.”

“Welcome to my world…” Peter turned to Gwen, who was, as per newly-formed tradition, walking hand-in-hand with him.

Gwen fiddled with her glasses, which, for once, were existent. She seemed to have settled for a happy medium between “messy-haired dork” and “trying her hardest to look like a blonde MJ.” Her glasses had made a triumphant return, and with her green jacket in the wash, she'd returned to her regular pink-jacket-pink-headband combo.

“You poor thing.” Gwen brought her other hand to his chest, gently pushing Peter’s head against his locker. “Single-handedly defeated the entire Legion of Losers all by yourself, and all you got in return was a broken wrist.” The official story was that Peter had fallen off a fire escape trying to photograph this morning’s battle. “If only there was some way I could fix that…” Peter’s wasn’t the only head drawing nearer to that locker.

“You could do my homework for me,” said Peter.

The remark earned his forehead a swat.

“I mean, you could make out with me.”

“Better.”

After that, the talking came to something of a halt, seeing as their mouths were now obstructed. Gwen was pretty sure she was improving at this. Or maybe it was the choice of boyfriend that’d
improved. With Harry, it’d felt like he’d been trying to rip her face off with his mouth. This was slower. Less one-sided. Dare she say sensua-?

“Hey, someone call the janitor!” rang out an ear-bleeding voice. “Dere’s nerd love all ova the lockas.”

Peter and Gwen nearly bits each other’s tongues off in their scramble to detach themselves. Ugh, perfect, this hallway wasn’t as secluded as it’d looked. The way Sally’s nose was twitching, Gwen couldn’t help but sniff herself for signs of body odor.

“Is dis really what ya been reduced to since Liz dumped ya?” Sally’s trademark voice was enough to draw the eyes of other passerby. “Now dat’s just sad.” A snicker ran through the crowd. “If you’re gonna stick a cow in a dress, at least make it a pretty dress.”

It took every once of will to keep Gwen from looking down at her outfit. She managed to keep her eyes level with Sally’s, though the tradeoff was that Gwen’s had compacted itself. Hadn’t the hall been empty a second ago? Where had all these snickering onlookers come from? Sally’s voice must’ve summoned them like a dog whistle.

Figured. Gwen turned to begin her typical response of slinking off in the opposite direction, head bowed… except her boyfriend went the opposite way. “Peter-?”

The gap between him and Sally had just grown considerably smaller. “Sorry, didn’t catch that.” Peter’s voice, usually so warm and bouncy, had become the polar opposite. “Care to repeat it?”

Turned out, when he wasn’t slouching, he was a good half-foot taller than her.

Now, in place of a snicker, an “Ooooooooooh” ran through the crowd.

“I- I- Well, I-” For the briefest of moment, Sally stammered, taking a step back. “I gotta go hurl. I got Parker in ma pers’nal space!” Of course. Only Sally could manage to run away with her tail between her legs while still looking haughty.

To Peter’s credit, though, not every member of the crowd seemed convinced by Sally’s performance. In fact, Rand was giving his girlfriend an outright scowl.

Sally halted her march to cock her head at him. “What?” But when her boyfriend failed to reply, she kept on marching.

Peter and his girlfriend regrouped in an empty classroom. He shut the door behind them, creating a buffer of safety between themselves and the pack of bloodthirsty teens outside.

“I swear to God, she’s a middle schooler trapped in a junior’s body,” Peter said with a scowl.

“Yeah.” Gwen’s back was to him. “She’s not totally off base, though… Probably wouldn’t kill me to hit the gym once in a while.”

“Gwen.” Peter had to navigate a couple empty desks to reach her side. “Sally only said that cuz she knew it’d get under your skin.

“Still, I don’t exactly have a cheerleader physique here.” Gwen pinched her tummy to illustrate. “This is what happens when you spend all day on your laptop instead of fighting crime.”

“Yeah, well, I wasn’t a beanpole before that spider bite, either.” Peter swung around to her front, but that only caused Gwen to jerk her face away from his gaze. “Look…” He took a breath. “…we
can start going to the gym if you want—"

“You don’t have to come,” said Gwen. “I’m not sure they’ll have ten-ton dumbbells.”

“-but you should only do that if you wanna get in shape and be healthy and stuff, not to meet Sally Avril’s standards.” Peter finally managed to meet Gwen’s eyes, but only after gently guiding her chin with his fingers. “And for what it’s worth, you’re already above and beyond my standards.”

A laugh fluttered, hesitant, from Gwen’s mouth. “You… You mean it, right? You really think I look okay?”

The humor drained from Peter’s eyes. “Gwen…”

“Forget I asked, forget I asked!” Gwen drew back, cowering. “Sorry, not trying to fish for compliments. I’m just still in awe that you like me, I guess. Keep expecting myself to wake up, y’know?”

For a moment, Peter’s face was unchanged. Then it drew nearer to hers. “You don’t need to fish for compliments, Gwen. You know I think you look so much more than ‘okay.’ I’ve always thought that.”

But this only made Gwen cower harder. “Look, I know you’re trying to nurse my ego back to health, and that’s sweet of you. I mean it. But the reason I keep thinking you’re lying is because you keep saying things like ‘I’ve always thought that.’”

“But I have always—”

Her hand wrapped around his. “It’s okay to admit it, Peter. Heck, at this point, I’d feel better if you did.” Gwen pushed her glasses up her nose. “I looked totally forgettable till MJ gave me that makeover.”

Peter brow creased. “That’s not true. I wish I could give you, like, video proof, but you’ve gotta take my word for it. I’ve thought you were pretty since my eleventh—” He halted mid-sentence.

Gwen blinked at him. “What?”

——

“Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday, dear Peter…”

Gwen sat huddled on the basement floor, hiding her face from the fuzzy footage blaring across the boxed-sized TV before her. “Oh dear god, please burn this video. I don’t mean copy it to a disc. I mean set it on fire.”

“Ooh, look who it is!” Peter pointed out Gwen’s eleven-year-old self as she entered the frame. “It was that dress that did it for me.” He gestured to the pink party dress that eleven-year-old Peter was eyeing.

“You can see my braces.” Gwen was on the verge of tears. “I thought I’d destroyed all the evidence of those.”

“Oh, come on, the braces were the cutest part!”

At this, Gwen sighed, then folded her arms. “Fine. I still don’t see how this proves anything.”

“Keep watching.”
A minute later, once eleven-year-old Peter was off to the side of the Parker household kitchen, the camera zoomed in on his face.

“So what’d you wish for, kiddo?” asked a warm, withered voice from offscreen.

“Oh, uh…” The young Peter’s eyes were clearly fixed on the cameraman and not the camera. “I don’t really know.”

“I know what he wished for,” said a voice. The camera spun to reveal a blonde, pimply-faced teenager. “Here’s a hint – Her last name’s ‘Stacy.’”

Young Peter’s glasses nearly popped off his face. “Eddie!”

“See?” On the other side of the glass, sixteen-year-old Peter turned back to sixteen-year-old Gwen. “Look how hard I was blushing. I totally thought you were cute. I was just a little too young for girls, and by the time puberty hit full swing, you were my best friend. You were too familiar a sight, y’know?”

“Yeah. I guess so.” Uh oh. She looked sadder than ever.

“Gwen? What’s wrong?” Instantly, Peter’s arms were around her from behind.

“Nothing, nothing.” Gwen made the transition from hugging her knees to hugging her boyfriend. “Thanks for showing me this, Peter. You really are sweet. It’s just…” Her eyes returned to the pimple-faced teen on the screen. “…do you think he’ll ever go back to normal?”

No response.

“He’s lying alone right now in some miserable little hospital room.” Gwen’s voice grew hollower with each word. “And meanwhile, here we are, goofing around and making out and… and…”

“Shh…” Peter wiped her eyes with his good hand. “You want to visit him?”

Gwen gave a feeble nod. “I just can’t help thinking… what if whatever the symbiote did to him, like, wears off after a while? What if we can reason with him now?”

But at this, Peter sighed. “You weren’t there before the ambulance carted him off. Eddie practically tried to squeeze himself down that drain pipe after the ooze. The first time I got it off him, I’d thought Eddie might go back to normal… we might just talk and hug it out… but after the second time, I…” He shut his eyes. “I don’t want to let myself hope.”

He reopened them a moment later to find Gwen’s gazing at him. “But don’t you think it’s worth trying?”

Eddie was lying alone right now in some miserable little hospital room. He sighed and stared at the ceiling. There wasn’t exactly much else to stare at now that he was back in the straightjacket, after all.

He’d finally started to nod off when the door to his room creaked open.

“Hi!” A head of red hair topped with Easter Bunny ears poked its way inside. “Aww, poor thing. Can’t move?” Cletus waltzed towards the bed. “You can still squirm a bit, though.” He reached into the folds of his hospital gown. “I like that.”

“Do you have it?” Eddie struggled against the jacket with all his might. “The alien? Is it in your
Cletus paused. “The alien?” He fished through his pockets. There were sharpened plastic spoons, little chunks of wood scraped off the bed posts, and a toothbrush that'd been snapped in half so the end was all jagged, but no aliens. “Sorry, I got nothin' but shivs.”

“Oh.” Eddie ceased struggling as disappointment gripped his face.

“That's a fun word,” said Cletus. “Shiv shiv shiv shiv shiv shiv shiv...” He spaced out for a minute. “Hey, random question, how attached are you to your arteries?”

“It's coming back for me,” said Eddie.

Cletus frowned. “What is? The alien?”

Eddie nodded. “It loves me. It's the... only one... who does...”

Cletus pondered this for a moment. “What's it like?”

“It engulfs your entire body... makes you one with it...”

“Wow!” His eyes filled with awe. “Can I have it?”

“No!” At this, Eddie's struggles resumed tenfold. “It's not yours! It doesn't want you! It wants ME! We're Venom! WE'RE VENOM!”

“Oh, well, if that's how you're gonna be about it...” Cletus looked over his shivs. Hmm... He had a wide selection to choose from, but the toothbrush was his personal favorite. “Alight, Brocky.” He held it high into the air. “Open wide and say 'ah.'”

“Eddie, are you-?” At the last possible second, the door opened, and a girl stumbled into the room. The instant she spotted Eddie's visitor, she started shrieking her head off. “Jesus, he's loose! Security! Security!”

Cletus spun towards her, a shiv in each hand and a big grin on his face. “Hel-lo, nurse.” He glanced at a TV in the corner of the room, which was currently displaying a nice, juicy hamburger. “You'd better hope those commercials end in the next three seconds.”

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**mayorofcrazytown:** so yeah, turns out spiderwoman actualy has nothing to do with spiderman at all. She just hapened to get spidr powers in a compltly unrelated incidnt

**battlecraftmaster:** Dude, it's Spider-Man, not Spiderman. There's a hyphen.

**mayorofcrazytown:** noone cares

**battlecraftmaster:** Your mom cared last night.

**Guess Who?:** Not that this isn't a riveting conversation, but can you answer a question?

**mayorofcrazytown:** whooooa, your back!!!

**battlecraftmaster:** Where the heck have YOU been? We had to get a new forum mod.

**kreeskrulltruther:** it was the gvrnmnt, wasnt it? they abducted you because they didnt want you
telling everyone spider-man's secret ID! I keep saying peter palmer is a alien! noone ever listens to me!

**Guess Who?**: Last January, the black Spider-Man, Venom, attacked Peter's high school. A boy named Eddie Brock took credit for it.

**mayorofcrazytown**: ...okay?????

**Guess Who?**: What happened after that? Where did the police put him? Where is Eddie Brock?

**battlecraftmaster**: Where they always put the crazy people. Ravencroft.

**Guess Who?**: Thanks.

**battlecraftmaster**: You know you could've just googled that, right?

**kreeskrulltruthr**: i sure am glad ravencroft keeps those people off the streets. There are some real wackos out there
Rand was still waiting for Sally by the courtyard fountain when he was suddenly approached by Flash’s girl. Which was fortunate because it meant Rand was spared Sally’s customary grumbling about him allowing a geek into his proximity.

“Hey, you’re Flash’s friend, right?” Sha Shan began, clutching her book bag to her chest. “Can I ask you something?”

Rand gave a shrug. “Hit me.”

Sha Shan took a breath, then glanced away before asking, “Do you know when Flash, uh, started taking an interest in me, exactly? I mean, what made him notice me in particular?”

“Ooh.” Rand might’ve given a less truthful reply, but his impulsive wince had already told Sha Shan everything. “Look, don’t tell him I said this, but… guess you deserve to hear it straight.” Rand gave the poor girl one last apologetic smile before revealing: “He was totally rebounding from Liz. You were just the first girl to cross his path. Then you rejected him, so he got butthurt and made dating you his personal Mount Everest.”

“Yeah.” With that, Sha Shan turned to leave, her face hidden by her hair. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

The holidays were still the holidays, even in insane asylums. Ravencroft's lounge area was overflowing with fake grass, plastic Easter eggs, a guy in a horrendously uncomfortable-looking rabbit costume, and hordes of inmates running around yelling, “I knew it! I knew the Easter Bunny was real!”

And, in the darkest, dankest corner of the room, a certain overweight mad scientist sat, scowling as hard as his scowling muscles would allow. He reached for his “EVIL GENIUS” mug, but with a sudden crash, it fell to the floor and shattered into a million pieces.

“Whoops!” Peter backed away from the coffee table, holding his injured hand innocently. “I am so sorry, sir! I'm such a klutz. It’s this splint-”

“Watch where you're going, you insolent brat! That was my favorite cup!” Otto looked just south of seething with unbridled rage, but when he had the proper amount of arms, he wasn't quite as threatening.

“Yes sir, of course, I'll just be out of your way.” With that, Peter scurried back over to where Gwen was waiting. The instant Doc Ock was safely out of sight, Peter's face overflowed with smugness.

“Peter,” Gwen said with barely restrained laughter, “were you taunting the imprisoned supervillain?”

“Me? No. That'd be petty...”

The couple made their way to the front desk, where a chubby, gray-haired lady was absorbed in a book.

“Hi, I'm Gwen Stacy,” said Gwen. “I have an appointment to see Edward Brock Jr. with my boyfriend.” She gestured to him. “Peter Parker.”
“Peter Parker?” the lady said, not looking up. “You mean the kid Brock swears up and down is Spider-Man?”

Peter promptly jumped out of his skin. “What? No! I've never even heard of Spider-Man! Why, is he some kind of superhero?”

“Look, I work at an asylum. I've met twelve Spider-Men, five Captain Americas, and a guy who was convinced Invisible Girl was stalking him.” The lady gave Peter a sour look. “It gets a little old.”

The couple’s second trip towards Eddie’s room wasn’t as eventful as the first. Electro seemed dormant, for one thing. Eventually, though, they reached Eddie’s room, and, just as before, Peter hesitated at the door.

“You sure you want me to come in? It could just freak him out worse-”

“I know, I know.” Gwen took a breath. “But if you could talk it out with him, maybe we could make Eddie underst-?”

“We will destroy Spider-Man! We will destroyyyyy Spider-Maaaaaan! WE ARE V-”

“Yeah, thanks, we haven’t forgot who you are in the last five seconds,” cut in Peter.

On the opposite side of the bed, Gwen shot him a glare.

“Sorry, I mean, uh...” Peter took a breath, then placed a hesitant hand on Eddie’s mattress. “Look, Eddie, if you want to rave about how much you hate me, could you at least, like, go over why you hate me one more time?”

“It doesn’t love you! It loves ME!” A few less inches between them, and Eddie would’ve managed to headbutt Peter. Luckily, his jacket held him back like a dog at the end of its chain.

“The symbiote messed with your head, Eddie!” At the start of this conversation, Gwen had been the calmest of the three, but even she was starting to slip. “There’s just no reason for you to hate Peter. The Connors gave you your job back, and sure, Peter shouldn’t have sold those Lizard pics to the Bugle, but he also saved us all from the Lizard in the first place. Doesn’t that count for-?”

“Ah, Gwen, our favorite plaything!” Seemed this was the first Eddie had noticed of her. He turned her way, lagging out his tongue like he thought it was still Venom’s. “You’ll make such a beautiful corpse, we can hardly wait-”

“That’s enough.” Before Gwen could react, Peter placed himself between the two. “This is getting us nowhere, Gwen. Let’s just leave already.” He turned for the door, shoulders sagged. “Something tells me Eddie doesn’t appreciate our company.”

“But-” Gwen sputtered for a second, then reluctantly trudged towards the door alongside her boyfriend. Just before slipping through it though, she spun back to snap, “Don’t you get that the symbiote’s half the reason Peter was such a jerk to you in the first place? It played you two against each other!”

“It loves me! It loves me!” Eddie’s raving continued long after the door slammed shut.

“Yo, Sha Shan!” Flash gave a pleasant wave as his girlfriend marched towards him across the
parking lot. “There you are. Been lookin’ everywhere for you. So, y’know, there’s this really cool movie out-”

But the words dried in his throat the instant a chocolate bunny slammed his palms.

“Here.” Sha Shan’s voice was nails on a chalkboard. “You might want to save this for the next hot girl who walks past.”

“Sha Shan, wait, that's not- Come back!”

By the time they returned to the front lobby, Peter’s arm was practically fused to Gwen’s waist. “C’mon… let’s get you some ice cream.”

“I’d like that.” Any signs of life had faded from Gwen’s voice.

“Hey, chin up.”

“I know, I know.” Gwen’s chin didn’t seem to feel like going up, though. “I guess we’ve done everything we can for Eddie.”

“Did you say Eddie? As in Eddie Brock?”

Peter and Gwen spun their heads to the front entrance, where a woman was heading towards them. She was pretty, maybe in her twenties, with pale skin, long dark hair, and some kinda leather biker jacket that didn't look as cool as she probably thought it did. She was exactly the kind of girl Eddie would date.

“Hi,” said Gwen, frowning. “You know Eddie, too?”

The woman nodded. “I met him at Empire State.”

Peter and Gwen traded glances. Weird... Eddie had never said anything about having a college girlfriend.

“So you're his friend?” said Peter.

“Something like that.” The woman looked to the lady behind the front desk. “What room is Eddie in?”

“Two-O-four B,” the lady said, eyes locked on her book.

“Thanks.” The woman started to move for the hall, but Peter blocked his path.

“Sorry, I don't think Eddie ever mentioned you.” Peter gave the biker jacket a suspicious glare.

“What did you say your name w-?”

“Everyone out of the halls!” That instant, a doctor bolted into the lounge, utter terror on his face. “Kasady's loose again! He's got a knife, and- and he grabbed a nurse!”

The asylum-goers' reactions were a mix of terrified screams and annoyed groans.

“For God's sake, that's the third time this month,” said Otto, rising to his feet. “Can't you buffoons keep one scrawny ginger in check? Kasady's hospitalized more people while locked up in Ravencroft than the entire Sinister Six combined!”
Back by the front desk, Peter gave a start. “What? Who is this guy, a serial killer?”

“Let me put it this way,” the desk-lady said as she fished for her bookmark, “when Cletus Kasady was eight, his pet cat fell into a meat grinder right in front of him-”

“That poor man!” gasped Gwen.

“-and then when he was fourteen, his girlfriend tripped into the middle of the street and got run over, and then when he was twenty, his parents' house caught fire – You seeing the pattern here?”

“Oh,” said Gwen.

“Well in that case, we'd better get outta here as fast as possible! Come on, Gwen-” Peter grabbed her hand and hurried out the door, past a couple security guards watching the exit. As soon as they were safely out of sight, Peter dived into some nearby bushes and unzipped his backpack.

“You- You don't think the guards can handle him?” Gwen said, breathless.

“Can't hurt to have a little spider-themed insurance.” Once the mask was over his face, Spider-Man doubled back towards the building.

“Peter, wait, what about-?” But he'd already hopped inside through a window.

Something here felt... off. Gwen's eyes flitted back towards Ravencroft's front entrance. She kept vigil for several minutes. The guards evacuated plenty of panicked patients and visitors, but not included among them were any mysterious women with pitch-black biker jackets.

Gwen shut her eyes, and for the briefest of seconds, she was dangling from a parade balloon again. But... no, no, she was just being paranoid. Back when those robots had attacked the school, Peter had made a big fuss about having precognition, hadn't he? If that woman was Venom, his spider-vision would've buzzed or whatever. Gwen breathed a sigh of relief.

She was sure everything was fine.

The instant his door creaked open, Eddie ceased his battle with his straightjacket and spun his head to the entrance. Standing in the doorway was a beautiful woman... but the jacket on her back was far more beautiful than she could ever hope to be.

“Do you have it?” Eddie's heart was beating faster. “Is it in your clothes?”

A big, wide smile crossed the woman's face. “Was it really that obvious?”

“Oh God... God, please, don't-”

The only thing louder than the nurse's sobs was Cletus's laughter. The volume of his cackles only increased as he pinned the girl against the hallway floor, a shiv hovering above her neck.

“There's no need to get so upset.” Ever so gently, Cletus pressed the tip under her chin. “There's no need to get so anything. It's pointless. Everything is pointless. All I'm trying to do is show you... show you the chaos.”

“Please, I have a daughter!”

“Oh, I know.” Cletus nodded. “Don't worry, she’s next.” The shiv began its descent...
Thwip.

...and was immediately yanked away by a strand of webbing.

“Geez, man, who peed in your Cheerios?”

“You?” Cletus spun towards the ceiling, snarling.

“Oh, look, a crazy murderous ginger.” Spider-Man crumpled the shiv like it was made of paper. “If you put on a goblin costume, I will friggin' scream.”

Good thing Peter didn’t need to wear that splint anymore. He’d only kept it on for show, really. Though he, err, probably didn’t need to let Gwen know that, seeing as she hadn’t finished his trig homework yet.

“You're ruining everything!” yelled Cletus. “I need it! I need it!”

“Okay, okay, we’ll get you some Cocoa Puffs! Calm down.” Before Cletus had time to try anything else, Spidey shot out a glob of webbing that pinned him to the far wall.

“You alright?” Spidey dropped down to the floor to check on the nurse, but she ran off screaming before he could get a good look at her. Spider-Man sighed and shook his head. “Ah, well, I didn't want her thanks, anyways…” He glanced back at the squirming Cletus, whose mouth had been mercifully covered over. “Now then, with bees-for-brains all webbed up, the next order of business is checking on that shady chick with the black jacket. Given how much the universe loves me, I've got a feeling that's Venom.”

No sooner was the word out his mouth than the door at the far end of the hallway exploded. “Say our name and we magically appear!”

“HEY!” yelled Spider-Man. “Get your own material!”

His first impulse might have been to quip, but that didn’t mean Peter’s muscles weren’t coiling themselves at the sight before him. He’d been was afraid Venom would rear his slimy head again, and lo and behold, there he was, standing in the destroyed remains of the doorway to Eddie's room, looking as slobber-tongued and top-heavy as ever.

“Ahhh, it feels so good to be back!” said Venom, stretching his symbiote-covered muscles. “Now the question is, do we kill Spider-Man now or wait until we've offed all his loved ones?”

“How about choice C?” Spidey crouched into a fighting stance. “You finally realize you're being possessed by an alien and every word coming out your mouth is crazy?”

“Hmm...” Venom pondered this for a moment. “Nah. Our way's more fun.” He dived out a nearby window.


The two of them (or three of them, depending on how you counted) landed by Ravencroft's front entrance, where Gwen had been waiting. The instant she spotted the big, black slime monster coming at her, she shrieked and ran for it.

Thwip. A black tendril shot after her.

Double-thwip! But then a gray tendril latched onto Venom's back, and he was swung into the far
wall. Venom went crashing through the building, sending rubble every which way. Spidey couldn't help but wince – though luckily the lobby had already been evacuated, so no one got hurt. Wow, Cletus had actually done something helpful.

“You okay?” Spider-Man spun towards Gwen, who looked not unlike a veteran in the middle of 'Nam flashbacks.

“You- You said your powers would warn you about stuff like this!” she managed to stammer.

“It doesn't work on Venom! I was bonded to the symbiote for so long, my spider-sense doesn't register him as a threat!”

“That's stupid! What, your spider-sense can judge how friendly the imminent danger is-?”

“I don't know how my spider-sense works, okay? It just does! Is now really the best time for this?”

“Right, sorry. Running away now!” Gwen bolted for the streets.

“Call your dad!” Spider-Man yelled after her. “Tell him to bring plenty of tranq gas!”

Suddenly, Spidey felt something cold and slimy wrap around his waste. Man, he hoped Gwen's dad got here fast…

“Agh!” Spider-Man was dragged through the hole Venom had made, landing in one of the asylum's nondescript hallways. He tried to struggle, but that got pretty difficult once Venom's slime wound its way around his throat.

“Maybe now people will believe us.” Venom's face peeled back to reveal a smug-looking Eddie.

“Maybe now they'll all listen to us when we say that YOU, PETER PARKER, ARE SPIDER-MAN!” He glanced around, but the only people who'd heard him were the crazies in their cells.

“Hmm, let's adjourn to a more public venue, shall we?”

Spidey was dragged along by his neck. Eff my life eff my life eff my life eff my life…

“HELLO, NURSES!” Apparently, Eddie found the staff break room suitably public. “LOOK, IT'S US, EDDIE BROCK! WE WEREN'T LYING ABOUT THAT ALIEN AFTER ALL! AND LOOK WHO WE'VE BROUGHT WITH US – OUR GOOD FRIEND PETER PARKER!” He reached for Spider-Man's mask…

Thwack.

…and was promptly kicked away. Spidey had gotten his second wind, finding the strength to do a backflip and rip the symbiote off his neck so he could gasp for breath.

“Indoor voices, Eddie.” Spider-Man waggled a disapproving finger.

Luckily, the nurses seemed more concerned with running for their lives than learning Spidey's secret ID. Venom reluctantly put his face back over Eddie's – What was the point of having a scary monster-face if you were just gonna keep it peeled back all the time?

“Oh, well,” Venom grinned, “we're sure people will listen to us once 'Guess Who?' uploads a dramatic video of us unmasking you to the world. It'll certainly give the people on our forum something to talk about. We've neglected them for so long…”

“What, they don't have wi-fi in insane asylums?” Spider-Man swung his fist as hard as he could.
“It's a little hard to type in a straightjacket.” But Venom caught the punch in his palm, then responded in kind. “You'd be surprised how helpful our little forum-goers can be, though. They were the ones who told us where to find Eddie, and then imagine our delight when you came straight here while we were stalking you. Saved us the trouble of having to figure out how to work a GPS.”

The blow had sent Spidey skidding, but he quickly collected himself and hopped up to the ceiling. “Well, sorry to burst your bubble, but if people believed half the stuff they read about me on the internet, they'd all be thinking I'm a space alien government spy who doesn't know how to shot web.”

“That's alright.” Once again, Venom copied Spider-Man, hopping up onto the ceiling. “Maybe we'll just post a detailed expose on Dr. Connors's cross-species experiments – specifically those genetically-altered spiders of his, and how they can give people spider-powers, and how Peter Parker, the kid who takes all the pictures of Spider-Man, just so happens to be interning at Connors's lab.”

“Hey!” Spidey shot web- err, shot a web at Venom, but he dodged with lightning speed. “Come on, Eddie, your vendetta against me's stupid enough, but don't drag the Connors into it! Do you even realize what you're saying? You were practically family to them!”

Venom retaliated with his own web, and, Spidey was ashamed to admit, without spider-sense, he wasn't quite as good at dodging.

“We don't have a family!” spat Venom. “We're sure it was easy for you to forget while your precious aunt was baking you wheatcakes, but we grew up alone! Well, guess what, 'bro?' We don't need a family anymore! We don't need Gwen, we don't need the Connors, and I definitely don't need you. I have all the family I need right here.” He pointed a thumb at his white chest-spider.

Beneath the mask, Peter raised an eyebrow. “I?”

“We! We have all the family we need!”

Peter's lips curled upwards. “Aww, is your crush on the symbiote a weeny bit one-sided?”

“Shut up. It doesn't want you anymore. It wants m- us. It wants us. It-” Suddenly, Venom plummeted off the ceiling, making a crater in the floor. “What the-?” The next thing Spidey knew, Venom was kneeled over, puking out what looked like half-digested mice. Great, because Venom wasn't disgusting enough before.


“I did?” said Spider-Man. “Awesome! One less evil alien in the world.”

“No...” Eddie's voice was shaking with horror. “It won't end like this. It can't. I... won't... die...” Venom's face crawled back over Eddie's. “…alone.”

A wave of blackness shot towards Spider-Man, but he tumbled out of harm's way, dropping back to the floor and dashing through another door. Venom gave chase, using his tendrils to carry himself Doc Ock-style. The cooky couple ended up back in the lounge area. By now, it was empty save for the guy in the bunny suit cowering in the corner.

“No more screwing around. If we don't have time to ruin your life, we'll just end it.” Venom aimed
his fists and started firing web-bullets big enough to take Spider-Man's head off. It was all Spidey could do to keep dodging them all.

"Don't worry, Spider-Man!" called out the Easter Bunny guy. "Venom's gotta run out of webs eventually!"

"Actually, we never run out," said Venom. "Our web-shooters are organic."

"Huh. I thought they were mechanical..."

Oh, man, Spidey couldn't keep dodging these things forever. With Venom's fists firing like machine guns, so much as one bullet grazing Spider-Man's leg would be enough to cripple him. There had to be a way out...

"Aha!" Spidey grabbed a nearby TV remote off a coffee table with his webs, then aimed it at the widescreen TV beside Venom and cranked up the stereo to max.

"BREAKING NEWS! YOU PROBABLY DIDN'T THINK THE SINGER'S BABY WOULD BE FOUND DRIVING THE CAR FOR A FIFTH TIME, BUT TUNE IT AT FOUR, AND YOU MIGHT JUST BE SUPR-

Venom stumbled back, hissing, but there were only a merciful few seconds before he managed to smash the TV into a million pieces. "Just for that, we're going to make your death unpleasant."

Venom turned back towards Spidey.

But Venom wasn't expecting to find Spider-Man lunging for his face. "Wha-?"

"You look thirsty!" Spidey landed on his shoulders. "Here, let me give you a nice, refreshing beverage." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a vial of yellow liquid.

Look, Spider-Man wasn't stupid. He knew eventually Morbius would corner him in a dark alley or Connors would turn back into the Lizard somehow or Kraven would show his stupid furry face again. After that little tussle with Man-Wolf, Spidey had gotten in the habit of keeping some spare gene cleanser on his utility belt, and right now, he was giving himself a really big pat on the back for that.

"No! No! Please, you'll kill us!" Venom tried to squirm, but Spidey was already pouring the vial down his throat. The cleanser trickled towards his tongue... but at the last second, the symbiote sprang off its host. The cleanser landed in Eddie's mouth, and seeing as Eddie already had a hundred percent human DNA, all it did was make him cough and sputter a bit.

"Come on, Venom, take your medicine!" Spider-Man reached into his belt and uncorked his backup vial. "Open wide. The airplane goes in the tunnel..." He tried to splash the cleanser directly on the slime – As far as Spidey could tell, the symbiote was an amorphous blob, so that mouth was just for show – but the symbiote dived back onto Eddie's ankle to dodge.

"Oh no you don't!" Before it had time to turn Eddie back into Venom, Spider-Man gave him a nice, strong punch to the face. It was hard enough to knock Eddie out cold, but not hard enough to break anything – Spidey had learned his lesson from the Grizzly. The monster-face and white spider emblem reformed over Eddie's slime-covered body, but he stayed on the ground. "Guess Venom's staying unconscious."

"Correction." Venom gave a sudden lurch, making Spidey come dangerously close to wetting his tights. "Eddie Brock is unconscious. WE are still very much awake." Venom rose to his feet, but something about his posture was off. He moved almost like a marionette. That wasn't the part that
sent shivers down Peter's spine, though. No, that'd be Venom's voice. Usually, it sounded like Eddie's regular voice, but with a kind of alien distortion to it. Now, though, it was all distortion, no Eddie.

“Oh, that's right.” Spidey yanked the far door open with a web so the Easter Bunny guy could flee. “I forgot you can take your hosts' bodies for joyrides while they sleep. Add that to the list of reasons I broke up with you.” Now that the civilian was out of harm's way, Spider-Man darted through the open door, but he wasn't three feet through the next hallway before Venom pounced on him.

“Where do you think you're going?” For the next couple seconds, the two of them traded blows. The problem was, given Eddie was unconscious, Venom didn't seem to care how hard he was hit. The same... couldn't be said for Spider-Man.

“Yeah! Get him!” a voice called out. “Kill that freak!”

Spidey managed to turn his head from the fight long enough to see who was in the cell behind him. “Maxie! Your moral support means the world to me, pal!”

Behind the bars, Electro scowled at him. Well, it was a little hard to see his expression under the containment suit, but Spider-Man assumed he was scowling. “I'm not cheering for you, Wall-Crawler.”

“Then you've picked the right side.” A tendril shot out of Venom's hand, latched onto the cell door, and yanked it off, and then another one made short work of Electro's inhibitor bracelets.

“Now we're talkin'!” The instant he was freed, Electro slid his helmet back to show off his full head of lightning-hair. “One deep-fried spider, coming right up!”

“Yes!” Spider-Man fist-pumped. “I love fighting Electro!”

“Time to d- Wait, what?” Electro did a double-take.

“Well, not one-on-one.” As he spoke, Spidey made sure to position himself exactly between the two villains. “But, like, every time you're in a group, you get all angry and zap your teammates like a complete doof.”

“Really?” Electro sneered. “You think I'm stupid enough to do that again?” He shot out a nice, small burst of electricity that made a wide arc around Venom.

“Well, to be fair, you do have a long history of stupidity,” said Spidey, dodging. “And sometimes you get really irrationally angry over nothing... Max. Maxie. Maxwell. Doofimus Maximus.”

“Oh, please.” Electro stomped his foot, sending out a shockwave. “I don't care if you call me 'Max' anymore. I know you're just trying to goad me.”

“Wow, Ravencroft's anger management courses really work.” Spider-Man side-stepped a mix of lightning and symbiote-webs.

Electro's eyes narrowed. “Glib doesn't equal clever, Spider-Man.”

“Glib?” Now where have I heard that one before?” Spidey pretended to ponder this as he ducked a swipe of Venom's fist. “Oh, I remember! That's one of Doc Ock's lines!”

At this, Electro tensed. “So what if it is? Otto Octavius is ten times the man you'll ever be.”
“D'aww, your boyfriend's giving you vocab lessons! That's so sweet!”

“What did you say?” It was a little hard to read his expression under all the electricity, but Spidey had a feeling Electro wasn't too happy.

“Oh, come on, we've all seen the way you look at him, Maxie. Those wistful glances during Sinister Six luncheons. Those-”

“You just cracked your last joke, freak! You can insult me all you want, but you do NOT bring HIM into it!”

“Hey, dude, I understand! Prison changes people-”

“SHUT UP!” Aaaaand three... two... one... Zap. Right on cue, Spidey jumped out of the way, and Electro's blast instead hit Venom right in the chest-spider.

“Argh! Watch it!” Venom didn't take too kindly to this. He apparently figured Electro was doing more harm than good, so he fired some web-bullets to knock him out.

“Ah, don't worry, Maxie.” Spidey bounced over to pat the fallen Electro's shoulder. “Our society's really come to accept love between a man and an octopus.”

“Well, that was a fun distraction.” Venom lunged at Spider-Man, but he once again dodged. “But I'm done playing around. The clock's ticking.”

Spidey tried to go for the third vial on his utility belt (Look, he fought a LOT of genetically-altered supervillains, okay?), but suddenly a black tendril wrapped around his ankle. “Gah!” Spidey was yanked off his feet.

“You want to know something funny?” Venom laughed, which, with his new alien voice, sounded extra creepy. “We actually didn't want to kill you. Brock did, but not US. It was our little secret we kept from him.”

Spider-Man had a really sharp retort ready, but the black slime over his mouth stifled it.

“All WE truly wanted was to break you. We wanted your loved ones gone. We wanted your powers gone. And when you were broken and alone and empty like Brock...” Venom leaned in until their faces were almost touching. “…then you would need us, and you would take us back.” He ran his tongue over Spider-Man's face.

Ugh, now Peter was gonna have to bleach this mask. That always made it look pink...

“But all of that's changed now.” More and more slime wrapped itself around Spidey, dragging him towards Venom. “Our life's almost up, Peter. We can feel the poison growing inside us like a tumor. You've killed us... and here we thought that was against your rules.” He shook his head. “Uncle Ben wouldn't approve, ' remember?”

“E-Evil aliens... don't... count...” Spider-Man got out, strangled.

For a minute, Venom took this in silently. “Well,” he finally said, “if that's how it must be...” The slime wrung Peter's neck. “…then all three of us will die together!”

Oh crud.... Oh poop... Oh humina humina humina, this was bad. Peter was seeing stars. He just... had to get the... slime off his neck... and then...
All of a sudden, the world came back into focus, and Spider-Man rolled up the bottom of his mask so he could suck in as much air as possible. The symbiote had just let him go. But why...?

Spider-Man’s eyes fell on Venom, who was once again kneeled over, retching.

“Oh, the cleanser's killing you right in the nick of time.” Spidey gave a grateful look to the heavens. “Wow, God doesn't hate me after all.”

“Blck!” A cascade of goop spewed from Venom's mouth and onto the hallway floor.

“Eww...” Spidey took a step back, eyeing the freshly-hurled slime warily. “Did you just puke blood?”

“No, no...” Eddie, apparently, had woken back up – The voice now sounded like his own. And it was shaking... with delight. Venom ran his hands through the red slime, giggling to himself. “Don't you see? We were wrong. We weren't dying. We... We were having a baby.”

Spider-Man brought his palm to his forehead. “Please tell me I'm not the father...”
“It's against the natural order o' things, I tell ya.” Sally picked at her salad while Rand sucked down his soda. He was making a concentrated effort not to cringe every time her voice hit his ears. “It was crazy enough that Liz and Flash are into geeks, but now we got robots and super-freaks running around smashin’ up the city, too? Like, what's up with that? Shouldn't the police be doin’ something to keep ‘em off the streets?” She gestured to the various passerby in the mall's food court. “The super-freaks, I mean. Not the geeks. Although...”

Rand slurped as hard as he could. He'd actually finished his drink a while ago, but if he slurped hard enough, it sort of drowned out Sally's voice. He was waiting for her to run out of air. In fact, he'd been waiting since the day they met.

“It's just not fair, y'know? They've canceled cheer practice for, like, a month thanks to that robot attack. What am I s'posed to do with myself n-?”


Sally’s face was a perfect blank. “Who’s John?”

Of course. Rand didn’t know what he’d expected. “John Jameson? He’s only my best friend who I’ve been worried about for months now. But then I don’t expect you to keep track of anyone who doesn’t orbit your head, anyways.”

“Oh, b-but Randy, your friend is different, obviously-”

“Why am I even bothering with you?” spat Rand. “It’s over between us.”

“Over?” That shut her up. “Buh- Buh- But why?”

“I don't know,” said Rand, sitting up straighter, “maybe because every time we hang out together, all we ever talk about is you, you, you, you. I gave you more than enough of a chance. I have been beyond patient, but newflash, Sally, a relationship takes two people.”

“Randy, no!” Sally reached across the table for his arm, but Rand pulled away. “Look, I'm sorry, okay? I didn't mean to tick you off. You're my man.”

Rand snorted. “Go find another football player. We're all the same to you.”

“Excuse me?” Sally sprang to her feet.

Rand folded his arms. His voice was the exact opposite of hers – deep and calm. “All you do is hang off my arm and parade me around in front of your friends. You know, that might get you popular in high school, but in the real world-”

“You sound like my ma!” If Sally had been loud before, now she was audible from the other side of the mall. “Whatever. I don't know why I wanted to date such a jerk in the first place.” She stormed off, but not before purposefully flipping her salad bowl over. “I'm goin' home.”

“While you're there, maybe try growing up a little!” Rand called after her.

She was gone. Finally. Rand took some deep breaths. All this time, he'd felt like a shaken soda
bottle, and now he'd finally let off some pressure. One of these days, he really needed to stop
dating the first girl who made eyes at him.

“Okay, I'm not gonna lie,” said a voice. “That was the greatest thing I've seen all week.”

Rand looked over his shoulder. The owner of the voice was a girl sitting at the table behind him.
She was mixed race, maybe a year or two older than Sally, and breathtakingly pretty. But
something about her looked much less... *artificial* than Sally. Her makeup was considerably more
reigned in, and her hair color looked natural. Somehow, her outfit seemed both more expensive and
less flashy than Sally's (in the rare instance Sally wasn't wearing her cheerleader uniform,
anyways).

Rand had to force himself not to stare. “Oh, uh, hey, there. Guess you heard us?”

“Don't look so ashamed of yourself.” The girl flashed him a smile. She had the kind of teeth Rand
had thought only existed on magazine covers. “She sounded like she needed to hear that.”

“Yeah.” Rand glanced back at the mall exit, but Sally was already long gone. “She really did. She's
kind of a b-”

“Bleached blonde high school cheerleader?”

“Yeah. That's what I was gonna say.” Rand found himself laughing. “I'm, uh, I'm Rand, by the
way.”

“Janice.” The girl extended a hand. “Can I buy you a milkshake?”

Rand was in heaven. Her voice wasn't the least bit shrill.

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Okay, okay, Peter had to remain calm. No need to panic. There was just a newborn symbiote
wriggling around the halls of Ravencroft, that was all. Just a little baby symbiote. No big deal. And
Peter probably wasn't *really* the father because 1) *EWW*, and 2) the Venom symbiote clearly had
some kinda crazy alien biology. It'd probably just reproduced asexually with no, err, human DNA
harvesting required. Spidey breathed a sigh of relief. The Bugle didn't pay him enough for Venom's
child support...

Wait. An evil alien that reproduced asexually? If someone didn't do something fast, the whole
planet could be up to its ears in symbiotes! Oh man, it was the Matthew Broderick Godzilla all
over again!

Spider-Man made a dive for the red symbiote, but Venom blocked his path, snarling. “Touch our
baby, and we will make you *regret* it.” Looked like he'd gone into full “mama bear” mode.

“Aww, but I was just trying to give him my baby shower gift.” Spidey fumbled through his utility
belt, but he was fresh out of gene cleanser. Great, the rest was still webbed up under his bedroom
desk, and something told Spidey he didn't have time for a quick commute home.

Venom ignored the Web-Head, instead crouching to scoop up the red slime in his hands. “Shh...
It's alright, little one. We've got you.” The ooze sifted around in his fingers, feeling out its
surroundings. “Come on, let's find you a host.” Venom glanced at the unconscious Electro for a
moment, but he seemed to decide against it. Good, the world wasn't ready for the rise of
“Velectrom.”

Suddenly, the big old mouth on Venom's stomach opened up, lapped up the red slime with its
oversized tongue, and then smoothed back over. It was like a kangaroo pouch, only... freakier. The next instant, Venom was darting down the hall.

“Hey, wait up!” Spider-Man gave chase, but he could only go so fast on foot, and there wasn't exactly room to web-swing in here. “I, uh, don't suppose it's too much to hope you happened to be pregnant and dying?”

“We feel better than ever, thanks for asking,” Venom called back as he turned the corner. “And good news – since we've still got a long life ahead of us after all, we can keep on dedicating it to ruining yours!”

“Y'know, the true meaning of Easter is forgiveness...” Spidey fired a web, but he wasn't great at hitting a moving target.

“Oh, don't worry, we'll be getting into the Easter spirit soon enough.”

Spider-Man rounded the corner, but Venom had already vanished. Dang it! Where could he have run off to? Spidey skimmed the hallway's doors. Venom had to have gone through one of these. Hmm... Knowing Venom, he'd want to give his newborn baby a host ASAP so they could gang up on Spidey. But not just any poor schmuck would do – It'd have to be someone with plenty of negative emotions for the red symbiote to feed off of.

But who...?

Cletus struggled against the webbing, but it wouldn't budge. This was so unfair! All Cletus had wanted was to chop a nurse into tiny bits! Was that too much to ask? If... If Cletus could just get to the spare shiv hidden up his sleeve, then maybe he could escape and catch that spider-person off guard. Cletus had never killed a superhero before. Now there was an exciting thought.

But before he could even get close to his shiv, Cletus found the webbing ripped off his mouth by a set of black claws. “W-Wha-?”

“Hey there, Cletus.” A big, dark figure descended from the ceiling, giving Cletus a toothy grin. “We told you it'd come back for us.”


“For once, no.” The alien leaned in closer, inspecting him with its gooey, white eyes. “Say, Cletus, you were pretty enthusiastic about getting an alien of your own, weren't you? If you were hypothetically to receive this alien... would you help us kill Spider-Man?”

“Yes! Yes!” If Cletus's heart thumped any faster, it'd burst. “I'll kill! I'll kill lots!”

“That's what we like to hear.” The next thing Cletus knew, a second, larger mouth was forming on the alien's stomach... which promptly puked all over Cletus's face.

Cold. Cold, cold, but... a good kind of cold. The kind of cold than enveloped your entire body. Cletus was suffocating! He was- No... No, it was breathing for him... His vision had gone red, and Cletus's head was throbbing, but somehow he didn't mind. He could feel it in his head. He... He wasn't alone anymore.

The answer had hit Spider-Man like a ton of bricks. Who had more negative emotions than a serial
“Eddie, stop, you can't—” He was too late. By the time he reached the hall where he'd left Cletus, Venom was already standing before the remains of Spidey's web-cocoon. And something was emerging from it... Something big and red. “Eddie.” Spider-Man took a step backwards. “You didn't.”

“What?” smirked Venom, patting his son on the shoulder. “We thought Cletus could use a partner, and we found someone just perfect for him.”

“Thanks, eHarmony,” Spidey deadpanned.

Cletus took a shaky step forward. Hoo boy. With all the craziness going on in his life, sometimes it was hard for Peter to truly appreciate the fact that one of his rogues gallery was an actual alien from outer space. The big, lanky, red thing was... Well, it wasn't just a recolored Venom. It had the same face, the same white eyes, but other than that, it didn't really look like the black Spider-Man costume at all. In place of the white spider symbol, there were pitch black “veins” running through the thing's chest. Other features included razor sharp fingertips, little wriggling tentacles coming out its back, and a frankly absurd amount of teeth. Like, how many fangs did it really take to rip someone to shreds? Sheesh.

“We told you we'd be getting into the Easter spirit,” said Venom. “You be Jesus... We'll be the Romans.”

“Cutting! Cutting! Cutting!” Cletus lunged-

“Whoa nelly- Gah!” -and Spider-Man failed miserably at dodging. He found himself tackled and pinned against the floor. Man, for a newborn, the red symbiote was fast. Oh, and, naturally, it'd inherited its dad's spider-sense immunity. “Cletus, no! Cutting bad! Cutting very bad!”

“Cutting! Cutting! Chop, chop, chop!” It was all Spider-Man could do to grab onto Cletus's slime-covered arms and keep those razor-sharp fingertips away from his beautiful face.

“That's our boy,” Venom grinned, crawling towards them on all fours. “But let's keep him alive a bit longer, shall we? We don't want it over too soon.”

“Are you kidding?” laughed Cletus. “The killing's the best part. Watch this!” At his words, his fingers started to twist and stretch, and the longer they grew, the closer the distressingly sharp tips got to our hero's face. “Now hold still.”

“Whoops! Sorry!” But Spidey freed himself with a sudden swing of his leg, sending the alien-lunatic duo flying into the far wall. “I always get 'hold still' confused with 'kick me in the face.'”

“Are you okay?” Venom rushed to his baby's side, but Cletus managed to peel himself out of his crater all on his own.

“I'm getting a little impatient,” he hissed. Huh. No 'royal we?' Guess that was just Venom's shtick. “I say we chop him to bits and be done with it.”

Spidey felt it was a good time to dive for a nearby window.

“Uh-uh-uh, no escaping, spider.” But a set of red tentacles grabbed his ankles and yanked him back to the floor.

Spider-Man squirmed against the red slime, but he couldn't stop it from reeling him towards Cletus
like the catch of the day. “Ow! Hey!” He tried to rip the slime off, but Cletus's tentacles felt
different from Venom’s. Venom's slime was sticky, probably because it was used to copying
Spider-Man's webs. Cletus’s, on the other hand, actually left Spidey with gashes on his hand where
he tried to grab it. The red symbiote was... sharp?

“Alright, we've got him.” Suddenly, Venom placed himself between the monster and its victim.
“Now let's make him watch as we pick off his loved ones!”

Cletus's white eyes shifted so he was giving Venom a dry stare. “Why bother? Once he's dead, he's
dead.”

“See, now there's a pragmatism too much of my rogues gallery is missing.” Spidey seized the
distraction to burst out of the slime. Note to self – Breaking out of the sharp red symbiote slime
was possible, but also very, very painful. “Ow, ow, ow...” Spidey dived out a window, and this
time the aliens were too off-guard to catch him.

As soon as he was in the air, Spider-Man shot a web to a nearby building and swung off, clutching
his chest. When this was all said and done, his costume wasn't the only thing that'd need to be sewn
up...

The aliens, of course, immediately swung after him on their own symbiote webs. Good, now
Spider-Man just needed to lead them somewhere with no civilians around... Preferably somewhere
noisy. Maybe back to that church with the bell-

“Ugh, this is boring!” Suddenly, Celtus dropped down onto the sidewalk, causing Spidey and
Venom to halt their swinging. Spidey stuck to the side of a building to observe from afar, while
Venom landed next to his kid.

“What are you doing?” Venom hissed. “You said you'd help kill Spider-Man!”

“He moves too fast!” Cletus let out a petulant groan. “Can't I kill someone else? How about... that
guy over there?” He shot his head towards a random bystander, who'd been busy gaping at them.
The instant Cletus made eye contact, the man ran for it, but a red tentacle shot after him.

Spidey was just about to leap into action... but Venom beat him to the punch.

“Stop it!” He grabbed the tendril until the pedestrian was out of harm's way. “We don't want to kill
anyone else! Only Spider-Man and his loved ones!”

“Well, now you're just being close-minded.” Cletus shot a tendril off in the opposite direction from
Spidey. “Look, I've got better things to be doing. Go kill the spider-guy on your own.”

“Get back here! We're your parent and you will listen to us!”

But Cletus had already swung off.

“Aww, they grow up so fast.” Spider-Man hopped down next to Venom.

“What... What have I done?” For the slightest of moments, the alien quality in Venom's voice was
gone – It was just Eddie talking.

“Oh, so now you realize hurting innocent people is bad.” Under his mask, Peter scowled. “You
seemed fine with dangling Gwen off a balloon.”

Venom stayed silent, hiding his face. When he didn't reply, Spider-Man turned away and web-
swung after Cletus.

Spidey didn't have time to deal with Venom right now. As much of a jerk as he was, he at least never attacked random civilians. Cletus, on the other hand... A serial killer backed by symbiote-power? The thought made Spider-Man’s stomach churn.

Luckily, by the time Spidey found Cletus, he was surrounded by a squad of New York's finest. The officers were decked out in full-on riot gear, tranquilizer guns at the ready. Oh, good, Gwen had remembered to tell her dad to bring plenty of tranq gas. Spider-Man perched himself on a rooftop a safe distance away and watched the gas do its thing. Now they just had to wait for the spawn of Venom's loins to pass out, and the NYPD could haul his unconscious keister to the Vault where he couldn't hurt anyone. Beautiful.

Soon enough, Cletus was enveloped by a noxious green cloud. Unfortunately, after a minute, there was a distressingly low amount of “dropping unconscious” and a distressingly high amount of “laughing maniacally” going on.

“I hope you weren't expecting me to go down that easy.” Through the fumes, Spider-Man could make out the symbiote's face – or lack thereof. His regular mouth had been smoothed over with red, and now instead he was talking out of a big mouth on his stomach. Great, of all the tricks he could've learned from his dad…

Wait a tick. If the NYPD's knockout gas was useless, then those officers were defenseless! No sooner had the thought struck Spider-Man than a swarm of red tendrils shot towards the police.

“Oh, that can't be good.” He swung towards them as fast as he could, but by the time Spider-Man reached ground level, Cletus was already hurling officers around like rag dolls.

“You can't stop me.” As the last of the gas cleared, Cletus's tummy-mouth vanished and his regular one returned. “I'm just an aspect of the rule that governs everything – chaos. I'm going to show you just how worthless your lives really are. I'm going to make a trail of corpses from here to the Pacific.” He pulled himself to his full stature. “I'm Carnage!”

“Blah blah blood blah blah murder!” The next instant, Spider-Man gave Carnage a nice, strong punch to the kisser – even knocking lose a couple teeth. “Look, I'm sure people found you very edgy back in the nineties, but-”

“You again?” Carnage went skidding, but he quickly regained his stance. “You're not going to quit trying to stop me, are you?”

“Yeah, crazy, right? Who do I think I am, a superhero?”

Carnage shot another halfhearted tendril at him, but Spider-Man effortlessly dodged. “You jump around too much. Killing you's not worth the trouble.” Suddenly, Carnage spun around and fired a particularly sharp-looking tendril at a random officer.

“No!” Spider-Man tried to tackle the tentacle out of the way, but he was too slow. The sharp bit was coming right for the poor officer's face at lighting speed... but then it was blocked by a giant, pitch black figure.

“That's enough!” yelled Venom. “We want Spider-Man. These people have nothing to do with him.”

“Oh, come on!” Carnage threw his hands in the air. “You won't even let me kill police officers? You're the worst dad ever!”
Under the mask, Peter blinked. Was... Was Venom actually saving innocent people? Well, Peter was pretty sure the symbiote itself didn't have a conscience, so... that meant Eddie wasn't completely far gone after all. He was a total nutjob, but at least he didn't want to hurt innocents. It was like Venom was some sort of... lethal protector. No, wait, that sounded stupid.

“If you won't kill Spider-Man, then we'll wrench our child from your corpse and give it to someone who will!” Venom pounced, and suddenly he and Carnage were rolling around in a great big cartoon smoke ball full of claws and teeth and slime and tentacles. Oh man, an alien vs. alien showdown. If those two kept at it, they'd tear up all of Westchester.

Venom and Carnage had made themselves a nice little crater in the middle of the street, thought at least the pedestrians had run out of harm's way by now. Well... most of them.

“You know, Spidey,” Venom called out as a set of black tendrils tossed a couple more stragglers out of Carnage’s range, “for a quote-unquote ‘superhero,’ you don’t seem to be pulling your weight here.”

“Oh, no, you don't get to be all self-righteous, Eddie!” Spider-Man snapped. “You put a super-powered alien on a crazed serial killer who's currently going on a murder spree with it.”

At this, Venom's face hardened. “Fine,” he said, “since you're such a selfless hero, you'll have no problem fighting Carnage on your own.” He swung off without another word. So much for “lethal protector.”

“Finally, he leaves.” Without a big, musclebound alien dad to distract him, Carnage turned his full attention on Spider-Man. “Now it's just you and me.”

“Oh, so you're gonna fight me after all?” Spider-Man pounced, fist raised...

“Nope!” Thwip.

...and was promptly webbed to the side of the building by red slime. Had Spidey mentioned how bad he was at dodging without his spider-sense?

“There we go.” Carnage looked tempted to cut Spidey's throat then and there, but he apparently thought better of it. “Maybe killing a superhero's not so much fun after all... Probably got indestructible skin or somethin'... Now then, time to go paint the town red.” With that, he swung off, too.

“Hey! Get back here!” Spider-Man struggled against the slime, but it was no good. By the time he broke free – which, by the way, stung like crazy thanks to Carnage's “sharp webbing” – Carnage was already out of sight. No.

Spider-Man swung after Carnage as fast as his webs would allow. He'd never lost a civilian to a supervillain, and he sure as heck wasn't about to start now.

A spontaneous marathon had broken out in the streets of Westchester. Every which way, civilians were stampeding, their screams filling the air.

But not every civilian was exactly in peak stampeding condition. Which was how something red and slimy ended up wrapping itself around the ankle of a shrieking, flailing elderly man and dragging him backwards over the pavement.

“Aww, what's the matter, old timer?” Next thing he knew, the man was strung upside-down.
“Legs not as spry as they used to be?”

The man was withered and balding, and if his hair hadn’t been white before, it certainly was now.

“Here, let old Dr. Carnage have a look...” The monster made a show of inspecting his calves.

The old man’s pulse pounded in his ears. The blood was rushing to his head. He had to stay calm. Had to-

That’s when he caught sight of something off in the distance. It was Spider-Man, and he was coming in fast. The man’s pulse slowed the slightest amount. Good, good, if Spider-Man was here, things couldn't really be that bad.

The old man just wished Spider-Man coulda gotten here a few seconds sooner, that was all.

“Oh dear, dear, dear,” the monster shook its head, grave. It raised a red arm into the air, and the next thing the man knew, its hand was morphing... “This is bad.” ...into an ax. “I'm afraid we'll have to amputate.”
Working for hours on end was always monotonous, even in the emergency room. There were only so many dramatic injuries doctors could rush off to treat before it all started to blend together. But nobody, not a single doctor, nurse, or toddler throwing up Kool-Aid would ever forget the time a kid in a tattered and bloodied Spider-Man costume burst through the entrance doors, carrying half a person in his arms. It was some poor elderly man, his face contorted in a valiant effort not to scream, wrapped in gray goo that grew redder by the second.

“This- This guy needs help,” the kid in the Spider-Man costume stammered out. He just stood there, dazed, until a nurse rushed over to take the man from him.

“What is that?” she asked, eyeing the web-covered stumps.

“I had to- to stop the bleeding.” As soon as his hands were free, the kid dashed for the doors. “Look, I gotta go. There's a monster... alien... thing.” Just before leaving, he glanced back and added, “You, uh, might be pretty busy today.”

And then, as suddenly as he'd appeared, the kid in the Spider-Man costume was gone.

The instant he was outside the hospital, Peter rolled up his mask and puked his guts out into the bushes. He tried his best to tune out all the passerby staring at a sobbing, hysterical Spider-Man.

Look, this wasn't Peter's first time dropping someone off at the ER. This was Manhattan. There were traffic accidents, shootouts... Things had gotten grisly before. But this... this was different. It was... intentional. Spider-Man had battled truckloads of supervillains since last summer, but this was the first time one had- Y'know what? No, Carnage wasn't even a supervillain. Supervillains traded banter and took hostages and swore revenge and plotted to take over the world. They didn't just butcher random people willy-nilly. Heck, even Walter Hardy had only been trying to steal a car. He hadn't killed for fun.

Peter glanced down at himself – specifically at the big, wide gashes across his chest. The price he'd payed to stop a helpless bystander from getting hacked to pieces. He hurriedly webbed himself up before he could lose any more blood.

Peter forced some deep breaths. He had to do this. This was what he'd signed up for when he'd decided to put on the costume and swing around stopping purse snatchers. There'd be no running back to his bedroom to hide. No waiting for the Fantastic Four to show up and save the day. No time for gene cleansers or church bells or any other tricks. He had to do this. He could've returned the black costume to Connors right away, and then none of this would've happened. Peter's fault. Peter's responsibility.

"Thwip." A web-strand stuck itself to a far-off skyscraper. Spider-Man had saved that civilian, but he'd done it by running away, meaning Carnage had been left unchecked. Time to put a stop to that.

Spider-Man swung through the streets as fast as his webs would carry him. Carnage wouldn't be that hard to track. Spidey just had to look for the telltale signs of his presence – earsplitting shrieks, crowds of pedestrians running like mad-

“Oh Jesus.”

-and the words “CARNAGE RULES” painted on the side of a building in blood, complete with red
arrows pointing out directions beneath the words “THIS WAY, SPIDER-MAN.” There was even a little blood-doodle of Carnage slicing off Spidey's head. Lovely.

The arrows led Spider-Man around the side of a building. When he reached the words “YOU'RE HERE” on the pavement, Spidey's heart stopped. Okay, good news and bad news. The good news was, as far as Spider-Man could see, there were no bodies lying in the middle of the street. The bad news was that what was in the middle of the street was a massive, intricate red spider web. And a huge web in the middle of one of New York's busier roads was a recipe for hordes of cars all trapped like flies, their passengers struggling to escape as red tendrils wrapped around their doors. Some of the cars had even been lifted into the air, several feet off the ground.

“Oh, there you are!” Carnage called down from his perch at the top. “Good to see you followed my instructions without any trouble.”

Spider-Man ignored him, wordlessly hopping to the nearest SUV in the web and setting to work freeing the terrified driver.

“I've been thinking—” As he spoke, Carnage sent out a red tendril to smack Spidey away. “-with you superhero types always up in my business, I don't really have time to savor each and every death the way I'd like. I was a little miffed at first, but then I realized... go big or go home!” He showed off his impressive collection of teeth. “So instead of picking people off one by one until someone stops me, I'm just gonna harvest as many as I can and then squeeze the life outta 'em all at once! It's like an arcade game. Sure, you're gonna game over eventually, but you've gotta aim for the high score, y'know?”

With a bit of struggling, Spider-Man managed to free a man and a woman from their van, fighting off Carnage's tentacles long enough for them to flee.

“Aww, what's wrong, spider?” Carnage hopped over to Spider-Man's side. “Aren't you gonna crack some jokes?”

Spider-Man stayed silent, only scowling at Carnage for a moment before jumping to the next van.

“Fine, I guess I'll tell the jokes.” With a sudden lurch, Carnage's arm stretched like a snake, smashed through the window, and yanked something out of the van. “Why'd the baby cross the road?” Carnage proudly held up an infant car seat... complete with bawling infant.

“You touch a single hair on that kid's head and I swear to God I'll-!” Spider-Man pounced, but Carnage sidestepped him.

“What?” said Carnage, idly morphing his free hand back into an ax. “Don't you wanna hear the punchline?” Spider-Man fired both his shooters, but Carnage's tendrils whipped the webs away.

By this point, the baby was shrieking so hard, his face was bright red. “Momma! Momma!” But back inside the trapped car, his mother could do nothing but watch helplessly, her eyes wide with horror.

Carnage raised his ax-blade into the air. His voice was barely audible over the child's screams: “To prove it had guts!” The blade fell-

*Thwip.*

-and collided with empty air. At the last second, the baby's car seat had been snatched away by a black tendril.
“What the-?” Carnage spun his head around to find Venom standing outside the web, the van in one hand, the baby in the other.

“Here.” Gently, Venom returned the van to solid ground and handed the baby to its hysterical mother. As soon as her child was safely inside, the mother sped off. With it gone, Venom hopped back onto the web next to Spidey.

“Eddie-” Spider-Man began.

“Talk about disappointing!” Carnage let loose a cackle. “Here I'd thought you were like me, 'Dad,' but it turns out you're just a big softie. You're no different from the boyscout over here!” He took a swipe at Spider-Man, who tumbled out of the way.

“Peter, listen!” said Venom, his milky eyes narrowing. “Our child is stronger than us – We were born on another planet, but Carnage gestated in Earth's more hospitable atmosphere. If we're going to stop it, we need to exploit our species' weakness.”

“What, vibrations?” frowned Spidey, ducking a slimy red ax blade. “Could we lure him back to the church bell?”

“You know I can hear you, right?” said Carnage.

“No, not vibrations.” Venom fired a black tendril, but Carnage darted further down the web out of earshot. “Our kind has another weakness, one easier to produce – fire. Carnage is a newborn, so he couldn't have known about it, or else he wouldn't have trapped himself in a big, flammable web.”

“So we light this thing up, and the symbiote jumps off him?” said Spider-Man. “Sounds like a plan. Just as soon as we get everyone in the cars to safety first.”

Venom snorted. “You really are a boyscout.” With that, he started after Carnage's trail. “We'll hold off our child. Save as many people as you can, then look for a flame source.”

“Will do.”

That wouldn't be too hard. In fact, after only a couple minutes of saving people, Spider-Man stumbled across just what he was looking for: a cab that reeked of smoke.

“Hold still, pal.” With a quick tug of his webs, Spidey got the driver out of his seat. As he dropped him off away from the web, Spider-Man said, “Hey, weird question, but can I borrow a lighter?”

“Yeah, o' course.” The cab driver retrieved a little metal doohickey from his pocket. Then, he looked from Spider-Man back to the center of the symbiote-web, where the red and black aliens were busy duking it out. “Y'know what? Here.” He handed over a whole pack of cigarettes. “You need 'em more than me.”

“Trust me, there aren't enough drugs in the world for what I go through.” Spidey handed them back. He already got way too much smoke just from hanging around Jameson...

Spider-Man returned to the center of the web to find Venom in a headlock.

“Lucky me!” said Carnage, raising his ax-hand high. “Never thought I'd get to commit patricide again.”

“Eddie, everyone's off the web!” Spider-Man held the lighter up for Venom to see.
“Finally.” With a sudden swipe of his arm, Venom ripped open an empty car and yanked out the tank, sending gasoline spewing every which way.

“Hey, Cletus, you like arson, right?” Spidey flicked on the lighter and tossed it in. He was kind of expecting a massive, movie-worthy fireball, but Spidey would have to settle for a nice, slow burn.

“The- The fire!” As the flames grew higher, Carnage's eyes grew wider. “It feels... unpleasant.” Suddenly, a shriek emanated not just from its mouth, but from the symbiote's entire being. It couldn't jump off Cletus fast enough. “No! No, wait, come back!” Cletus fought as hard as he could, clawing at the red slime, but it was seeping away like a liquid. “Come back! It's just a little fire! We can still- We can still-”

His head spun towards Venom. By now there were bits of red hair and pale skin peeking out of Carnage's face. “We can still kill you.”

Eddie's symbiote didn't seem too thrilled by the heat, either, but before he could swing away, a red tendril grabbed Venom's ankle.

“Where do you think you're going, 'Dad?'” With a tug, Cletus sent the whole mess of psychopaths and aliens spiraling down to the pavement below.

“Hold on, Eddie, I got you!” Thwip. With a dive, a web, and a prayer, Spidey managed to catch... Cletus. What a relief.

“Give it back! I need it! I need my alien!” Apparently, bonding with an evil alien hadn't done wonders for Cletus's sanity. Spidey had to web him up just to stop him from thrashing around like a landlocked fish.

“That oughta hold you.” Once Cletus was securely webbed up on a rooftop, Spider-Man jumped back down for Eddie. By now, the whole symbiote web was a flaming mass in the middle of the street. Luckily, Spidey had made sure all the cars were evacuated, and he could already hear the fire trucks in the distance. Unluckily, Venom had landed smack in the middle of the flames, and now Eddie was flailing around, screaming his lungs out as the black slime wriggled and thrashed.

Spider-Man hesitated outside the fire. What should he do? What could he do?

Before he could make up his mind, Spidey felt something brush his foot. “Oh, you.” He glanced down to see a red puddle wriggling away as fast as it could. “No you don't!” A hastily-spun web-cocoon would keep the Carnage symbiote nice and snug until Spidey could figure out what to do with it.

“Peter!” Spider-Man flinched at the sound of his name. Eddie had apparently toppled over, his legs trapped in the shapeless black slime. The ooze darted away from the flames long enough for Spidey to see Eddie's terrified face.

Wait... Of course! Spider-Man's heart skipped a beat. If symbiotes were just as weak to fire as they were to vibrations, then being trapped in flaming rubble was like Eddie's own church bell! The problem was, whereas Cletus's newborn symbiote had dived right off him, Eddie's was stuck a bit tighter.

“Eddie, listen to me!” Spider-Man risked running through the flames so he could tug on the black slime. Usually, the symbiote stayed glued to its host, but with the fire mere feet away, it was stretching like taffy. “You've gotta get this thing off you!”

“P-Pete...” Eddie's eyes didn't look quite as lucid as Spidey would've hoped.
“The symbiote screws with your head. I went through the same thing, and I got it off. You have to fight it!” It was no good. The harder Spider-Man pulled, the harder the symbiote squeezed. Even with the flames nearby, it was clamping down on Eddie like a boa constrictor.

Spidey was sweating a fountain over here. After a minute, he was forced to let go. The moment it was freed, the symbiote engulfed Eddie’s whole body, solidifying into a big, black cocoon.

“Eddie, can you hear me?” Spider-Man punched it as hard as he could, but all that accomplished was bruising his knuckles. “Eddie! Eddie? Ed...”

That voice... sounded like it was underwater...

“Eddie? Eddie, can you hear me?”

Eddie felt like he was underwater, too. He was weightless... in a black void... Mind was a haze. Nothing but flashes of Spider-Man and Venom and a red monster-

A red monster? Carnage's bloodstrained grin burned behind Eddie's eyes. The monster. It... It'd slaughtered people. Ripped them apart like they were made of paper. And Eddie had... had made the monster.

A black creature flashed through his mind. Eddie was the monster. No, no, that couldn't be right. Eddie was innocent. Peter was the monster. Peter was... was...

A boy shrieking as he clutched his legs. An infant wailing as the red monster hoisted it into the air. “Why'd the baby cross the road?”

Suddenly, Venom was standing on a rooftop, overlooking a massive spider web. It felt so vivid, so real, except that the whole world was grayscale. Down below, Spider-Man and Carnage stood across from each other, and in Carnage's claws was a terrified child, hardly bigger than a football.

Venom tried to turn his back, but... he couldn't tear his eyes away.

“Momma!” The baby struggled to escape Carnage's grasp, but it was helpless. “Momma!”

“I want my mom.”

The next thing he knew, Eddie was a little boy sitting above the covers, and in his arms was an even littler boy. His face was buried so deep in Eddie's shoulder, it hurt.

“I know, Pete,” Eddie said softly. “I know.” Behind his big, round glasses, Peter's eyes moved towards a muted TV on the far side of the room. Onscreen, a news banner proclaimed, Flight 264 down over the Atlantic. “I want mine, too. Do... Do you get it, Pete? Do you get what's happened to us? We're the same now.” Eddie squeezed his hand. “We're brothers.”

Peter nodded.

And in the blink of an eye, the whole black-and-white world changed again, and now Eddie was a little boy sitting at a kitchen table, a plate of uneaten cookies before him. In the seats across from him, a white-haired couple was speaking in hushes voices over a stack of papers.

“You know we want you to be happy, Eddie. Really, we do. It's just...” The woman faltered.

“We have to do what's best for you,” the man said firmly. “Believe me, kiddo, the last thing we want is to separate you and Peter, but a growing boy needs food, clothes... stability. You shouldn't
have to wonder if you'll have electricity each month.” He gave Eddie a sad smile. “You deserve so much more than we can give you.”

“You… You really think this is best for me, Mr. Parker?”

The man nodded. “I really do.”

In a flash, the world changed again, and the smiling old man was replaced with a bald, snarling one. Now Eddie was a teenager with messy blond hair and a black jacket, standing defiantly in the middle of the hallway.

“You stole someone's car, took it for a joyride, and then wrecked it?”

“Didn't steal it,” Eddie mumbled, glancing away. “The guy let me borrow it.”

The bald man snorted. “Jesus Christ, no wonder no one ever wants to adopt you.”

And in another blink of an eye, the foster home was replaced with the front doors of Midtown High. Now Eddie was taller, less scraggly, with Gwen and Peter hovering at his sides.

“Empire State, huh?” said Gwen.

“Crazy, right?” Eddie nodded. “I'll introduce you to the Connors someday. They're good people.” He smiled, but his eyes stayed somber. “Wish you guys could be there.”

“Hey, we've only got one more year, bro.” Peter laughed, fidgeting with his glasses. “It's not like it'll be the end of life as we know it.”

The memory changed even faster this time, like lightning. “Shut it.” Eddie was tumbling to the ground, and looming over him was the timid little boy – only his glasses had been traded for a black t-shirt, and suddenly he didn't look so timid anymore. “We're tired of your whining.”

By the time Eddie was back on his feet, the black and white world had changed once again. Now there was nothing but a void... and a black creature standing at the head of it, a white spider symbol on its chest.

“I can't believe you bought it all those years.” Venom stepped forward, outstretching a black hand. “You were never brothers. You were never the same. He had his precious aunt and uncle. What did you have, Eddie Brock?”

“I...” Eddie took a step back. “I...”

“You've got more than you think, kiddo,” said a voice.

The dream changed again. Now Eddie was a little boy sitting on the porch outside Peter's house, and seated beside him was a white-haired man.

“Yeah?” Eddie let out a huff. “Like what?”

For a moment, the man was silent. “Y'know,” he finally said, “May and I have been married for, oh, goin' on forty years, and we've always wanted kids.” He shut his eyes. “And look what we have now.” His eyes pointed to the window. Inside, Eddie could see Peter's aunt handing him another tray of cookies. “A little squirt who needs us.”

“Yeah.” Eddie folded his arms. “But I guess a second little squirt's too much for you...”
Ben sighed. “My point is, there are plenty of people out there ready to love a kid in need.”

“Yeah, sure.” Eddie glanced away. “A little kid. No one wants someone as old as me.”

At this, Ben frowned. “Y’know, Eddie, sometimes you’ve just gotta deal with the hand you’ve been dealt.” He met Eddie's eyes. “It’s not easy, and not fair, but it’s the way it is. At the end of the day, no one's responsible for your life but you.”

The memories changed one last time. Eddie was Venom once again, watching Carnage lob an ax at a helpless child.

“To prove it had guts!”

*Thwip.* At the last second, the ax was knocked away by a black tendril. Carnage and the baby vanished in a cloud of smoke, replaced by the hulking form of Venom. Looking at it from the outside... those fangs, those claws... How could he have not realized before?

“You did this!” Eddie pointed an accusing finger. “You created Carnage! You didn't care how many innocent people he killed so long as he hurt Peter! You- You tried to kill *Gwen*!”

“Eddie, Eddie, listen to what you're saying. The only monster here is Peter. You know that. We're your family. We're your brother.”

“No!” Eddie swung a fist, sending Venom tumbling backwards. “I'm sick of using Peter as a scapegoat! What happens once we get revenge on him, huh? Is that gonna make us any less miserable?”

“Well, we WERE going to get filthy rich working for Tombstone, so there's that...”

“Working for a criminal?” Eddie raised his fist for another blow. “You're not even trying to hide it anymore. You're the monster. Peter was-” His breath caught in his throat. “Peter was your first host. He didn't start acting like trash until... until you bonded to him.”

Peter's words echoed around the memory-world:

“We're tired of your whining.”

“We're tired of your whining.”

“We're tired of your whining.”

“And he was wearing a black shirt that day.” Eddie's eyes narrowed. “Where have I seen *that* before?”

“In our defense-” Venom prowled towards him on all fours. “-you were being REALLY whiny. How were we supposed to know we’d bond to you later? See, Peter was stupid enough to reject our gift, but you, Eddie... we’d always thought you were smarter than that.”

“Get off me.” Eddie tried to flail his arms, and suddenly he could feel the slime around himself. The claustrophobia hit him like a tidal wave. “Get off me!”

Not a good idea. Now the dream-Venom was gone, nothing but a voice in Eddie's head. See, with those powers of his, Peter had more than enough strength to break our bond and survive unscathed. But you, Eddie Brock... You are nothing but a weak, ordinary little boy.

“Get off me!” Eddie could swear he was shrieking at the top of his lungs, but no sound came out.
“Get off me!”

So, well... The symbiote chuckled to itself. *Let's just say you can't live with us... you can't live without us.*

For a moment, the world was nothing but blackness.

“Eddie! Eddie!” And then something bright red and blue broke its way through.

“P... Pete...” Eddie was only dimly aware of his surroundings, but he could feel himself being wrenched from the cocoon.

“I got you, Eddie, I got you...” His vision was all fuzzy, but Eddie could definitely feel Peter's arms around him. “C'mon, let's get you to a hospital.”

“Pete, I...” His mouth barely worked, but Eddie forced the sounds out. “I'm...” The effort was too much. “...sorry...” The world was growing black again. “...b...”

Peter honestly didn't know if this was better or worse. Eddie had traded his alien symbiote for a hospital bed and tubes in his nose. All Peter could do now was sit at the bedside and listen to the beeping of the heart rate monitor as his hand clamped harder and harder over Gwen's. For a moment, the hospital room was silent, save for the soft beeping of machinery.

“Well,” Gwen said, “at least he can’t blurt out your secret ID anymore...”

“Yeah... Guess that's something.” Peter's voice had never sounded so dull and lifeless. His eyes stayed fixed on Eddie even once Gwen put an arm around him.

“You okay?” she murmured in his ear.

“You okay?” she murmured in his ear.

“Yeah, yeah. I was just thinking...” Peter turned to meet her gaze. “You were right, you know. Sure, it could’ve gone better, but... I don’t think our Ravencroft trip was a waste of time after all.”

Gwen took this in silently. “You think Eddie will be okay when... if... he wakes up?”

Peter’s eyes hadn’t left hers. Nor would they in the near future. “I hope so.”

The two of them stayed that way a moment. There was something almost picturesque about it.

“The- The symbiotes,” Gwen eventually said. “There’s no way they could’ve escaped that fire. They’re dead, right?”

At this, Peter could only bow his head. “Right.”

Something black and slimy scurried through the grungy sewer pipeline. The symbiote’s speed had greatly increased since it bonded to that rat. That was about the most complex lifeform it could bond with right now. That fire had... had taken so much out of it. The symbiote needed to rest. It needed to get to safety.

Back into the darkness.

Something red and slimy roared through the clouds. It flew above the trees, but just barely. As it turned out, the weight of the symbiote prevented the pigeon from flying too incredibly high. But
that didn’t stop it from trying. Up it went.

Up towards the light.

Working for hours on end was always monotonous, even in a mental hospital. Yes, the battle between Spider-Man and those supervillains had shaken things up a bit, but by now Ravencroft had returned to its usual tedium.

“*No, please, give it back! I need it! It chose me! The- The black thing chose me!*” Right now, for instance, a pair of nurses were leading yet another straightjacket-wearing loon into her padded room. The woman was, naturally, fighting them every step of the way.

“Where’d this one come from?” a nurse asked as he narrowly avoided being elbowed in the face.

“No idea,” said his co-worker. “She came to visit that Eddie Brock guy right before the supervillains attacked. Must’ve triggered some sort of episode.”

The nurses had almost gotten their patient down the hallway when they bumped right smack into another straightjacket-wearing loon being led into his room.

For only a moment, the redheaded patient locked eyes with the raven-haired patient, and just like that, she clammed up.

“Well, hello, beautiful.” The redhead wet his lips.

“That’s enough. Move along.” With that, the nurses hurried the raven-haired girl down the hallway.

The woman didn’t make another noise until she was inside a room, being helped into a hospital bed. “I... I understand now,” she finally spoke. “It chose me. The black thing. It brought me here... to meet him.”

“Try and calm down, Miss...” The nurse glanced at his clipboard. “...Barrison.”

“No.” The nurse tried to rest her head on a pillow, but the woman squirmed out of his grasp. “*No, you don’t understand. It chose me! It chose me!*”

A beat-up old teddy bear sat on the shelf across from the bed, giving an almost inquisitive stare to the redheaded man wriggling around in a straightjacket under the covers.

“Hello, Binky.” With a bit of effort, Cletus managed to sit up to meet the bear’s button eyes. “Today was the best day of my life.”

Cletus giggled to himself, but his voice was barely audible over the sound of the raven-haired woman from down the hallway shrieking her lungs out.
“We told you we'd be getting into the Easter spirit.”
A pair of hulking monsters. Sharp claws, way too many teeth. One pitch black, the other blood red.
“*You be Jesus... We'll be the Romans.*”
And there was so, *so* much red.

“Peter? Peter, are you alright?”

“Huh, what?” Peter snapped back into reality to find himself in the middle of the Parker household living room, an Easter basket on his lap, cold sweat on his forehead, and Aunt May giving him a concerned look. “Yeah, I'm good. Just spaced out for a second.”

“Peter...” The look changed to something more bittersweet. “If anything's the matter, you can tell me.”

For the briefest of moments, Peter was tempted. Strictly speaking, he could tell her what had happened to Eddie without giving away his secret identity... but why worry her?

“It's nothing, Aunt May. I'm fine.” It took a conscious effort to keep Peter's hands from shaking. “Totally fine.”

Normally, Gwen was quite guarded when it came to her phone calls. She’d clam up if her father so much as entered the same half of the house as her. But there was a chink in Gwen’s defenses – She’d needed to traverse the stairs to reach the bathroom below, and apparently her current conversation was far too important to be paused.

“...don’t know what to do, Mary Jane. Peter seemed so out of it all through Easter dinner yesterday.”

Captain Stacy would never *eavesdrop*, of course. Perish the thought. But, well, could he really help it if Gwen’s voice carried all the way to the kitchen? Or if it distracted him from his morning paper and coffee?

“Why? Oh, y’know...” There was a brief silence from the stairway. “Eddie’s coma really shook him up.” Another pause. “Yeah, it’s been hard on us both... Thanks, MJ. You’re sweet.”

Back at the kitchen counter, Captain Stacy stared into his mug. It couldn’t have been easy for Gwen to dance around Peter’s secret with her best friend like that. At least Gwen had her father to talk to about it – not that she often did. Gwen had been reluctant enough to discuss the subject of Peter Parker with him even *before* the kid could stick to walls.

“Well, if you’ve got any ways to cheer him up, I’m all ears.” There was one last pause from Gwen’s end. Followed by a yelp.

Captain Stacy’s eyes rose from his coffee. He could feel the heat of Gwen’s cheeks from all the way back here.
“M-Maybe I shouldn’t go that far...”

It was at this point that Captain Stacy found himself on his feet, calling out, “And how far would that be, Gwendolyn?”

“Daaaaad!” There was the soft, rapid sound of slippers scurrying down the stairs, followed by the slam of the bathroom door.

“I meant metaphorically!” Mary Jane groaned into her phone. “Like, stroke his ego. Quickest way to get guys hooked on you, guaranteed.” There was a pause from MJ’s end. “What do you mean, that’s Tiger’s strategy? Gwen, he keeps telling you you’re hot because you are.” But just then, a new arrival made MJ glance up from her phone. “Oop, gotta go, girlfriend. My study buddy’s here.” At the next pause, MJ rolled her eyes into the speaker. “I told you, he’s just a buddy- I mean, just a friend. Anyways, later.” With that, she hung up.

Mary Jane had been camped out in the Midtown High theater magnet’s prop room, using a poofy old fairy queen dress as makeshift bedding, but she hopped off of it once the newcomer arrived.

“Well, you’re early.” Her eyes traveled over him like a computer scanner. “You certainly don’t keep a girl waiting, do you?”

“Y-Yeah. Ha. Guess not.” Weird. Put him in front of a crowd, and Hobie could rattle off monologue after monologue unimpeded, but stick him with one little gorgeous woman and suddenly he was a mess. His cornrows practically quivered.

“So, ready to ace these auditions?” MJ held up the stapled stack of papers in her other hand.

“Ready as I’ll ever be...” The guy was surprisingly soft-spoken given that football build of his. His voice was almoststrained from disuse.

“Cool.” MJ prowled over, shut the door behind Hobie, and then leaned against the wall, script at the ready. “Here, let’s pick up where we left off with Glory. I’ll take Happy’s lines, seeing as its just the two of us this time...”

Hobie stood in place, stiff as a statue. “You sure I should try for Biff?”

“What, are you kidding? It’s bad enough we almost let you be a background extra the last time.” Mary Jane threw out smiles the same way fishermen threw out lures. “Seriously, Hobie, you killed it as Puck. You...” She trailed off.

Hobie blinked. “What?”

“Oh, sorry. Spaced out.” Okay, the combo meter was charged enough. Time for the finishing move. “It’s just, I didn’t notice before under all the green makeup, but your eyes are pretty. That super dark chestnut is, like, my favorite color.”

“T-Thanks.” Beat still, her heart – He was trembling. “So are yours. Pretty, I mean. Your eyes.”

A moment passed.

“Well, what’re we waiting for?” MJ gave the script a jostle. “We can talk when we’re dead. We got a scene to learn!”

“I don’t think that’s how that saying, err... Never mind.” Hobie cleared his throat, then began:
“Hello, kid. Sorry I’m late.”

MJ put on a deeper, scratchier voice for the male part: “I just got here. Uh, Miss... ?” In the same breath, she swapped to her regular one: “Forsythe.” And then back. “Miss Forsythe, this is my brother.”

“I-Is Dad here?”

They carried on like that for a minute. A couple lines in, though, Mary Jane looked up from the page. “Hey, Hobie, constructive crit – I get your character’s supposed to be nervous, but you don’t have to overdo it. Unwind a little.”

“Yeah, thanks, thanks.” Hobie nodded his head a couple seconds longer than necessary.

MJ nodded back, then returned her gaze to the script. “Oh, I see. How do you do?” She turned her profile, showing it off. As specified by the stage directions.

“Isn’t Dad coming?” This time, Hobie’s voice shook a little less.

Mary Jane’s lips had been stretched thin. She leaned forward. “You want her?” Whoops, she’d forgotten to put on the deeper voice.

Hobie drew back. “Oh, I could never make that...”

MJ giggled. “I remember the time that idea would never come into your head. Where’s the old confidence, Biff?”

“I-I just saw Oliver...”

“Wait a minute.” MJ brought a hand to his shoulder. Like her character would do. “I’ve got to see that old confidence again.” Not to brag, but Mary Jane’s striking emerald eyes could give those dark chestnut ones a run for their money. “Do you want her? She’s on call.”

“Oh, no,” said Hobie.

Spider-Man had swung halfway down the Queensboro Bridge when the Doc finally answered his phone.

“I’ll be blunt, Peter,” Curt was saying, “the fact that the symbiotes reproduce asexually doesn’t bode too well.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen the Matthew Broderick Godzilla.”

“However, from what you’ve described to me, I think it’s very possible that the second symbiote’s birth wasn’t caused by ordinary circumstances. Your gene cleanser could’ve triggered some sort of ‘pregnancy reflex,’ acting as a species preservation mechanism in case the symbiote’s immune system failed to purge it of the poison.”

“Well, I sure hope you’re right, Doc. I’ve got enough headaches without having to deal with an alien invasion...” They was no point fretting over this, anyways. The symbiotes were both dead now. Definitely.

Of course, Peter was one of a handful of people who now knew for a fact that intelligent life existed beyond the stars, so he was fully aware of the chance that a whole spaceship full of symbiotes might pay the Earth a visit one day... but any time that thought crossed Peter’s mind, he
forced himself to go to his happy place.

The three-day weekend hadn’t been nearly enough time to recuperate. Heck, a hundred-day weekend wouldn’t have been enough time. Peter had hoped his classes would help keep his mind off things, but wouldn't you know it, the whole student body had been called down to some kind of special concert to celebrate the newly-repaired courtyard. You could hardly even tell evil spider-slaying robots had invaded it.

Peter rolled his eyes as a bunch of dorks in goofy costumes set up their instruments on the stage (not that Peter was one to throw stones). From the seat next to him, Gwen was frowning.

“You okay?” she asked. “You're being really quiet. It's kinda eerie.”

“Am I okay?” Peter repeated, burying his eyes. “What do you think?”

“Total honesty?” Gwen cocked a brow at him. “I think you need a therapist.”

“Gwen.” Peter surprised himself with the sharpness in his voice. “We've been over this. I can't go to therapy. It just wouldn't work out.”

“I know, I know...”

For a moment, to the two of them sat there, eyes on the stage.

“I love you.” But Gwen’s eyes weren’t on the stage for too long.

“You, too.” Peter gave her something resembling a smile.

“Look, Peter, I know everything’s going to be okay.” Gwen returned the expression. “Yeah, there was a close call this time, but you’d never lose people on your watch.”

“Tell that to Flint Marko…”

“That was outside your control, Peter.” Gwen’s hand clamped down over his. “Listen to me. You’re smart. The smartest guy I’ve ever met. And that didn’t come from the spider bite. I know we can work through this-”

“Look, Gwen, it’s not that I don’t appreciate the flattery…” Peter sighed. “...but I don’t think there’s some trick to magically make me go back to normal if that’s what you’re trying to-”

“And now, without further ado…” Just then, the couple’s attention returned to the stage, where one of the teachers was speaking into a mike: “...Midtown High gives a warm welcome to... the Mercy Killers!”

Holy moly, it was like Peter had stepped through a time portal to the seventies. Just... afros. Everywhere. So many afros. Why did the school system subject its students to this torture? Why?

Standing at the front and center of the madness was a the band’s lead – At least, Peter assumed he was the lead given his afro was the biggest and most luscious of the bunch. And since that clearly wasn't straight enough, he also had on a white skintight outfit complete with a pair of goggled and a hot pink guitar.

“Evenin’, ladies and gents,” the guy said as a giant disco ball descended from the top of the stage. “You ready for my mesmerizin' melodies?”
There was a prolonged silence. Someone in the audience coughed.

“...Okay, uh, let's get started! Everybody stare into the lights!” Without further ado, his music washed over the crowd:

“Well, you can tell by the way I like to dress,
I'm a supervillain – not hard to guess.
My music can control your brain.
When it's put like that, it sounds insane.
But that is alright, it's okay,
'Cuz now I got the perfect way,
To liven up this little bash.
I'm gonna steal all of your cash!”

The song picked up speed as the disco ball spun faster and faster, emitting a gaudy neon light:

“Whether you're a brother or whether you're a mother,
You're hypno-hustled, hypno-hustled!
And it's just so funny how I'm stealin' all your money.
You been hypno-hustled, hypno-hustled!
Hyp, no, no, no, hypno-hustled, hypno-hustled!
Hyp, no, no, no, hypno-hustled, hypno-hustled!”

“Look, ignore the stupid school concert,” said Gwen, grabbing Peter's arm. “I'm sorry, Peter, I can give you some space if you need, but- but I want you to know I'm here for you.”

“W-Well, I appreciate that, but I'm not sure how much good you can do when I can't even close my eyes for two seconds without seeing blood and- and people's limbs severed clean off of-”

“Hold that thought, Peter.” Gwen abruptly stood up. “I need to give the Hypno-Hustler my wallet.”

“What? Oh yeah, good idea.” Peter stood up, too. In fact, the whole auditorium was forming an orderly line to dump their wallets into a big sack one of the Mercy Killers crew members was carrying. Peter fished through his pockets, but he came up empty. “Whoops. Left mine in my locker. I'll be right back.”

“Okay, you do that,” said Gwen faintly. “I'm gonna stay here and... listen to the pretty music.” She started to drool.

The nearer Peter drew to his locker, the quieter the music grew, but he was so lost in thought, he hardly noticed. This was all Peter's fault. He'd kept the black costume. He'd been a jerk to Eddie. Heck, Peter had even fed Venom the gene cleanser that, according to Dr. Connors, had probably triggered some crazy asexual symbiote pregnancy reflex. Carnage existed because of Peter.
Peter slammed his locker shut. Ah, well, no point standing around moping. He needed to hurry back to the auditorium so he could hand over his wallet to the Hypno-

Wait.

“Oh my GOD, where do these people keep COMING FROM?”

“I wish I knew, Spider-Man.” Captain Stacy could offer nothing but a shrug as his men led every last member of the Mercy Killers out the school parking lot to the cop cars. “I wish I knew.”

A ceiling light flickered over the darkened cell, illuminating the form of a boy in a wheelchair. He faced the wall, listening intently as the sound of footsteps grew louder from down the hall. Each time the footsteps passed a cell, a new warning blared to life:

“Do not approach walls or door, or tranquilizing gas will be released to immobilize Gargon, comma, MacDonald.”

“Do not approach walls or door, or intense UV light will be released to neutralize Ohnn, comma, Jonathan.”

“Do not sing, hum, play an instrument, turn on a portable MP3 player, or tap your feet in a rhythmic fashion in such a manner that would be considered consistent with the pop culture phenomenon of the nineteen seventies known as ‘disco,’ or a pressurized vacuum will be created to prevent the movement of sound waves to and from Delsoin, comma, Antoine.”

Finally, the footsteps stopped.

“Do not approach walls or door, or a series of EMP pulses will be emitted to neutralize potential undetected nanotechnology within Alister, comma, Smythe.”

“Disable EMP,” said a voice. “Open the door.”

“Override accepted.”

The cell door whirred open amid whispers of “Lucky jerk...” from the other supervillains.

Alistair looked up at his visitor, a smirk on his lips. “I wondered when you'd finally get around to bailing me out.”

Standing before him was a gray-haired man. Somehow, his face was both massively wrinkled and hard as stone. “If it was up to me, you'd never see the sun again. Osborn wanted you.”

Alistair raised an eyebrow. “Which one?” He was met with silence. “Fine, be that way.” Alistair rolled himself to the man's side. “So where are we headed, Dad?”

“The Cayman Islands.”

“Ooh, sounds tropical.”

“You won't have time for sightseeing. You have a special assignment.”

“My favorite kind of assignment! So what is it?” Silence. “Well, don’t leave me in the dark here. Come on, at least give me a hint.”
The man's face was unmoving. “It involves spiders. And the slaying thereof.”

Alistair chuckled. “My favorite thing of all. Well, what are we waiting for?”

After that, there was silence, save for the squeak of a wheelchair rolling down the hall.

“The man's face was unmoving. “It involves spiders. And the slaying thereof.”

Alistair chuckled. “My favorite thing of all. Well, what are we waiting for?”

After that, there was silence, save for the squeak of a wheelchair rolling down the hall.

“Scarlett Johansson or Susan Storm… but she’s invisible the whole time?”

“Still Susan Storm.”

“Dude, you’re crazy.”

The Scorpion swished his tail at a stray fly. Meanwhile, in the opposite cell, another, normal-looking man swatted at a fly of his own. When the bug got near the cell wall, a little black portal opened up, and it found itself flying out a matching portal on the ceiling.

Scorpion turned to the cell adjacent to his own, but he was met with silence. “Well, you’ve been awfully quiet. Horn screwed on too tight?”

The Rhino's only reply was a scowl.

“Ah, don't worry about him,” said the Spot (not that you could recognize him without his skintight onepiece). “He's just sad his boyfriend's dead.”

“That’s it!” Suddenly, Rhino was on his feet and dangerously close to approaching a wall or door. “First off, Marko ain't my boyfriend. Second off, he ain't dead!” Rhino’s fists clenched. “The whole point o' turnin' into Sandman was so he could be imp- impervi-” He faltered. “Uhhh…”

“Don't hurt yourself,” said Scorpion.

“So he could never get hurt by nothin'! If even a little bit o' sand survived, Marko can reform himself good as new. It just… takes him a while, that's all.”

“Dude, chill,” said a fourth voice. “Don't be such a spaz. It's colder than a deuce in this crib. I wanna watch the boob tube! That'd be, like, fab to the max.”

Every last eye fell on the cell of a certain afro-wearing convict.

“That guy scares me,” said Rhino.

“Everything scares you,” said Scorpion.

Rhino glared at him through the wall. “I'm not scared of every-”

“Agh!” All of a sudden, Rhino was cowering in the far corner of his cell as someone approached his door. “He’s back!”

The “he” in question was a short-haired, one-armed man in a sterile white lab coat, and standing beside him was his redhead wife.

“Well, if it ain’t the esteemed Mr. and Mrs. Doctor Connors flown all the way from Florida to pay us a visit… for the ten billionth time.” On the other side of the cells, Scorpion gave an irritable flick of his tail. “Don't tell me you're still tryin' to make us 'normal?'”
Curt nodded, shrinking back. “I’ve got a new process that’s guaranteed to remove your subdermal armor. Well, in theory, anyways.”

“Nuh uh!” Rhino folded his arms. “My lawyers said you can’t experiment on me no more!”

“Are you sure, Alexander?” frowned Curt. “The new process will result in far fewer internal lacerations—”

“I’m not listenin’! La la la la-”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better,” said Martha, “you won’t be the first guinea pig.”

As she spoke, Hank pressed his palm against a scanner on one of the cells. An automated voice proclaimed, “Override accepted,” and then the door whirred open. Out stepped a boy whose shirtless torso shone like gold, though he stepped pretty hesitantly in light of the swarm of guards aiming their plasma-rifles at him.

Curt brought his (only) hand to Mark's metallic shoulder. “You sure you want to do this, Mark? You could be hospitalized for, well, I don't know how long.”

Mark nodded. “I'll take that bet.”

“What exactly are you gonna do to him, anyways?” Scorpion pointed to Mark's golden skin with his tail. “How d'ya make that normal again?”

“Well, it's a simple process, really,” said Curt, fidgeting with his name tag. “The patients’ subdermal armors have proven too tough for any regular surgical equipment to penetrate with the needed level of precision, but thanks to a recent increase in government funding, Ryker’s hospital staff has been able to afford a handful of scalpels made with slivers of adamantium, the strongest known metal on Earth. Now, with careful guidance, they can slice the patients free of their armors and then, with my and my wife’s knowledge of biogenetics, regrow a new layer of ordinary skin over the patients’ exposed musculature—”

“You're SLICIN’ OFF our SKIN?” shrieked Rhino.

“Well, that's...” Curt eyes met the floor. “...one way of putting it.”

"...obviously the greatest of nature's creatures, but nobody ever takes them seriously anymore. I mean, little girls sleep with these- these stuffed caricatures of them under their arms, and nobody thinks it's weird! Isn't that screwed up? All I want is for people to see us for the threats that we are-”

“Oh my god, Markham, you've been rambling about bears for three hours.” On sheer impulse, Electro sprang to his feet and made a sweeping gesture with his arms, but not a single spark escaped his hands. He scowled at the inhibitor bracelets around his wrists.

“Electro, please, remember what we've discussed-” Before Dr. Kafka could get a sentence out, another member of the therapy group was already on his feet – a hairy, hunchbacked man who walked to the center of the circle of chairs until he was face-to-face with Electro.

“So what if he has?” spat the man, drawing himself in front of the trembling Markham. “Dude's allowed to like bears if he wants. At least he doesn't make everyone call him 'Electro.'”

“Martin, please-” Kafka tried to say.
“I mean, ‘Electro?’ Really?” Martin sneered. “Seriously, Max, that sounds like something a four-year-old came up w- *Urk!*” Suddenly, he found a set of containment suit-covered fingers around his neck.

“Don’t,” Electro said through gritted teeth, “Call. Me. MAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA.Spring!”

“Oh... *There, Calypso, there!*” A big, hairy man rolled onto his back, sprawling himself over the silk covers of a king-sized bed. “*Faster, my love... Don’t stop...*”

A dark-skinned woman loomed over him, stroking her hand back and forth, back and forth. “You like it, Sergei? You like it when I rub your tummy?”

Kraven’s only response was to purr, then lick his paw so he could brush his head with it.

Meanwhile, in the adjacent room, a pair of men at a table were shooting glances through the wide-open bedroom door.

One of the men – the one with a blank white mask covering everything but his eyes and mouth – shook his head, then said, “You know, in my years of impersonation, I’ve witnessed many disturbing things, but...” His voice held a hint of a Russian accent, matching Kraven’s.

“Meh,” said the man on the opposite end of the table – the one with the squarish face and hair in some kinda bowl cut. “Still less weird than Sandman.” He drew a card from the deck on the table, then glanced at his hand and frowned.

Chameleon smirked. “Bad draw, Beck?”

“Well, I guess I can't win every- *Behind you!*” Suddenly, Beck pointed over the shoulder of Chameleon, who spun around. Into the kitchen had slinked a genuine, living, breathing lion. The creature yawned before plopping down on the rug like an oversized housecat.

Chameleon turned back to Beck. “That’s just Gulyadkin, Sergei’s pet. Surely you’ve met him by now?”

“Yeah, yeah, of course,” Beck said hurriedly. “Just not used to sharing living space with a hungry lion, that's all... Hey, check it out!” He slapped some cards onto the table. “Four of a kind.”

Chameleon gave him a sour look. “What... luck.”

“Well, guess I shouldn't complain about a few jungle cats,” Beck shrugged. “Your half-brother's place is still way better than the last joint we laid low in.” He gestured to the enormous penthouse window overlooking the city.

“Yes, Calypso's voodoo magic has proven quite useful in evading the authorities.”


Chameleon chuckled to himself. “Just because *you* have to fake your powers doesn't mean *everyone* does.”

“How much longer are we staying here, anyways?” asked Beck. “Ever since that little Valentine's Day fiasco, the Sinister Six's been cut in half, and now we're just lounging around. Why don’t we have Kraven’s lion track Spider-Man’s sent? We can find out who he is, kill him in his home—”
“Kraven doesn’t kill beasts in their nests,” Chameleon replied without looking up from his cards.

Beck rolled his eyes. “Look, I’ve got plenty of heists I could pull off on my own if he’s not gonna-”

“Patience,” cut in Chameleon as he drew another card. “Believe me, I’ve been growing just as restless as you ever since my last employer blew himself up, but there’s no point making a move until we know what we’re doing. I don’t impersonate someone without extensive prior research, and the Six shouldn't operate at half-strength. Right now, the only members out of prison are you, Sergei, and-” Chameleon blinked. “Wait, whatever happened to that old man? The... Buzzard, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, Toomes? He retired from supervillany right before you got here. Seemed real happy about something or other.”

Meanwhile, in a nondescript pub on the other side of New York:

“Gimme another round!” A wrinkled, bald, hook-nosed old man slammed his mug onto the table. “I’m having a 'Norman Osborn is Dead' celebration drink!”

“Norman Osborn?” frowned the bartender. “But didn't he die weeks ago?”

“Yes.” The old man stared into his mug. “Yes, he did.”

Thump. Gulyadkin pounced for the front entrance, a low growl in his throat. Chameleon and Beck were broken from their card game by the door swinging open and another man waltzing into the penthouse. The lion seemed to recognize him and backed off.

“Evening, boys.” Given his grayed hair, the newcomer's voice was surprisingly high-pitched

“Tinkerer?” The penthouse floor shook as Kraven lumbered into the living room. “Back so soon? Does that mean we are ready to move forward?”

“More than ready.” The Tinkerer stepped aside and held the door open. “Our new associate would like to finally introduce himself. He's quite eager to both swell the ranks of the Sinister Six and provide Chameleon here with new work.”

“Is he?” Chameleon made a half-interested grunt. “Just so long as he's not another nut in a goblin costume.”

“Now, now-” Suddenly, the front door was filled by the roar of an engine. A gargoyle-themed glider squeezed its way through the front door, then unfurled its wings in the middle of the penthouse... and atop said glider was a man clad in an orange cloak. “-let’s try to look past our prejudices, shall we?”

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: THE NEWEST AND DEADLIEST ITERATION OF THE SINISTER SIX!
The sound of footsteps carried down the sterile halls of Ravencroft.

“...this keeps up, we'll have no choice but to put him in extreme isolation like Castle and Kasady,” said a hushed voice. “And, well, you're the only one here he gets along with, so we thought-”

“I understand, Kafka,” said a second voice. “Just leave us be for a moment.”

“Alright.”

The cell door clicked shut. The short, plump man took a breath, then pushed his square glasses up to the bridge of his nose. “Electro.”

On the far side of the room, Electro sat facing the other way, cradling himself. “Doc...”

Otto folded his arms. “You know they'll never let you out of here if this behavior continues.”

“I know.” Electro's voice shook. “I know I'm screwing up your plans. I'm sorry. Spider-Man was right. All I ever do is- is get mad and hurt my own teammates.”

“My plans were foiled by one person and one person alone,” Otto said firmly. “And that person wasn't you.”

Electro buried his helmet-covered face in his arms. “I'm so sick of it, Doc. Sick of bein' a freak. My own family doesn't even visit.”

Behind the goggles and burning yellow lights, Electro's eyes were watering, but before he had the chance to make any full-on tears, he flinched. Electro turned his head, startled. He stared at the hand on his shoulder like he couldn't believe it was there.

“You're right, Electro,” said Otto. “You are a freak. But that doesn't make you inferior to them. You have worth because you're different. Never forget that.”

Electro merely nodded, silent. After a moment, he asked, “How... How much longer till we find a way to bust out of here again?”

A smile crossed Otto's lips. “Oh, it might be sooner than you'd think.”

“A pair of guards strode down the long, drab hallways of Ryker's Island Penitentiary, tranquilizer-guns in hand.

“I hear ya,” said the second guard. “I keep expectin' that rhino guy to bust out and squish us.”

The first guard scoffed. “You think he's bad, then you've never had to guard the Hulk out in Utah.”

“The Hulk?” The second guard raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah. Haven't you ever wondered how I got this limp-?”

Clink, clink, clank.
Both guards' heads spun around, but there was nothing behind them but an empty hallway.

“Hey, you're right,” said the first. “This place does make you paran—”

**Thump.** Mid-sentence, the guard found a silver blur dropping on him from the ceiling. Next thing he knew, he’d been pinned to the floor by a boot.

“What the-?” Before the other guard could so much as point his gun, there was a *clang*, and he found his arm stuck to the far wall by a staple the size of a baseball.

“Don't raise the alarm.” Standing with a foot on the first guard's chest was a slender woman decked out in a skintight silver-and-white outfit. She had flowing white hair, eye black, a silver headband, and a massive rifle aimed right at the second guard's face. “Unless you want something a lot worse than a limp.” Her eyes darted to his pockets. “Get me the access code to Silvermane's cell. I know you have it.”

“Lady, if you think I'm just gonna—” *Clang*. The next staple embedded itself dangerously close to the guard's head. “One access code, comin' right up!”

“Thanks.” *Crack*. Naturally, the moment she had the card in her hand, the woman delivered a kick to the guard's forehead, knocking him out cold. She smiled to herself, then turned to continue down the hall.

“How does that ammo fit in the barrel?” asked a voice.

Like lightning, the woman had the aforementioned barrel aimed at the face of a *second* woman slouched against the far wall – a woman wearing a domino mask over her eyes and a matching skintight black outfit covered with white fluff.

“Whoa, whoa, calm down, Sable!” Black Cat smirked. “I was just curious. Not the best quality for a feline to have, I know.”

Silver Sable huffed. “What are you doing here?”

“Who, me?” the Cat said silkily. “I'm just a white-haired femme fatale trying to rescue her daddy from the slammer. And you?”

Sable hesitated for a moment, then lowered her weapon. “How did you find me?”

“I followed your trail.” Black Cat smirked at her. “No offense, hon, but you're not exactly a master of stealth. You stapled one of the guards to a flagpole.”

“Then you know we have precious little time until the alarm is sounded,” said Sable, “so get out of my way... unless you came here to stop me?”

“I prefer to watch these gang wars from a distance, thanks.” Black Cat made a show of stepping out of Sable's path. “Don't worry, I'm not loyal to the Big Man or Hammerhead or, well, anyone who's not me. If you wanna bust out your daddy, hey, more power to you. I just thought you'd like to know the cells are that way.” She pointed a thumb in the opposite direction.

Silver Sable scowled, muttered something under her breath, then scurried off.

Black Cat smiled to herself as she shook her head. “I think I've got a new best friend.”

“I’m wanted elsewhere?” The first guard didn’t look entirely convinced, but the second held his
ground on the issue.

“Sorry, uh, sir,” he mumbled, tugging his uniform's hat over his face. “Warden's orders.”

“Alright, alright...” The first guard trudged off down the cell corridor, hanging his head.

Naturally, the moment the first was out of sight, the second guard turned to the cells, smirked, and then peeled off his face to reveal a blank, white one beneath.

“You?” Inside his cell, Rhino's eyes lit up. “Beck's friend?”

Chameleon nodded. “Yes. And I come bearing gifts.” He held up his hands. In one was a key card, and in the other what appeared to be an oversized shopping bag.

“What's in there?” asked Scorpion from his own cell.

“Just a little something for the more theatric among you.” As he spoke, Chameleon swiped the card through a terminal on the wall. “I of all people appreciate the art of costume design.”

A cheer rang out as cell doors whirred open and inhibitor bracelets snapped off. The bad guys without subdermal armor formed a single-file line so they could receive their trademark outfits – Spot's skintight polka dot one-piece… and a certain white and pink getup.

“Thanks, pops,” the Hyno-Hustler said as he zipped up his incredibly tight pants. “You did me a real solid. Now let's book it before the Man catches us.”

“Not so fast. I've got more than just costumes...” Chameleon reached into his bag once again. “For Scorpion, a fresh supply of acid—”

“Now we're talkin'.” Scorpion promptly set to work loading the vial into the tip of his stinger.

“-and for Hustler, the latest model of the OsPod.” Chameleon handed the Hypno-Hustler a small, rectangular, silver device.

The Hustler thumbed through its screen, going straight for a playlist labeled “Disco's Greatest Hits.” A big, wide grin crossed his face. “I can dig it.”

Believe it or not, there was actually a tiny sliver of New York City's prisons dedicated to housing the criminals who didn't have super powers.

“First thing I'm gonna do once I'm out?” Fancy Dan gave his beard a thoughtful stroke. “Find myself a woman. What about you?” He glanced at his cell mate.

“Catch up on some cartoons.” Ox's mustache twitched with anticipation. “They've only got basic cable in this dump, so I'm way behind on all my favorite—” He caught sight of Dan's face. “What?”

“Nothin'.” Dan rolled his eyes, then looked to the neighboring cell, where a third man sat all alone on a cot (He'd used to have a cell mate, but they'd turned out to be a robot). “What about you, Montana?”

“That's easy,” said Montana, his voice positively dripping with Southern-ness. “Soon as I'm out, I'm goin' to Gaxton's place and shootin' pool 'til my arms fall off.”

“Yeah, well, I'll be out sooner than all of you,” spoke up a snively, redhead man in the opposite cell, “just as soon as they pass that brainwashed victim protection legislation—"
“Shut up, Menken.” Montana scowled, then turned to the final neighboring cell – the one housing a white-haired old man. “And what 'bout you?”

The man stayed silent.

“Who, Silvermane?” blurted out Fancy Dan. “The only way he'll be leavin' this place is in a coffin.”

“Yeah, look at the guy,” smirked Ox. “He's fixin' to drop dead any minute now.”

“He won't be the only one if you don't watch your mouth,” said a voice.

“What the-?” Suddenly, all eyes in the corridor fell on the twin sets of curves strolling towards them. The hot babes entering their proximity left every last prisoner drooling – all save for Silvermane, who sprang to his feet with surprising speed for a man his age.

“Sable?” he said, eyes bulging. “What are you doing here?”

“What do you think?” Sable held up her pilfered access card.

“Man,” whispered Ox, nudging his cell mate, “what I'd give for a piece of THAT.” He gestured to the shinier portions of Sable’s jumpsuit.

“Dude!” Fancy Dan whispered back. “That's Silvermane's daughter!”

Ox looked blank. “So what?”

“What?” Ox made a face. “Eww, forget it, I ain't touchin' nothin' that's touched his 'hammer!'” His eyes shifted to the other hot babe. “Okay, what about that cat chick? Who's SHE slept with?”

“Uh...” Dan looked thoughtful. “Spider-Man, most likely.”

“That's... even worse.”

“Probably laid eggs in her or somethin'.”

With a whirr, Silvermane's cell door swung open, but he stayed rooted in place.

“What are you waiting for?” snapped Sable.

“You shouldn't have come here!” Silvermane snapped back. “I didn't think you'd be stupid enough to risk your neck like this.”

Sable's face tightened. “I risked my neck for you. Everything you've spent your whole life building is falling apart. We need you free.”

“No, Sable, you don't.” Silvermane glanced away. “I'm old. I'm weak. And after ten years behind bars, things have changed too much for me. Even with the most advanced armor and weaponry my money could buy, I was sent right back to prison by that masked vigilante. People like him... like Octavius's band of freaks... I'm no match for them.” His eyes locked with his daughter's. “Don't you get it, Sable? It has to be you, not me.”

Sable’s eyes were wide, though with shock or anger, it was hard to say. “Me? You want me to take your empire? Right now?”
Silvermane gave a slow nod. “What do you think I've been grooming you for all these years? Why do you think I bothered adopting a little orphan girl off the streets of Symkaria? I saw potential in you.”

Sable's eyes settled on “anger.” “And what about you? Are you just going to sit there when your cell’s wide open?”

“Breaking out of Ryker's is a lot harder than breaking in,” said Silvermane. “I'd only slow you down.”

“Fine, then you can rot in here!” Slam. The door shut in Silvermane's face. “I should never have come back for you...” Sable spun around, marching away down the hall.

“So let me get this straight-” Black Cat trotted after her. “-you went through all the trouble of breaking in here to save your daddy only to learn he doesn't want to be freed? Wow, you must be my soul mate-”

“Shut up.” The Cat found the barrel of the oversized staple gun resting under her chin. “What are you doing here, anyways? Why are you following me?”

“I'm not following you,” Black Cat said coolly. “We just both happened to be going the same way.”

“And we both happened to break in here on the exact same day at the exact same time?”

The Cat shrugged. “Hey, it's a good day to break into Ryker's. With Oscorp's old CEO dead and the new one disappearing overseas with her kid, the board of directors handed the Vault over to S.H.I.E.L.D.”

Ah, yes, the Supreme Headquarters International Espionage Law-Enforcement Division, the organization the government had finally slapped together to deal with the six-hundred percent increase in superhuman activity the U.S. had seen in the past couple years (a considerable chunk of which had come from Manhattan alone). With the government swooping in to handle things, Oscorp had been thrilled to relinquish the duties of supervillain containment, at least according to their PR statement.

“Today's the changing of the guard,” Cat continued, “meaning everything's disorganized and it's the last day before Ryker's security quadruples, so if anyone wants to break into the place, they'll do it tod-”

“COWER IN FEAR, EARTHLINGS!”

Black Cat flinched in a manner not unlike her namesake as the whole chamber spontaneously filled with pea green smoke.

“Wha-?” Before Sable could so much as fire a staple, she and the Cat found themselves on their knees. Apparently, their legs had moved of their own accord.

“That's right, humans!” said a bellowing British voice that over-enunciated every word. “Already, my spores have infected your primitive primate biology, forcing you to kneel in the presence of true greatness!” Through the smoke, a humanoid shape was becoming visible... “Behold the soon-to-be ruler of this miserable planet, the hive mind of the oncoming alien swarm, otherwise known as the Master Yggdrasil System Terminal Electrified Robotic Interior Operator!” ...a humanoid shape wearing a green suit and a purple cape with a big, smoke-filled crystal orb for a head.

“Wait a minute, I know you!” said Sable.
“Y-You do?” The “alien’s” voice cracked a little with delight.

“Yeah, you’re one of Octavius's freaks.” Sable's eyes narrowed. “But I thought you were pretending to be a sorcerer, not an alien.”

“Ha! Fool!” Mysterio let out a painfully stilted laugh. “That's what my alien probes wanted you to think! I disguised my otherworldly technology as mere magic tricks, preying on the superstitions of your ignorant species in order to—”

“Look, sweetheart,” cut in Black Cat, “I’ve seen a real alien before, and even I don't believe you.”

“You?” It was hard to tell under that oversized fishbowl, but apparently Mysterio had spotted Black Cat for the first time. He pointed a gloved hand at her. “You're one of Spider-Man's friends!”

Black Cat's face soured. “Trust me, I'm really, really not.”

“Yes you are! You helped him out on that boat!”

“Oh.” Black Cat blinked. “You were one of the crooks there?”

“Yes! Yes! You remember!” Mysterio was so excited, he forgot to do the phoney accent for a second.

“Yeah.” Black Cat strained her forehead, thinking back. “You were disguised as the… captain?”

Mysterio's whole posture stiffened like he'd been slapped in the face- err, dome. Slowly, like a tea kettle boiling over, he hissed, “I. Was. The. WAITER!” There was a flourish of his arms, followed by another plume of smoke, and suddenly the room was filled with dozens of little red, winged alien bugs that were totally NOT repurposed homunculi robots. “Get them, my spawn!”

“Bite them!” squeaked a bug.

“Scratch them!” squeaked a second.

“I'm allergic to cats!” squeaked a third.

“Maybe this will teach you to respect the great M.Y.S.T.E.R.I.O hive mind of Planet Oiretsym!” Mysterio let loose a hearty chuckle. “And since my spores have left you paralyzed, you'll be helpless as my spawn consumes your nutrient-dense human flesh.”

“Spores?” A smirk crossed Silver Sable's lips. “Or maybe...” Smash. The next thing he knew, Mysterio had a giant steel staple embedded in the gauntlet on his right arm. “...some colorless gas hidden up your sleeve?” With a bit of straining, Sable and Black Cat managed to return to their feet. The “alien spawn” dived for them, but with a swish of the Cat's claws and a throw of Sable's bolas, they were made short work of.

“Lucky guess,” Mysterio muttered, clutching his arm.

“Beck.” Another supervillain emerged from the fog. A bigger, hairier one. “Is this really the time to be picking fights?” Kraven shot his comrade a snarl.

“That girl is Spider-Man's partner!” Mysterio pointed an accusing finger at Black Cat.

“No I'm not!” spat the Cat. “That's what I was trying to tell you! I hate Spider-Man!”

The jungle cat gave the domestic one a look over. “Well, if you have no quarrel with us, stay out of
“I was just leaving.” Black Cat slinked off towards one of the cells.

“For once, we agree on something.” Silver Sable started to follow, but she didn't make it far before her path was blocked.

“Where are you off to in such a hurry?” One final shape emerged from the smoke... a lanky figure in an orange cloak standing atop a gargoyle-themed glider. “Last I checked, Black Cat wasn't a mob boss – That’d be stupid. But you, my dear...” Before Sable could so much as aim her gun, the Hobgoblin had a pumpkin bomb poised to be thrown. “Well, call me sexist, but I'm not too keen on the idea of anyone vying for the title of 'the Big Woman.'”

The pumpkin sailed through the air, but before it could reach Sable's face, it collided with a staple. The only sound audible over the deafening explosion was the bomb's earsplitting “HA” noise.

“Look! Look!” Over in his cell, Menken bounced up and down like a toddler. “See! There's the real one! That proves I'm not the Hob-”

“Shut up, Menken!” the other prisoners yelled in synch.

For someone with no superpowers, Silver Sable could move. She rolled out of the way before the next wave of Hobgoblin's pumpkins hit the ground, then sprinted for the exit. Her path was quickly blocked by a snarling jungle beast, but said jungle beast was just as quickly sent to the floor by a bolas wrapping around his legs. Sable took the time to fire a couple staples into Kraven's arms and chest, leaving him roaring in pain as she rounded the corner and vanished from sight.

Mysterio started after her, but Hobgoblin stopped him. “We'll deal with her later. Right now, let's say we swell our ranks?” The glider came to a stop before the Enforcers' cells. “Hey, there, nice to meet ya. The name's Hobgoblin, but you can just call me 'boss.'”

“Really, now?” Montana raised an eyebrow. “And why should we do a fool thing like that?”

“Well, gee, I suppose I could always find some other thugs to wear these...” The Goblin held up a sack. Poking out the top was a piece of fabric with a familiar-looking yellow quilt texture. “...but Tinkerer already fitted them to you guys and everything.”

“Who are you s'posed to be, anyways?” asked Fancy Dan. “Last I heard, the Green Goblin got himself blown up.”

“And was, y'know, actually green,” added Ox.

The Hobgoblin chuckled to himself. “Here's a protip for any aspiring Big Men out there – image is everything. The last Big Man wore that goblin outfit for a reason, and I guess you could say I'm stealing his thunder.”

“Sure, partner. Whatever ya say...”

Without further ado, the Goblin swiped a key card to open the Enforcers' cells, and they got to work changing into costume.

While he waited, the Hobgoblin's attention fell on a certain old man. “Ooh, sorry, old timer, I didn't pack you any mechsuits. Must've slipped my mind.” The Hobgoblin hovered outside Silvermane's cell, cackling. “Well, I suppose in light of that heart-to-heart with your little girl, you're out of the
running for Big Man now, anyways.”

Silvermane merely scowled at him.

“Not that you were ever a threat in the first place, of course,” Hobgoblin shrugged. “An old geezer like you’s not even worth wasting a pumpkin bomb over. I'll just wait another month or so and let nature take its course.”

“There we go,” said Montana. The Goblin's attention turned to the fully-costumed Enforcers – There Shocker stood in all his yellow couch-cushioney glory, flanked by Ricochet and Ox in their decidedly more dignified gray-and-purple mechsuits. “Now, just so we're clear, you ain't loyal to Tombstone?”

“Not one tiny bit,” the Hobgoblin said proudly.

“Good.” Wham. A pillar of compressed air sent Gobbie hurtling off his glider. “I'd been wantin' to do that ever since I saw yer stupid face,” said Shocker (A.K.A. Montana). “Boy, you're dumber than a cat at a canine convention.”

“Sorry, Goblin,” said Ricochet (A.K.A. Fancy Dan), “but we're more scared of double-crossin' Tombstone than we are o' double-crossin' some nut in a mask.”

“And your costume's really unoriginal,” said Ox (A.K.A. Ox).

By the time the Hobgoblin made it back onto his glider, the Enforcers were gone save for the faint boing, boing, boing of Ricochet, well, ricocheting off the walls.

“Wow,” said Mysterio, “and I thought I had no dignity.”

“No skin off my back,” said the Hobgoblin. “I couldn't care less who those chumps work for so long as they give Spider-Man a hard time. That's what this little jailbreak's all about, my dear Mysterio – causing chaos.”

“Well, we can't cause much chaos behind bars, so I suggest we take our leave.” Mysterio gestured to the squadron of guards headed their way from the opposite end of the chamber. “But what about Kraven?” He nodded his bulbous head towards the overgrown feline, who was still struggling in vain against the various cords and staples holding him down.

“Somehow, I think we'll manage without him.”

And so, with a sweep of Mysterio's hands, the pair of villains vanished in a plume of smoke.

A legion of guards swarmed the cold, bleak hallways of the Vault, blocking the path of a small army of supervillains. The escapees were surrounded on both sides, but before a single guard could so much as fire his tranquilizer gun, a totally fab beat swept over the hall.

“Drop your funky weapons, white boy!” On the Hypno-Hustler's orders, every last guard dropped their gun to the floor and obediently stepped aside.

“Nice.” The Spot picked up a tranq gun for himself, and any other unarmed supervillains followed suit. All save the Hypno-Hustler, who seemed content to be armed with just his OsPod.

The horde of villains grinned to themselves as they continued through the Vault unobstructed. One villain, however, looked troubled.
“I don’t get it,” said Rhino. “How’d you get brainwashey-music powers? And why’s it have to be disco music?”

Hustler’s only answer was a shrug.

“Yeah, when it comes to super-mercenaries, Tricorp just throws everything at the wall to see what sticks,” said the Spot.

“Wait a minute!” Rhino gave him a suspicious glare. “If your power’s to make portal-spot-things, and you ain’t in your special anti-superpowers cell no more, why haven’t you teleported us out o’ here already?”

“Because the Vault’s miles beneath Ryker’s Island and I don’t know my way around this place,” said Spot. “You want me to accidentally make a portal to the bottom of the ocean?”

“Oh.” Rhino’s face flushed. “Yeah, I don’t do so good underwater…”

“Look, once we get to the surface, I can ‘port us to my apartment.” It was hard to judge Spot’s mood with his faceless mask on, but he sounded pretty smug. “And then we’ll form the new-and-improved Spider-Man Revenge Sq-”

“Not another step,” a voice rang out.

All heads turned to find a blazing golden guy blocking the exit, flanked by Mr. and Mrs. Connors.

“Take a chill pill, you jive turkey!” The Hypno-Hustler hoisted his OsPod over his head. “You wanna boogie with the cool cats, then fine, let’s boogie!” But before a funky beat had time to wash over the newcomers, a ball of molten lava sailed towards him. “No! My jam!” In his hurry to dodge, the Hustler ended up dropping the Pod straight into the resulting lava puddle, rendering it nothing more than a glob of gooey plastic.

“Crap! Run!” Spot shouted a warning to the others – only to get clonked in the head himself. But it was a sacrifice that allowed Rhino and Scorpion to turn tail (literally in one of their cases) and bolt the other way down the hall, Rhino running along the floor and Scorpion running along the ceiling.

“W-Wait!” Molten Man started after them, but he halted himself once his luster faded. “Great, my fire’s conked out again. Ugh, it’s been so touch and go lately.” Without the added edge, he wasn’t nearly brave enough to chase after the remaining crooks. “I mean, normally that’d be a good thing…”

“It’s alright, Mark. You still did well.” Behind him, Martha nodded to Spot and Hypno-Hustler. A legion of guards had already arrived to usher them back to their cells alongside Kraven.

“Least I can do to make up for things…” Mark bowed his metal forehead.

“You know,” Curt said with a wry smile, “it’s not too late to consider a superhero career.”

“I’ll stick with the surgery, thanks.”

“Felicia! I told you not to come back h-” Before the old man could get another horrified word out, Black Cat held a canister to his face and sprayed. Hss. “Ugh…” The man immediately collapsed into her arms.
“You’ll thank me later.” The Cat heaved him over her shoulder and then turned for the cell’s exit. “Now let's make ourselves scarce before the real excitement starts...”
There was red. So much red. And the old man was in the middle of it, lying there in the street, and when he turned towards Peter, there wasn't pain on his face. He didn't look scared – He looked livid. “You could've saved me.”

And then the blood started to pool, swirling and bubbling and rising off the ground until it'd taken a humanoid shape. A humanoid shape with pure white eyes and a mouthful of jagged teeth. The creature raised an arm, its hand morphing into an ax, and then-

“Parker!”

“Gah!” Peter jolted upright in his desk. Wait, his desk? He jerked his head around, sputtering. As soon as the room stopped spinning and he could make out the Quadratic Equation poster hanging on the wall, Peter realized where he was – precalc. Precalc? That was, like, third period! What happened to first and second period? Peter tried to think back, but his mind was a haze, and it didn't help that his neck ached like crazy from the whiplash.

“Mr. Parker, just because you're my star pupil doesn't mean you can sleep through-” The teacher did a double-take, which was presumably when she noticed the thick layer of cold sweat on Peter's forehead. “Are you alright, Peter? Do you need to see the nurse?”

“No, no, I'm good.” Peter tried his best to sit up straight and look normal. Ever since that bug bite, he'd been terrified his next doctor's visit would end with the officially documented discovery of his spider-DNA-tainted blood. Or of those little hairs in his hands and feet that let him stick to walls. Or maybe his spider-sense would go off and Peter would kick before the rubber mallet hit his knee. Or maybe- Brrring.

“Gah!” Peter was jolted back to reality by the bell. Holy moly, third period was over already? What time was it? As the class collectively rose from their desks, Peter took his phone out. Hmm... There was a text from Gwen, but Peter was in no state to be speaking coherent sentences, let alone reading them.

Slam. The sound of his locker closing seemed to wake Peter up. Whoa, hold up, his locker? Hadn't he been in the classroom a second ago? Man, it was like his brain had switched to autopilot. Peter tried to make an indignant scoff, but all that came out his mouth was a yawn.

With the proper textbook now in hand, Peter made his way towards fourth period. The only problem was it was hard to navigate the halls when his eyes kept shutting all on their own. It wasn't that Peter didn't want to get enough sleep. It was just that, well, lately, sleeping had been...

Claws and crimson and the agonized shrieks of its victim as a creature let loose an inhuman laugh. ...difficult.

Peter's eyes shot back open, and for a disorienting second, he wasn't sure if he was still dreaming or not. It wasn't fair. Spider-Man had saved bazillions of people, and he was bound to slip up every now and then, but… at this rate, it was only a matter of time before Peter failed someone really important. Y'know, besides the important person he'd already-

Whoa, hold it, angst alarm going off. Man, if he kept brooding like this, Spidey would have to add pointy ears and a cape to his costume. Peter took a deep breath. Soothing thoughts, Pete. Soothing thoughts.
Despite being caught halfway between the waking and dream worlds, Peter actually made it to fourth period early. He had to resist the urge to throw himself into his seat. The last thing Peter wanted was to destroy his desk with his spider-strength… again.

“Peter?” Naturally, Peter had chosen the desk right next to his stunningly beautiful girlfriend. “You never texted back last night. You okay?”

“Huh?” Peter shook himself awake. “Yeah, yeah, I'm fine, Gwen.”

“Do you want to visit Eddie after class?”

Peter's stomach sank. Oh, right, Eddie. Another thing to feel terrible about. “Sorry, I've gotta work, and, well…” Peter sighed, rubbing his temple. “Honestly, with the state he's in, I'm not sure it makes much difference if we visit him or not.”

Gwen didn't look totally pleased with this answer, but all she said was, “I understand.” After a moment's silence, she asked, “You okay?”

“Great,” Peter said immediately. “I feel way better now. I'm totally fine.”

“That's good.” Gwen patted his hand, giving a strained smile.

After that, the teacher started talking, so Peter had to turn his brain towards the herculean task of paying attention. He took one last wistful look at Gwen before opening up his textbook.

Great. Just when Peter thought he'd finally gotten out of his “lying to his girlfriend” phase.

Thwip. Spidey swung furiously through the city. He wasn't even headed towards Queens – He was wandering aimlessly, and at top speed to boot. Spider-Man was literally going nowhere fast.

Okay. Okay, fine, yes, things had gotten a little more intense last battle than he was used to. Guess all the crime-fighting in the world couldn't prepare him to tussle with a bloodthirsty alien symbiote. But… But so what if they lived in a world full of aliens and sand-people and who knew what other weird crap? What was Peter supposed to do, go back home and hang up the tights so he could watch TV and eat nachos all day? Ugh, Peter was sick of all this navel-gazing. Yes, okay, he was scared to death of Carnage, Peter admitted it, but if he kept letting it get under his skin, Spider-Man was gonna turn into one of those whiny, angst-ridden superheroes that were all the rage these days.

Thwip. Spider-Man was so lost in thought, he hardly even noticed the awesome flip he did around the Empire State Building's lightning rod.

“Help! Help! My bag!”

Spider-Man was just close enough to the ground to hear the panicked cries of a woman in peril. He dropped down to a lamppost right as a scraggly haired guy sped by with a Hello Kitty purse in hand.

Thwip. “I could be wrong, dude, but I've got a feeling that's not yours.”

Oh, thank God, Spider-Man loved purse snatchers. There was nothing introspective about purse snatchers.
A flock of birds darted off at Flash’s approach. Somehow, after school, he’d found himself wandering through the heart of Manhattan. He’d wound up at a small park where he and Kong had used to throw footballs. You know, back when Flash had still been capable of happiness.

Stupid Sha Shan. Ugh, girls were impossible! What'd Flash done wrong? Why was she so ticked at him? Was it because he didn't wanna be in A Telemarketer Dies or whatever? That was so unfair! Flash had already done a whole play for her! He'd spent hours of his life memorizing all those stupid ancient fancy-pants words written by- by- by that guy who wrote all those plays! What, was Flash supposed to stay in drama club for the rest of his life?

It wasn't like this was the first time Flash had had girl problems. Liz had left him for Puny Parker, for God's sake! But Sha Shan was different. She wasn't just any girl. She was more than that. And was it really Flash's fault that he hadn't quite been able to put that into words when she'd asked?

Thwip.

“Whuh-?” Flash’s head went skyward. He managed to catch the most fleeting of glimpses of something red and blue before it rounded the corner of a skyscraper and vanished.

The teeniest, tiniest of smiles couldn’t help but play in Flash’s lips. If there was one person in all the world who could improve Flash’s mood, it was that guy. Spider-Man was the best. Flash bet he never had girl problems.

He never thought he’d say this, but Spider-Man kinda missed the good old days when Tombstone was in charge and there were always plenty of crooks to web up. Now all that was left were petty thieves and vandals, and Spidey could take those guys with his eyes shut. In fact, that’s exactly what he did for a couple of ’em.

The point is, Spidey spent his whole weekend cracking down on NYC’s numerous crooks. With curfew lifted, all Peter had to do was call Aunt May to say he’d be working late (which was true from a certain point of view), and he could stay out as long as he wanted no questions asked.

Oh, don't look at him like that. Peter was a super genius. He could get all his homework done Monday morning. In fact, since Spider-Man was spending as much time as he could fighting crime, when you thought about it, it'd be massively irresponsible of him not to put his homework off until Monday morning.

“Boom! Caught this guy robbing an ATM!” A triumphant Spider-Man deposited a bundle of webbing onto the floor of the NYPD.

“I want my lawy-” Thwip. The criminal found his mouth obstructed.

“Wow, how many is that today?” From the far side of the room, Sergeant DeWolff shot the Web-Head a scowl, her coffee mug raised halfway to her lips. “Twelve?”

“Yeah,” said Spider-Man, turning to leave. “Actually, I'm kinda running out of mooks to web up. It's getting a little boring.”

“I know a criminal you can catch,” DeWolff said dryly. “There's this crazy guy running around Manhattan, wanted on over five hundred separate counts of assault since last summer.”

“Seriously?” Spider-Man nearly tripped over himself in excitement. “I bet I can catch him! What's he look like?”
“Well, he wears this stupid costume…”

“Is it Daredevil? It's Daredevil, isn't?”

DeWolff gave a pointed stare.

“Oh,” said Spider-Man.

After that, he politely excused himself from the station.

Spider-Man needed someone to punch. It wasn't that he was one of those violence crazed maniac vigilante types. It was just… well, it was the only thing that kept him from feeling so tired. Heck, with all the crooks he’d clonked today, he was more awake than ever.

Spider-Man yawned.

Okay, fine, he was getting sleepy. Sue him. Spidey perched himself on the side of a building, retrieved his Osberry from his handy-dandy utility belt, and texted *Home in 5 mins* to Aunt May. Now all he had to do was swing back to Queens and-

“A guy was waving at him from down on the sidewalk. A guy with a beard that went down to his knees, an oversized backpack, and a thick layer of grime over his entire body.

Spider-Man held back a sigh. “Yeah, dude?” He dropped down to the street beside him.

“I hate to bother you, man, but, uh…” The guy glanced away. “I really need to get to Washington Heights, and I can't afford a cab.”

“Uh... yeah,” Spider-Man stuck a discreet hand back into his utility belt. “It's your lucky day. I was just headed there.”

Peter felt his wallet. Actually, giving this guy a couple bucks would be way cheaper than the cost of the web-fluid wasted on a trip, but you know what they say. He might spend it on drugs or something.

The sigh couldn't be held back any longer as Spidey pulled out his phone again to text, *Make that half an hour.*

“Hey! Hey, Spider-Man!”

A guy was waving at him from down on the sidewalk. A guy with a beard that went down to his knees, an oversized backpack, and a thick layer of grime over his entire body.

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“Gwen? I'm home.” Captain Stacy shut the door behind him, then hung up his coat. He strolled into the living room to find his daughter slouched over on the couch, her glasses halfway off her face, staring at a blank phone screen. “You alright, dear?”

“Yeah, I'm fine,” Gwen said dully. “Just haven't heard back from Peter in a while. That always makes me paranoid he's been kidnapped by Doctor Doom or something.”

“Really, he hasn't texted you?” Her dad frowned. “My men say he's been swinging aimlessly around the city all day.”

“He's been so flaky lately!” Gwen rolled over on the mattress. “Guess I don't blame him, though. Losing Eddie so soon after losing Harry again…” She faltered. “But it's like the only way Peter knows how to deal it is by putting on a costume and beating up criminals, and I just don't think…” Her eyes squeezed shut. “Dad, can- can you promise me you'll watch out for him?”
A hand came to rest on her shoulder. “I promise.”

“Peter... Peter... wake up.”

Slowly, Peter opened his eyelids, rubbing out the blurriness as the sun streamed through the window... and the first thing in his line of sight was a big, red, humanoid figure with milky white eyes.

“Gah!” He nearly jumped onto the ceiling before Peter realized it was only his costume sprawled across the desk chair. “Oh, man.”

As soon as he was sure he wasn't experiencing cardiac arrest, Peter stashed his costume in his backpack and then opened the bedroom door to find Aunt May waiting for him.

“Gwen's father is here to see you,” she said, smiling at him. “Said he needed to talk to you about your criminology homework.”

“Cool, I'll be right down.”

Criminology homework? But Gwen's dad hadn't assigned any homework this weekend... meaning that had to be code for Peter's “extracurricular activities.” As soon as Peter was sure his hair wasn't sticking up funny, he bolted downstairs to the living room, where Captain Stacy was waiting by the front door.

As soon as Peter got near, Gwen's dad grabbed the remote from the coffee table, turned up the TV (in case any little old ladies happened to be eavesdropping), then said in a low voice, “We need to talk.”

“Sure,” Peter whispered back. “What's up?”

“If you remember, Peter,” Gwen's dad began, “I told you I only tolerated your vigilantism out of necessity – You can take out threats the police can't. But there hasn't been any supervillain activity since that red monster attacked Westchester...” His brow creased. “So then why have Spider-Man sightings been up six-hundred percent in the last two days?”

“Oh.” Peter shrank. “Well, I, uh...”

Gwen's dad sighed. “Peter, it's been weeks since Norman died, and the Big Man power vacuum hasn't been filled yet. Believe me, the NYPD has the city's crime under control – The world doesn't rest on your shoulders. You should be playing video games, hanging out with Gwen, doing your homework... You deserve to be a normal kid, Peter.” He gave a sad smile. “You know, if there's anything you need to talk about...”

Peter stared. He wanted to say it... to say everything... but he could hear Aunt May's footsteps at the top of the stairs. So instead, all he got out was, “Maybe you're right. Guess I should take a break for a while.” Of course, what Peter didn't mention was that if he took a break, he'd start seeing Carnage's ugly mug again the next time he shut his eyes.

“I’m glad to hear it.” Gwen's dad smiled again, but his eyes lingered on Peter a while. “Well, guess I'd better get going.” He turned for the door.

Okay, Peter had been planning on throwing on his costume and going on patrol first thing this morning, but, well, maybe instead he'd pour himself some Cocoa Puffs, text Gwen, and watch some-
“-breaking news of a massive security breach from Ryker's Island Penitentiary. Reports are still coming in, but we can confirm that among the Vault escapees are the superhumans Alex O'Hirn and Mac Gargan, as well as several high profile non-super criminals considered highly dangerous by police. The growing list includes Jackson Brice, Raymond Bloch, Daniel Brito, Walter Hardy—”

-TV.

“Hello, America, this is Dilbert Trilby reporting.” A brown-haired man in a crisp, gray suit stared sternly into the camera. “In light of yet another supervillain prison breakout this morning, many New Yorkers are forced to yet again ask themselves… is the city safe to live in anymore? This is the question we posed to the people of Manhattan today, and these are their answers.”

The camera cut to footage of a random passerby on the streets with a microphone shoved in her face.

“Really? Another breakout?” the woman said, dazed. “What are those jails made out of, rice paper?”

Then it cut to some old guy in the middle of a game of chess:

“Supervillains in New York? Gimme a break!”

Then it cut to a little boy bouncing with excitement at his mother's side:

“Oh! Oh! Last time, the Sinister Six attacked Ravencroft to bust out Dr. Octopus and Electro! I bet they're gonna do that again!”

“I want these two in maximum security STAT! Let's move it, people!”

A short, pudgy man in a hospital gown and a tall, spindly man in a containment suit were ushered down the hall by a squadron of guards. The guards kept their tranq guns pointed in a circle around the supervillains, as if they were expecting an attack to come from anywhere.

“Well, at least you're trying to put up a defense,” said Otto. “It's reassuring to know I won't be outwitting complete imbeciles this time.”

“Can it, you narcissistic cephalopod!” snapped a guard, swinging his barrel into Otto's face. “We're armed to the teeth. This time, your little henchmen aren't getting within fifty feet of—”

Boom. The next instant, guards and staff alike were screaming as an entire wall collapsed. The dust cleared to reveal a massive, gray, hulking figure standing in the rubble.

“Outta the way.” Rhino crouched into a charging stance. “Unless you wanna find out if Ravencroft guards are as fragile as Ryker's ones.”

“Fire! Fire!” Naturally, the guards unloaded their tranq guns, but it had no effect. When the smoke cleared, the reason why became obvious – Namely, the gas mask on his face.

“The heavy rounds!” barked the squad leader, stumbling backwards. “Use the heavy rounds!”

But before the guard at the back could so much as lift his bazooka, the entire squadron suddenly fell to their knees. “What the-?”

“That's right, Earthlings!” a voice cackled as the hall filled with pea green fog. “Kneel before the
A caped, bubble-headed form emerged from the smoke to hand Otto a gas mask of his own (Electro's came built into his suit). “I suggest you put this on quickly,” said Mysterio. “Primitive as it is, this human technology will protect you from my neural spores.”

“Will you drop the 'alien' bullcrap already?” Scorpion scurried across the ceiling overhead, a mask stuck his face to match Rhino's. “It's about as believable as my ex-wife's—”

“Enough prattling!” Otto clicked his own gas mask into place. “Rhino, take care of Electro's inhibitor bands.”

“Sure thing.”

Electro held up his wrists so he could break off the bracelets via Rhino's horn. With the bands off, Electro could roll back his helmet, letting the crackling ball of electricity dance freely around his head. “Finally! Thanks.”

“No problem.” Rhino nodded, then reached for something at his hip. Apparently, in addition to the gas mask on his face, he had an enormous belt around his waist that carried a pair of oversized cylinders. Rhino detached one with his massive hand, popped open the top, yanked off his mask, and guzzled down a whole stomach's worth of water.

Electro raised an eyebrow (though it was hard to tell through the lightshow that was his head). “What's that for?”

“Me and Scorpion can only sweat through our face,” said Rhino, handing the second cylinder to his arachnid-themed comrade. “We gotta make sure we stay nice and hydrated so we don't pass out.”

“But won't that just make you really have to-? Wait.” Electro's eyes darted to Rhino's lower waist. “Come to think of it, how do you-?”

“How do you?” countered Rhino.

“Touché.” Electro's attention turned to Scorpion. “Anyways, aren't you one of the newer supervillains? Since when are you loyal to the Doc?”

Scorpion shrugged. “I'll work for anyone so long as the pay's good.”

“I would've liked to swell our ranks even more, but Rhino and Scorpion were the only ones to escape the Vault.” Otto smirked to himself. “I suppose we'll have to settle for six members. Funny how it keeps working out that way.”

“Wait! Wait! We'll join you!” Suddenly, a pair of voices from a nearby padded cell started making a racket.

“Oh?” Otto turned towards the cellmates. One was a dark-haired boy with oversized spectacles while the other was an overweight man sporting a neckbeard. “And what do you two have to add to the table?”

“I wear a kangaroo costume in honor of my idol!” said the boy.

“And I'm a grizzly bear on all levels except physical!” said the man.
"Yeah, don't call us, we'll call you," said another voice. With a *whirr* of his glider's engine, the Hobgoblin swooped into the hall through the Rhino-sized hole in the wall. "The guards outside are taken care of, so what do you say we blow this popsicle stand?"

"What?" Electro did a double-take, looking back and forth between Otto and Hobgoblin. "I thought the Green Goblin was dead! Since when is he workin' with you, Doc? And since when is he orange?"

"Ah, yes, forgive me for leaving you out of the loop." As he spoke, Otto strolled his way towards the hole in the wall. "I'm afraid the Hobgoblin and I had to arrange this coup in secret. Escaping from prison is an insultingly easy matter, but only if you have a friend on the outside – As I'm sure you're well aware."

*Doc Ock is alluding to the time Electro helped him bust out of jail way back in Spectacular Spider-Man ep 11, Group Therapy, as any Marvelite worth their mustard will remember! – Continuity Police*

"Y'know, I'm surprised you two get along so well," said Scorpion. "I'd think you'd be fightin' over who gets to be the Big Man or whatever."

"We'll cross that bridge when we get there," Hobgoblin said with a shrug. "But as for now, let's just say Otto and I have bonded over our mutual hobbies..."

Just then, there was a sudden rumble, followed by a metal harness pulling itself through the hole in the wall, supported by four mechanical tendrils.

"...such as bug-squishing."

Dilbert Trilby's face was plastered on the TV again.

"...dramatic footage from the rooftop of the Bliss Private Hospital, where earlier tonight the team of supervillains known as the 'Sinister Six' stole a camera from a gathering news crew to deliver a dire message."

The footage cut to a close up of Doctor Octopus's face. His glasses had been traded for those menacing eyepieces of his, his hospital gown had been traded for his trademark brown trenchcoat, and considering his hands were free, it was a safe bet the camera was being held via his newly-returned tentacle-arms.

"Listen well, Spider-Man. We both know you can't resist playing the hero. Come to this hospital rooftop so my associates and I can execute you, and come alone. Or else we'll- Hmm..." He glanced off-camera. "Let's see, shall we have Rhino topple the building or simply have Electro cause a blackout? I do believe there are several life-saving surgeries scheduled for tonight." He looked back to center-screen. "Well, you get the idea. See you soon, arachnid."

The screen cut to black.

"Hey-!" On the other side of the TV, Peter spun towards Gwen, startled. The two of them had been camped out in Gwen's bedroom, holding onto the news’s every word until Gwen had grabbed the remote. "Gwen, what are you-?"

"You can't fight them!" Behind her glasses, Gwen's eyes were bulging. Peter could hear her heartbeat loud and clear, and super-hearing wasn't one of his powers. "It's a death sentence."
“Gwen, Gwen, calm down.” Of course, Peter wasn't thrilled at this news, either, but he couldn't let it show. Gwen was upset enough without the big strong superhero freaking out, too. “It's okay. I've beat the Sinister Six before.”

“Yeah, and your biggest handicap back then was a burnt tongue!” snapped Gwen. “You weren't half-delirious and sleep-deprived from saving people all weekend long.”

“I...” Peter faltered. She had a point. Right now, Peter could barely lift his head without his muscles screaming in protest. Heck, he didn't even want to throw down with Sinister Six version three. What he really wanted was to drop everything and hunt for Walter Hardy... except Walter Hardy wasn't holding up a hospital full of innocent people at the moment.

Peter took a breath. “It doesn't matter, Gwen.” He sat up on the mattress, gently resting his hands on her shoulders. “If I don't do something, people will get hurt. That's what 'great power, great responsibility' means.”

“But you don't have great power right now!” Gwen was beginning to sound more than a little frantic. “A light breeze could knock you over.”

Peter gave a feeble smile. “I'm less exhausted than I look. Honest.” Honest. That was a good one.

“Can't you let someone else handle this?” Gwen asked, sullen. “The police or-?”

“You heard Doc Ock,” said Peter. “If the Six see a police copter flying their way or anything, they'll start killing hostages.”

Gwen bowed her head, defeated. “What do I tell your aunt?”

“Say the Bugle asked me to take pictures of the fight.” Peter kissed her forehead, then grabbed his backpack from the foot of the bed. “From a safe distance, of course.” He unzipped it to reveal a bundle of red and blue spandex. By now, Peter was a master quick-change artist. Not a moment later, a fully-uniformed Spider-Man was unlatching Gwen's bedroom window.

“Peter?”

He glanced back.

“Are you sure you have to do this?”

“Gwen, I—” Spider-Man swung his head back around... only to find a crimson creature baring its fangs at him, its claws dripping with dark liquid. Whuh-? Double take.

A tree. It was just a tree outside.

“Yeah. I'm sure.”
"Thwip. "Ow!" Geez, even just web-swinging made it feel like Spider-Man's arms were gonna get torn out their sockets. Every last cell in his brain was shrieking that Peter needed to nap for at least twelve hours, but he tuned them out.

The patients. Think of all those emergency room patients who need surgery. The emergency room... like where that old man had been sent...

Peter only hallucinated Carnage four or five more times before arriving at the hospital.

He perched himself on the wall of the neighboring building, studying the Sinister Six from afar. Spider-Man could see their silhouettes against the city lights. Their backs were turned to him, and it looked like Kraven and Sandman had been swapped out for Scorpion and Hobgoblin. The old order changeth and all that.

Okay, okay, he could do this. Spidey had the element of surprise. He would simply knock Electro into Rhino's face, electrocuting them both unconscious, then web Hobgoblin's pumpkin bombs and swing 'em into Doc Ock's metal arms, then punch Scorpion and Mysterio really hard over and over again until they passed out. Easy peasy.

There, plan formed, now Spidey needed to hurry up and beat the Six. He'd like to line his costume with rubber or something before kicking Electro, but he had a feeling if he took too long, the Sinister Six would take out their impatience on the hostages.

Alright... Spider-Man took a deep breath. Here went nothing. Ow, ow, even breathing made his chest ache.

"Please, hold the applause! I'm blushing!" Spider-Man pounced towards the rooftop. His foot made a beeline for the back of Electro's head... "Agh! Wha-?" ...and promptly sailed clean through it.

Spidey hit the pavement just in time to see all six supervillains flicker out of existence as the rooftop filled with pea green fog.

"An amusing effort, Earthling," said a booming, British voice, "but I'm afraid you fell right into our trap."

"'Earthling?'" Before he could so much as make a smart remark, Spidey's sense tingled and he found himself dodging a sudden scorpion stinger from the smoke.

"That is correct." Beside Scorpion, Fishbowl-head himself emerged from the fog, his fists resting smugly on his hips. "I, the M.Y.S.T.E.R.I.O. hive mind of Planet Oiretsym from the Xisretsinis galaxy, have finally revealed my true form – or at least the closest your feeble human mind can come to comprehending it."

"Right, riiriiiiiiiiiiight." Spidey swung at fist at Mysterio, but, surprise, he was another hologram. "So you were just pretending to be a bowl cut-wearing loser. Got it."

The next thing he knew, there was an entire Rhino charging at Spider-Man's face. He flinched, but... his spider-sense didn't tingle. Rhino passed straight through him without leaving a dent. Oh, another hologram.

And then, of course, his spider-sense did tingle and Spidey found himself backflipping over the
real Rhino, who'd charged in from the opposite direction.

"See how my alien mind tricks make you question the very nature of reality itself?" The Mysterio-hologram let out a hearty laugh. "And now I shall unleash my spawn upon you." He started waving his arms, chanting, "Credo Elvem ipsum etiam vivere!"

With another plume of smoke, a horde of gargoyles – sorry, a horde of winged aliens appeared around their master.

"Kill the spider!"

"Kill the spider!"

"I've forgotten what I started fighting for!"

Spider-Man tried to dodge, but space was limited on this rooftop. He couldn't tumble out of the robots' flight path without tumbling into range of Scorpion's tail or Hobgoblin's pumpkin bombs, and, honestly, Spidey's reflexes weren't at peak performance right now. One of the bug-bots actually nicked his shoulder before he could smash them all.

"Why-? Ow." Spidey clutched his wound, backing towards the edge of the roof. "Why would a space alien speak Latin?"

"What?" Mysterio gave a start. "Oh, well, um, obviously, my race was the one who taught humans language when we visited them thousands of years ago, just as we taught them irrigation and agriculture."

"Huh." Spidey contemplated this as he tumbled out of the way of Scorpion's projectile acid. "That sounds kinda like the plot of the fourth Ind-"

"Don't you dare speak of that atrocity in my presence!" Mysterio's accent was all but abandoned as he started ranting and raving, swinging his arms wildly. "I was hired to do the practical effects for that movie! It was going to launch my career! I had the most convincing prairie dog puppet I'd ever built all ready to go, and then some IDIOT decided to replace it with CGI!"

"Alright, Mysterio, you've had your fun." Suddenly, the fog dispersed as Hobgoblin swooped his glider down onto the center of the rooftop. "Give someone else a turn to monologue." He tossed another pumpkin bomb.

"Hobby, is that you?" Spidey tried to swing it into Doc Ock's arms, but he just hit another hologram doppelganger. Darn, this had been so much easier in his head. "I can never tell you apart from all the other lame Green Goblin impersonators. There's the Orange Orc, the Burgundy Bugbear-"

"That's enough!"

Both Spider-Man's and Hobgoblin's heads shot around. Electro was standing by a fusebox by the door to the stairs, and Doc Ock was looming over him, lifted into the air by his tentacle arms.

"I've heard about as much quipping as I can stand," said Doctor Octopus, his eyes narrowing behind his eyepieces. "Get on your knees with your hands over your head, arachnid. I assume you remember the threat we made on the news regarding those surgeries." He looked down at Electro, whose hands crackled threateningly in front of the fuse box.

"Really, Electro?" Spidey cocked his head. "You'd seriously murder a whole building of innocent
people over, what, petty revenge?”

“I- Well-” Electro sighed and shut his glowing eyes. “Alright, you caught our bluff. I wouldn't.” He drew back from the box.

“I knew it.” Spidey found himself smiling. “Now if you'll just stop terrorizing everybody and cooperate with-”

“But I'd gladly murder YOU!” Zap.

Okay, maybe Spider-Man should have lined his suit with rubber. His spider-sense went off like a foghorn, but electricity kinda tended to move fast, and Spidey's reflexes weren't exactly at peak condition. He found himself hurtling off the roof like a ragdoll.

Of course, Spider-Man's muscles had already been aching like crazy, and the electrocution really didn't help matters. It was all he could do just to close his fingers around his web shooter so he wouldn't go splat on the pavement. Good thing that “proportional strength of a spider” thing applied to Spidey's heart, too, or else he'd be deader than the Hypno-Hustler's gimmick.

Spidey tried to swing away to recuperate, but before he could even make it halfway through the arc, a metal tentacle wrapped around his leg. “Agh!” Spider-Man was yanked back onto the rooftop and dangled upside-down by his foot. “Uh oh. I've seen enough hentai to know where-”

“Shut up!” Smack. One of Ock's tentacles stopped Spidey mid-quip. “I can't even begin to articulate the glee it will bring me to silence that incessant chatter of yours forever.” The arm slammed Spider-Man onto the pavement.

With a grand effort, Spidey managed to peel himself out of his crater – only to immediately be flattened again by a charging Rhino.

It was getting hard to see the Sinister Six behind all the stars in his vision. Spider-Man was no stranger to pain, but he wasn't sure he could take much more of this. His spider-sense was literally buzzing nonstop. The villains made a distressingly tight circle around the hero – Rhino cracking his knuckles, Scorpion tensing his stinger, Mysterio conjuring his robots, Electro sparking his palms, Hobgoblin readying his bomb, Doc Ock raising his tentacles, Carnage morphing his hand…

Spider-Man tried to move, but his limbs were having a bit of trouble following orders. Maybe... Maybe he could take a second to rest right here... He had been meaning to sleep lately... Been so tired all weekend... Eyelids were shutting all on their own. Head throbbing. Throat dry.

Spidey managed to keep his eyes open long enough to see the claws on one of Ock's tentacles start spinning around like a saw blade. It was getting hard to think straight with his head throbbing so much...

Whrrrrrrrr. The blade drew nearer.

Spider-Man's eyes squeezed shut-

Whrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr-

-and Gwen's worried face flashed behind them.

He was so stupid. Why hadn't he listened to her?
You could've saved me.

Ock’s saw blades were milimeters away from Spider-Man’s neck when a shot rang out across the rooftop.

“What-?”

“Hey-!”

The next instant, Electro crumpled to the ground – Some kinda gigantic tranquilizer dart had just lodged itself in his neck, moving clean through his containment suit.

“A sniper.” Doc Ock was the first to catch on. He dropped Spidey with a thud, returning his attention to the surrounding roofs. “Show yourself, coward!”

Spider-Man honestly thought the guy would be met with silence, but he actually got a clear, booming answer via megaphone: “Surrender, Octavius. We have you outgunned.”

From within his crater in the roof, Spider-Man's head went skyward. His vision may have been a bit on the fuzzy side at the moment, but Spidey could at least see who the cavalry was comprised of – a swarm of police helicopters. With Electro sniped, it seemed they’d gotten bold enough to swoop in real close. Naturally, by this point, the rest of the Sinister Six had scattered in terror. Mysterio and Scorpion made a bee-line for the stairs, but Rhino was too big to fit. He looked like he was considering diving off the rooftop, but he was stopped by a tentacle grabbing his shoulder.

“Where are you going?” Doctor Octopus snarled. “Topple the hospital already!”

“The whole hospital? But I thought that was just a bluff-” Rhino didn’t have long to argue, though, before a tranq gas grenade landed at his oversized feet. “Aw, not again-!” With a hiss and a thump, Rhino, too, toppled over.

Mysterio and Scorpion were the next to succumb to the gas, but there was at least one team member capable of flying over the stuff.

“No you don’t!” Thwip. With a sudden second wind, Spider-Man leaped onto a nearby wall, then shot a quickly-spun web onto the Hobgoblin’s glider and yanked with all his might. It wasn’t enough to make the glider crash, but it did bring Hobby low enough to inhale some of that yummy tranq gas… which subsequently made the glider crash.

Five down, one to go.

“I won’t soon forget this, you wretched-!” Pew. A lucky shot from a plasma rifle shut Ock up – It’d gone through a gap in all four arms to hit his gut square in the torso, toppling him straight into the gas cloud.

From his perch on the adjacent wall, Spider-Man let out a whistle. Soon as the smoke and/or tranquilizer fumes cleared, he hopped back over to the rooftop. By then, the helicopter had landed and officers in full-on riot gear had poured out.

One officer in particular was right in the middle of unmasking the latest goblin.

“Lefty Donovan.” Captain Stacy held up the rubber mask. Its owner was, it turned out, a completely unremarkable thug. “His family reported him missing a couple days ago.” Stacy gave
his chin a scratch. “But I seriously doubt he’d have the initiative to involve himself in all this. Not without someone else pulling his strings…”

“Another brainwashed mook?” Spider-Man’s charming voice sent all heads his way. “Ugh, the Hobgoblin’s secret ID has got to be the most convoluted…” He was now standing across from the armored police squad, hands on his hips. “Swear to God, if he has an identical twin brother, I’m gonna flip out.”

“Spider-Man.” Captain Stacy didn’t so much as smile at him from behind that tactical helmet. “You alright, son? You looked like you took a real beating back there.” He gestured to all the brown and red poking out the torn spandex.

“Oh, y-yeah, I’m cool,” said Spider-Man, clutching his arm. “My spider-powers let me heal pretty quick. That’s not a thing spiders are known for, but, uh…”

“Sorry we couldn’t act sooner. We had to make sure there was no risk to the hostages.”

“Yeah, I get it. Thanks for the save.” Spider-Man paused. “Oh, but make sure Mysterio didn’t swap himself out for a robot double. He does that-”

“Don’t thank us yet, Spider-Man.” The sudden cold in Stacy’s voice made Spidey wince.

“What-?” His spider-sense was tingling. Not in a “you’re in mortal danger” kinda way, but in a cautionary-little-buzzing kinda way. That tended to happen when a whole police squad was aiming their plasma rifle barrels right in your face. Spider-Man would’ve found himself tensing with or without spider-sense.

“If we’d acted a second later, you wouldn’t be talking to us right now.” Captain Stacy met Spider-Man’s big, white eyes with his clear, blue, unwavering ones. “What you did tonight was nothing short of stupid.”

“Oh.” Peter’s voice came out waaay sharper than he’d meant. “Well, excuse me for not wanting a building full of helpless patients to-”

“If you wanted to protect them, why didn’t you consult with us before acting?” Stacy snapped. “We could’ve devised a plan together.”

The only response the words generated was a resounding silence.

“Listen to me, Spider-Man.” Captain Stacy’s eyes went sharp and narrow the way they did when he was giving out a demerit in criminology. He never once raised his voice, but somehow the calmness made him sound all the angrier. “I tolerate your vigilantism because, when it comes to threats like Carnage, your track record is still miles ahead of the NYPD’s metahuman response force… but never forget that I know who you are, and if I feel like you’ve become too reckless for your own good, I won’t hesitate to unmask you and put your loved ones into witness protection. Do I make myself clear?”

On Spider-Man’s end of the rooftop, the silence continued to resonate. Finally, though, Spider-Man said, “Crystal.”

If Captain Stacy had anything else to say, Spider-Man didn’t hear it. He was too busy web-swinging off into the night.

“Ugh…” Gradually, Rhino's eyes opened and the bleariness faded, revealing a cold, gray surface. It
took him a moment to realize he was staring at the ceiling. “What the-?” His first impulse was to bolt upright, except that when he tried, Rhino didn't budge. There were straps around his limbs and torso, and no matter how hard he squirmed, they wouldn't so much as wiggle. Nuts. Someone had sprung for the adamantium restraints.

Rhino was about to call out to see if anyone was there, but then a voice hit his ears. A voice that sent chills down his neck. A voice that made goosebumps break out beneath his rhinoceros-like hide. The absolute last voice the Rhino wanted to hear ever.

“Alexander.” Curt Connors leaned down into Rhino's field of vision.

“W-What are you gonna do to me?” Rhino's teeth chattered. He had a feeling he already knew the answer.

Curt sighed. “Well, Alexander, if you remember, the agreement your lawyer worked out was that the government couldn't experiment on you so long as you exhibited good behavior. But… I'd say threatening to topple a hospital violates those terms.”

“No,” Rhino said faintly. “No, no, no! You can't do this to me! You're sick!”

“I assure you, there's no lethal risk involved,” said Curt. “We've already tested the procedure on Mark, and it was highly successful.” But then he glanced away. “Unfortunately, since your subdermal armor's too thick for us to monitor your vitals, we, err, can't safely sedate you like we did him. But try to relax. It won't be that bad, I promise.” Curt gave him a soothing pat on his armored shoulder. “When your skin grows back, it'll look very normal.” He paused. “Ideally.”

Reportedly, Rhino's screams were audible from the far side of the Vault.

Hours later, a much wearier Curt Connors trudged into the Vault's hospital wing and plopped himself down in the chair beside his wife’s. Martha had been watching Mark's heavily-bandaged chest rise and fall from within his nearby bed, but she looked up at Curt’s approach.

“Everything okay?”

“Three operations in one night!” Curt buried his palms in his forehead. “I want to help as many metahumans as I can, especially after…” He faltered. “…after Michael passed, but… the constant flights to Florida and back… They're taking their toll.”

“Well, look on the bright side – You cured those people like you wanted.” Martha nodded to the far side of the room.

In the bed directly across from Mark's, a much smaller and much lighter Alex O'Hirn was resting under the covers with about half a billion different pain meds shooting into his arm. Now he looked less like a rhinoceros, more like a mummy.

And, of course, his sleep was made difficult by the short, wrinkled, bespectacled old lady crouched over his bed and speaking in a voice that'd make dogs howl in pain: “Alexander O'Hirn, what did I say would happen if you went to jail again?”

“Aw, momma-”

“What did I say would happen?”

Alex bowed his head. “I... I can't stay in your basement no more.”
“You're darn right you can't! How did I raise such a shameless little criminal, huh? Where'd I go wrong, Alexander? Where'd I go wrong?”

Back on the other end of the hospital, Martha snickered.

Another voice snickered, too, but for a different reason – Curt and Martha turned to the third occupied bed, in which rested a third man in a full-body cast.

“You think you 'cured' us?” About the only portion of Mac Gargan's body not covered in bandages was his face, which was currently contorted into quite the sneer. “Please. Soon as I'm free, I'll find some other mad scientist to give me powers. And if not me, someone else'll come along and do it. Sorry to bust your bubble, but there's a lot more where me and Rhino came from.”

“Is that so?” Martha scowled at him, arms folded. “Like who, exactly?”

“Mr. Kingsley, sir.” A door opened on a darkened room, and in entered a monkey suit-wearing man with absolutely perfect posture. “Octavius failed. He and his associates were captured – including Lefty Donovan.”

Instead of replying, Kingsley took a deep whiff of the perfume bottle in his hands, exhaled slowly… and then tossed it to the ground, sending a mixture of glass and fumes into the air. “Still can't get the fragrance quite right, can we?” He chuckled to himself. “Well, like I always say, if you want something done right... brainwash someone more competent into doing it for you.”

Kingsley turned to another figure in the corner – one covered in even more shadows than Kingsley himself.

“Cassandra? You have work to do.”

By the time Peter reached Forest Hills, it was pitch black out. For once, he'd actually shelled out the money for the subway because he was too flat-out exhausted to web-swing.

Peter shut the door to the Parker household behind him, his tattered costume stuffed haphazardly into his backpack, praying he could make it up to his room without Aunt May noticing the blood or the bruises or the limp. He'd almost made it to the staircase when he caught sight of someone in the living room armchair.

But it wasn't Aunt May. It was Gwen, her tear-stained face lit by the pale light of the TV. The TV that was currently playing news footage of the Sinister Six smearing Spider-Man into the pavement.

“Gwen?” Peter rushed to her side. “What's wrong?”

“What's wrong?” Gwen repeated, incredulous. “What's wrong? The news has been showing you getting shot, beaten, and electrocuted on repeat for over an hour.”

“Keep your voice down,” Peter said in a harsh whisper, shooting wary glances around the room. “Where's Aunt May?”

“Sleeping,” Gwen said tightly. “She thought you were perfectly safe taking pictures with your nonexistent zoom lens. She didn't get why I was freaking out so bad.” Gwen hugged her arms. They were shaking.
Gwen, I'm sorry- Hey!” Peter took a step towards her, but before he could get close, Gwen sprang out of her seat and backed away. “Look, I'm sorry I scared you, but I'm really okay- Ow.” Dang it, Peter had put his weight on his foot the wrong way, and now it stung like crazy. “I've got superpowers, remember? I heal faster, I can take more punishment-”

“Doctor Octopus was about to slice your head off!”

“Yeah, well, that's not the first time the bad guys have come close, but I always-” Okay, judging from her face, that wasn't the right thing to say. “I mean, it wasn't like I was in real danger. You saw it all on the news, right? Your dad saved me. It was actually pretty awes-”

“That's another thing!” Gwen's voice was so shrill, it cracked a bit. “My dad was on top of it! You almost died for nothing. You-” A sniffle escaped her throat. “You almost died. I... I thought you were dead.”

“Gwen...” This time she accepted the hug. “I'm sorry – I mean it. I swear, I really thought it was up to me.”

“That's the thing, though.” Gwen let out a bitter, bitter laugh. “You always think it's up to you.”

“What's with this attitude?” The words came out with so much more bite than Peter had meant that he found himself withdrawing from the hug. “I just risked my life trying to save a bunch of people I'll never meet – Heck, I've been doing it nonstop since last summer – and, y'know, I hate to sound too entitled, but a 'thank you' every now and then would be nice.” Crap, now he was the one who needed to keep his voice down. “I’ve beaten Ock and his goons a billion times apiece, but they get in one lucky shot, and suddenly your dad’s treating me like an amateur-”

“He’s treating you like that because I asked him to.” Gwen made another incredulous laugh, and this time she didn't sound even remotely amused. “And I should’ve done it sooner. God, I’ve been an idiot. I honestly thought you were invincible, and all these monsters would just give up eventually, but-”

“You know what being Spider-Man means to me, Gwen!” Peter snapped. “If the bad guys don’t stop coming, then neither do I.”

“The bad guys keep coming because of you! They only threatened that hospital to draw you out-”

“Yeah, because I’m the only thing stopping guys like Ock from taking the Big Man throne and having their way with the city.”

“But- But it's- You’re not changing anything!” By this point, Gwen was reduced to sputtering at him. “All you’re doing is punching people, and then they break out of jail and you punch them again, and then they break out again, and- and that only ends one way, Peter.”

The words shot up Peter’s throat and straight out his mouth, totally circumventing his brain: “Well, if that’s how it’s gotta be.”

“You want to die.” It wasn't a question. Gwen put her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide and watering. “That is literally what you just told me.”

Peter blinked. “What? No, that's not what I-”

“You want to die! You think it's your fault your uncle's dead, so now you won't be happy until you're dead, too!”
They weren't even that loud, but somehow, the words reverberated like a church bell. Peter could take a beating. Getting smacked, getting shot at, getting deep fried by some plasma-spewing supervillain... He could take all that because... because when it came down to it, not fighting bad guys hurt him a lot more than fighting them.

But this? Hearing those words from this person?

“Gwen, I-”

She didn't even give him a chance to speak. She just slammed the front door behind her and bolted off into the night.

Peter's first impulse was to go after her, but even running to the front door made his legs burn. Instead, Peter found himself collapsing into the very same armchair his girlfriend had spent the past few hours in. His eyes fell on the TV screen, staring at it.

Spider-Man's execution?! the ticker-tape proclaimed as the news played the clip of Electro zapping Spidey half to death in super slow motion. Absently, Peter laid his hand down, then flinched. The armrest was damp. Peter's eyes clamped shut, and suddenly his head was impossible to lift.

For the first time that night, Peter hurt.

**End of Lesson 2**
Hobie shut the door behind him as softly as he could. The one leading to the drama club’s prop room was always creaky, but then, Hobie supposed it hardly mattered, seeing as he was the only person back here at this hour-

“Guess who?”

“Agh!” The moment his back was turned, Hobie found a pair of hands over his eyes. “Mary Jane-?”

“Ooh, good guess.” At this, she released him. “What gave it away? The foxy voice? Or just that little flutter of joy you get in your gut when I’m near?”

“W-What are you doing here this early?” Hobie spun to hide his backpack from her line of sight. But that only gave him a better look at his attacker. Wha-? Oh, that skirt could not be dress code.

“Waiting for you, silly.” MJ tapped her pointer finger to his chest. “You think I haven’t noticed you hanging out back here every morning?”

“I, uh, didn’t know anyone paid that much attention to me…”

“But seriously, Hobie, I just wanted to say-” For a moment, MJ’s brow creased. “-our drama teach is crazy for not casting you as Biff. You totally nailed that role.”


“I’m just calling it like I see it.”

“Well, hey, at least I’m Happy, right?”

“Actually, you look like you could still use some cheering up.”

“No, I meant- Err, never mind…” A moment passed. “Hey, MJ? You wanna, like, hang out or something after school? To… cheer me up?” Well, that was the smoothest Hobie had ever sounded.

He could see MJ’s eyes growing brighter. “Thought you’d never ask.”

“Great, great.” Hobie tried not to exhale too loudly. “That’s great.”

Another moment passed.

Then MJ stood on tippy-toes to look over his shoulder. “So what’s in the backpack? An elephant?”

“What-? It’s nothing! I mean, uh-” Hobie zipped it all the way shut. “Just textbooks and- and normal backpack things. Ha! What a weird question. Hey, I gotta go, but we’re definitely hanging out after class. See you then!” He scurried away from backstage without another word.

“I’m counting down the minutes!” MJ called after him.

Geez, Mary Jane really knew how to make a guy sweat.
Geez, Hobie really knew how to make a gal scratch her head. She’d checked the prop room, like, three times, and Mary Jane hadn’t seen anything near cool enough to swipe. But then, she supposed that was because Hobie had already swiped it, whatever it was. MJ had even rummaged through the trash. Nothing. Phht, what’d she expected to find? Another crumpled up picture of her?

...Okay, that was one of those thoughts that needed to be filed away into the “never again” section of MJ’s brain. Along with the other, like, 75% of her thoughts.

Mary Jane had been kinda peeved she’d come here so early and hadn’t even gotten to hang out with Hobie for more than a minute, but then, lounging around at school waiting for class to start was still infinitely preferable to lounging around at home waiting for class to start.

She was almost feeling better when MJ made the mistake of leaving the auditorium and heading to the entrance hall. Instantly, she spotted the cute blonde with the glasses huddled near the cute brunette with the beauty mark. Of course, the sight of Gwen with Peter at her side was normally enough to melt MJ’s heart on the coldest of days, but not when the two of them were engaged in a whisper-battle with each other.

Uh oh. Mary Jane’s relationship drama sense was tingling! She scurried over just in time to catch the tail end of it:

“...your dad does basically the same thing. Does that mean you can’t love HIM?”

“That’s exactly it, though! I already have to go through this with my dad, and now you just expect me to...? It’s too much, Peter! This isn’t what I thought it’d be. It was fun at first, but-”

“I really think you’re blowing this out of propor-”

“It’s not that I don’t love you, but I can’t be AROUND you!” It was at this point that Gwen bolted for it down the hall, leaving Peter alone to glower at the tile floor, hands in his shorts’ pockets.

The little show hadn’t gone unnoticed – The obligatory lineup of jocks in the hallway snickered with schadenfreude. In fact, Mary Jane was literally the only onlooker with worry on her face. Great, the lovebirds had gone their separate ways. Now MJ had to choose which one was worth her time first. Ugh, MJ hated having to choose.

But if she had to, then MJ supposed she’d go in the order of lowest to highest self-esteem. “Gwen? Is everything okay with you two?”

“No.” Gwen spun towards her, revealing the water bubbles accumulating on those glasses. “We broke up, so- so that’s about as far from ‘okay’ as it could possibly get.”

MJ winced. There was something uncannily close to real, physical pain in her chest. “What happened?”

Silence. “Look, I know you mean well, Mary Jane, and I’m sorry, but can you please not ask?”

“Oh.” Now the pain was more of an ache. “Y-Yeah, if that’s really what you...”

“I need to be alone right now.” Gwen pushed past her, but not before muttering, “I’ve had enough crying-sessions in front of you for one lifetime...”

Wow. MJ had been abandoned. Again. Well, fine, if that’s how Gwen was gonna be…
“Tiger?” Mary Jane found Peter at his locker. He looked like he’d been staring into it for the past five minutes.

“Oh, MJ.” He flinched at her approach. Y’know, sometimes that amused MJ, but she wished guys didn’t have to do it every time she approached them. “Hey. Guess you saw…?”

“Yeah, I witnessed the crime, but I haven’t filed my dating police incident report yet.” Mary Jane shook her head. “God, this sucks…”

“You’re telling me.”

“I’d thought everything was perfect between you guys.”

Peter huffed. “Same. The breakup came out of nowhere.” He paused, then added, “I mean, it’s more like Gwen dumped me.”

“I’m sorry.” MJ took a breath. “I’ve had some experience with that, too, lately.”

The remark raised Peter’s eyebrow. “You’ve been dumped before? You?”

A smile couldn’t help but force itself on Mary Jane’s lips. “Guess there’s a first time for everything, huh?”

Peter seemed to be in a similar situation. “Well, thanks for talking to me. I’m pretty sure you’re the only other student here who doesn’t think this development is the funniest thing ever, so… y’know, I appreciate that.”

For a moment, the two of them stood in place.

“Can I ask why Gwen would-?”

“Sorry, it’s really between me and her.”

“It’s alright, I get it.” Mary Jane sighed. “But if you ever need someone to talk to about all this nonsense…”

“Oh.” Peter blinked. Then smiled. “I’d like that, actually. Thanks. Could you… meet up after class?”

“Yeah, of c- Ugh, wait!” MJ brought a hand to her scalp. “I’m hanging out with another guy then. But when I’m done with that, I can call-” She caught herself. “I just realized… we’ve been friends for months and I don’t have your number.”

“Oh, y-yeah, here…” Peter fished his Osberry out of his pocket. “Duh. Weird that we never… noticed that before.”

“Yeah, weird,” said MJ. “Well, hey, problem solved. Now we can talk to each other whenever we want to about…”

“…how much fun it is to be single?” finished Peter.

“Right, right.”

“Seriously, I kinda sprang straight from Liz to Gwen before. I’d like to savor it this time around.”

“Oh, I know,” MJ said as retrieved her own phone. “The first night I didn’t have to vote on which
Netflix show to watch, I almost cried.” The two of them got to work adding each other to their contacts, but midway through the process, Mary Jane paused to frown at Peter. “Just... keep this between us, okay? I don’t want Gwen to think-”

“Yeah, well, Gwen thinks a lot of things.” Peter was visibly fighting to keep his eyes from rolling. “I can’t change up my whole life just to accommodate all her irrational fears.”

“Guess you’re right...” They finished swapping numbers without another word.

Before they went their separate ways, Peter said, “Hey, MJ? Thanks. You’re a great friend.”

“Yeah.” Mary Jane met his eyes. “You, too.” His super dark chestnut eyes.

But then the bell rang and MJ had to scamper off.

Even once she’d reached her classroom, Mary Jane’s thoughts were back with that locker. Those conversations with the fractured lovebirds hadn’t left MJ as enlightened as she’d hoped. What on earth could’ve possibly torn them apart...?

It seemed MJ was the only kid wasting brain power on that subject, though. All the other ones were too busy going on about last night’s super cool battle between Spider-Man and the Sinister Six, where Spider-Man had gotten his butt whooped and the NYPD had needed to bail him out.

You’d think, this close to summer vacation, the notion of a dead silent classroom would be unthinkable. Yet here they were. The teacher had even gone out of the room for a minute on an errand, and still this place was quiet as a tomb. It was unnatural.

So unnatural, in fact, it made Flash’s hands shake as he clutched his desk. With every passing moment, they shook harder and harder until...

“I can’t TAKE it anymore!”

...Flash was on his feet, and every last startled eye was fixed on him.

“Sha Shan broke up with me, Rand broke up with Sally, Parker broke up with Liz-” Flash’s finger jabbed itself in the face of each listed student in turn. “-Mark broke up with MJ because he’s in jail, and now even the geek and geekette have split up, and they were friggin’ MADE for each other!”

Finally, Flash turned his attention to the student body as a whole. “Is there anyone in this classroom who isn’t miserable?”

The silence lasted minutes.

“I was in a pretty good mood, actually-”

“SHUT UP, SEYMOUR.”

Flash slammed the classroom door so hard, it was a wonder its hinges remained intact.

After that, Flash found himself in the moist, grungy men’s room, splashing tap water on his face in a futile attempt to slow his breathing. Class was in session, of course, so Flash was the only one in here.

At first.

“Hey, man...” Lo and behold, who should follow in after Flash but Puny Parker himself. The guy
looked so miserable, Flash almost felt sorry for him. “Look, don’t feel too bad about… you know. I mean, I was on the verge of screaming, myself. You totally stole my thunder.”

Peter simpered, but he received no response for his efforts, and so his face went neutral. “Look…” He took a breath. “You know what I think’s going on? This place has got a huge divide between the nerds and the cool kids – yeah, even fancy magnet schools aren’t safe – and it’s, like, the biblical root of all evil in Midtown High. Pretty sure Rand broke up with Sally cuz she refused to give the bullying a rest, and Liz was basically ostracized for dating me, and then, of course, I’m the authority on getting shoved into lockers…” The way he said it, Peter struck the perfect balance between self-righteous and self-deprecating. “My point is, this place drains people’s egos. So when a theater geek… or a band geek… thinks a guy might like her, it… makes her feel good about herself. But then she puts all her worth on your shoulders, so when you… do stupid stuff… it’s kinda devastating to her.” He paused. “Okay, did that make any sense, or do I just sound like a crazy person?”

“It made sense.” Flash stepped towards the guy… then surprised himself by clapping a hand on Peter’s shoulder. “Thanks, man. And, listen, these past couple years… I’ve been an asshole to you, and that’s stopping right now. You’re a good guy, Park-” He caught himself. “Peter.”

Peter made a soft, earnest laugh. “Don’t mention it. You always have been a guy who can see when his friends are trying to help.”

Peter hung his head as he trudged down Midtown High’s depressingly upbeat halls. Well, at least now Flash had gotten some sage advice to help with his girl problem…

In fact, Peter was, apparently, the only student still in a sour mood. All the other ones were smiling and laughing and going on about their impending summer vacation. It was mere weeks away at this point – weeks Peter would be spending hunting for Vault escapees. Not that he was holding his breath. Spider-Man had already wasted the rest of his weekend scouring the streets yesterday, but he hadn’t found so much as a white hair from Black Cat or her dad. Or Silver S- Okay, a lot of his enemies were snow-capped.

Normally, Peter would've vamooshed now that the bell had rung, but he hesitated as he passed a certain locker... and a certain unmistakable, salmon-colored headband atop a mop of blonde hair. Gwen's back was turned to him. Good, she hadn’t seen-

“So did Mary Jane make you feel any better?” Gwen asked without turning around.

“What?” Peter nearly did a pratfall. “How do you know about-?”

“I didn’t. That was a shot in the dark. Though I guess my aim was true…”

Geez, wasn’t Peter’s spider-sense supposed to warn him of this kinda thing? “She’s just a friend.”

“I know that,” said Gwen, “and I never said anything to imply otherwise.”

“Sure you didn’t.” It was a good thing Gwen wasn’t facing him so she couldn’t see how hard Peter’s eyes were rolling. “At this rate, I really am gonna develop a death wish-”

“That’s not funny.” Gwen stormed off without another word.

Actually, Peter had expected to hear the slam of her locker, but it looked like she’d forgotten to shut it. Peter stepped forward to do it for her… which was when he caught sight of the picture
hanging in it.

It was of a smiling woman. Blonde, pretty, kind of a softer face, not at all unlike Gwen’s, only with rounder glasses and a few more wrinkles. Peter recognized her from the background on Gwen's phone. Gwen had lost her in a car crash. The more statistically likely scenario compared to Peter's and Eddie's.

“And that’s when I realized I was being an asshole.”

“Language, Peter.”

“Sorry, sorry...” For the umpteenth time that day, Peter hung his head. He was currently camped out on a kitchen chair while Aunt May toiled over the stove across from him. “It’s just, well, Gwen didn’t return my calls or texts at all yesterday, so I guess I got ticked at her. But butting heads with her only made things a jillion times worse.” Yeah, interning with Gwen after class today hadn’t been fun. Looked like they were back to doing it in dead silence.

“Every couple in this world fights, Peter,” Aunt May said as she reached for her mixing bowl. “Heaven knows things weren’t always smooth sailing between me and Ben… but I only wish you’d tell me why you and Gwen broke up.”

Peter could only shake his head. But after a moment, he suddenly asked, “You okay?”

“I’m fine. Just feeling a bit left in the dark about your life-”

“No, I mean are you okay because you’re putting pepper in the banana cake mix?” Peter rose from his seat.

“Oh, goodness!” May dropped the pepper shaker like it was scalding hot, letting it clatter to the counter top. “Now I’ll have to throw the whole batch out.” Her shoulders sagged. “I’m sorry, Peter, I don’t mean to worry you. I suppose it’s just...”

“Walter Hardy?” Peter’s voice was barely audible.

May managed a nod. “The thought of- of that man loose in the world again...” She took a steadying breath. “Well, no sense getting worked up over things outside our control. Now how’d you like to help me with the next batch?”

“No thanks,” said Peter, backing towards the front door. “I just remembered something I gotta go do.”

At least Peter had ducked out of the internship early to get to his Bugle job, so Gwen had the last fifteen minutes to herself. Dr. Warren seemed to notice something was up, judging by the way he was frowning at her, but Gwen said nothing to him. And Debra, of course, remained cold and aloof as ever.

Fifteen minutes later, Gwen was strolling down the ESU campus, her backpack slung over her shoulder. She’d have passed for a college student if she wasn’t so tiny.

But then Gwen came upon something that halted her march. A heart-shaped statue decorating the sidewalk. Well, it was more of an abstract shape, but the negative space in its center made a heart.

“I’d never pegged you for a dilettante,” said a voice.
“Oh, Mary Jane-!” Gwen turned to find that unmistakable redhead coming towards her. It was getting warmer out, which MJ had apparently taken as a chance to free her arms, shoulders, legs, and whatever else she could get away with freeing. “What are you doing here?”

MJ gave an apologetic shrug. “Waiting to ambush you in a place with less high schoolers. Look, Gwen, I hate to be pushy, but I did work my butt off to get the Peter-Gwen ship into harbor, and now it’s sinking before my eyes…”

“No, no, it’s okay… I appreciate you coming out here.” Gwen rubbed the bridge of her nose behind her glasses. “Sorry I gave you the cold shoulder this morning. I’m not trying to shut you out. You…” She took a breath. “Well, I guess it sounds silly now, but that crush on Peter was the biggest, most important thing in the world to me, and you were the only other person who- who noticed that and cared.” Slowly, Gwen’s eyes rose to meet MJ’s gaze. “Those couple months I was dating him were honestly the greatest of my life. I owe you more than I could ever…” She trailed off.

The breeze was ruffling MJ’s top. And making Gwen’s cheeks pink. Oh gosh, she could see MJ’s… MJ’s bodice.

“A-Anyways-” Gwen’s eyes flitted back to the statue. “-the truth is, I am kind of a dilettante. I only got into science because Peter was into it – well, Eddie, too, but mostly Peter – and it’s my whole future career now, so I’m stuck interning with him.” Then Gwen’s gaze went to the pavement. “Cutting Peter out of my life feels like mutilating myself. Guess that’s what I get for putting all my eggs in one basket, right?”

MJ frowned. “But if you really feel that way about him, why would you…?”

“I wish I could tell you.” Suddenly, Gwen’s arms were around MJ’s waist. “God, and now I can’t even go back to being ‘just friends’ with him. It’s so awful between us now.” The hug tightened. “You’re my only friend left, Mary Jane.”

“Hey, it’s okay, girl. N-No need to be so dramatic.” Mary Jane brought a hesitant hand to the back of Gwen’s head. “I’ve got a gift for making friends. Remind me to introduce you to Hobie sometime. You’d like him.” She smoothed some stray strands sticking out Gwen’s headband. “Stick with me, and soon you’ll be begging me for some alone time.” MJ paused. “Because of all the friends you’ll be making.”

The two of them held that pose a minute.

“Excuse me!” called out an onlooker. “I just want to let you girls know how brave you are for-”

“No, no, we were just-!” The girls promptly detached themselves.

“We should, err, probably get away from the heart-shaped statue,” said Gwen.

“Yes, let’s…”

The two hurried away without another word, making sure to keep at least three feet between each other at all times.

“Montana? Uh… you okay, buddy?” Fancy Dan and Ox watched for several long minutes as Montana stood with a briefcase in hand, glassy-eyed, staring at the charred remains of a sign that just barely had enough non-scorched paint left on it to read, “Big Sky Lounge.”
“It's alright,” Fancy Dan said gently. “There'll be other pool joints.”

“Y’know, I heard about this one really good bar where guys like us hang out,” said Ox. “What was its name again...?”

“The Bar with No Name,” said Dan.

“Oh. Right.” Ox turned to Montana. “How 'bout it, Montana? You wanna go there?”

Not a single muscle on Montana's face came close to moving. Not even to blink.

“Maybe... Maybe you need a moment.” Fancy Dan turned himself around. “C'mon, Ox, let's give him some time al-”

Montana stepped forward, climbing over the “building condemned” tape and through the door.

“Montana, wait!” yelped Ox, scurrying after him. “That's not safe!”

“You don't want a building falling on top of you!” added Fancy Dan. “Again...”

Nonetheless, both Ox and Fancy Dan found themselves accompanying their comrade inside the shriveled building. Ox coughed and Dan rubbed his eyes, but Montana was apparently unaffected by all the ash wafting through the air. Wordlessly, he marched up to the biggest pile of ash – the pile where a pool table had once stood.

Finally, some words escaped his mouth, barely audible: “Who did this?”

“What?” Ox and Dan snapped to attention.

“Well, the truth is...” Ox bowed his head. “Dan and me read about this in the paper. We- We didn't have the heart to tell you, but... they say this was done by some guy with fire powers. His whole body was flaming.”

Montana spun towards him. “That Fantastic Four punk?”

“No, another fire guy.”

“Well, heck, how many fire guys are there?”

“A lot, actually. See, Johnny Storm is the second Human Torch, and then there's also-”

“Shutup, now.” Out of nowhere, Montana's body tensed. His eyes narrowed. “Someone's comin’.”

All three Enforcers went deathly quiet. They turned their heads towards the remains of the lounge's entrance – the source of some echoing footsteps growing louder. Finally, the source of the footsteps came into view, pushing his way through the scorched front door. It was a man who, despite the summer heat, was wrapped in a heavy overcoat, his face hidden by a dark hood.

After a moment's silence, the man said, his voice rough and ragged, “Are you Montana?”

Montana pulled himself to his full stature. “Who wants t'know?”

The man chuckled. “Yeah, it's you. No mistaking that accent.” He raised his head, revealing a silver visor over his eyes. “I heard this place was your old haunt. Figured you'd come back here
eventually. Only a matter of time.”

Montana snorted. “Son, am I s'posed to know you?”

The man chuckled harder. “I guess not. Not many people do know me...” But his humor quickly vanished. “...but everyone knows the Shocker. Soon as you get a costume and codename, suddenly everyone remembers you, don't they?”

“Eh, not really,” said Ox. “We're C-list villains, to be hon-”

“Shut up.” A pillar of screeching sound erupted from the man's hands. The far wall exploded with enough force to knock the Enforcers off their feet and leave their ears ringing.

“What in tarnation-?” Montana was the first one to regain his composure. He tumbled behind the burned up pool table, stopping only long enough to get a good look at his attacker.

“You tell your boss he can steal as much of my tech as he wants.” The man's coat zipper had come loose to reveal a tangle of tubes and wires all connected to a steel harness around his torso. Apparently, his sonic attack had had enough force to rip his sleeves off, too, exposing the centerpieces of his device – namely, a pair of gauntlets that dwarfed the Shocker's. They were so big around, they made the man's forearms look twice as thick as his upper arms. “I'll just build an improved version and use it to kill his entire criminal empire.”
Entrepreneur

There must’ve been some chemical imbalance in the teenage brain that made it physically incapable of putting things into perspective. Peter had just spent, like, half an hour moping to Aunt May about his stupid breakup when that half hour could’ve been spent hunting for Black Cat and her dad. Peter knew he’d promised Gwen’s dad he’d take a break from the web-slinging for while, but that was then, this was now.

Not like it made a difference, though. Spider-Man had just spent two additional hours scouring the streets again to make up for lost time, and he’d gotten the same results as yesterday. Black Cat was just too smart to let herself be found. In fact, if Spider-Man was her, he’d have high-tailed it out of Manhattan by now – Spidey didn’t have enough of a vendetta to chase her that far.

But still… he was kind of tempted to. Just look how torn up Aunt May had been at the news of the escape. Not that you’d ever know it if you took her at face value. Aunt May had been like that ever since they’d lost Uncle Ben – always putting on a brave front. Peter had thought he knew how to see through it, but, well, it turned out Gwen had been hiding her fears all this time, and Peter hadn’t been able to see through that, so…

Not like Peter was one to give others heat for keeping secrets. And when he’d tried to share his secret with someone he cared about, Peter had learned the hard way how much damage it could do. Now Gwen was gonna spend the rest of her life terrified for Peter’s, and there wasn’t a thing Peter could do or say to reassure her. But- But it wasn’t his fault, was it? Not totally. Really, how was Peter supposed to have known Gwen would be so- so sensitive about it? It was Peter’s life being put in danger here, and it’d never bothered him. The Sinister Six had come close to killing him before, and Peter hadn’t, like, freaked out about it. And yeah, Gwen had lost her mom, but if they really wanted to tally up the dead parental figures, Peter kind of, y’know…

Spider-Man was still hung up on this by his third lap past the Hudson. You’re never going to believe it, but he’d been web-swinging aimlessly while having an internal monologue. It was so unlike him, he was starting to scare himself.

Truth was, when Peter had told Aunt May he didn’t want to talk about the breakup, that’d been a bold-faced lie. Peter wanted to talk about it more than anything. It was just… if Gwen was so hurt by learning his secret, Peter didn’t even want to think about how Aunt May would take it. But keeping it completely bottled in was gonna make Peter explode… Who else could he confide in? Gwen’s dad? Yeah, no. Ugh, Peter wished there was someone he could go to who wouldn’t be too… serious.

Oh yeah.

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Hoo boy, the summer breeze was practically begging Peter to look at Mary Jane’s underbodice. He totally couldn’t though, since his eyes were so busy studying the big silver spoon prop resting above the entrance to the, err, Silver Spoon.

“Y’know, I’d be a lot more help to you lovebirds if either of you’d fill me in on why you broke up.” MJ leaned back in her deck chair, sipping her coffee. “At least give me a hint here.”

“There’s really nothing you can do, MJ. This isn’t one of those things that can be fixed with an apology and flowers. Me and Gwen are at kind of an… an impasse.” Okay, Peter couldn’t help himself – He risked a peek. At her face, he meant. No, wait, that made him just as flustered as any
other part of her. Okay, okay, Peter would simply have to focus on a part of MJ that wasn’t sexy. Like her… um… uh… uhh… uhhhhhhhhhhhhhh…

“C’mon, Tiger, everyone knows how bad you and Gwen have it for each other.” Her nose. Yeah, her nose. “It practically radiates off you two any time you’re together. Even when you were arguing at school today, you guys seemed, like, three seconds away from an angry make out session.”

It was so small and smooth. It could’ve gone between the eyes of a Greek statue. Peter couldn’t put his finger on it, but there was something distinctly feminine about it… Oh god, he was developing a nose fetish.

“I nose- err, I know. It’s not that me and Gwen don’t love each other anymore.” Peter wrenched his eyes back towards his own coffee. “It’s more like I have a- a lifestyle that’s… incompatible with Gwen’s.” If Peter was being honest with himself, the temptation to spill his guts to MJ was rising. He’d gotten so used to having people to confide in about his big secret, going back to the old way was a struggle.

“Incompatible how?” Another peek at Mary Jane’s face revealed a funny look.

“I mean, uh…” Deep breath. Time to play some verbal gymnastics. “It’s basically the same reason things didn’t work out with Liz. I’ve got responsibilities and- and my photography career, and it gets in the way of everything, so I’m never really there for Gwen, and I’m always putting myself in danger, and that freaks Gwen out even though I keep telling her I know what I’m doing, and she can’t handle it anymore. It was too much to ask of her in the first place. I love Gwen with all my heart, but…” The words were losing steam. “…I can’t give her the relationship she deserves. Not without quitting… the photography.”

What was the harm in one last peek? Peter’s eyes made the slow, careful journey back to Mary Jane’s perfectly-sculpted face… where they discovered her mouth hanging agape. “What?”

“Nothing, nothing.” MJ shut it back. “It’s just… that is, like, exactly the same reason behind my breakup. Guess when your boyfriend is- is Molten Man, it kinda gets in the way of the relationship.” After that, she went back to sipping her coffee.

Okay, this was officially the longest peek of Peter’s life. “I’m sorry. I hadn’t realized…”

“Ahhh, what I am doing, dropping the M-word like that?” MJ touched a pointer finger to her temple. “I thought I’d had all my memory of him, like, surgically carved out of my brain.”

“Oh.” Peter’s voice was drowned out by the breeze. “That’s how to deal with breakups? Just forget everything?”

“But, hey, don’t waste your energy worrying about little old me, okay, Tiger? I’ve been vaccinated for ‘emo.’” If MJ had heard him, she didn’t show it. “Besides, I’ve learned my lesson – The commitment game’s clearly rigged. You put all your chips on the table, and when the house inevitably wins, you lose everything, even your ‘just friends’ card.”

“Leaving you totally penniless?”

“Right.” MJ gave a content nod. “Look at that. Our minds are in synch today. We must be on the same wavelength or something.”

“Well, thanks for the advice, MJ. I actually feel way better now.”
“Glad I could-” It took a second for the other shoe to drop. “Wait, no, I was talking about me. That’d be friggin’ terrible advice for you and Gw-”

The next second, the earth was quaking a bit too hard for her to finish that.

“Huh-? What-?” Countless café-goers looked around in horror, griping of spilled coffee and dampened pants.

“What was that?” Mary Jane backed away before her own coffee could travel from the table to her designer boots.

Peter, meanwhile, had sprung from his seat to protect the sneakers he’d foraged from that thrift store. His eyes traveled to the skyline, then narrowed. “Shocker.”

“Um, yeah, can’t say I was expecting it-”

“Hey, MJ-” He turned back to her. “-sorry to cut your pep-talk short, but-”

“You’ve gotta take pictures?” MJ’s face lit up. “Well, don’t let me stop you, Tiger. Oh, but if you see anything super dangerous-”

“I’ll be caref-”

“-forward the pics to me. You are, like, a bottomless supply of cool wallpapers.”

“Oh. Y-Yeah, can do.” Peter stood in place a moment, blinking. It took him a moment to register this development. She really wasn’t…?

No time to dwell on it, though. Tons of Spider-Man stuff to go do! Just… tons and tons.

“Boy, you’re a couple farmhands short of a ranch if you think you can-” Montana didn't have time to finish his Southernism before he had to duck another blast.

“Hold still!” the man yelled, hoisting his gauntlets high. “These puppies aren't like your dinky little compressed air shooters. Yours are prototypes, whereas one hit from these is enough to pop every last fleshy balloon in your body.”

Of course, the design flaw here was that the gauntlets were too bulky to aim properly, giving the Enforcers plenty of leeway to dodge. On the other hand, it didn't take precise aiming to topple a condemned building.

“I told you we shouldn’t have come in here!” Fancy Dan's teeth started to chatter, but Ox's face held far more confidence.

“Move over. I got this.” He ripped off his extra-extra-extra large t-shirt, freeing the mechsuit underneath. With a metallic click, Ox's helmet flipped back over his face, and he crouched into a charging stance.

*Boom.* Before their assailant could fire another blast, the Enforcers were escaping through an Ox-shaped hole in the wall, leaving the mystery man to deal with the building's wreckage all by himself.

The Enforcers bolted down the streets, not even caring if civilians saw Fancy Dan changing into the Ricochet outfit beneath his own civvies. This being Manhattan, it only took them a second to hail down a cab – though Ox standing in the middle of the road might have sped the process up a
“Drive.” Montana pushed his way inside, followed by Richochet and Ox. The moment the doors were shut, the cabbie obediently hit the gas.

“Who the heck is that guy?” Ricochet's chest heaved as the sidewalk sped by the window.

“Ain't got a clue.” As he spoke, Montana popped open his briefcase. “And frankly, I don't care. Whoever this punk is, you boys and me are gonna teach him some manners.” And within the case were a familiar mask and gauntlets.

Unfortunately, before the taxi could get far, the road beneath it was overturned by a sonic blast. The cabbie was forced to make a u-turn, narrowly dodging what would've undoubtedly been a deadly explosion.

“GET BACK HERE, SHOCKER!” The mystery man had, evidently, escaped the collapsing building unscathed. He ran after the cab, firing his gauntlets blindly.

“SHOOOOOOOOOOOCKEEEEEEREEEEEER! YOU CAN'T ESCAPE MEEEEEEE! I'LL CHASE YOU TO THE ENDS OF THE EAAAAAAAARTHH!”

“Jesus, what's wrong with this guy?” Ricochet leaned over just to gape at the man through the cab's back window.

“My guess?” said Montana, now in full, banana yellow Shocker garb. “The other kids picked on him on the short bus.”

As soon as their attacker had vanished safely over the horizon, Shocker ordered the cabbie to hit the brakes, and the Enforcers hopped out.

“Good, now keep drivin’,” said Shocker.

The cabbie didn’t look nearly brave enough to ask for fare.

Once the taxi sped off, the Enforcers ducked into a nearby alleyway.

“Alright, boys, here's the deal,” Shocker said in an undertone. “That nut ain't expectin' us to leave the cab. Soon as he runs by, we jump 'im.” Ox and Ricochet nodded in synch.

“Great plan as always, chief,” said Ricochet. “Don't see how it could possibly go-”

*Thwip.* “Well, if it isn't my favorite rodeo clown!” The next instant, a strand of webbing on the back of his neck sent Ricochet's head into a brick wall. True to his name, Ricochet rebounded and smacked straight into Ox's stomach, toppling him over.

“Bug.” Shocker immediately fired his gauntlets skyward, but the “bug” did an impressive midair twirl, dodging perfectly and landing in the alleyway between Shocker and his cohorts.

“And here I thought you were gonna be hard to find,” said Spider-Man, puffing out his chest, “but nope, you're running around in full costume in broad daylight. Guess you really missed me.”

“Now's not the time for this, bug!” Shocker tried to flee the other way, but Spidey quickly sealed the far end with webbing.

“It's not? Well, gee, then let me come back when it's more convenient to you.” While Spider-Man was busy running his mouth, Ox regained his composure and crept up behind him... only for
Spidey to duck his punch at the last second. “I'd hate to be inconsiderate.”

Shocker fired another blast of green light and compressed air, but all he managed to hit was the trash can behind Spidey.

“Hey, Shockey, y'know what I've been thinking?” Next, Spider-Man turned his attention on Ricochet. The two of them traded fisticuffs, which, thanks to Ricochet's mechsuit, ended up looking like a big blur to the naked eye. “You wear bright yellow and red, and your cronies here wear dark purple and gray. What is up with that?” Ricochet started reverberating between the alley walls, forcing Spidey to run up them to dodge like some demented game of Pong. “Would it kill you guys to color coordinate? I mean, if one of you has to look like a giant doof, it's only fair that the other two should-”

“Would you shut up and listen for one doggone second?” Shocker fired straight upward just for the sake of drowning out the noise. “There's some dangerous nutjob comin' after us, and if you keep makin' all this racket, he's gonna-”

“There you are, Shocker. I knew you couldn't hide forever.” Everyone's favorite madman rounded the corner.

Spider-Man finally halted the battle so he could stare at the newcomer from up on the alley wall. After several silent seconds, he looked back down at Shocker. “Man, you Enforcers really need stricter hiring standards.”

“He's not with us!” snapped Ox. “We don't even know the guy.”

“Really? Hmm, well then...” Spidey turned to the mystery man. “Hey, dude, what's your deal?”

“I want to topple Tombstone's empire!” said the man.

“Mm hmm, mm hmm, I'm with you so far.” Spidey nodded.

“And I'm gonna start by killing his lackeys here.”

“Aaaaaaand you lost me.” Spider-Man dropped down between the two parties. “Call me old fashioned, but I'm really not on board with murder.”

“Well, if you're not with me...” The man raised his gauntlets. Spidey didn't need spider-sense to know where this was headed. “...then you're against me.”

Boom. Spider-Man was glad he didn't have super-hearing, or else his eardrums would've burst for sure. He managed to tumble out of the way, but this guy's blasts were way bigger and thicker than Shocker's. There was probably an uncouth joke in there somewhere, but Spidey was too busy being trapped under a massive pile of debris to make it.

Every couple minutes, the whole block would vibrate, sending dogs barking and car alarms honking. Apparently, Spider-Man was having an epic showdown with the Shocker not too terribly far from here. In fact, it was close enough that a cop had yelled at Flash for getting too near the danger zone. But Flash had managed to slip by him.

This couldn’t wait.

Knock, knock, knock, knock, knock.
Flash only needed to knock on the apartment door another fifty more times or so before it was finally answered by a cute Vietnamese girl.

“Oh. It’s you.” Sha Shan only blushed a teeny bit before tugging her bathrobe tighter over her undershirt.

Flash didn’t give her the chance to say even one more word before blurting out, “I read Death of a Salesman!” The remark earned him a skeptical eyebrow. “Okay, fine, I watched the movie version, but still, it was really good.” Flash forced himself to take a breath. “I didn’t give it a fair, uh, evaluation at first, but when I did, I got really into it.” He slouched his shoulders, admitting, “It, I don’t know, made me feel things.” Then, when Sha Shan merely looked confused, he added, “I want to be in the play now, Sha Shan. I mean it.”

Sha Shan still wasn’t saying anything, which naturally made Flash want to talk even faster:

“See, that’s the thing about me. I can be really stupid about things, but when I put actual effort into getting to knowing something – someone – there’s so much more there to appreciate.” He took an only-somewhat-shaky step towards her. “I… love… Death of a Salesman.”

The statement hung in the air.

“You getting the metaphor-?”

“Yes, I got it, thanks.” Well, Sha Shan was laughing now. Possibly at instead of with Flash, but still, progress.

“Ugh…” Why was it so dark all of a sudden? Spider-Man impulsively pushed upwards. He managed to move the largest chunks of rubble off his back, letting just enough light flood in for him to get a good look at his surroundings. With a pang, he realized he was pushing against a row of bricks that'd once been the wall of a building. A building full of innocent people.

“No!” Spider-Man struggled with all his might, but even with the proportionate strength of a spider, lifting a chunk of building wasn't an easy task. Spidey glanced around, his eyes slowly adjusting to the dimness. He saw Ox, Ricochet, and a couple pedestrians all unconscious at his feet. At least, he hoped they were unconscious.

“Are you really gonna go through all this effort just cuz someone stole your toys, boy?” Wait, Spider-Man heard a voice. Unless the blast had knocked him all the way to Texas, that had to be Shocker.

“I didn't just have my 'toys' stolen,” said a whinier, higher-pitched voice that could only belong to the mysterious attacker. “Tombstone ruined my life! TriCorp was going to make me a billionaire until you robbed their truck. Now I have nothing.” The ground shook, sending even more rubble down on Spider-Man's shoulders. Great.

“So yer in the business o’ blamin' other people fer yer problems?” There was a smaller shockwave, presumably courtesy of Shocker. “Well, I got news fer ya, boy. Way I reckon', if all yer self-worth was tied up in some little doohickey you built, then you deserved to have it stolen.”

“I'm gonna kill you! I'm gonna kill you!” Even more shockwaves. If Spider-Man didn't get out of here soon, all those villains who'd said he'd be squished like a bug would be saying told-ya-so.

“Now look what ya done! I ain’t one to go hurtin' innocent bystanders. Too messy.”
Bystanders? No. Spidey redoubled his efforts to escape the rubble. C'mon, c'mon, this wasn't even as heavy as the one back at the Master Planner's lair. He could do this... He could do this... Sure, Spider-Man had been winded, but there had to be a way to bounce back from-

Wait a minute.

Shocker and his assailant stood on opposite ends of the street, staring each other down. The collapsed wall of a nearby building sent dust clouds into the air. It was like a western, only instead of guns, they had compressed air-shooters. But other than that, totally identical.

“I'm gonna pry that suit off your corpse!” The bulging eyes behind the attacker's visor didn't make him look any saner. “I built this tech. I should be the Shocker. Me. All this time, you've been nothing but an imposter.”

Behind his own, green visor, Montana cocked his eyebrows. “I seen turkeys in November with more sense than you.”

“Talk all you want, but one more blast from my gloves, and you're dead.” The man's gauntlet's started to vibrate, preparing to fire... but before they had a chance, something exploded from the rubble.

There was a blur so fast, it could hardly be seen by the naked eye, and the next thing anyone knew, all the machinery on the man's chest had been smashed. His gauntlets made a pathetic little farting noise before growing still.

“What the-?” Before he could even react, the man was knocked onto his back by a swift kick from the blur. Finally, with him defeated, the blur grew still enough to be seen properly.

“Dan?” Shocker gawked at the purple-and-gray man standing before him. “I ain't never seen you go that fast-”

“Guess again!” Thwip. Suddenly, Shocker was glued to the floor by a burst of webbing from the metal cylinders around Ricochet's wrists. “Turns out this suit is one-size-fits-all. Pretty cool, right?” Spidey motioned back to the pile of rubble, where the real Fancy Dan was lying unconscious in his boxer shorts.

“Aww, shucks, I don't know whether to kiss you or kill you.” Shocker tried to fire his own gauntlets, but apparently the kinetic energy from the Ricochet suit on top of Spidey's own abundant energy meant he could give the Road Runner a run for his money. He smashed the gloves before Shocker even knew what hit him.

“This suit is awesome!” Spider-Man fist-pumped. “I'm keeping it forever!”

“What do you mean, 'police evidence'?”

Sergeant DeWolff gave Spider-Man a look. “You really want to add 'tampering with a crime scene' to your list of felonies?”

“Alright, alright. If it'll help put Tinkerer behind bars someday...” Spidey reluctantly began undressing (Don't worry, he'd kept his spandex on underneath it).

Behind DeWolff, the Enforcers and, uh, Lame Shocker Knockoff Man were being led in handcuffs into a police van. And all the while, the Shocker knockoff was screaming at the top of his lungs:
“I'll kill Tombstone! I'll kill him and everyone who works for him if it's the last thing I do! I'm the REAL Shocker! I'll teach the world to respect the name Herman Schultz! I'll...” Finally, the van doors mercifully shut.

And with that, Spider-Man swung off before the police had time to decide if he was a threat or a menace. Man, what a bummer... Ah, well, it probably would've turned out to be another evil alien costume, anyways.

Spider-Man was just glad the ambulances had gotten there fast and no one was seriously hurt. Heck, Damage Control had already arrived to fix the wall before Spidey had even left. Still, he had to admit, being trapped under that rubble, able only to watch as the Shockers duked it out, praying no innocent people had been hurt... It'd been scary.

Was that what Gwen felt like every time Peter put on the tights? Helplessly watching from afar, praying no one got killed this time? Peter guessed, in light of that, he really couldn’t blame her… No, Peter couldn’t blame anyone for his problems but himself. He’d chosen to be Spider-Man, and he’d chosen to date Gwen. And now he had to deal with the consequences.

Spider-Man sighed as he released his web, hurtling through the air until he fired another at the nearest building. At least now the most dangerous Vault escapees were back behind bars. Maybe he could take Captain Stacy’s advice after all? Hang up the tights for a while? With all the major supervillains put away, Peter didn't really have anything else to worry about, right? Right?

A spotlight blared over the darkened stage, illuminating a beefy blonde boy.

“It's a measly manner of existence. To get on that subway on the hot mornings in summer... To suffer fifty weeks a year for the sake of a two-week vacation, when all you really desire is to be outdoors with your shirt off. And always to have to get ahead of the next fella. And still-” Flash shut his eyes. “-that's how you build a future.”

There was only one man in the audience, but he made enough applause for a whole crowd. “That was excellent, Mr. Thompson, excellent!” St. Devereaux beamed at him. “I have to say, this role suits you perfectly.”

Flash gave a wry smile. “Not as much as my last role.”

The wry smile was shared with the one woman in the audience. The one who would be leaving practice with Flash today, the two of them walking hand-in-hand.
Any time Peter even thought about leaving his bed covers, his brain shrieked in protest. Geez, summer had just started and already he was wasting it. This was certainly a far cry from last summer, back when the thrill of being Spider-Man hadn’t yet worn off and the utter, utter horribleness of being Spider-Man hadn’t yet set in.

At least when Peter slept till noon, he wasn’t having to put up with super awkward interning shifts with his ex-girlfriend or ultra delta omega awkward criminology classes with his ex-girlfriend’s dad. Still, though, summer vacation without the responsibilities of Spider-Manning ought to have been a welcome breather for Peter. By all right, he should’ve been going to the beach with his girlfriend, making out with his girlfriend, playing couch co-op with his girlfriend, making out with his girlfriend, frolicking through Central Park with his girlfriend, making out with his girlfriend, and, oh yeah, making out with his girlfriend.

“Nnngh...” With a concentrated effort, Peter managed to roll over on the mattress. It took him a second to realize there was something nestled in his arms – a stinky old red-and-blue spandex suit. Oh, that was right, Peter had cuddled up with it last night. His arms had felt awfully empty otherwise.

...Peter was reaching peak forever alone-ness here.

He ought to call her. Yeah. Maybe if she just heard his voice, Gwen would remember how much she loved Peter and she’d snap out of this. His hand was halfway to the phone in his bedside charger when Peter caught himself. No, Gwen had every reason to feel how she did. The fear and the danger, it- it was overwhelming. The only way to make things kosher between them would be if Peter swore off being Spider-Man for good.

His eyes traveled to the picture of Uncle Ben on the nightstand. Ben had this self-satisfied little smile on his winkled lips. Peter could practically hear the words, Ha ha, nice try, kiddo. You’re stuck doing this for-EVER.

His eyes returned to the Osberry. Peter took a breath, fumbled around until the charger cord popped out, and then flopped back onto his bed with phone in hand. He rested his head on his pillow as he thumbed through the contacts list. Eddie? Comatose. Harry? In Europe. Liz? Oh, that bridge had been burned. Miss Brant? Peter had humiliated himself in front of her enough for one lifetime, thanks. The Jolly One? That’d be an interesting conversation. It’d alleviate Peter’s boredom, at least.

His thumb reached the latest contact on the list. He stared at it a minute. Then Peter groaned, sat up under the covers, and turned to face that lamp with the bright red shade Aunt May had found at the thrift store. “Hey, MJ. It’s me. Tiger. Y’know, Mary Jane, I’ve had a lotta time to think this last month, and I realized… that anti-commitment, no-strings-attached, free spirit creed of yours? I finally get it. It’s way better than- than letting yourself get all worked up over relationship drama. Sure, that’s totally shallow, but… maybe that’s what I need right now?” He paused for a reply.

The lampshade said nothing. It couldn’t talk. It was a lampshade.

“So whattaya say, Red? Wanna go out sometime? Like, on a date? We wouldn’t be going steady or anything equally primitive, right? We’d just be having a little fun. Not like we’d be making out. I mean, unless you really wanted to, in which case, I’d- I’d think about it. But we’d just be making out as friends.”
“You’re #$*%ing pathetic,” said the lampshade.

Slowly, Peter moved his gaze back to the phone screen. Y’know, the crazy thing about modern technology was that you didn’t have to enter a complex sequence of digits just to call someone anymore. All it took was… one quick tap of the thumb…

Don’t do it. Don’t do it don’t do it don’t do it don’t- Y ou did it. I hate you.

Somehow, Mary Jane had ended up huddled in the corner of her bedroom, tapping a faded spot of the wallpaper with her perfectly-shaped nail. A decade of this ritual had left the spot quite eroded. In fact, it’d formed a peculiar pattern… Great, her life was becoming a Charlotte Perkins Gilman story.

It wasn’t MJ’s fault she was losing it, though. Her bedroom just happened to be the least, err, scream-ey part of her house – so long as she kept her headphones at a reasonably high volume to account for the thin walls. It was a feasible short-term solution, but only when MJ had school to escape to for half the day. Yeah, summer wasn’t her favorite time of year.

Luckily, her phone went off to save MJ from her pending insanity. “Mary Jane Watson speaking. Hold the applause.”

“Hey, MJ.”

She was nearly the one applauding when she realized who it was. “Tiger! To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Oh, y’know, we’re three days into summer break and I’m bored out of my skull.”

“Really?” MJ’s eyes flitted to the wallpaper. “Sounds rough.”

“So, well, I’ve been doing a lotta thinking this past month, and I realized-”

“Oop, hold that thought, Tiger. Incoming call.”

“Oh, th-that’s oka-”

Peter’s smarmy, smooth, yet slightly stammering voice was replaced by a considerably higher, more stammer-filled one. “H-Hi, Mary Jane.”

“Girlfriend! What’s up?”

“Oh, y’know, summer break’s hardly started and I’m already wasting it lounging around the house,” said Gwen. “I was thinking we could do something together for the Fourth of July this Friday. And maybe you could introduce me to your friend like you said?”

“Now that you mention it, there is a party I’m planning on crashing, but I’m not really sure if it’s your kind of-”

“I can party.” Gwen’s voice went tighter. “What, you think I don’t know how to have fun just because I’m the police captain’s daughter?”

“You sure, girlfriend? We are talking about, like, a party party-” MJ was cut off by her phone’s incoming call alert. Seriously? Another one? “One sec, Gwen… Hello?”

“H-H-Hey, MJ.” This next voice was even more stammer-filled than the last one.
“Hobie! How’s life treating you?”

“Ah, y-y’know, summer break’s-”

“Summer break’s just started and you’re already bored?”

“Yeah, exactly! So, um, I was thinking about it a lot, and- and I was wondering if you could come over to my garage in Springfield Gardens? I’ve got something really cool I’ve been wanting to show you.” There was a pause, then a sharp inhale from the phone’s other end. “My, err, dad won’t be home, though. I hope you don’t mind. We’ll just be in the garage...”

“Mind?” MJ imbued the word with all the ingenuousness it could carry. “Why would I m-?”

Incoming call. “Oh, for the love of… Hello?”

“H-H-H-Hi, Mary J-Jane.” This latest voice was the most stammer-filled yet. “Do you want to go out with me?” There was a silence, which the voice filled with heavy breathing.

“Who is this?”

“Seymour. Seymour O’Reilly. From gym class-”

“How did you get this number?”

“Wait, don’t hang up, I love y-!” Boop.

Mary Jane generally avoided the garage at her own house – for the same reason she avoided every other part of it that wasn’t her bedroom, the straightest possible path leading from the front door to her bedroom, and also the bathroom across the hall from her bedroom when absolutely necessary – so she guessed she’d never given the general concept of garages much thought before. She’d especially never thought that any garage could be frickin’ cool. Yet here she was in the Brown family’s, gawking at the display before her. How was a car even supposed to fit in here when there were so many gadgets and doohickeys lining the place? She and Hobie had to walk on tiptoe just to reach his workbench in the center.

That little phone conference earlier had ended with both Peter and Gwen vying for MJ’s attention. So, of course, when forced to choose between the two of them, MJ had gone for Hobie.

“You promise you won’t tell anyone?” he said for the millionth time that afternoon.

“Don’t you worry,” said MJ. “I’ve got something of a knack for keeping secrets.”

“Okay. Here goes...” Hobie took a breath, then yanked a purple cloth off the workbench to reveal… “Ta da!” ...some kinda, like, battle suit. The main body was green, but the gloves and boots were purple, as was the skintight mask resting over the shoulders. Top that with white eye-holes surrounded with black markings, not to mention some real sharp-looking claws on the gloves’ fingers, and the suit looked like a force to be reckoned with. At least, it would if someone was actually wearing it, as opposed to it just flopping over on the workbench, hollow.

“Whoa, cool.” MJ let out a whistle. “What is this? A cosplay?” She brought a hand towards it.

“Careful!” But Hobie blocked it with his arm. “Those are real blades in the claws.”

“Uh… dare I ask what you need real blades for?”

At this, Hobie shrank. “W-Well, they’re supposed to help you scale walls so you can… wash
A laugh escaped MJ’s mouth. “You went through all this trouble just to look like a badass at your day job?”

“It’s my dad’s job, and I was trying to make it safer for him!” Hobie’s voice cracked a bit. “I was gonna surprise him with this. At least, I was at first. But then I decided to add on a cool mask, and I guess I got carried away from there. I mean, I put everything and the kitchen sink in this costume—spring-loaded boots, spray-guns in the wrists… They’re supposed to spray cleaning fluid, but they can also fire smoke pellets so you can do the whole, like, ninja disappearing thing.” The speed of Hobie’s words had increased for a moment, but then he caught himself. His shoulders sagged. “I’ve been working on this for months. It’s my pride and joy. Like, this weird little passion project.”

MJ gave him a look. “And I’m the only other person who knows about it?”

“Who was I supposed to tell?” Hobie huffed. “The rest of the football team? They’d think I was the biggest dork in school. I mean…” He bowed his head. “…this *does* all sound incredibly frickin’ autistic now that I say it out loud.”

A moment passed. Then a hand wrapped itself around Hobie’s. “Yeah, well, who cares what those guys think? They don’t have an awesome super suit.”

Hobie managed a laugh. “You… You really don’t think it’s stupid?”

“You kidding?” MJ’s face drew nearer. “This is the least boring thing that’s happened all month. And here I’d thought you were just making a booty call.”

At this, Hobie almost squeaked. “You thought-?” The realization was sinking in. “And you came here anyways?”

Oh, wow. Never before had MJ boxed herself in so perfectly. “Yeah… guess I did.” Really only one response she could give to that.

And then, well, you can guess what happened next. Hobie wasn’t half bad for a beginner. Plenty of tongue.

Though he’d have to learn to hold his breath for way longer, judging by how fast he broke things off. “Wow.” Now he was grinning like a loon. The exchange had left MJ’s back pressed against the workbench. “That was… MJ, you’re amazing.” And he was the one doing the pressing.

“Well, I don’t like to brag…” Mary Jane made a show of inspecting her nails. “So, err, whatever happened to Mindy?”

“Nothing ever happened with her. We’ve barely even spoken since spring break.”

“Cool.”

Hobie laughed. Well, it was more of a manic giggle. “This is officially the greatest day of my life. It’s like I’m an actual superhero.” He leaned in again. “I’m just like Spider-Man!”

But MJ leaned back. “Um, y-yeah, guess there is kind of a resemblance in the, uh, in the mask. But, I mean, really, I’d say you’re more like a peasant Black Panther. Totally… Totally different hero. And besides…” Her hand fumbled for the purple cloth lying half-off the table. “…Spider-Man doesn’t wear a cape, now does he?”
“A cape?” Hobie blinked. “Oh, no, that was just to cover everything. A cape would be kind of...”

“Awesome?”

“Impractical.”

“C’mooooon.” As she spoke, MJ wrapped the cloth around Hobie’s shoulders. “You’d look great in it.”

“I don’t think that’s such a good-” It was at that point that Hobie made the mistake of gazing into MJ’s eyes. “But on the other hand... I could totally rock a cape.”

“Now we’re talking.” MJ began rubbing her hand over Hobie’s forearm. Just one of those subtle little hints she loved to give. “So what’s this suit thingy for, anyhow?”

“For?” Hint received loud and clear. “It’s not really ‘for’ anything. It’s just, like, an art project. I mean, I doubt they’d let my dad actually wear it to work at this point, and- and I ended up fitting it to me, anyways.”

“You don’t want to fight crime or something?”

“You kidding? You seen the thanks the Bugle gives Spider-Man for all his altruism?” For a moment, Hobie was actually distracted from the approaching lips.

“Sure, but you’re not just gonna let your suit collect dust down here, are you?”

“Well, if you have any uses for it, I’m all ears.”

MJ actually did have an idea, but she’d have to tell him in a minute. When her mouth was unobstructed.

“Whoooooooo-!”

A pair of purple, spring-loaded boots touched down on a rooftop in the heart of Manhattan, followed by a pair of regular, black, designer boots. Their whoops of delight were followed by the whir of a grappling hook retracting back into Hobie’s wrist. His brand new cape was wrapped around Mary Jane even tighter than Hobie’s big, beefy arms. It was almost enough to make MJ self-conscious, seeing as all she had to protect herself from the night air was a plain pink t-shirt and short shorts. She said “almost” because Mary Jane Watson wasn’t actually capable of feeling self-conscious.

“Oh my god, I honestly didn’t think I’d get my pulse up all summer,” she said, grinning. “We’re doing this every day for the rest of our lives, okay?”

“Heh. Yeah.” Hobie puffed out his chest. His face was impossible to read behind that mouthless mask, but MJ could hazard a guess. “Rest of our lives.”

MJ’s eyes flitted to his wrist. “So that’s really the same pulley mechanism thing Glory used to drop from the ceiling in Midsummer Night’s?”

Hobie nodded. “I kinda repurposed it. I was just studying it at first, and I was gonna give it back, but-”

“Eh, not like the drama club was getting much use out of it, anyways.”
“I guess not.” Hobie’s own eyes traveled to the skyline above the vanishing sun. “Man, the city’s gorgeous from up here. This must be what it feels like to be S.”

“-to be Daredevil?” offered Mary Jane. “Y’know, with those weird billy club cables he swings on? I’m sure he appreciates a nice view every now and then.”

“Yeah,” said Hobie. “Daredevil.”

“And speaking of Midsummer Night’s, I notice you kept the color scheme from your Puck costume.” MJ poked a finger to the center of Hobie’s green chest piece. It was made of Kevlar or something, by the looks of it. “It looks good on you.”

“Thanks.”

“Surprised the cable can hold that much weight, though…”

“Course it can. Watch this.” Hobie fired the grappling hook into the arm of a crane overhead, then pulled himself up, flipping over so he was hanging upside down in midair, knees bent like a frog’s.

“Wow. Nice grip for a guy with no super strength.” As she spoke, MJ brought a hand to his mask, pulling it back over his jaw. “Must be that football physique.” For a moment, she was worried the physical contact would make him let go, but Hobie managed to keep up that grip, even once MJ started upside-down-kissing him.

Well, wasn’t this picturesque? Mary Jane had finally gotten everything she’d ever wanted. An escape from boredom, a cute guy to fool around with… It was all perfect. Which was why Mary Jane felt so happy right now. Yep. Happy.

“Hey!” But again, the making out didn’t last as long as Mary Jane would’ve liked – this time because of the security guard who’d just entered the rooftop from the stairway door. “What the-?” The moment he spotted the crazy kids, the guy’s hand went for the walkie-talkie on his belt. “We’ve got a prowler up here! And a cute redhead.”

“Crap! Run-!”

The next instant, Hobie had scooped MJ up in his arms again so they could swing to safety. After several gut-wrenching minutes, the two of them dropped down into an alleyway, panting.

“That- That was a close one.”

“Yes,” said Mary Jane, hands on her knees, “juvie is not a fun place to visit.” She paused. “Or so I’ve heard.”

They remained in the alley a second. Okay, MJ hadn’t wanted her pulse to get quite this high over the summer.

“I think that was enough, uh, prowling for one night,” said Hobie, pulling his mask back over his chin. “Let’s get you home.”

“Aww, but-”

“Hey, we’ve got the whole summer ahead of us to screw around. There’s no rush.”

“Yeah… okay.”

“Come on, MJ.” Hobie nearly put a hand on her shoulder, but he darted his claws away in the nick
of time. “I’ll even swing you home in costume.”

Well, that was one way to make the return trip less disheartening.

The imaginary talking lampshade had been right. Even after waiting all that time on hold, Peter hadn’t had the guts to ask MJ out. At least, he hadn’t had the guts to specify he wanted to go on a date with her and not a platonic friend buddy pal friendship party adventure.

Peter straightened his posture as he neared the house, draped in shadow by the glow of the streetlamps. He’d never been here before, but this was the place, judging from the numbers on the mailbox. It’d only been a short walk from Forest Hills. No wonder MJ was always popping back and forth between here and her aunt’s.

Even if Peter had worked up the nerve, it turned out MJ had already made plans to spend the day with some other guy. How many guys was she in contact with, exactly? And how many had made the groundbreaking observation that Mary Jane was super hot? If Peter did ask MJ out, would that really be anything special to her? Would it be anything special to him? Did a date even need to be special?

Peter had no clue – He’d never been on a non-special date before. Heck, half the reason he’d hooked up with Liz was because she’d burned bridges with Flash to be with him, and that was a big deal to Peter because- because he’d thought he was just some stupid nerd, and then out of the blue, a cheerleader had been on his doorstep making out with him. That was about as “special” as it got.

And then there was Gwen. Ugh, just thinking that name made Peter’s chest ache. Even after Thanksgiving, Peter hadn’t guessed how hard Gwen had fallen for him. She’d really loved Peter. And… she still did. Peter wondered if she was the least bit tempted to go fool around with a random hot guy? He pictured Gwen kissing, like, Rand or someone. Y’know, making out “as friends.”

…Peter had the sudden urge to teach Rand the definition of “defenestration.”

Well, it was decided, then. Peter would simply turn back around, and then he’d spend the rest of his life miserable and alone because even if he did find another girl with genuine feelings for him, she’d never hold a candle to Gwen Stacy, so Peter might as well get used to being sing-

Oh, wait, he was already on MJ’s doorstep. Too late now. Maybe… Maybe Peter didn’t actually have to ask MJ on a date, specifically. Mary Jane had taken it upon herself to be Peter’s and Gwen’s relationship coach, right? Peter could simply say he needed to talk to her again about all that. Or maybe – and this was the craziest idea of all – maybe Peter could actually be honest with Mary Jane about his conflicted feelings?

After all, it wasn’t like MJ had never shown up on Peter’s doorstep unannounced before. Well, informing Peter of Aunt May’s heart attack wasn’t quite as vapid a reason, but still. Come to think of it, if Peter knocked right now, he wondered if MJ would have on those cute bunny slippers?

His finger hovered over the doorbell.

Peter stayed that way a minute… until he was snapped from his spell by the sound of muffled screams. Not like, “save me, Spider-Man” screams, but like, “no YOU left the lid up” screams. Huh. Peter hadn’t realized MJ’s folks were so, err, noisy.

But then he heard an even louder sound – a thump. For a sec, Peter wondered what exactly was going on in that house. But then he realized where that thump was actually coming from. Either
MJ’s parents were having their argument on the roof, or…

Peter peeked around the corner. And the sight above made his heart stop. A shadowed figure was hanging off the wall beside an upstairs window, clinging to the brick with the set of talons on its hands. It was hard to tell in the moonlight, but those claws looked distinctly… feline.

Scarcely a second later, a fully-costumed Spider-Man pounced onto the wall across from the window. No, he hadn’t been seeing things – There was indeed a humanoid figure up here.

“Hey, you! Wanna buy some girl scout cookies?” At the sound of Spidey’s voice, the figure sprang back, startled, and then sprinted up onto the roof. “Wait, come back! I’ve got thin mint!”

What was Black Cat doing at Mary Jane’s house? Oh lord, what if Black Cat was Mary Jane? Spider-Man had no clue how the logistics of that would work, but the idea did hold a… certain appeal.

But Spidey barely had time to rationalize before he was closing in on the figure. Right as his heart was starting to pound, he got close enough to realize… this wasn’t Black Cat. Or Mary Jane, for that matter. The intruder was a bit too, um, lacking.

Spider-Man landed directly in front of the mysterious figure, blocking his path. The intruder drew back, startled. He seemed to be covered from head to toe in a pale green-and-purple uniform. Hard to tell in the moonlight, but it looked like something a bit more durable than Spidey’s spandex. The dude’s mask was molded into a scowling face with pure, white eyes surrounded by black markings, and his gloves ended in pointy-looking claws. He kinda resembled Black Panther, except this guy had a flowing violet cape wrapped around his shoulders. So he was Batman. Black Panther with a cape would just be Batman.

“A cape, huh?” Spidey crouched into a fighting stance. “Gotta say, I admire the boldness.” He ducked a swipe of the stranger’s claws, his mouth running all the while. “I almost put a cape on my costume, too-” He swung his fist. “-but then I realized it’d look stupid.”

To Spider-Man’s surprise, the punch actually landed, sending the crook reeling backwards. Huh. For a supervillain, this guy sure moved slow. “What, you need me to go easy on you?”

And now Not-Batman was wordlessly running away. Sheesh, tough rooftop. Guess this guy was the strong, silent type.

“Okay, I realize the last time I attacked a guy just for looking like a supervillain, I ended up making things worse-” Spidey sprang after him as the guy bounded to the next rooftop over. Queens was, after all, better suited to rooftop-hopping than building-swinging. “-but something tells me you didn’t get that battle suit from a freak lab accident. No, wait, lemme guess, the zipper got stuck and now you have no choice but to wear it while you, um, creep around the houses of attractive high school girls?” Yeah, Spider-Man was having a hard time concocting an alibi that made this dude look anything approaching sympathetic. “But, hey, maybe I’ve got it all wrong. Maybe you’re actually a fellow superhero? In which case, guess you missed the memo, we generally avoid green and purple-”

Before Spidey could land another blow, the crook held out his arm. There was some sort of cylinder wrapped around it, not at all unlike Spider-Man’s web-shooters, except instead of webs, it shot out a cloud of gas.

“Look, you’re obviously new, so I guess you don’t know this-” Spidey ducked the oncoming
plume. His spider-sense wasn’t tingling, so it was safe to say this stuff wasn’t bug spray. “-but it’s customary to trade witty banter with me.”

He charged into the gas, only to discover the dude was long gone. Sheesh, maybe the guy really was Batman, escaped from the pages of silly comic books and into the real world.

Peter was still reluctant to discount the possibility that the cape-wearing weirdo was a good guy. Maybe he was an impoverished loser who’d gotten suckered into wearing that suit by some evil mastermind, and now if he tried to take it off, it’d explode? Yeah, that sounded contrived enough to be true.

Nevertheless, Peter couldn’t help but worry that the dude might return to the scene of the crime. That was why Peter rolled down his sleeves to make sure every inch of red spandex was hidden, took a deep breath, and rang the doorbell.

The muffled screams from within had a sudden exponential increase.

After a few moments of this, Peter caught a voice from the other side of the door’s peephole: “Oh, don’t get up. This isn’t one of your-” The next snatch of conversation was indecipherable. “-just a sixteen-year-old boy from my school. No one you’d be interested in, Phil. Or is that too much of an assumpt-?” More indecipherable bits. “Yeah, $#*$% you, too.” Then the door swung open.

Turned out Mary Jane wasn’t wearing her bunny slippers. In fact, she wasn’t wearing much more than a pink t-shirt and a black bathrobe. “Tiger! Always good to see you.” Instantly, MJ’s nails were in Peter’s arm, and he found himself led down the doorstep. “It feels great out here. Let’s talk outside.” She kicked the front door shut behind them.

“Yes, yeah, sure.” Peter’s arm wasn’t freed until they were a good five feet from the doorstep. They were closer to the road than the house. “Sorry to bother you. I was just, y’know, walking through the neighborhood, and I thought I saw, like, these weird guys jumping around on your roof. Wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Oh, you’re no bother. That’s sweet of you, Tiger.” The breeze fluttered MJ’s bathrobe open, prompting her to fold her arms over her chest. “Don’t worry. Phil- my dad, he- he already called the police. The cops are on it.”

“That’s good,” said Peter.

A moment passed, during which time the breeze turned its attention to Peter. He had to pin his blue t-shirt down with his hands, lest he flash his spider-logo in MJ’s face.

“I feel horrible,” MJ suddenly said. “I totally blew you off on the phone this morning. I mean, I had a thing with Hobie, and, well… Anyways, you wanna hang out tomorrow?”

“Hang out?” Peter swallowed. “Just the two of us?”

“Yeah,” said MJ. “You know me. It wouldn’t be, like, a date date, but…”

“…just a date?”

Mary Jane’s eyes traveled to the grass. “Guess so.”

Peter’s own eyes traveled back to the front door. He took in a breath of frigid night air. “Sorry, my boss called earlier, and I’m actually gonna be, like, swamped with work for the foreseeable future.
Maybe some other time?”

At this, something about MJ’s posture seemed to loosen. “Oh, that’s okay, Tiger. Gotta respect a career man.” Her eyes flitted to the front door, too. “Well, I’m sure you’ve got places to be. Don’t let me keep you.”

“Yeah.” Now that the breeze had died down, Peter risked bringing his hands to his pockets. The two of them stood in place a bit, shivering. “Goodnight, Red.”

“Goodnight, Tiger.” Just before turning around, Mary Jane seemed to catch herself and blurted out, “Oh, but for future reference, if you’re dying to hear from little old me again, call me first, and if I don’t answer, try my aunt’s house or- or leave a message or whatever. No need to walk all the way out here-”

“Oh, I didn’t- I- I was just in the neighborhood.”

“Okay. Okay, good.” Not another word was spoken as Mary Jane scurried across the front lawn and back into her house.

Peter’s eyes stayed trapped on her back until it vanished behind the front door. Even once he was alone, Peter stood in place a minute.

Man, these bed covers were toasty. Clearly, leaving them had been a mistake.
The first thing to hit Gwen was the music. She was actually kind of impressed – She hadn’t known sound waves could rattle your teeth. It was erupting from a set of massive speakers thoughtfully planted by the apartment’s front entrance:

“Now I’m lying on the table,
With everything you said.
It will all catch up eventually.
Well, it caught up, and honestly—”

The second thing to hit Gwen was the sight of the other girls. She hadn’t expected there to be so many. The ratio of girls to their clothing, though, was a different story. And Gwen couldn’t help but roll her eyes at the masters of subtlety checking those girls out (i.e. the swarms of teenage boys in even more disproportionately high numbers). But then, the sight of those other teen girls at least made Gwen feel less horrible about what she was wearing.

“The weight of my decisions,
Was impossible to hold,
But they were never-
They were never-
They were never yours.”

It was taking a conscious effort to keep from folding her arms over her chest. That’d defeat the whole purpose of letting this top suffocate Gwen in the first place – if you could even call it a top, it was so tiny.

“Well, I know you know... everything.
I know you didn't mean it.
I know you didn't mean it...”

“I can’t believe you made me wear this.” Gwen’s eyes flitted to Mary Jane, who’d managed to wear even less than Gwen while looking far classier, a fact which made Gwen’s brain hurt.

“Funny, I don’t remember putting a gun to your head in the changing room.” That seemed to settle the matter, and so MJ grabbed Gwen’s wrist and led her to the heart of the party.

“Whose apartment is this?” Gwen wondered aloud. She received no answer – Her voice had all but vanished behind the boom of the speakers. Everyone was supposed to head out to the balcony in a minute to watch the fireworks over the East River, but between the noise and all the glowsticks people were waving around, Gwen doubted anyone would actually notice once the show started.
Even once Gwen’s wrist was free, she trailed behind MJ, praying she didn’t look too much like a duckling following its mother. Every so often, a guy would lay eyes on Gwen, which only prompted her to huddle ever closer to her redheaded protector, which in turn prompted even more eyes to fall on the both of them. Stupid cleavage window on MJ’s stupid black top…

Gwen wished she’d worn her glasses so she’d have something to fidget with. The lack of them made her keep wanting to touch her face, but the last thing Gwen needed to do right now was ruin her hair and makeup. Mary Jane had outdone herself with this latest makeover. Gwen was about as pretty as she was capable of being, which she was fairly certain was the only thing keeping her from being laughed out of the party.

She and MJ passed a group of guys leaned against the living room wall, drinking who-knows-what out of plastic cups. This time, Gwen huddled close enough to catch MJ’s notice.

“Hey, loosen up, girlfriend.” Mary Jane rolled her shoulders, as if to illustrate the proper amount of looseness. “You’re the one who wanted to come here with me.”

“Yeah… Guess I was.” Gwen couldn’t help but gape at MJ some more. Apparently, the living rooms of total strangers were her element. MJ was only one of a massive number of bodies occupying the apartment, yet with all the stolen glances she was earning from partygoers, you’d think she was omnipresent.

“Come on, a little fun will do you good.” Mary Jane turned back to meet Gwen’s eyes. There was something about her face… Well, MJ’s face had always struck Gwen as perfectly-formed, but now it seemed even more so. It wasn’t any physical change, like the fact that MJ’s hair had grown out since the Fall Formal and now fell past her shoulders. No, it was a- a kind of radiance, if that made any sense. Maybe it was just the way Mary Jane was looking at Gwen, like she was well aware Gwen was using her as a walking comfort blanket, and she didn’t mind in the least. It made Gwen feel more relaxed. But also more nervous.

“Oh, there’s Hobie.” MJ hurried off to the apartment’s kitchen area, and Gwen, of course, hurried after her. “You’ll like him, I promise. Me and him are-” For the first time that night, the intensity of Mary Jane’s swagger fell below a hundred percent. “-are an item now, I think.”

Gwen raised an eyebrow. “You think?”

“Hobie! You look great!” Mary Jane didn’t have time to reply to Gwen because she was too busy charging towards the guy who may or may not have been her boyfriend.

“Not compared to you.” Well, Hobie hugged MJ pretty tight the moment she drew near, so Gwen would have to throw that in the evidence pile. Gwen was pretty sure she’d seen Hobie Brown before, but only out of her peripheral vision – or else covered from head to toe in green makeup. His hair was styled in evenly-spaced corn rows running from neck to forehead, and his biceps poked out the short sleeves of his white t-shirt. Eh, he wasn’t the kind of guy Gwen would go for, but then, few guys were. “And who’s your friend there?”

MJ grinned. “Would you believe she’s Gwen Stacy?”

“Gwen Stacy?” Hobie’s wasn’t the only head that turned. “The Gwen Stacy from our school?”

Gwen managed to mumble something resembling the word “yes.”

“She’s my masterpiece, is what she is.” Yeesh, MJ needed to warn her before slinging an arm over Gwen’s shoulder like this. Gwen nearly had a heart attack. “I’m so proud of her, I might cry.”
Despite her best efforts, Gwen ended up laughing. “Just don’t expect me to start singing ‘You’re the One That I Want.’”

“Ooh, there’s the punch bowl.” MJ pointed it out to the other two. “Is anyone thirsty?” She gave Gwen a look. “Besides every boy you and me walk past, I mean.”

After that, Mary Jane glided off towards the bowl, leaving Gwen and Hobie to bask in her aftershock. Wow. Look at the way Hobie was staring at Gwen. Look at the way everyone was staring at Gwen. Was she really drawing as many eyes as Mary Jane friggin’ Watson? Maybe all those times MJ had said Gwen was every bit as gorgeous as her, she hadn’t just been saying it?

Without meaning to, Gwen locked eyes with a random boy from the crowd. His darted away the moment hers neared, prompting his cheeks to fill with red. Heh, Gwen hadn’t realized she was so powerful. Was this what it was like to be Mary Jane? No wonder she loved these parties so much.

“She’s something else, isn’t she?” Hobie’s voice shook Gwen back to reality. Looked like he was still basking in that aftershock. “Like, you just stand next to her, and she’ll make you think you’re the most important thing in her world.”

“Yeah.” Gwen’s cheeks had started to rise, but now she found them sinking back down. “She’ll… make you think…” A moment passed. “Hey, Hobie? This is none of my business, really, but are you and MJ, y’know…?”

“A couple?” Hobie shrugged. “Well, we haven’t said it in so many words, but…”

“I mean, I didn’t think Mary Jane was interested in real relationships, but then all that stuff with Mark happened—”

“Mark?” Hobie gave a start. “Who’s Mark?”

“Mark Allan?” Gwen’s jaw nearly dropped. “You don’t know about-? Hobie, it was on every news station last February.”

“Wait, the molten guy?” Hobie strained to remember. “Sorry, there’s so many supervillains now… Didn’t he used to work the drama club’s lights?”

“Yes, and things were serious between him and MJ before he went molten. It was traumatic for her. I mean—” Gwen glanced back at the punch bowl, where Mary Jane seemed to have gotten distracted chatting up some random guy. “—she doesn’t seem traumatized, but, well, how could she not be?” Gwen’s attention returned to Hobie. “She hasn’t said anything to you about it?”

Hobie opened his mouth to reply.

“Hobie! You’re here, too? Awesome!” But the next instant, a group of kids barged towards them. The approach of Flash and Kong made Gwen impulsively cringe, though it was mollified a bit by the presence of Glory. Rand was there, too, though Sally had been replaced with a girl in an expensive-looking violet dress – Janice, if Gwen was remembering right. She was from a different school.

“Great party, huh?” said Flash.

“I’ve seen better,” muttered Janice from behind her phone.

“I-It’s pretty good.” Hobie looked almost relieved to have gotten a word in. “I’m really just here to hang out with Mary Jane, though. We’re, uh, we’re kind of a thing now.” Gwen didn’t know what
response Hobie had expected. A round of high-fives, maybe, but definitely not a round of awkward stares. “What?”

“No, no, that’s cool,” said Flash. “Mary Jane’s pretty great. I mean, even I tried to go out with her at first, but—”

“But what?” Hobie’s voice had gone a note higher.

“She’s a gigantic slut,” Kong said through a mouthful of brownie.

It was just one tiny syllable, yet it sent a ripple through the group. Hobie looked dumbfounded, Gwen looked horrified, Janice looked amused, and Glory looked a second away from clawing Kong’s eyes out. “Kenneth. Kong.”

“What?” Kong swallowed with a little more noise than Gwen would’ve liked. “She is!”

In a rare display of thoughtfulness, Flash seemed to notice Hobie’s face. He looked over at him, took a breath, and said, “Look, we don’t have anything against her, but you gotta face the facts, man. MJ totally led me on after the formal, and then when I tried to get too serious with her, she played the ‘free agent’ card like she always does.” He made finger quotes to punctuate his point.

“And then she went through the same song and dance with just about every other guy on the football team,” said Rand. “And some of the cheerleaders...”

“Ah, she’s one of those girls,” spoke up Janice. “Lemme guess, she just so happened to hit on those cheerleaders while a crowd of guys was nearby-?”

“She’s not faking being bi!” Next thing Gwen knew, every head had snapped her way. They looked as surprised as she felt – Gwen hadn’t expected her words to hold so much bile.

“Nerdette? Is that you?” Flash’s eyes had gone wide. “Damn, and I thought your last remodel was—” He was cut off by the closest Gwen could come to The Look without her glasses.

“I can’t believe you guys.” Gwen had to fight to keep from trembling. “Some friends you are... H-How do you think Mary Jane’s going to feel when I tell her what you all really think of her?”

“We don’t have a problem with her, though,” Flash said tightly. “It’s just pretty obvious every guy on the football team’s getting a turn with her, and I’m trying to spare Hobie from going through what I had to—”

“But MJ really does like me!” Hobie’s voice didn’t hold nearly the bile of Gwen’s. It was trembling too much for that. “Because she, uh, she loves theater, and she liked me as Puck, so I’m... not just a random football player to her.”

“That’s exactly right, Hobie.” Gwen put a hand on his back. “You don’t have to listen to this crap.” Her gaze moved to Flash. “I mean, isn’t that exactly how you got Sha Shan to like you?” When Flash failed to reply, Gwen turned to Glory. “Glory, come on, you’re MJ’s friend, too. Back us up here.”

But Glory’s face seemed to have grown more bemused over the course of the conversation. “Well... I’m definitely not judging Mary Jane or anything, but now that I think about it, she does engage in some behaviors I find a bit... off-putting.” On the last word, she shot a stabbing glance Gwen’s way.

Gwen found herself hugging her chest. She hadn’t noticed before, but Glory seemed to be wearing,
y’know, her normal amount of clothing. In fact, the more Gwen examined the crowd, the more
girls she spotted wearing that amount, and the more difficult it grew for Gwen to stop from
trembling. Maybe she was just cold. She wasn’t exactly protecting herself from the elements here.

“Okay, but- but me and MJ really hit it off at the Fall Formal,” said Hobie.

Flash snorted. “Yeah, everyone hit it off with her at the formal. More guys danced with her than
didn’t.”

“And yeah, she dated Mark for a while,” added Rand, “but she couldn’t go five minutes without
reminding everyone those were ‘un-dates.’”

“Unbelievable.” Gwen’s brow had started to quiver.

“Oh, and MJ’s part of the reason me and Liz broke up,” added Flash.

“She didn’t make you go to Coney Island with her!” Whoa, Gwen’s voice had actually carried over
the music. She was drawing onlookers, and not with her outfit this time. “You’re- You’re
projecting! Maybe MJ’s not the slut here, Eugene?”

“Projecting?” snapped Flash. “Mary Jane posed like a camgirl in my birthday video. When my
MOM was holding the camera!”

For a moment, the only noise in the group came from the background music.

“She did not,” said Gwen.

Flash whipped out his phone. “Oh yeah? Wanna see?”

“You kept it?” said Janice with a smirk.

Gwen had to admit, she was a little tempted to lean over Flash’s shoulder and watch the screen just
to, err, judge for herself. But before Gwen had the chance to resist that temptation, a breathy voice
said, “Don’t worry, I’m back! The party’s fun again!”

Every last eye became trapped on the approaching redhead.

“Cool balancing trick, huh?” Mary Jane handed the plastic cups in her hands to Gwen and Hobie,
who robotically accepted, and then retrieved the third cup for herself from its resting place on the,
err, window of her top. “I knew us gals had these things for a reason.” She took a sip. “This punch
is amazing. This is, like, my fourth cup.”

The group stared at her in dead, dead silence.

“You’re new.” MJ’s head snapped towards Janice. “Hi, I’m Mary Jane Watson. But I’m sure my
rep precedes me.”

“Actually—” Janice’s eyes flitted to the rest of the group. “—I think it really does.” She waved a hand.
“Hi, Janice L—”

“Hey, MJ?” But just then, Gwen gave MJ’s shoulder a tap. “Sorry, but can I talk to you for a
second?”

“Yeah, talk away.” MJ spun towards her. When Gwen failed to reply, MJ said, “Ohhh, you mean in
private.” Gwen nodded, and so Mary Jane strutted away alongside her, but not before turning back
to wink at the group. “Sorry, I gotta go. Now the party’s boring again.”
Gwen hadn’t the faintest idea where she was going, meaning she ended up leading MJ into the laundry room. This was about as private a location as they’d manage given the circumstances, Gwen supposed. A pair of boys was making out behind the washing machine, one small and mousey, the other big and burly, but they didn’t pay the girls any notice. Well, MJ paid them notice – She started to whistle and applaud before Gwen yanked her away.

“Can you please get serious?” Gwen folded the door shut, trapping them inside. Now the only light came from the glowing buttons of the washer and dryer. It made everything look blue. “Look, I appreciate what you're trying to do here, but this party isn’t for me. Can we leave?”

“Leave? Aww, but we just got here!” MJ lurched forward, letting the cup fall from her hands and spill punch all over a stray towel.

“Well-” Finally, Gwen gave into temptation and fidgeted with the part of her nose where her glasses usually sat. “-you can double back after you take me home. I know you want to spend time with Hobie-”

“What?” MJ blinked. “No, forget Hobie. He’s boring without his costume. I care about-”

“Without his what?”

“I care about you.” Okay, MJ seriously did need to warn Gwen before touching both her shoulders like this. “I’m not staying here if you’re not staying. We could just go back to your place. To- To hang out.”

Gwen took a breath. “I don’t want to ruin your night, though.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t wanna ruin yours.” MJ’s head was a lot droopier, all of a sudden. “I’m sorry, girlfriend. I just wanted to help you get over your breakup with Peter and stuff.”

Gwen couldn’t help but wince. That was the first time MJ had dropped the P-word in weeks. Huh. Weird…

“And I only pressured you into one of my slutty outfits to, y’know, build up your confidence.” MJ’s head gave another lurch. “And because you’re super cute when you’re embarrassed.”

“Hey-!” Gwen tried to squirm away, but those hands stayed tight on her shoulders. With the light shining on it, Gwen’s face must’ve looked bright purple.

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“I know, I know, I’m sorry.” MJ carried on rambling, oblivious to her struggle. “I’ve been a real shitty friend lately. I mean, if you knew how much I’ve been hanging out with your ex, you’d hate my guts.”

The squirming came to an abrupt halt. “Excuse me?”

“But it’s not fair, though, because he’s my friend, too, and I’m a full-blooded bisexual anyways, so, like, should I quit hanging out with both of you?” Mary Jane’s words were gaining in speed and losing in articulation. “I could be crushing on you for all Pete knows.”

“Oh,” said Gwen, more to herself than to MJ.

“Ah, look at me.” MJ released Gwen’s shoulder so she could slap her own forehead. “Why do I gotta make everything so dramatic? Must be my inner theater geek. C’mon, Gwen, you know you’re just my gal pal.”
“Are- Are you feeling okay?”


Gwen was forced to catch her before MJ face-planted on the carpet. “MJ, what’s…” Gwen’s eyes darted to the cup in her own hand, then to the one MJ had let drop on the towels. “…in this punch?”

“Huh?” MJ murmured into Gwen’s shoulder. “Oh, c’mon, this party’s for high schoolers. The punch isn’t-” She was forced press a hand to her mouth to stifle a sudden burp. “Okay, I might be a little buzzed, now that I think about it.”

“Oh my god.” Gwen’s grip tightened. “Did someone roofie you?”

MJ laughed. “What? That’s just in movies. No one actually does that.”

“Yes they do! My dad sees it all the-”

“Gwen, Gwen, listen. This is important.” Now MJ’s face was a mere three inches from Gwen’s. “You’re my best friend in the whole world. You know that, right? Nothing matters more to me than making you happy. Nothing. You deserve to be happy after…” MJ’s lids were shutting. “…all the Spider-Man stuff Peter’s put you through.”

The next instant, Mary Jane found herself shoved onto the towels.

“What did you say?” If Gwen’s pulse hadn’t been pounding before, it was now.

“Whuh?” MJ flopped backwards, rubbing her head. “What did I say?”

“He-?” Gwen’s mind was racing. “He told y-?”

Rap, rap, rap, rap, rap. She nearly sprang onto the ceiling. Someone was knocking even louder than the m- Actually, come to think of it, what’d happened to the music?

Gwen risked a peek out of the laundry room. Turned out the knocking hadn’t been on this door, but the front one. The sound had sent the party into a panic of fleeing girls and cowering boys spreading whispers of a spiked punch bowl.

But Gwen managed to stay calm. At least until she saw who was on the other side of that front door. “Alright, break it up. We’ve got noise complaints, reports of underage drinking…” The sight of that tidy, platinum hair over that wizened face nearly made her faint.

“Seriously?” She spun back to the towel pile, eyes bulging. “If my dad sees me like this, he’ll make me join a convent!” Gwen gestured to her top, which was honestly more of a large pink ribbon wrapped around the right places.

“Your dad?” If anything could make MJ sober up, it was that. She sprang upright on the towels, matching Gwen’s face with her own. “What’s a police captain doing here?”

“He must’ve been in the neighborhood when the cops got called.” Gwen retreated deeper into the laundry room, shaking her head and hugging herself. “Oh god, my life’s flashing before my eyes.”

“Um, uh-” Mary Jane’s own eyes darted around the area. “Maybe you can trade clothes with one of
them?” She pointed at a thumb at the two boys, who continued to make out, pleasantly oblivious to their surroundings.

Gwen stared a moment at their matching flannel jackets. “Yeah, because Dad would take that way better-”

“The fire escape.” Mary Jane pulled herself to her feet, though she was a bit on the wobbly side. “It’s a straight shot from here to there. I’ll distract him, you run.”

“Really?” Before she realized what she was doing, Gwen’s arms were around MJ’s neck. “Thank you so much.”

Wow, who’d have thought Mary Jane’s natural propensity for distracting would come in handy?

“Cap’n Stacy?” Mary Jane managed to approach him without swaying too much. “Oh my god, you like parties, too? No way!”

Captain Stacy gave her a wry smile as he marched across the apartment’s living room, which was considerably emptier than it’d been a minute ago. What a mystery. “Watson.” He nodded to her.

“Sherlock.” MJ nodded back.

Behind her, MJ caught a sound that she could only hope was a poor girl running to the fire escape. MJ didn’t envy Gwen. Especially not in those heels. Youch.

“How many more times are we going to meet like this?” Luckily, Captain Stacy’s eyes remained planted on MJ amid the chaos.

“Aww, that’s sweet of you to worry, sir, but I’ve cleaned up my act.” Mary Jane took a step back, though she stumbled a bit. “I’m gay as an-” She hiccuped. “-straight as an arrow now.” It was shortly followed by another hiccup.

That wry smile had grown a bit more strained. “Then you’d have no problem taking a breathalyzer test?” Captain Stacy reached into his uniform’s pocket to retrieve a gray, squarish device with a little plastic tube coming out the top.

Mary Jane couldn’t look away from it. “Yeah,” she said. “Of course. Duh. I mean, I don’t know why you’d waste your time on me when there are so many other kids here who’re clearly plastered, but- but okay.”

“Well, I might have something of a bias-” Captain Stacy shoved the device into her perfectly-manicured hands. “-seeing as you’re my daughter’s personal hero.”

“Me?” MJ couldn’t help but smirk. “You, uh, sure you don’t have me mixed up with someone else?”

At this, Captain Stacy sighed. He had to tilt his head to meet her gaze. Dude was tall. “Gwen thinks the world of you, Watson. You’re her friend. She doesn’t have many of those.” He nodded to the breathalyzer. “Now let’s make sure that admiration isn’t misplaced, shall we?”

Mary Jane swallowed. “Right. Here goes.” Slowly, she brought the tube to her lips…

*Thump.* But a sudden noise turned all heads towards the balcony. MJ was so startled, she let the breathalyzer tumble to the carpet. There perched on the balcony railing, was Hobie, dressed in his
super suit, cape and all. Had he dropped down from the roof? When had he-?

Mary Jane glanced around the room, but the gang of Midtown High kids (plus Janice) was nowhere in sight.

“The Prowler?” Instantly, Captain Stacy’s gun was drawn, but he didn’t have time to point it before Hobie filled the balcony with smoke. “Everyone run!” Stacy glanced back at MJ. “I don’t know what he’s capable of.”

The funny thing was, MJ knew Hobie was harmless, but she couldn’t exactly communicate that to the rest of the crowd. They seemed to have presumed the worst, given how fast they were fleeing. Problem was, they couldn’t see an inch in front on them with all this smoke filling the place. Now kids were tripping over each other like some screwed up version of Twister, and somehow in the confusion, the music got turned back on:

“Walkin’ through the city,
Lookin’ oh so pretty.
I’ve just got to find my way…”

MJ couldn’t see a thing. She’d been going for the front door, but instead she ended up on the balcony. She’d hardly had time to realize that, though, before someone’s arms were around her from behind. Her screams didn’t even stand out from the rest of the crowd’s.

“I’m here,” said a familiar voice in her ear.

MJ held on tight, and then there was the *pwing* of a wrist-mounted grappling hook, followed by a rush of air.

“Shee the ladies flashin’,
All their legs and lashes.
I’ve just got to find my way…”

After a gut-wrenching minute, Mary Jane was deposited on a random rooftop. She took a second to catch her breath, then turned to find Hobie perched on a smokestack. That mask of his looked like it was scowling right at her.

“What are you doing?” MJ asked, panting.

“Saving your skin!” Hobie snapped. “You’re lucky I had the suit in my backpack. I mean, I was, uh, maybe thinking about showing off for the crowd, but I guess that plan’s a bust now.” He took a moment to pant, himself. “Why didn’t you just tell the cop the truth? You didn’t know that punch was spiked. Do you have any idea how bad you made yourself look?”

“I don’t know, I choked!” MJ stumbled back, hands on her scalp. “I get stupid when I’m tipsy. But-” She took a steadying breath. “-thanks for bailing me out. You coulda gotten shot. That was really brave of you.”

“I just wanted to make sure you were okay.” Hobie jumped down so he could walk towards her.

“Well… I am now. Thanks.”

The couple’s loving stare was cut off by the sound of popping from behind them. Turned out this
building was right across from the East River. MJ and Hobie stood there a minute, watching the explosions paint the black sky with color.

“Guess you left an impression on that security guard. You must be pretty infamous if the police captain knows who you are.” MJ found herself smiling. “You’ve even got a proper codename now – the Prowler.”

Hobie scoffed. “That makes me sound like some kinda pervert.”

“Your costume must be givin’ ’em the wrong idea…”

There was a laugh, but it was kinda jumpy. And short-lived. “Hey. I like you.”

MJ’s arms wrapped around his neck. “I like you, too.”

“No, I mean, I really like you.” Gently, Hobie removed his clawed gloved so he could put a hand on the back of her head. “And not just because you think my costume’s cool. I was one of the last people in line to dance with you at the Fall Formal. I thought you were gonna bail, but… you didn’t.”

“Oh. Right. The formal. Pretty good meet-cute story.” MJ had danced with Hobie? Had that been when she was bored and looking to pass the time until Peter got back? Or had that been when she’d danced with Seymour? God, it all blended together.

“Pretty good?” Hobie cocked his head. “No, MJ, you don’t get it. This is a big deal to me. I’ve never had a girlfriend before.” His face was unreadable behind that mask. “You are my girlfriend… right?”

There was a moment’s silence.

“Why do we have to put labels on everything?” Mary Jane’s stepped back, though her go-go boot nearly slipped on a rain puddle. “Can’t we just have fun without sweating the…” Um, had the Prowler mask’s design always been this unnerving? “I- I mean, yeah, we can be exclusive if- if it’s really important to you. You’re cute, and you’re into theater, and you’re sweet and sensitive and smart and all that jazz, so there’s no reason I shouldn’t be your girlfriend.”

“You sound thrilled.” Hobie’s face may have been unreadable, but his voice was definitely quivering.

“Hey, c’mon, I don’t wanna argue. Arguments are a drag.” MJ touched a palm to his chest. “You know what’s not a drag? Making out. Would you feel better if we made-?”

The Prowler drew away from her, his cape swishing over his shoulders.

“Oh, don’t be like that!” A groan escaped MJ’s mouth. “We’ve already made out, like, a gazillion times. Why didn’t you bring this up before?”

The Prowler said nothing.

“Hobie, I’m sorry! I’m happy to be your girlfriend. I am.”

He aimed his grappling hook at a far-off building.

“Hey, don’t leave me up here! I’m sorry! I mean it. I wasn’t trying to hurt your feelings. I told you, I’m stupid when I’m-”
It was at this point that Hobie swung away. Or at least, he would’ve. Except that, in MJ’s hurry to stop him, her boot happened to slip on a puddle and snag on his cape.

“Wha-?” So instead, MJ got to watch the violet sheet rip off his shoulders and send Hobie tumbling over the edge. “Holy-!”

Instead of the familiar *wing* of a grappling hook securely latching into its target, there was a more disheartening *poonk* of a grappling hook kind of hitting its target, but not completely. The sharp part had embedded itself halfway through one of the smokestacks, but the weight was already making it creak.

But MJ hardly noticed that. Her attention was more occupied by the sight of the Prowler swinging around the end of the cable like a pinball until he came smashing shoulder-first into the side of the building. Ooh, his shoulder had gone right into a windowsill. Watching it had made MJ wince.

**“Hobie?”** And now the cable wasn’t reeling itself in. The sudden force must’ve broke the mechanism. Mary Jane ran to where the hook had landed and tried her best to pull Hobie up, but she couldn’t get the thing to budge. She wasn’t… strong enough. **“Hobie, listen, I’m gonna get you help.”**

MJ leaned over the building’s edge. There was Hobie, dangling a good several feet above the darkened street below, hanging onto the cable for dear life. He was doing it one-handed, though – Looked like his other arm had broken from the impact.

Hobie’s masked head tilted skyward. **“Nine-one-one! Call nine-one-one!”**

**“I can’t go back to juvie!”** The moment the words were out her mouth, Mary Jane dug her nails into her forehead. Why had she said that out loud? **Idiot.**

Her eyes fell on the clawed gloves lying beside her on the roof. Hobie had gotten so worked up, he’d forgotten them. Not like it mattered, though. He couldn’t climb with a busted arm, and MJ’s hands were so dainty, the gloves would slide right off her. Mary Jane was no good at… crawling walls.

MJ did her best to navigate her phone screen despite her pounding forehead. **“Come on, come on, pick up…”**

It only rang a minute before a groggy voice said, **“MJ? What’s wrong?”**

**“I need you!”** MJ all but screamed into the receiver. **“I need you. I need you. Listen to me-”**

**“Whoa, slow down! You, uh, sound a bit slurred, there-”**

**“I’m texting you the address right now.”** MJ switched to speaker mode so she could type while she talked. **“You need to get here. You need to get here now. I need you.”**

There was a prolonged silence from Peter’s end. **“Are you drunk dialing m-?”**

**“Hobie Brown is about to fall off a mother%#$*ing building!”**

**“Who’s ’bout to what now?”** The expected amount of stammering ensued. **“Okay, but- but what do you want me to do about it-?”**

**“Don’t you give me any of your $**%king *#$% $*$#$ #%#*, you #$%^ $*%#er! Now you put on your #$$ #$$ #$$ Spider-$$*# costume and swing the %$%* *### $*$# over here NOW!”**
There was another prolonged silence, followed by a click.

“*We’re sorry,*” said a pleasant female voice, “*but your call has been disconnected. To leave a message, please speak after the tone.*” Beeeeeeeeeep.

Chapter End Notes

Mary Jane Watson knows Peter’s GREATEST SECRET?!
Peter hadn’t had it in him to go see the fireworks. Fireworks, Peter had explained to a concerned Aunt May, reminded him of pop music, and which reminded him of Gwen’s undying hatred for pop music, which reminded him of the time he’d chased Gwen around her bedroom blasting pop music from his phone until she’d whacked him with a pillow enough to make him relent, which reminded him of the part right after that where they’d started laughing and making out, which reminded him that Gwen Stacy was beautiful and perfect in every conceivable way.

So if you were wondering why Peter had spent the past few hours becoming one with his bed covers, there was your answer. He was one lab accident away from having them fuse to his spine and turn him into a blanket-themed supervillain.

Ugh. Peter wished Jameson actually had swamped him with work. At least then he wouldn’t feel like such a waste of space. Why had he lied to MJ about that? He could’ve been on a date (but not a date) with her right this second! What was wrong with Peter? He hadn’t even needed to work up the guts to ask her in the end – She’d asked him. By all right, Peter should’ve snapped that up. But when the moment of truth had come… he hadn’t been able to get that muffled screaming out of his head. In fact, the memory of it was still bouncing around in Peter’s skull, right alongside all the memories of… of…

Oh god, he’d left the broom in here and the golden bristles reminded him of her haaaaaaaaaaaiiiiiiiir.

Peter was midway through the process of rolling over on the mattress and moaning when The Itsy-Bitsy Spider sounded from his bed stand. What if that was her? What if she was calling to tell Peter their argument was stupid and Peter definitely didn’t have a death wish and her dad’s treatment of him had been a hundred percent uncalled for and she still loved h-?

Oh, it was just Mary Jane. Peter gave the caller ID a morose stare before answering. “MJ?” He stifled a yawn. “What’s wrong?”

“I need you!”

She needed him.

Spider-Man raced across the Queensboro Bridge, then banked a hard right so he could shoot down the edge of the East River, his backpack fluttering on his spandex-covered shoulders. Web-swinging on the outer row left him bouncing from building to building in a string of horizontal arcs. That always made him dizzy, but Spidey forced himself to concentrate. He had to be close.

Sure enough, it wasn’t long before Spider-Man found his target. The rooftop with the familiar green-and-purple dude dangling off it was kinda hard to miss, especially with that even-more-familiar redhead at the top frantically trying to reel him in. Spidey sailed towards the guy, though he couldn’t help but roll his eyes behind his mask. This was about the superhero equivalent of watching someone struggle to tie their shoes.

“Wow, you guys.” With a thwip and a whoosh, Spider-Man snatched the dude from midair, vaulted over the side of the building on a web-line, and landed on his feet right across from MJ. “This is
the second kinkiest date I’ve ever-”

“Oh thank god.” He couldn’t even finish the quip before MJ’s arms were around him. “I didn’t know you were- When- When you hung up on me, I thought-”

Spider-Man gently pushed her off, then deposited Hobie butt-first on the skylight. At least, he assumed it was Hobie in that getup. Peter was pretty sure he’d caught Hobie Brown’s name over the phone right before the flood of expletives. Guess that was one mystery solved.

Hobie sat in place a moment, clutching his arm and gaping up at the Web-Head. He seemed dazed, though maybe that was just the unblinking mask he was wearing.

“Hobie.” Mary Jane’s arms traveled from one boy to the other. “God, I’m so, so sorry. Are you hurt?”

Hobie stayed silent.

The hug tightened. “Say something!”

“You have Spider-Man on speed dial,” said Hobie.

“You’re welcome,” said Spider-Man.

“Why do you have Spider-Man on speed dial?”

“Yeah.” Spidey gave MJ a pointed look. “Why do you have Spider-Man on speed dial?”

“Um…” She stepped back, hiding herself in the shadow of a neighboring building. “W-Well…” For a moment, her emerald eyes locked with Spidey’s white ones. “I can’t really say without giving away his secret ID, so…”

Hobie scoffed. “Of course. I’d wondered why he showed up at your house. So does Spidey take you swinging around the city on the days I can’t make it?” He trudged over to where his grappling hook had landed, yanked it free, then stood in place as the cord shot back into his wrist like a measuring tape.

“It’s not like that!” MJ started towards him. “He didn’t know I knew.”

Just then, a particularly big firework went off, leaving Mary Jane’s entire body illuminated red. And leaving Peter’s breath in his throat.

“W-Well, you’re on the right rack- track,” Spider-Man said, “but the guy you called isn’t actually me. He’s just an, um, acquaintance.”

The only response MJ gave him was a roll of her eyes. Whoa, even when she was being disdainful, she was gorgeous. Why was she dressed like- like if Black Cat suddenly lost all inhibition? Black boots that went almost to her knees, a black top with a rather large hole in it, black shorts a few inches shy of being a thong…

“Are you Mark Allan?” Hobie’s voice shook Spidey back to reality.

“Yeah, you caught me, I totally moonlight as Molten Man-” This earned a glare from MJ. “Sorry. Seriously, though, I’m the one who put Mark in jail. What, you think he strung himself up over a fire hydrant?”

Hobie’s reply was grumbled under his breath. He knelt to retrieve a pair of clawed gloves from the
ground, then turned back to MJ. “What’d you get sent to juvie for?”

Even in the darkness, Spider-Man could tell Mary Jane had flinched.

“What?” So had he. “Juvie?”

“It wasn’t that big a deal.” MJ’s answer was addressed to her boots. “I just spent a month in Coral Moon for stealing my dad’s booze a buncha times. And for, like, general incorrigibility.”

“When was this?” asked Spider-Man.

“I don’t know. Two schools ago, I think.”

The white slits of Hobie’s mask went narrow. “No wonder you and Mark hit it off.”

*That* lit MJ’s fire. “You mean because he got what I was going through? *Yes*, actually, that *is* why.”

“I really am your rebound, aren’t I? Was there ever *anything* about me that was even the least bit special to you?”

“I fight horrible monstrosities of science that even the cops’ elite SWAT teams can’t handle,” said Spider-Man. “Just… Just throwing that out there.”

“I like you, Hobie! I do. It’s over between me and Mark, so you really don’t have to worry about-”

“That’s not the-!” Hobie was cut off by a pair of thwips. Now his and MJ’s mouths were covered in gobs of webbing.

“I’m gonna count to three,” said Spider-Man.

“Dude,” said Hobie, “I’m wearing a mask. This isn’t stopping me from-”

“*I’m gonna count to three*, and then I’m gonna take off your web-gags, and you guys are gonna quit arguing and tell me what in the name of Mysterio’s fish bowl is going on here.”

Three counts and one explanation later, Spider-Man was gawking at the other two, head in his hands.

“So you weren’t trying to fight or- or even commit crime,” he said, dumbfounded. “You were just screwing around.”

“It was my idea.” Mary Jane rubbed her mouth, which was still a bit red from the gag. “Hobie was making the suit as, like, an art project at first.”

“Well, yeah, if you wanna larp as a superhero, that’s cool, but it’s when you start adding the smoke-shooter and the blades and the working grappling hook – the *stolen* working grappling hook – and jumping off rooftops that I gotta question-”

“Come on, man,” said Hobie, whose web-gag Spidey hadn’t bothered to remove. “Have you never web-swung around the city just for fun before?”

“Well, yeah, but I’ve got super spider strength. A fall from this height wouldn’t actually kill me.” As Spider-Man had lovingly demonstrated after his first encounter with Hobgoblin. “Look, I get that being a superhero is cool, but the last thing I want is to watch some stupid kid put himself in-” He nearly bit his tongue. “-danger.” Oh. Maybe he owed Gwen’s dad an apology.
Spider-Man rubbed his temple. “Okay, here’s what we’re gonna do… I take it you learned your lesson, seeing as you almost went splat a minute ago?”

“Yeah.” Hobie bowed his masked head. “Guess so.”

“And your grappling hook’s busted now, anyways,” said Spidey, “so I’m gonna set you back on solid ground, you’re gonna return everything you stole from your school’s drama club, and then I don’t want to catch you rooftop-hopping again, capiche?”

“Capiche.” Hobie stepped forward, letting Spider-Man put an arm around him.

MJ did, too, but she was stopped. “Hup up up, you’re not going anywhere yet, young lady. You and the Hobester can deal with your love drama on your own time. Right now, you and me gotta have some words. Be back in a sec.”

MJ didn’t protest, and so Spidey spun a web to the conveniently-placed crane above them and descended to the sidewalk below.

Once they’d touched down, he released Hobie, though the poor dumb kid was still nursing his arm.

“Thanks for saving my life,” Hobie murmured. “Sorry I didn’t say that right away. And thanks for not webbing me up and handing me to the cops.”

At this, Spider-Man sighed. “You’re not a bad kid, Hobe. You’re quiet and dorky and you like to work alone on little pet projects. I totally get it.” More than Hobie would ever realize. “It’s just, the more features you added to that cool costume of yours, the more powerful it became, and, if I can polish off an old chestnut, the more responsible you needed to be with it.”

Hobie nodded for a moment, then tugged off his mask. His pink, damp eyes were visible only a moment before they were hidden behind his hands. “God, I’m an idiot.”

“Dude, you built a working super-suit.” Spidey brought a hand to his shoulder. “You’ve got a real gift, and I know you’ll put it to good use someday. And for what it’s worth, I hope you and your girl can work things out.”

With that, Spider-Man spun yet another web, and Hobie watched him sail off beneath the fireworks.

“Oh, and for the record,” Spidey called back down, “the rooftop-hopping life’s not all it’s cracked up to be, anyways. Count yourself lucky you got off the ride before it hit the sudden drop.”

Spider-Man found Mary Jane huddled by the rooftop’s smokestack, hugging her knees.

“Luuuuucy…” He touched down beside her, turning her head his way. “…you’ve got some s’plainin’ to do.”

“I’m sorry about all this.”

“You’re lucky the Parker kid had my number.” Spidey was trying to do something of a Brooklyn accent, but he wasn’t sure how gracefully he pulled it off. “I ring his cell when I want my pic in the paper, okay? We split the cut. Don’t tell his boss.”

At this, MJ rose to her feet. “You don’t have to bother with that, Peter. I know it’s you in there.”

Great. It figured an airhead like Mary Jane would be a believer in the dance remix video. She
probably frequented Eddie’s dumb forum, too-

“I was at my aunt’s house the night you lost your uncle.”

Peter nearly yelped like a pup whose tail had been stepped on. “You were?”

“My folks were having another one of their episodes, so I had to run over there. For my own
sanity.” MJ’s eyes clamped shut. “There were so many cop cars by your place… I wanted to go tell
you I was sorry, but we’d never met before. It woulda been awkward, y’know?” No response. “I
thought you were just some sheltered weirdo. Then I saw you climb out the window in your
costume.”

“And you realized I wasn’t a weirdo at all?”

MJ managed a smile. “Sure.”

“And… you get that being Spider-Man isn’t a game to me?”

MJ’s eyes traveled to the dented smokestack where a grappling hook had once been embedded.
“Well, if I didn’t before, I sure as heck do now…”

“And you’ve known all this time?”

“Since Spider-Man day one, yeah.”

A minute passed. “So when you said I filled out my Halloween costume nicely…?”

The smile widened. “I was screwing with you. I do that.”

“But why didn’t you ever tell me all this before?”

MJ only reply was a shrug. “Maybe I would’ve eventually. But sure as heck not like
this.” Silence.

“His motivation for fighting crime? Looked like MJ had managed to reverse engineer a good chunk
of Spider-Man’s origin story, there. The only other person to do that was Gwen’s dad. Not bad for
an airhead.

“No, no, it’s cool.” On impulse, Spidey brought a hand to her shoulder. “I mean, I guess you know
not to go blabbing about this to everyone, or you’d have done it already.” Oh lord, she wasn’t
wearing sleeves. He was touching her skin. He was touching her skin.

The hand darted away with enough subtlety to catch MJ’s eye. She gave him a look.

“The- The truth is-” Behind his mask, Peter’s own eyes shut. Here went nothing. “-I’ve kinda been
keeping something from you, too. Besides the obvious, I mean. I…” He had to wrench each
syllable out his mouth. “…lied to you about being swamped with work the other day. I was just a
bit jumpy about spending too much alone time with you because… because…”

Mary Jane gave another smile. One considerably more bittersweet. “You don’t have to say it,
Tiger.” For a moment, though, the sweet outweighed the bitter. “I’ve been around enough guys to
know what goes through those heads of yours. I really don’t mind.” She let out a soft laugh. “I
mean, I wouldn’t be dressed like this if I did.” But then the bitter made a sudden comeback. “But I
wasn’t trying to toy with your feelings or anything.”
“It’s not your fault. I’ve got crazy teenage boy hormones, that’s all.”

“Well, to your credit, ninety-nine percent of straight guys would’ve made a move on me by now, so… thanks for being chill about it.” Finally, the sweetness and bitterness found a good balance. “Guess we both learned rebounds aren’t as fun as they seem.” MJ brought a hand to her eyes. “Look at me. I made such a big deal about not wanting to be Flash’s replacement girl, and then one breakup later, I turned around and got myself a replacement guy. I’m a real piece of work…”

“You’re human,” said Spider-Man. “The important thing is that you tell Hobie the truth. He deserves that much.”


Spider-Man bumped it with his own. “Friends.”

For a second, the two of them stood there, watching the fireworks over the river.

“Would your teenage boy hormones go too crazy if I hugged you right now?”

“Well, I’m not gonna stop you…”

“Smooth.” Her arms squeezed his shoulders. “Y’know, I’ve never thanked you for all the times you saved my life.”

“And you’ll never have to,” said Spidey in his goofiest, scratchiest voice.

MJ laughed. “Really, though, with all the lives you’ve saved, you’ve gotta be the greatest guy in history behind, like, Steve and Fred Rogers.”

“Oh, I-I’m no better than your average cop or firefighter.”

“Modest, too?”

After a moment’s hesitation, Spider-Man hugged back. He’d just remembered he was in full-body spandex, so he technically wasn’t touching her skin.

“Peter?” MJ’s voice was getting slurried again. “I’m glad you don’t hate me.”

He touched a hand to her hair. But, see, he had on a glove, so technically… “Why would I hate you?”

“I don’t know. Hobie’s got plenty of reasons…” MJ was quiet for a bit. “Sorry for swearing at you.”

“You don’t have to apologize for every little thing,” Spider-Man said softly. “You were stressed. I get it.”

“I hate when I swear. It makes me sound like my… my…” Mid-sentence, Mary Jane yanked herself free so she could sprint to the edge of the rooftop.

“MJ?” Spidey started after her. “What’s wrong-?”

For a crazed second, he thought she was gonna jump, but instead she fell to her knees. MJ’s head was the only thing that went past the edge. Well, her head and the torrent of sludge that erupted from it to plummet to the street below.
“Guh.” MJ drew back, wiping her lips on her arm.

“Well,” said Spider-Man, “that was the least sexy thing I’ve ever seen you do.”

“I’m sure it’s someone’s fetish…”

J. Jonah Jameson leaned back on the bench, gazing wide-eyed at the array of colors in the sky above.

“Oh, Jonah.” At his side, his wonderful wife placed her hand over his. “I’m almost glad the bus is late. The fireworks are so beautiful.”


How could putting on clothes make Peter feel so dirty? It must’ve been that look of utter fascination plastered on Mary Jane’s face the whole time. It definitely wasn’t helping his heart rate. And frankly, the revelation that MJ knew exactly what his teen boy brain was thinking and didn’t mind in the slightest… Well, that wasn’t helping, either.

Once Peter’s shoes were on his feet, his mask and gloves were in his pockets, and the rest of his costume was hidden beneath long sleeves and sweat pants, he and Mary Jane emerged from the alleyway to hurry down the sidewalk. Good thing they were in Manhattan, or it might’ve actually been dark out by now.

“…so what if you screwed him over?” MJ was saying. “Sounds like the wrestling guy had it coming.”

“I know,” said Peter, “except it turned out it was the same thief.”

“Seriously?” MJ was left gaping at him. “Jesus, Peter, that is, like, a one in a million… Someone up there hates you.”

“Boy, has that thought ever occurred to me…”

“Well… I guess I get why you do what you do, then.” As they walked, MJ touched a hand to his arm. “I always kinda knew you were dealing with a lot, but I’d never realized…”

“It’s okay.” Peter took a breath. “Except now Gwen’s got it in her head that I’m trying to, like, die heroically to absolve myself, and I can’t get it out of her head.”

“Because the Sinister Six almost killed you and she freaked out?”

“Yeah, exactly.” Color Peter impressed. MJ was a quick study. “And- And I don’t know what to do, so I guess I just don’t get to have a girlfriend now.” His eyes met the pavement. “Maybe that someone up there is trying to tell me I don’t deserve one.”

After that, the two of them simply trudged along, watching the lightshow overhead.

“I’ll talk to her,” said Mary Jane. “Try to change her mind.”

“Good luck.”

MJ sighed. “Hey, chin up, Tiger. Things aren’t as bad as- Oh, there she is!”
The next instant, she and Peter were hurrying across the parking lot of an apartment complex. In the grass to the side was a faded red Buick (on loan from Anna Watson), and beside that was… was…

“Gwen?” Peter was shocked his voice still worked. He wouldn’t have known it was her, but that face had occupied enough of his dreams for him to recognize it on sight. Her legs were- and- and her shoulders were- and lord help him, he could see her tummy. Like, all of it.

It took Peter longer than it should’ve to notice the look on Gwen’s face. “Mary Jane! Where have you been? What’s Peter doing here?” It was a perfect cocktail of terrified, relieved, and furious. “And Peter, did you-?” She got within heart attack-causing distance of him. “Did you TELL Mary Jane?”

“I found out on my own!” MJ pushed her way between them, waving her hands. “Pete had no idea till just now.”

“Wait, wait, wait, I’m confused.” Peter backed away, hand to his head. His eyes darted between the girls. “How did you know that I know that she knows that-?”

“I promise I’ll explain everything to both of you later-” MJ’s head swiveled towards the not-insignificant number of partygoers still lurking about. “-in private.” She knelt to fiddle with her boot.

It took Peter a second to realize what she was fishing out of there. “Oh, your keys. Guess that’s the, uh, least uncomfortable place to put ’em?”

MJ flashed him a smirk. “There’s no room anywhere else…”

But the moment MJ lurched towards her car, Gwen blocked her path. “Don’t even think about it. You had four cups of that punch.”

“Huh?” Peter gave a start. “Punch?”

“Later.” MJ’s keys were hurriedly returned to whence they came. “Sorry, Gwen, you’re right. I’ll have to, err, leave the car here and come back for it in the morning. Unless either of you know how to drive?” She gave the other two a glance.

Peter gestured to the web-shooters under his sleeves, while Gwen said, “My dad let me drive his squad car. In a cul-de-sac. Once.”

A moment passed.

“We’ll take the subway.”

“Yeah.”

“The subway sounds good.”

It was weird for Peter to think that he was beneath the East River fireworks show right now. But then, that paled in comparison to the Weirdness of sitting side-by-side with his gorgeous ex-girlfriend, and that paled in comparison to the weirdness of sitting side-by-side with his gorgeous ex-girlfriend with another gorgeous girl sprawled across their laps, sound asleep. Neither of them had the heart to move her, despite the looks they were getting from other passengers.
Peter watched MJ’s chest rise and fall. She could put the firework show to shame. Look at her, resting her torso on Peter’s knees and her head on Gwen’s, letting her hair fall where it pleased. There was something hypnotizing about it, and not because MJ was hot. In fact, maybe it was because she wasn’t hot right now – Peter had never seen Mary Jane look childlike before. If you ignored her outfit and focused on her body language, well, you wouldn’t think she was the least bit sultry. If anything, she brought to mind Liz’s cat whenever it’d shown its belly to him. It was almost weirder than watching MJ puke – which, come to think of it, was also analogous to Liz’s cat.

“I don’t blame you, you know,” said Gwen.

“Whuh?” Peter almost jolted hard enough to send MJ tumbling to the grimy floor.

Gwen head traveled downward. “She really is beautiful.”

“I told you, Gwen, we’re just friends.” The only reason Peter had been studying MJ was because studying the other girl made his heart thump way too loud. “And, I mean, even if looking beautiful was all it took for me to like someone… you’d have nothing to worry about.”

“God, Peter.” Gwen’s hands snapped to her face. “You know how I am with mushy stuff.”

Her defenses were crumbling. The words poured from Peter’s mouth all the faster: “You look great. More than great. You’re gorgeous.”

“I…” Gwen’s fingers had been pressed to her eyes, but they were starting to lower. “I know. I know that now.” She paused. “So are you.” Then groaned. “Why did I just say that?”

“Well, the sweatshirt and sweatpants look isn’t my best, but hey, who am I to argue with a beautiful woman?”

“Stop it.” He’d gotten her giggling. That was good. That was very good.

Time for the coup de grâce. “I miss you.”

At this, Gwen’s head shot away. But after a moment, Peter heard a faint voice say, “I miss you, too.”

Peter had to keep from grinning like a maniac. “I was a jerk to you, and you didn’t deserve that. You were right about- about your dad. He was just looking out for me.” Gently, he took her hands. “You forgive me?”

Hers clamped around his. “I forgive you for that, Peter. But…”

“But what?” Peter squeezed back. “Why are we doing this to ourselves?”

“Why?” Out of nowhere, Gwen’s voice gained speed. “How about because I wake up crying in the middle of the night about Eddie or- or Harry killing me? Killing you? Every night?”

She’d been trying to whisper, but she might as well have screamed it at him. “Gwen…”

“Sometime it happens when I’m awake, right in the middle of class. I’ll be sitting there, and I’ll start… falling.”

“Gwen… c’mere.” Peter leaned in for a hug, though it required him to shove MJ’s torso half-off him. “I have nightmares, too.” He took a breath. “Carnage made me scared of the color red. I’m not
kidding. I’m not being goofy. I- I see him every time I…” The sentence proved impossible to finish. “But is making ourselves lonely and miserable really helping anything? I love you, Gwen, and I know you feel the sa-”

“I fell in love with you when I thought you were normal!” That last word echoed enough to turn heads.

“Oh, that’s fair.” The hug came to an abrupt end. “I never asked to be bit by-”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” Gwen was left rubbing a thumb on the bridge of her nose. “I know that. I do love you. I love you, and you’re doing the best you can, and you’re saving lives. But… that’s just it, isn’t it?” A sniffle escaped her. “You’re going to let yourself die in that stupid costume, and there’s not a thing I can do to stop you.” Another sniffle. “I can’t do this. I can’t be your girlfriend and your therapist and your doctor and- and the one who helps you wash blood off your spandex. I’m sorry.”

“Gwen.” His heart hurt. Like, it literally ached every time it beat. “I swear to you, I don’t have a death wish.”

Gwen’s gaze returned to MJ’s head in her lap. “I wish I believed you.”

They spent the rest of the ride staring at her.

“…ary Jane? Mary Jane, wake up. We’re here.”

“Nngh... Mom?” It wasn’t until MJ rubbed the sleep from her eyes that she realized her mistake. “Oh! Girlfriend!” Instantly, Mary Jane was on her feet, cranking the foxiness faucet as far as it’d crank. “And Tiger. Thanks. You guys make for a pretty good bed. We gotta do this again sometime.” She hoped she sounded foxy enough. Her head was killing her, but she didn’t dare clutch it.

After that, they exited the train, made their way out the station, and headed for Gwen’s house. It was considerably darker down in Queens, though there were a handful of local fireworks to light the way. MJ ended up skipping ahead down the sidewalk while the lovebirds trailed behind.

Another word wasn’t spoken until they’d reached the Stacy household. Peter was politely asked to wait on the porch while Gwen escorted MJ in for a private chat. Mary Jane could never get over how clean this house was. Or how quiet. Like, for example, Gwen actually made her bed. What was even the point of that when you were gonna mess it up again come nightfall? The mind boggled.

But the girls scarcely made it past the welcome mat, let alone to the bedroom, before Gwen trapped Mary Jane in her arms. “You knew all this time?”

“Sorry I never told you,” said MJ. “I wasn’t sure if you knew or not. And, y’know, if I’d spilled the beans to you, I thought Tiger might freak out and hate me.” The next couple seconds were spent purely on hugging. Eventually, though, MJ blurted out, “This whole mess is my fault. I knew Pete was Spider-Man all along, and I pushed you towards him anyways. It never even occurred to me that being a superhero could ever be anything but fun.” She brought a palm to her temple. “I’m such an airhead.”

Gwen gave a wry smile. “Well, I must be one, too, then, because when I first found out, I thought it was the greatest thing to ever happen in my life. Guess the other shoe had to drop sometime.”
Suddenly, MJ’s hand was over Gwen’s. “Oh, you’re a total airhead. An airhead who’s top of her class and a savant on the sax and spends her free time at the local science lab-” She caught herself. “But, well, I’ve spoiled you enough with that outfit. Your ego’s gotta be almost as big as mine by now.”

The two shared a jittery laugh.

“You know,” said MJ, “from what he’s said to me, I really don’t think Peter’s got a death wish.”

In the blink of an eye, Gwen’s humor vanished. “That’s because you didn’t see him running off to fight the Six. It was like he couldn’t wait to get the snot beaten out of him.”

“But-”

“And frankly, Peter’s not the only one I’m worried about.” The hug’s strength grew tenfold. “You’re lucky I came to that party with you, MJ. If you’d been alone… I don’t wanna think about it. You can’t just go to these things and drink whatever some stranger hands you-”

“I know that. I know that.” With each word, MJ’s head traveled closer to Gwen’s shoulder. “I swear I will never do something that stupid again. You had enough of a drug scare with your old boyfriend…” But then MJ shut her eyes. The past few hours flashed behind them, and the next thing MJ knew, there was a good foot and a half of distance between her and Gwen. “Oh, and I’m sorry if, uh… Drunk-Me did anything to- to creep you out.”

“Creep me out?” Gwen gave her a look. “You didn’t really, no. You just worried me. But I mean…” She glanced away, shrinking. “…if anything, that punch made you friendlier.”

“W-Well, what can I say?” MJ forced a laugh. “Drunk-Me’s a big softie.”

“And I really don’t mind you hanging out with Peter. You were totally right. I mean, you are bi, so…”


“Hold up.” But Gwen grabbed her arm before MJ could get too near the door. “We’re not done here yet.” Gwen knelt to retrieve a pink cell from her own high-heeled boot. “First, we’re calling my dad so you can explain the truth to him.” But then she hiccuped and glanced down at the thick pink ribbon wrapped around her otherwise bear torso. “Oh, but maybe don’t be too truthful…”

It turned out the, err, substance in that punch wasn’t anything too crazy or dangerous. Nothing that wouldn’t wear off soon. Captain Stacy let MJ off with a warning – and a lecture, as if MJ didn’t get enough of those in criminology. But the important thing was MJ’s record had dodged yet another black mark.

“Well… guess I shouldn’t leave Tiger waiting much longer.” MJ handed the phone back to Gwen, head drooping. “Funny how that worked out. I took you to that party to help you forget about him, and instead I ended up smashing him in your face.”

“It’s okay,” Gwen said dully. “Not like I won’t be seeing plenty of him once school starts back…” That seemed to jog her memory. “Oh yeah, MJ, we need to talk about Flash and his friends. They-They said some things about you that-”

“Flash?” MJ laughed. “What, don’t tell me he’s still fawning over me? Isn’t he back with Sha Shan now?”
There was silence. "Never mind. Forget I said anything…"

"Can do." With that, Mary Jane strutted for the door. "Sweet dreams, girlfriend."

"Yeah." Gwen watched her go until she’d vanished behind the frame. "You, too."

Not that tapping his foot on Gwen’s doorstep hadn’t been fun, but Peter was more than ready to get home. It’d occurred to him that he could’ve gotten there ages ago with his web-shooters, but then what kinda gentleman would he be?

"…never told Liz, no. So yeah, the whole Spider-Man thing might’ve been a contributing factor to that breakup, too."

They’d been walking and talking for a while, but MJ came to a sudden halt on the sidewalk.

"What?" Peter turned back to her.

"I’m close enough," MJ said. "My place is right around this next corner."

"You sure? I really don’t mind walking you there-"

"Aww, look at you, getting all worried me." Without warning, MJ pinched his cheek. "I’m a big girl. I’ll be fine." And with that, she strutted off. "Sweet dreams, Tiger."

"Yeah." Peter watched her go until she’d vanished behind the corner. "You, too."

Mary Jane had never shut the front door so gently in her life. Slowly, carefully, she pushed the wood into place. Click.

"The hell’ve YOU been?" barked a voice from the TV room. "The hell’re you wearin’?"

"Oh, you’ll be happy to know I’ve found employment as a stripper."

"I can’t even tell if that’s sarcasm anymore."

"Well, if it wasn’t, at least SOMEONE would be bringing home a paycheck!" barked another, shriller voice from the opposite room.

"I told you, I’m gettin’ that advance soon as I finish the manuscript, which maybe I could do if I could ever THINK in this hou-"

The voices were momentarily masked by the thump of boots on stairs and the slam of a bedroom door. Mary Jane marched past old VHS tapes, a crusty-furred teddy bear, and countless articles of clothing far too expensive to be strewn about so sloppily, until she’d reached the foot of her bed. MJ wanted nothing more in this whole universe than to let herself plop down on it, but her phone was at ten percent power and her charger cord didn’t stretch that far.

MJ flopped over on the carpet, listening to the ringing by her ear. Eventually, it came to a stop, but no voice sounded.

"Hobie?" When it was clear a reply wasn’t forthcoming, MJ said, "I needed to talk to you again. I really screwed up tonight, and I don’t want to leave things so horrible between us. Can- Can we start over? Do you want to go on a date?" Still nothing. "Hobie? Is your arm okay?" Nada. "Come on, say something. Please. I know I don’t deserve you-"
“Do you have feelings for me?”

There was more silence. From both ends.

Mary Jane knew. Mary Jane knew Peter was Spider-Man. Mary Jane knew Peter was Spider-Man, and it was one in the morning by now, and Peter needed to go sleepy sleep.

Mary Jane knew. He couldn’t believe it. Mary Jane knew. Like, she knew knew. And she had all along. She’d seen him climb out his bedroom window in costume. The possibility of nosy neighbors had hardly ever occurred to Peter. How could he have been so stupid?

*From now on, I’m gonna be more careful,* Spider-Man thought as he climbed into his bedroom window in costume, tugging off his mask.

He was lying asleep above his covers within the minute.

The zoom lens gave her a real clear look at the kid’s face.

“Well, whattaya know?” The slender, dark, feline figure leaned back against the tile roof of the neighboring house. “That Venom guy was right.” See, the great thing about fireworks was that they made it hilariously easy to sneak around.

Alright, her work here was done. Black Cat returned her camera to her pouch and replaced it with her grappling hook, not that she’d have much use for it until she reached the bridge. But either way, she wasn’t eager to stick around.

“Poor Spider.” She shook her head. She hated dragging kids into her crazy life, but, well, he hadn’t given her much choice.

In the kid’s defense, though, this was far from the worst blackmail pic Black Cat had ever taken.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT ISSUE: Kraven the Hunter!
Planned Obsolescence

Supervillains were a varied bunch. When it came to powers and gimmicks, you'd be hard pressed to find two with the same. Some supervillain MOs were, however, trendier than others. Right now, for instance, turning yourself into a genetically-altered half-animal monstrosity was the latest fad. There was an entire, newly-built wing of the Vault specially dedicated to housing these abominations against nature. The place looked more like an animal sanctuary than a maximum security prison. It had puma-men, snake-men, insect-men... They all seemed quite ferocious at first blush, but at the moment, most of the animal-people were simply curled up in their cells with bored looks on their faces. The Zoo, as the guards called it, was actually one of the more peaceful regions of the Vault.

Most of the time.

"Unhand me!" A writhing mass of orange fur lashed out at its captors, missing the face of one of the luckier guards by millimeters. The creature hissed as it struggled against its inhibitor collar. The thing looked like the result of someone taking a big, buff Russian guy and throwing him in a blender with a bunch of jungle cats – which was actually not far from the truth.

Kraven the Hunter bared his fangs at the guards. He'd been one of the few members of Spider-Man's rouges gallery to have completely avoided jail time up until now, making this ordeal doubly unpleasant for him. Right before lunch, a small army had opened up Kraven's cell and ushered him out into the middle of the gray, barren hallway.

Kraven fought valiantly, but after several more prods from the guards' shock sticks, he was forced to allow a man in a white coat to inject a serum of yellow fluid into his arm.

The instant the needle left his skin, an uneasy sensation rocked Kraven's entire body. He tried to roar in displeasure, but all that came out was a distressingly human cry of agony. When the tremors finally stopped and the room finished spinning, Kraven picked himself up off the floor, then froze. His eyes had caught sight of his small, pink, totally furless hands.

“I’m... I'm human again?” he stammered, hoarse. Slowly, he turned to the guards, eyes wide and wrathful. “What have you done to me?”

“Well, huh.” The doctor sounded just as surprised as Kraven. “Whattaya know? That gene cleanser Oscorp sold us actually worked for once.”

On pure impulse, Kraven tried to bare his fangs, but the only things he ended up baring were his molars. “Do you have any idea how much money you just cost me?”

The doctor smirked at him. “Next time you need a mad scientist to experiment on you, try investing in Vincent Stegron. We’ve been pumping gene cleansers into Stegron’s little vermin here for weeks, and he's feral as ever.”

He pointed behind them, and so Kraven turned his head to see another supervillain being dragged out of his cell – a ratlike creature with beady red eyes and messy brown fur. The beast screeched as it swatted a shock stick away.

Kraven snorted. “Inject me with whatever serums you like,” he said, his Russian accent growing even thicker. “You will not stop the hunt.”

“Uh huh. Sure.” The doctor hardly spared a glance up from his clipboard. “Alright, boys, take him
to observation.”

This time, they apparently thought it safe to ferry Kraven into the chamber with half the number of guards. He obediently marched out of the Zoo, but not before giving one last, lingering look back at the rat creature.

The beast was still struggling with all its might, and the shock sticks were having no effect. They were clearly hurting the creature, but... it didn't seem to care. There was simply too much animal and too little man remaining.

Reaching the Williamsburg Bridge had required a bit of a detour, but it was worth it for this view of the river. It was nice to ride an aboveground train every once in a while. It helped motivate Gwen to get out of the house, for one thing. She hadn’t the faintest clue what she’d do with herself once she reached Manhattan, but anything was better than wasting away in her room on her laptop for days on end. Yeah, Gwen’s life hadn’t been particularly eventful since last week’s little Fourth of July party.

Actually, though, there was another motive for leaving her house – It ensured Gwen was a safe distance from any eavesdropping fathers. She scooted closer to the glass beside her seat, took one last, calming look at the sunlit river, and then turned her attention to the bulky, salmon-colored purse in her lap, out of which she fished a matching, salmon-colored phone.

Deep breaths. She was almost seventeen. She wasn’t a child anymore. She could do this. It would be simple. It would be healthy for her, in fact. This was a good idea. A perfect idea. No harm in trying.

A trembling thumb tapped the screen, and then a trembling hand raised the cell to Gwen’s ear.

“Oh my god, Seymour, when the girl hangs up on you, that’s usually a sign that-”

“Um, MJ?”

“Oh, girlfriend! Whoops.” An apologetic laugh emanated from the phone’s speaker. “Sorry ’bout that. There was this guy. You know how it is.”

“Y-Yeah. Guys.” Gwen hadn’t gotten a call from a guy in weeks, and that last one had just tried to sell her steak knives.

“I’m glad you rang, actually. I could use a break from guys. Like, a permanent one.”

“Funny you should say that…” Gwen cleared her throat. She hoped her voice hadn’t gone too high there. “See, I was wondering if tomorrow you, uh, wanted to, um, go... out... with me?”

“Yeah, of course. You know I’m always down to hang with my gal pal.”

“I know, I know, but I didn’t say hang out. I said…” Let’s see if Gwen could get these next two words out before her heart rebelled against the rest of her chest. “...go out. Go out. With…”

“…you?”

The silence lasted eons. Gwen kept looking out the window, but no amount of calming views could help her now. She was beyond saving.

“I’m sorry, Mary Jane, I just made things super weird between us, didn’t I? Why do I always have
to go out with my best friends? Heck, even Eddie ended up being my date to the formal if you wanna count that. But meeting new people freaks me out, so, like, what am I supposed to do, right? Oh, and you’re a girl, so that’s different, but- but you look great. I’m not sure if I’ve ever told you that, but-”

“Gwen-”

“But I know it hasn’t even been that long since all that Prowler stuff with Hobie blew up in your face, so you probably don’t even want to- Ohhh, I shouldn’t have brought that up. I’m so sorry.”

“Gwen-”

“I’m sorry, I’m being a weirdo today.” Gwen had thought doing this over the phone would be easier, but it turned out not seeing MJ’s face made it a zillion times harder. “But it feels like we’ve gotten really close lately, and I could swear I was getting, y’know, vibes from you at the party in- in- in the laundry room. Remember that? You might not because of the punch.”

“Gwen-”

“Whaaat am I saying? I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I can drop this. In fact, yeah, let’s drop this and things can go back to normal between us and we don’t have to talk about this ever ag-”

“Gwen.” Finally, MJ’s voice was sharp enough to cut her off. “Yes.”

“Yes?” Gwen jolted. The train had come to a sudden stop at the station. So had her pulse. “Yes, what?”

“Yes, I want to go out with you.”

Gwen blinked. “You want to go out with me?”

“Yes.”

“Yes? With me? Out?”

“Yes…”

“You want to go out with me?”

“I want to go out with you.”

“Yes?”

“Yes. Why are we talking like this?”

“Talking like what?”

“No one talks like this.”

“No one talks like this?”

“I’ll only go out with you if you stop talking like this.”

The phone nearly fell from Gwen’s hands. “Sorry!”

“Ah, relax, I’m teasing.”
Gwen had to remind herself to breathe before she turned blue. “So you’re really okay with…?”

“Yeah, you caught me off guard, that’s all.” Mary Jane paused. “I always thought you were straight.”

“So did I…”

“Must be something in the water.”

“I mean, I’m still into guys, though.” Gwen had even google-imaged Daniel Radcliffe again to make certain. “It’s just, well…”

“Hi, welcome to Camp Bi-Curious. I’m the guidance councilor.”

The two shared a laugh, though Gwen’s half of it was a bit flightier. “But I’m not just using you to experiment or anything. And I know I gave you grief about rebounds before, but I’ve been single a while now, so this isn’t really a-”

“We’re not getting married here,” said MJ. “This is me, remember? I hate attaching strings. Let’s just hit the town like we always do, and then we’ll see how we feel and figure it out from there. Baby steps.”

“Yeah. Yeah, baby steps.” Gwen could feel herself fusing to her seat like candy on a hot sidewalk. “Hey, MJ? Thanks for being so cool about this.”

“No prob.” Mary Jane sounded smooth as ever. How did she do that? “And thank you for saying all this to me. You’ve got more guts than you think. And I don’t want you to feel like there’s anything you could ever say to, y’know, ruin things between us.” She paused. “We’ve kept enough secrets from each other for one lifetime.”

“Yeah…” Gwen’s eyes returned to the window. The East River had been replaced by dull buildings, but it didn’t seem to matter as much anymore. “Wow. I was hyperventilating before I called you, but now this all seems so… normal.”

“Normal?” MJ’s smirk oozed out the receiver. “I must be losing my touch.”

“Well…” Gwen couldn’t help smiling, herself. “…being normal’s not the worst thing in the world.”

The conversation didn’t dip above the level of small talk after that, and so after a couple minutes, the two made their plans for tomorrow and said their goodbyes. Gwen looked up from her phone right in time to realize she’d missed her stop. Great. She’d been thinking of going to the library.

Would it be too desperate if Gwen called MJ back immediately? No, no, she’d be seeing plenty of Mary Jane tomorrow. She could find someone else to chat with. Not that she had a ton of options, of course. Gwen scrolled through her contacts list, frowning.

But then she hit a name that screeched her screen to a halt. An alliterative name. Gwen’s thumb hovered above it a moment… and then darted to the trash can icon at its side.

Now that he was small enough to fit inside one, Kraven had been given a standard, orange prison jumpsuit. The color scheme suited him. And, at the very least, now that Kraven was away from the constant growls and howls of the Zoo, he could meditate on the observation room’s mattress in silence.
At least, he could until the sound of jungle drums filled the air.

“Calypso,” Kraven said without opening his eyes.

He didn’t need to open them to know that the dark-skinned beauty was peering down at him from behind the hood of her white fur robes.

“Is this how you’ll be spending the rest of your days, Sergei?” Her voice, usually so warm, had gone frigid. “Locked in a cage like the mindless beasts you’re so proud of hunting?”

“Calypso, my love!” Kraven hurried to his feet. “I plan to escape, of course, but it will take time and patience. I must study my environment, wait for an opening—”

“The man I fell for was never this boring. I’d hoped this Spider-Man would be a mere warmup before you hunted the real superhumans, but instead, I seemed to have learned the upper limits of your prowess.”

“Upper limits?” spat Kraven. “Kraven the Hunter has no such things! I assure you, Calypso, the Spider-Man’s victories thus far have been mere flukes.”

“Mmm, perhaps. But I’m afraid it no longer concerns me.” Calypso turned away, growing less and less opaque as she walked.

“But Calypso—”

“Calypso, my sweet!” Now instead of jungle drums, a deep voice filled the air, as if coming from afar. “Return to bed so we can resume making passionate love till sunrise.”

“Coming, Ka-Zar…” Calypso vanished without another word.

Kraven stood alone. His nails dug into his palm. Upon further reflection, it turned out time and patience weren’t as necessary as he’d thought.

A pair of guards stared, slack-jawed, at the camera feed.

“Was... Was that a teleporting voodoo chick?” The thinner guard traded glances with his less thin coworker. “Should we... call Doctor Strange?”

“Screw it.” The other guard sprang out his seat. “I'm gonna go get some donuts. They don't pay me enough to deal with friggin' magic...”

She wished she could believe him? What did that mean? She was the one who was supposed to have been madly in love with him since seventh grade, and now suddenly his word wasn’t good enough for her? How was Peter expected to “prove” he didn’t have a death wish?

His worries must’ve shown through on his face because suddenly, Aunt May was frowning at him. “Peter, dear?”

“Nnggh?” With a great effort, Peter managed to lift his head from his napkin.

“I understand what happened with Gwen was upsetting, but all this moping isn’t healthy for you.” May’s eyes traveled across the kitchen table to the napkin’s cheek-shaped indent.

“I know, I know…” said Peter, stirring his scrambled eggs with his fork.
“Do you want to invite a friend over?” May leaned forward to tousle his hair. “I’d love to see Mary Jane again.”

“Ugh…” Despite his best efforts, Peter’s head returned to the napkin. Yeah, Aunt May would love to see Mary Jane… on Peter’s arm. “I don’t even want to look at another girl right now.”

May’s frown returned. “I’m sorry. I know moving on can be hard, but it’s something almost everyone faces at some point or another.” She brought a hand to her glasses. “Even I’ve been looking for a boyfriend lately…”

Peter’s head rocketed upright. “You have?” Then he hurriedly peeled the napkin free of his cheek.

The first thing the Ryker’s guards had tried to do was peel Chameleon’s white, leather, full-head mask free of his cheeks, but it hadn’t come off. It didn’t come off. And so Chameleon had ended up wearing it above his orange prison jumpsuit. It was a fact that amused him.

But not as much as the amusement of today’s lunchtime, during which the guards had opened up Sergei’s cell to usher him into the cafeteria. Now that Sergei’s mutation had been undone, the higher-ups had evidently felt it safe to escort him with half the number of guards.

Like Chameleon said. Amusing.

“Agh!” As soon as the last guard fell to the floor, Chameleon stood back a safe distance so Sergei could aim a stolen laser-rifle at his door.

Foom. After the smoke cleared, the lock was in considerably more pieces than it’d been a minute ago.

“Much obliged, brother.” Chameleon strolled out, hands folded behind his back. “I underestimated you. Looks like you are capable of escaping this place.”

“When properly motivated,” Sergei said stiffly. “This prison is nothing to me. I have survived nights in the deepest, uncharted regions of the Congo with only-”

“-with only your bare hands for aid. Yes, yes, you’re very talented. Now let’s not delay-”

“We’re not leaving yet, Dmitri.” Sergei turned for the hallway. “There is one more I wish to free.”

“Oh?” Chameleon knelt to retrieve a rifle of his own from a fallen guard. “And here I thought you’d learned your lesson about hunting in packs?”

“I don’t require a pack,” said Sergei. “Only a hunting dog.”

It was incredible how much could change in a year. Last summer, Peter had swung around Manhattan without a care in the world, earnestly believing being Spider-Man was the best thing ever. And now here he was a year later, hiding out on a flagpole beneath a little underhanging to escape the downpour, moping and angisting to himself about how his double life hurt all his loved ones.

Spider-Man shivered. He knew he should’ve worn his thermals today…

“I can’t get over it.” He had to huddle right up against the building’s back wall to keep from getting his phone soaking wet. “You know how bad I want her to be happy, but every time I picture Aunt...
May with a boyfriend, I break out in hives."

"Don’t you think it’s good for people to move on, though?" Odd, Mary Jane’s voice was lacking its usual foxiness. She was almost unrecognizable without it. "You’ve gotta learn to deal with it, and not just from your aunt. I mean, y-you never know, Pete, you could walk into class after summer break to find Gwen holding hands with someone else…"

"Don’t even start. My skin’s crawling enough as it is, thanks." Peter brought a hand to his forehead. "Well, at least she couldn’t possibly pick someone worse than Harry."

"Yeah.” MJ’s laugh seemed more tepid than usual, too. "Guess she’s got a thing for redheads."

"Sorry, didn’t catch that last part-"

"Nothing. It’s nothing."

"I coulda sworn I heard you say- say- ay- ah- achoo." A moment passed. "Okay, eww.” Instantly, Peter’s mask was off his face.

"What?"

"Snotty mask. Ugh, that’s the worst.” Peter promptly flipped it inside-out so he rinse it off in the rain. "Bet Iron Man’s got some fancy filtration system on his…"

"Tiger.” Ah, there was the old MJ. "Have you been in costume this whole time?"

"Whuh?” Peter blinked. "Oh yeah, I was trying to get some swinging in before the rain hit."

"You realize you’re taking me with you one of these days? Non-negotiable."

"MJ.” To his great shock, Peter found himself laughing. "Hey, though, you wanna know something? This is really cool. You knowing my secret, I mean. It feels like, I don’t know, like it broke the ice between us. I don’t think I’d have opened up to you before about my aunt wanting to date and stuff.”

"Ah, it’s nothing, Tiger. And look, you really don’t have to worry about your aunt. In fact, if you do get a stepdad… I’ll kinda envy you."

The remark generated some silence.

"MJ…” Peter took a breath, and then- "Whoop!” -he almost cracked his skull on the pavement below.

"Pete?"

"I’m okay, I’m okay. Flagpole’s just slick.” That hadn’t done Peter’s heart rate any favors – His grip on the pole had returned at the last possible second. Now he was hanging on upside down.

"Be more careful! You know what almost happened to Hobie!”

That remark generated even more silence.

"Truth is… my life kinda flashed before my eyes there.” Peter took another, deeper breath. "Mary Jane, what if, on some subconscious level…” His lids shut of their own accord. “…Gwen’s right about me? What if I’m only doing this whole Spider-Man thing because… because…”
Even more silence.

“Peter…”

But whatever Mary Jane said next was drowned out by an earsplitting shriek.

“What the-? Call you back!” Not a second later, Peter’s phone was back in his utility belt and his mask was back on his head. Spider-Man swung down to street-level to find a hysterical woman standing beside an empty stroller. It was hard to tell how much of her face was wet from the rain versus her tears. “What's wrong?”

“My baby. It took my baby.” The woman was, apparently, beside herself with shock. All she could manage was to point feebly to the opened manhole cover in the road. “It was a- a monster.”

“Call the cops!” Without a moment's hesitation, Spider-Man dived into the sewers.

Peter could debate the motivations behind his heroics until he was blue in the face, and it wouldn't change the fact that there were babies to be rescued.

The woman lingered at the edge of the manhole. But as soon as the sound of Spider-Man’s splashes became inaudible… the woman’s face was yanked off to reveal the stark, white, featureless one beneath.

Chameleon pressed a finger to the side of his white mask, turning on its built-in radio. “He took the bait.”

Oh, man, this wasn't good. Spider-Man could make out a shadowy, humanoid shape sprinting away from him as he bolted through the sewers (which, incidentally, meant that the residual mucus in his mask was now the least of his sanitation problems), but he couldn't hear the sound of crying. Peter knew how babies worked – He’d played Yoshi's Island. The poor thing ought to be screaming its head off right about now. And it wasn't, which could only mean...

Spider-Man rounded the corner, trying not to retch at the fresh wave of stench that hit his nose. The sewer tunnel led out into a much larger opening, almost as big as his living room back home. Spidey wasn’t sure why the sewers needed to be so huge, exactly, but he wasn’t complaining.

Spidey spun his head around, heart thumping in his chest. It looked like the other sewage tunnels were too narrow for any “monster” to fit through, so that meant the thing had to be...

“Raaaагh!”

-right behind him.

Thanks to the wonders of spider-sense, Spider-Man ducked the claw swipe, then spun to get a look at his attacker. “Holy-!” Really, it wasn't too surprising, as far as monsters went. Let's describe it with an analogy: Lizards are to the Lizard as rats are to, uh, this guy. That is to say, it was a giant humanoid rat creature. The creature tried to sink its oversized front teeth into Spidey's juicy shoulder, but he managed to kick it in the stomach, sending the thing flying into the far wall.

“So if I destroy you by battle, do you get to Special Summon an earth monster with fifteen hundred or less attack from your deck?”

The rat made another lunge. Man, that thing had recovered fast. Spider-Man hadn't even been
pulling his punches. The next thing he knew, Spidey was pinned down in the filthy water, letting his spandex get ripped to shreds by the rat's knife-sized claws. In another few seconds, Spidey would be missing some chunks, and to make matters worse, he was running dangerously low on rat-related pop culture references.

“Uh... Uh... Are you sure kids will like the new Chuck E. Cheese design-?” Spidey didn't even bother finishing that one. Instead, he focused on firing his web-shooters as hard as he could. The webs went straight up the rat's nostrils, causing it to stumble back, screeching its head off. Spider-Man had actually been aiming for its eyes, but he'd take it.

He pulled himself back to his feet, though he was a bit wobbly. Okay, okay, he could do this. Spidey just had to punch this thing until it fell unconscious, then haul it back up to the surface for the police to deal with. Simple.

Or at least, simple until something crawled over Spider-Man's foot.

“Oh Jesus-!” It was another rat – a normal-sized one – and now there was another one on his leg. And two on his arm. They were scurrying out of the pipes, out of cracks in the wall... Pretty soon, the whole sewer was covered in muddy brown fur. Spider-Man wondered dimly when he’d last had his tetanus shot.

But the next second, he was a bit too preoccupied with the mind-numbing pain of a hundred rat bites. Hoo boy. And he'd thought that spider bite had hurt.

“Swear to god, if one of you gives me rat powers- Ow!” Alright, time to let you in on a little secret. The truth was, the reason Spider-Man cracked so many jokes in the heat of battle wasn't because he was cocky – It was because he was absolutely friggin' terrified, and when Spidey got scared, he impulsively told jokes. It was a stress thing.

So whenever Spider-Man stopped telling jokes, well... that basically meant his brain had reached a whole new level of sheer, foam-mouthed terror.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh oh god oh god they're crawling all over meeeeeeepFFFFF-” What was even happening right now? Where'd all these rats come from? Had that big rat summoned them somehow?

Now Spider-Man was feeling... whoozy. Maybe he just needed a little... a little nap time. He fell to his knees in the sewage, the largest rat looming over him while the smaller ones pinned him down. Really, when you thought about it, this wasn't the worst way to go. He'd only been trying to save some poor woman's baby. Even... Even the Daily Bugle had to realize he was a hero now.

Slowly, Peter's eyes started to close... but before they could, a big, buff man pounced from the shadows, tackling the rat-creature with his massive biceps. The Manhattan sewer system wasn't exactly well-lit, but Spider-Man thought he could make out the man's clothing. Something about it seemed... familiar.

A moment later, the rat-creature let out a gag and plopped to the ground, unconscious. Apparently, the mystery man had put it in a choke hold.

“Were you watching, my darling Calypso?” Okay, that Russian accent definitely rung a bell. “I defeated it. I, without any powers, bested the beast that the Spider-Man could not!”

He was right. He'd totally one-upped the Web-Head. Spider-Man would've been amazed if he wasn't half-delirious.
The last thing Spidey managed to say was, “Are you the... Pied Piper?” And then the whole world grew black.

Was black Gwen’s color? She held the dress to her chest. Hmm… No, it wasn’t. Gwen tossed it onto her bed’s “nope” pile, though it was a bit tricky to pull off, seeing as that pile almost touched the ceiling.

“Going somewhere?” said a voice from behind.

“Oh, Dad-!” Gwen spun around to find him standing in her bedroom doorway, arms folded.

“You’re back early.”

“I’ll be heading out again in a minute.”

“Well, to answer your question, I’m just going into the city tomorrow with- with a friend.”

“Just a friend?” Her dad’s eyes flitted to the “nope” pile. Typical. Once in his life, could he not play the detective?

Gwen thought he might press the issue, but instead, her dad simply turned to leave. Right before he left, though, he paused. “Gwen, listen.” There was an intake of breath. “Losing your mother hurt me. It still does. But the time I spent with her… I wouldn’t trade that. Not for anything.”

After that, there was silence. By the time Gwen mustered the courage to turn her head to the doorway, he was already gone.

“Ugh... Aunt May?” Peter's whole body felt like one big paper cut. He tried to roll over under the covers, only to realize with a pang that there were no covers. Or pillows. Or even a mattress. Peter tried to spring upright, but his body didn't listen. It was like every muscle below the neck had gone dead.

He at least managed to wrench his eyes open. “What the-?” There was rain hitting his face, and- and shadow-painted stones poking out of overgrown grass. He tried to work out where he was, but Peter's brain wasn't braining so good right now.

Wait. If the rain was hitting his face... Peter's eyes traveled downwards to discover his bare neck at the edge of the red spandex. “No.”

His eyes shot back up. Standing in front of the nearest stone was a huge, musclebound man, topless save for his trademark lion-face vest. Peter almost didn't recognize him without any fur or whiskers, but it there was no mistaking Kraven the Hunter. Now Peter was seriously confused. Last he'd checked, Kraven hadn't been one of the Ryker's escapees, and he'd, y'know, turned himself into every furry's wet dream.

But that wasn't what concerned Peter the most. No, that'd be the Spider-Man mask clutched firmly in Kraven's big, sweaty hand.

“So, little boy,” Kraven said softly, “you finally awaken.”

There was something about Kraven's eyes. Something different. Peter had seen those eyes before... in Harry's dad. And in Cletus Kasady.

Kraven chuckled to himself. “Yes, Spider-Man, I've learned the truth. All this time, I have been
bested by an adolescent. But I do not feel cheated. No, you were a worthy opponent.” It was hard to make out in this rainstorm, but there seemed to be something in Kraven's other hand, too. Something like... a shovel. “And though you may have been nothing but a naïve child playing the hero, you can take solace in the knowledge that you've served a higher purpose. You've shown me the power of the Spider.”

He laughed again, louder this time, and then slipped the mask over his own face. “Fear not, child. I will continue your work. I have proven myself the worthiest man for the task.”

“I...” Peter struggled to make his tongue work. “...hope you washed that thing first.” He tried to move his arms, but it was no good. Looked like Kraven had wrapped Peter up in chains and tossed him in some kinda big, wooden box.

Kraven crouched down, meeting Peter's small, trembling brown eyes with the mask’s big, steady white ones. “Struggle all you like, child. Normally, you might be able to break those chains... but not when I've filled you with enough tranquilizer to stop on elephant.” He glanced away. “I prefer not to rely on such tricks, of course, but in your case, I believe it's warranted.”

Hold on a tick. Peter's brain had finally realized where he was. An open, grassy field? A bunch of rocks sticking out of the ground? A big, wooden box? A shovel in Kraven's hand?

“My Calypso would’ve wanted you alive for this part. Would’ve wanted you to understand the true extent of your failure.”

Right before the coffin was shut, there was a flash of lightning, and Peter managed to make out the big rock jutting out behind Kraven. Carved into the stone's face were the words:

HERE LIES SPIDER-MAN, SLAIN BY THE HUNTER.
Cost of Living


It felt good. Lying there, unmoving. It was like sleeping in on Saturday morning, only without the sunlight creeping through the curtains or the little blinking light on your phone charger or your aunt making a racket downstairs-

Aunt.

Aunt? What aunt? There was no aunt. The only things that existed in the whole wide world were his muscles, which were so very tired, and that amazing feeling that surged through them when he let them go completely limp. Man, what a great world to live in. A world where he was winning at life just by lying there asleep. Good job, Peter, you did great.

Except... Except he wasn't alive.

Peter.

Peter? Who was that? He'd never heard of any Peter! Peter was nobody. Nothing was real except for a tiny little half-awake consciousness floating in a warm, white void. It was okay. Peter Parker was gone. He'd died saving a baby from a rat monster. It was super heroic. There was no doubt at all anymore that... he was a hero. All he had to do now was lie here, feeling his shallow breaths growing hotter and hotter until they were broiling. It was finished.

No more power meant no more responsibility.

"Whoops. Butterfingers." The goblin was laughing and the parade floats were swirling around her and Peter was shrieking and a line of webbing was erupting from his wrist and-

Beep, beep, beep, beep.

-and then Gwen was sitting up in her bedcovers, wiping sweat from her forehead and trying desperately to catch her breath. For one disorienting second, she thought she heard the sound of her own screaming ringing in her ears, but then she realized what it really was – an alarm.

Gwen flung herself out of her covers and dropped to her knees before the pile of junk by her bed. She couldn't help but feel like an idiot as her hands fumbled through the pitch-blackness. This room’s layout was still a bit unfamiliar to her. Even after the wall of her old bedroom had been repaired, Gwen had been forced to move out thanks to the bad memories it held. Honestly, so much as being in the same house as that room made Gwen feel unsafe.

After a minute of searching, Gwen finally retrieved the source of the beeping – a handheld GPS. The blue spider-tracer.

Gwen pressed a button, replacing the noise of the device with the far more pleasant pattering of rain outside, and then squinted at the screen. Yes, she wasn't wearing her glasses, and yes, her eyes hadn't adjusted yet, but after years of checking her phone in the middle of the night, Gwen was a master at the art. It looked like Peter was somewhere at the edge of Manhattan, not too far from Queens. What could he be up to?

On impulse, Gwen shut her eyes, and like clockwork, the image of a cackling goblin flashed before
them. *Calm down, calm down.* She was sure Peter was fine. He was probably just on a stakeout or something, and he'd forgotten to turn the tracer off. Yeah. That was it.

Gwen groped her way to the far wall, where she retrieved her phone from the charger. The number she needed wasn’t in her contacts list anymore, but, err… she kinda knew it by heart.

*You okay?* read Gwen’s hastily-typed message. *That GPS alarm we made went off.* Her phone proclaimed that the message had been sent successfully, and so Gwen waited, staring expectantly at the screen.

Okay, it'd been thirty seconds and there was no response. He was definitely dead.

*Calm down.* Gwen forced herself to breathe. She was letting her fears get out of control. Peter knew how to take care of himself. He'd battled dozens of supervillains before. Why would tonight be any different?

But Gwen knew the answer before the question had even finished forming in her head. *Because he's upset and exhausted and you broke up with him and he wants to die.*

In seconds, Gwen had sent another, identical text. No response. She tried to call him. It went to voice mail. “Peter? Peter, you're not answering. Are you okay? Oh god.” Gwen was such an idiot. Peter was probably laughing at her right this second. “I'm gonna get my dad. If we can't find you, we're gonna tell your aunt. We're gonna tell her everything. But- But it won't come to that. You'll be okay. You're alive.” She hung up, then forced herself to take a deep breath. She was overreacting. He was fine.

Gwen got the answering machine three more times in a row.

Five minutes. She'd give him five minutes to text back. Gwen took another breath. Five minutes.

Four minutes later, Gwen was charging into her father's bedroom, screaming, “*Dad! Dad!*”

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*The itsy-bitsy spider went up the water spout. Down came the rain and washed the spider out.*

“*Hee hee hee...*” Despite his protesting muscles, he managed a faint giggle. That song was funny. Ha ha. Funny song. He wondered why he was thinking of that particular song right now, though.

*Phone.*

Phone? Oh, of course! That song wasn't just in his head. He'd made Itsy-Bisty Spider his ringtone. It'd seemed really clever at the time.

Suddenly, he was overcome with an irresistible urge. Every teenager-ey instinct in his body was begging him to answer his phone. What if work was calling?

*The itsy-bitsy spider went up the water spout. Down came the rain and-*

It was ringing again. He had to answer it! Had to-

*No. Don't wanna.* A groan escaped his lips. He was tired. And so what if work was calling? He wasn't gonna answer that. He was finished. Done. He wasn't going to work ever again.

“*Peter?*”

For the briefest of seconds, Peter's eyelids twitched, but they proved far too heavy to open. That
voice. He knew that voice. It was... impossible. It was...

“Peter, you're not answering. Are you okay? Oh god.” It was muffled by his utility belt’s pouch and intercut with labored breathing, but there was no mistaking it – Gwen was leaving him a voicemail. “I'm gonna get my dad. If we can't find you, we’re gonna tell your aunt. We're gonna tell her everything. But- But it won't come to that. You'll be okay. You're alive.” That last sentence was barely a whisper.

A jolt rocked Peter's body – a jolt every bit as strong as the one he’d felt that fateful night in the warehouse, when he'd laid eyes on Walter Hardy. He couldn't be dead. He couldn't be- Peter’s hand twitched. All at once, it came back to him. Kraven. The tranquilizers. *Getting buried alive.*

What had a second ago felt like a warm bed now felt distressingly more like a dark, cramped coffin. Peter slammed the lid as hard as he could. Normally, with his super spider strength, busting out would be a breeze, but at the moment, Peter could barely lift his elbows, let alone the rest of his arms.

“Aaaaaaaaaaagh-!”

His lungs were working just fine, though.

A police car rolled up to a pitch-black cemetery. Gwen hopped out before it'd even come to a stop, then sprinted across the mud without so much as a jacket to protect herself from the torrent of rain.

“Gwen, wait-” Her dad sprinted after her, though he, at least, had taken the time to throw on a raincoat. By the time he was halfway across the street, Gwen had already hopped the cemetery's fence.

“Peter? Peter?”

Her phone's flashlight scanned the perimeter, then came to a halt on the grave with the freshly-planted soil. Gwen's eyes fell on the tombstone: *HERE LIES SPIDER-MAN, SLAIN BY THE HUNTER.* She only pondered the absurdity of it for a moment (Seriously, what kind of bad guy took the time to engrave an epitaph?), then threw herself, hands and knees, into the dirt.

“Peter! Peter! No, no, please, god-” She was hardly even aware of what she was doing as she clawed her way through the mud. This wasn't happening. Couldn't be happening. Was this how Peter had felt about- about his uncle? If Gwen had just stayed with Peter… But no, she’d had to be a stupid little spineless baby like always, and now everything was ruined. Now everything was...

“Gwen, what are you-? Lord.” Her dad arrived right in time to watch her fingernails hit wood.

Gwen halted the dig. The grave had been shallower than she'd thought. Good, good. But now she hesitated. If she opened that coffin... what would she find inside?

But as it turned out, Gwen's question would be answered for her. With a sudden *wham,* the lid of the coffin cracked open. Gwen had to shield her eyes to keep out the shrapnel, but when she reopened them... there he was.

His mask was missing, and the rest of his costume had been torn to shreds, but he was there. Sweaty and panting and beautiful and *alive.*

Peter half-leaned, half-fainted into her shoulder, then muttered a ragged, “G-Gwen... How...? Am I
seein' things?

Somehow, Gwen found herself smiling. She wiped her eyes, held her boyfriend close, and whispered, “I believe you, Peter. I believe you now.”

There was no way a McDonald's burger could possibly taste this good. It wasn't natural. Of course, after spending god knew how many hours in the ground, Peter wouldn't turn his nose up at a burger foraged straight from a dumpster. He didn't care. All that mattered was that he was safe and warm in the back of Captain Stacy's car with a nice, soft shock blanket around his shoulders and Gwen's rainsoaked hair resting against the crook of his neck.

Come to think of it, Peter hadn't even stopped to change out of his Spider-Man costume, so hopefully the bored-looking teenager at the drive-through window hadn't glanced at the passenger seat.

“How are you feeling?” Gwen's dad gave Peter a look through the rearview mirror.

“Pretty good, all things considered,” Peter said through a mouthful of fries. “I'm, y'know, superhuman, so I bounce back from stuff like this pretty easy. I've had worse.”

Gwen's dad looked distinctly unconvinced. “You need a doctor. I can't even begin to guess what kind of drugs Kravinoff put in you... not to mention your entire body’s covered in rat bites.”

But at this, Peter drew back in his seat. “I'm not sure I could make it through a whole checkup without blowing my secret ID.”

Gwen’s dad kept his eyes firmly on the road ahead. “I know a guy who won’t ask too many questions.”

“Great,” said Peter, “but Kraven took my mask. I’m not going in without a mask.”

Peter sat on the couch of the middle of a pleasant, old person apartment somewhere in NoHo. He grumbled, fiddling with the brown paper McDonald’s bag on his head, into which eye and mouth holes had been crudely torn. In the far corner of the room, Gwen was making a futile effort to stifle her giggles.

“Hrmph,” said Peter.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Spider-Man.” Just then, Peter was approached by the old guy who played against himself in chess in that one Pixar short. The guy had just finished having a little talk with Gwen’s dad, and so now he extended a hand Peter’s way. “Leo Zelinsky.”

Peter accepted. “Thanks for helping me out, sir.”

“After you saved my grandson from muggers last summer? My pleasure.” Leo gave his warmest, wrinkliest old-person-smile, though the lopsided beanie and oversized glasses added a bit of a quirky vibe to the gesture. “Now let’s get some antibiotics in you.”

“Yeah, I, err, might be in need of those.” After a moment's hesitation, Peter admitted, “I’ve kinda been avoiding doctor’s visits since I got my powers.”

“Well, I’m not quite a doctor,” said Leo, “but I practiced medicine in a past life, so I’ve got plenty of medical supplies handy. But what I really am right now is a therapist.”
“Oh.” Behind his fancy new mask, Peter’s eyes traveled to Gwen and her dad, whose own eyes were looking away from him in opposite directions.

To be clear, Peter’s stance on accepting charity hadn’t softened in the slightest. But as it turned out, Leo’s sessions were free to superheroes, and Peter had no qualms whatsoever about accepting free stuff.

“I'm still seeing Carnage every time I close my eyes.” Spider-Man rolled over on the cushion. “It's one of those – What do you call it? – flashbulb memories. I'm even having them when I'm awake now.” Man, lying on a couch in costume felt wrong. Spidey had to fight back the urge to crawl up the wall just to feel more normal.

Leo's office was great and all – dimly lit, motivational posters on the wall, a box of tissues and a little portable fountain on the desk, very tranquil – but Spider-Man had a hard time feeling at ease unless he was miles above the honks of rush hour traffic, breathing in smog. Yeah, this city did things to people.

“Well, that's understandable,” Leo said in his enthused-yet-cigarette-addled voice. “It's not every day a space alien tries to kill you. You have every right to be upset about it.” He leaned over in his chair to jot something down in his notepad.

“No, but, the thing is, I'm not just upset. I...” Spidey's head drooped. “I could've stopped it.”

“Spider-Man...” Leo looked up from his pad to meet the whites of Spidey's mask. “It's not my job to tell you how to feel, but I think you should at least explore the possibility that you're suffering from a misplaced sense of guilt.”

“It's not misplaced!” snapped Spidey. “If I'd returned the symbiote sooner, it would never have bonded to Eddie, and I'd have never had to feed it the gene cleanser that made Carnage!”

“Well,” said Leo, straightening his square glasses, “I don't pretend to be an expert on alien biology, but from what you've told me, it sounds like the symbiote got in your head. Can you really blame yourself for being brainwashed by an alien?”

“It doesn't matter,” said Spider-Man. “The symbiote made them worse, but they were still my thoughts. My actions. My responsibility.”

“Now, hold on a second,” said Leo. “I didn't say if you were responsible or not. I said you felt guilty.”

Spidey cocked his head. “What's the difference?”

“Responsible is what you are. Guilty is how you feel.” Leo set his pen and paper on his desk, turning his full attention to his patient. “Right now, our world's being subjected to things we can barely comprehend – mad science experiments, aliens, whatever they are – and I don't think wrinkled old men and scared little boys ought to be expected to have all the perfect responses to that.”

A while later, Peter found himself resting on the mattress in Leo’s spare room while Gwen sat in a chair nearby. With his costume torn to shreds, Peter had been allowed to borrow some sweatpants and an oversized turtleneck.

Gradually, Peter and Gwen found their eyes meeting. They seemed to have wordlessly agreed to
resume dating, seeing as they'd kissed each other about a bajillion more times by now. Peter hoped he hadn’t gotten any soil in her mouth…

After a while, Gwen broke the silence. “Peter... I'm sorry for what I said. I let my anxiety get the best of me, and I gave you a hard time over nothing.”

“It wasn’t nothing.” Peter bowed his head. “Truth is, after what happened with Carnage, I lost my nerve. I've been reckless and- and sloppy lately, and you had every right to be worried about me. I don't want to ever do that to you again. You were right, Gwen, I should’ve been seeing a therapist all along. You saved my life and my mental health.” His cheeks grew a shade redder. “I love you.”

Gwen’s weren’t untouched, either. “I love you, too.”

Their lips crept closer… and then Gwen's dad walked through the door, and suddenly those lips were on opposite sides of the room.

“I just got off the phone with your aunt,” he said. “I told her you snuck over to our house and spent the last few hours having a big emotional reunion with Gwen, and now I’m letting you stay the night in our guest room. May’s not particularly happy you missed curfew, but she believed it.”

“Well...” Peter shifted in place. “...it's better than telling her the truth.”

Gwen’s dad folded his arms. “Peter, you almost died tonight. Don’t you think she has the right to know?”

At this, Peter's eyes met his bedsheets. His only reply was a feeble, “Yeah, but... her heart…”

“May’s stronger than you give her credit for.” Gwen's dad rubbed his temple. “Peter, listen, I know you'll bounce back from what Kravenoff did to you, but I'm not so sure you need to get back into costume anytime soon.”

Peter's eyes snapped back to his. “Look, I know I promised I'd take a vacation for a while, but that was before that mass breakout from the Vault-”

“I told you, I only approved of your heroism because you did things the police couldn't.” Something about this guy's glare unnerved Peter. Now he knew where Gwen got it from. “Yes, you put away supervillains, but you haven't kept them away.” Gwen's dad let out a sigh. “Between this and the incident at the hospital, it's clear the Sinister Six won't rest until you're back in the ground. With Kravenoff and Toomes still at large, the smartest thing you can do right now is lay low.”

Peter sprang up in his bed. “But Kraven saw my face! Even he's smart enough to connect the dots and figure out who I am. I can't just sit around on my butt while he's running free.”

Gwen’s dad wasn’t having it. “If the NYPD’s metahuman response team can handle the Sinister Six, they can handle Kraven, too.”

“But-”

“He's got a point, Peter,” spoke up Gwen. “You were off your game even before Kraven buried you. You need to rest.”

“I- Well… alright.” Reluctantly, Peter crawled back under the covers. “I can hang up the tights for a while. But I'm not telling Aunt May the truth yet. That-” He faltered. “That can wait.” But then he regained his vigor, turning back towards Gwen’s dad. “But you've gotta promise me you'll do everything you can to stop Black Cat and her father.”
Gwen's dad nodded. “I promise.” Then he sighed again and turned to stare out the window. “I just hope my men can take care of Kravenoff soon. Something about the way you described him made him seem... different. Desperate. I've seen that before in criminals.” His eyes narrowed. “Right before they lost their minds”

Spyder! Spyder! Burning bright.

It had been here. Kraven had seen them. The memory pounded in his head like jungle drums. The spiders.

Kraven dropped down through the skylight into the laboratory below. The scientist with the mustache was absent, seeing as it was the dead of night, but other than that, the room appeared unchanged in the months since Kraven had last come here. Before, he had asked for the power of the jungle cats. Ha. He'd been so naïve. All along, the real power had been staring Kraven in the face.

In the forests of the night.

Silent as a lion in the grass, Kraven crept his way to the glass terrariums lining the wall. With a swift motion, he sent his fist through the glass, shattering it instantly. The spider within was startled, but not as startled as when Kraven reached in to grab it. It was a beautiful creature – deep blue with red makings and nearly as big as Kraven's fist. The arachnid impulsively bit Kraven's hand, but he hardly noticed. To Kraven the Hunter, it was little more than a gnat sting.

But then, he wasn't Kraven the Hunter anymore. Gently, Kraven rolled back his mask, then lifted the struggling creature to his mouth. He was the Spider.

What immortal hand or eye.

Crunch. Kraven chewed noisily. It was working. He could feel it working already. Just as the ancient tribes of Africa consumed the flesh of their enemies to gain their powers, so too would Kraven gain the power of the Spider.

Crash. Shards of glass were again sent flying as Kraven retrieved his next meal, and then his next, and then his next...

Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

A commandeered taxi cab sped down the streets of Manhattan, followed closely by an entire squadron of shrieking police cars. The ragged, unshaven man in the taxi's passenger seat glanced out the back window. The sweat on his forehead was accumulating at an alarming rate.

“Remind me why we're doing this again, Henry.” The man gestured to the suspiciously large number of Hammer Tech plasma rifles resting by his feet. “Tell me it's not to impress Silver Sable again.”

“What?” Henry laughed as he slammed on the gas pedal. “Of course not. We're lucky we managed to escape Ryker's in all the confusion. No, Marty, I've finally realized that my obsession with Sable was crazy and stupid, and there's no point risking my neck to impress her anymore.”

This seemed to ease Martin's conscience. “Well, I'm glad you-”

“I'm risking my neck to impress Black Cat!”
Martin buried his face in his hands.

"With these guns, she'll have enough fire power to storm Ryker's and free her d-"

"*She already freed him.*"

"Oh." Henry's luster promptly vanished. "Well, uh, Black Cat could still need all these guns. What if one day, I don't know, Spider-Man suddenly turns evil and punches her, and then Black Cat gets all mad and decides to become a crime lord?"

Martin gave him a long, hard stare. "Henry, that is the single dumbest thing I have ever-"

*Wham.* Apparently, when coming up with this plan, Henry had failed to consider the fact that in New York City, the statistical probability of a big, musclebound superhuman landing on the hood of your car was a bit higher than in all the surrounding cities.

"*Holy $#%*!"* The next thing they knew, Henry and Martin found their car suspended off the ground as they screamed their lungs out. Their assailant was wearing a Spider-Man mask, but other than that he didn't share the Web-Head's fashion sense. Spider-Man wasn't known for his shirtlessness or his animal fur vest.

With a disheartening *crunch,* the crooks were flung to the pavement, tumbling down the street like a pair of ragdolls before finally coming to a rest by an overturned street lamp. "Ugh..." Henry managed to lift his head long enough to see a crazed jungle man heaving the remains of their stolen taxi over his head.

"*Where is she?*" the man snarled. "I bested the Spider. I *became* the Spider. I can do whatever the Spider can! So why has my beloved not returned to me?"

After that, the world grew dark. Though it brought Henry the slightest bit of comfort to know that at least the supervillains didn't have great dating lives, either.

He couldn't move. It was dark and *he couldn't move.* There was barely any light seeping through the cracks in the coffin, and yet he could see it clear as day. The red. Oozing its way inside. His blood-? No. Not blood. It was... growing a face. A grinning mouth with endless teeth, and those pure white, misshapen eyes.

"*Time to draw your blood,*" Carnage whispered.

"Gah!" Peter's eyes burst open, and he sat up, dazed. It took him a second to remember where he was – Leo’s guest room.

"Time to draw your blood," said a voice.

"What the-?" Peter came uncomfortably close to punching Leo’s head clean off.

"Whoa, there, Bag-Boy, I just need to check your blood work for signs of infection."

"Oh. Sorry." Peter hurriedly readjusted the bag on his head (He’d slept with it on, which might explain why all he could smell right now was French fries), then allowed the guy to stick his arm without protest. He took it on the superhero code of honor that Leo wasn't gonna use Peter's blood for the purposes of mad science.

While he waited, Peter fixed his eyes on the chair by his bedside – He was fine with getting his
blood drawn, but that didn't mean he was eager to watch it happen.

“Morning,” Gwen murmured, sitting up in the chair and tucking her phone in her jacket pocket. “Dad left for work. You feeling okay?”

“Yeah.” Peter ordered his lips to smile. “Never better. How 'bout you?”

“Fine. I'm just glad that, if you had to get hurt, it happened over summer break.” Gwen responded with her own, equally forced smile. “I would not be having a good time in school right now.”

“I hear you.” The conversation lulled for a second. Peter took a breath. He'd love to launch into their usual playful banter, but right now he had a bit too much on his mind. “I need to get back to Aunt May. She's probably worried sick. Well, that or she's plotting to ground me for life as soon as I walk in the door.”

“Well, if that's true, I see no reason to keep you here.” As he spoke, Leo withdrew the needle from Peter's arm and stuck on a band-aid. “You're good to go.”

“Cool.” Without further ado, Peter flung off the covers and returned to his feet. He ached a bit, but nowhere near as bad as he had after his last tussle with the Sinister Six. “Now c'mon, Gwen, let's head home.” As he made for the door, Peter added, “I'll feel better once I know May's safe. If Kraven's pieced together who I am...” He gave an involuntary shudder.

There was silence.

“Gwen?” Peter glanced back, only to find Gwen still in her seat, avoiding eye contact. “What's wrong?”

“There's... something I need to tell you.” Reluctantly, Gwen retrieved her phone from her pocket. “While you were asleep, I checked the news.” She took a breath. “Kraven's been on a rampage all over Manhattan. He's running around in your mask brutalizing criminals. He hasn't killed anyone yet, but it's only a matter of time at this rate. And it looks like he's got some new superpowers to boot.”

“What?” Peter gave a start. “Why haven't the cops stopped him?”

“They've been trying to all day, but he must've taken some weird voodoo herbs that make him immune to the tranq gas.”

“So in other words, I'm the only one powerful enough to stop Kraven right now.”

Gwen rested a hand on his arm. “It's okay, Peter,” she said softly. “Go save some lives.”
A horde of pedestrians fled, shrieking, from a trashcan resting by a shop door. Next to said trashcan was a stray newspaper, and on the wall above it was a raving jungle man in a Spider-Man mask.

“Littering is a crime against society!” Kraven screamed at the top of his lungs. “You're criminals, and I'm going to hunt every last one of you! Then Calypso will love me. I am the Spider! I am the-” Suddenly, he groaned, clutching his temples. “My head. Why do I feel a... tingling?”

Wham. The next thing he knew, Kraven was kicked off his perch by an unknown assailant.

“Gee, I'm surprised you can even hear your spider-sense over all the voices in there.”

Kraven picked himself off the ground, then locked eyes with his attacker. His jaw dropped. “What game is this?” Kraven snarled. “Only a madman would dress as you do!”

“Hi pot, I'm kettle.” The attacker pulled himself to his full stature. “What's wrong, big guy? Haven't you ever heard of the Bombastic Bag-Man before?”

Of course, the reason Kraven hadn't heard of him before probably had to do with the fact that the McDonald’s bag was still firmly stuck to Peter’s head – He’d even glued it in place with some web-fluid to accommodate his acrobatics.

Yeah, this one was a keeper. Screw Spider-Man – Clearly, Bag-Man was Peter's true calling.

“So where'd you get the new powers, Kravie? Wall-crawling doesn't really fit the 'jungle cat' motif.”

“I recognize that voice.” Kraven's brow creased as he stepped closer to his prey. “I received my powers from the same place you did, Spider-Man – your college's laboratory.”

The ESU lab? That didn't bode well. If Elmer Fudd here had broken in and stolen one of the genetically-altered spiders, it could tip Professor Warren off to the fact that the spiders gave people spider-powers.

But Peter didn't let this concern show in his voice. “Laboratory? You mean you didn't get yours from a box of Cracker Jack? Weird.” Peter fired his web-shooters, but Kraven's reflexes were too fast now. He dodged like it was nothing.

“I'm glad you're here, boy.” Kraven crouched down like a big cat fixing to pounce. A... spider-cat, Peter guessed. “I've finally realized why my darling Calypso has not yet reappeared. This time, when I bury you, I'll make sure it's permanent.” On the last word, he lunged.

“Dude, do your ears not work?” Peter said as he ducked a swipe of Kraven's fist. “I'm the Bombastic Bag-Man.” He webbed the nearby trashcan and yanked it into Kraven, but it merely shattered against the guy's back like it was glass. Sheesh. Peter guessed that was what happened when you gave spider-powers to someone who was already way too buff.

“Talk all you like, boy, but deep down you know that I am the true Spider now!” Kraven did a sudden flip over Peter's head, landing behind and then kicking Peter's legs out from under him.
“Agh!” Peter face-planted into the pavement. Dang, Kraven was so much faster than normal.

“That's why you've chosen to wear that ridiculous costume, isn't it?” Kraven lifted his fist for the finishing blow. “I stripped your title from you.”

“Hey, don't knock the new threads!” Thwip. The finishing blow was softened by a layer of webs over Kraven's fist.

“You were never worthy!” With his newfound spider-strength, Kraven managed to tear off the webbing, but by that time Spider-Man – sorry, Bag-Man – was already back on his feet. “I was always meant to be the Spider. Me!” Kraven swung his fists blindly, chanting, “Spyder! Spyder! Burning bright!”

“Great, now we can add 'ruining William Blake' to your list of crimes.” Sure, Peter was a whole heck of a lot weaker that Kraven now, but he at least still had all his mental faculties intact, meaning instead of attacking randomly, Peter knew exactly where to strike. “The tiger's 'burning bright' because it's, y'know, orange. It doesn't really work if you replace it with a spider.” He delivered a kick to Kraven's stomach. “I mean, unless it’s a red and blue one, but, phht, c’mon, what kind of spider's bright red and blue. That’s just silly.”

Kraven was winded for a second, but he quickly collected himself. “Silence! I am the Spider, and you are merely a fly for me to devour in my web.” Kraven smashed his pointer and middle fingers against his palms. Peter impulsively flinched, but... nothing happened. Well, besides Kraven inadvertently declaring “I love you” in sign language.

“W-What?” Kraven stared at his wrists, dumbfounded. “Why is it not working? I am the Spider! Where are my webs?”

“They're not org- Oh, I'm not even gonna say it this time.” Peter seized the confusion to shoot some actual webs, pinning Kraven to the sidewalk.

“No! No this cannot be!” Kraven roared with fury as he squirmed against his restraints. “I am the Spider!”

Before Kraven had a chance to break free, Peter uncorked a vial of gene cleanser from his belt. “Boy, all that deranged rambling must make you thirsty.”

“Please, no! I can't lose my powers! Not again! Not ag-! Glug.” Kraven tried to close his mouth, but Peter held his nostrils shut, forcing Kraven to open up if he wanted to breathe.

“Ah, gene cleanser. Is there any problem it can't fix?” The moment the cleanser was safely down Kraven's throat, Peter yanked the Spider-Man mask off his head. “And I believe this belongs to me.” Peter didn't put it back on, though. No, he wouldn't be doing that until his mask had gone through at least three hot cycles in the wash.

“I... I failed.” After a minute of struggling against his sticky prison, Kraven finally gave up, panting, and bowed his head. “I am not the Spider.”

“Hey, I'm sorry, man,” Peter said as he turned to stroll down the street. “Tell you what, why don't I go fetch some friends from the NYPD, and we'll all treat you to some ice cream?”

It only took Peter a minute to hunt down Captain Stacy. Naturally, Kraven's wacky antics had attracted a whole host of squad cars. He'd had such a long day, it actually took Peter a minute to realize why the other officers were staring at him.
“Oh, this?” Peter gestured to the bag on his head. “My suit's at the dry cleaners. Anywho, I came to
tell you Kraven's all webbed up right over-” He turned around to point in Kraven's general
direction. “-here.”

He was pointing at an empty pile of webs.

Peter groaned. “Not again-”

“Ragh!” Even without spider-powers, Kraven was fast. In the blink of an eye, he sprang from an
alleyway.

*Spider-sense.* Peter caught the hunting knife millimeters from his throat.

“What do you plan to do, boy?” Kraven struggled with all his might, but Peter’s pinky alone had
the strength to pin him to the pavement. “Imprison me? I shall escape again. Always, Kraven the
Hunter shall escape. The hunt will not relent! Next time, I will be swifter! I will be merciless!”

“But-” The words caught in Peter’s throat. Kraven had a point. The only reason Peter was still alive
was because Kraven had gotten too hasty with the burial, and something told him Kraven wouldn’t
make that mistake again. How was Peter supposed to live the rest of his life? How was he
supposed to be there for Gwen when this nut could escape Ryker’s at any moment? Could lay
another trap for him?

“You know what must be done.” Kraven’s eyes flitted to the knife in his struggling hand. “This
only ends with one of us in the ground.”

“But… you know you can’t beat me.”

*This only ends with one of us in the ground.*

“You…” Trembling fingers drew near Kraven’s knife.

“That’s it, boy,” Kraven said softly. “Show no fear.”

“…want to die?”

Kraven snorted. “What I want is the dignity a cage cannot allow.”

A moment passed.

“Do it,” said Kraven. “*Do it.*”

*Thwip.* The next instant, the blade’s edge was blunted by a gob of webbing. *Thwip.* And the instant
after that, the rest of Kraven was once again trapped in a cocoon.

“But why?” Kraven spat, struggling with all his might. “I’ll escape again. I’ll kill you! You must
strike first. You have no choice!”

“There’s always a choice.” Peter looked to the officers behind them. To Gwen’s dad, who nodded.
“See a therapist, Kraven. Get some help.” A second ago, Kraven had made Peter’s heart pound, but
now he just seemed... sad.

“But why-? I’ve done nothing but hunt you. I buried you alive!” Kraven had this look of earnest
confusion on his bearded face. It was almost childlike. “Why should you care what happens to
me?”
Peter’s eyes met his feet, which were bare beneath his costume. “Because no one should have to feel… how you feel right now.” But slowly, his eyes locked with Kraven’s. “There’s more to life than hunting. Than fighting over and over until you… can’t anymore. I mean, you have all these amazing skills. You could really help people, work on a nature reserve or something. If you’ve got the power to do good, then you have a responsibility to the world.”

Kaven stared at him. “You truly believe that?”

Peter nodded. “With all my soul.”

Another moment passed.

After what felt like forever, Kraven finally said, “You fight with honor, Spider-Man. I will respect your wishes.”

Peter almost laughed in relief. The tension had vanished faster than flipping a light switch.

As the officers stepped forward to collect the webbed-up Kraven, all he said was, “Make sure my lion, Gulyadkin, is cared for. You will find him in my safe house.”

“We’ll call animal control,” said Captain Stacy.

And with that, Kraven allowed himself to be led away into a police van. Right before the doors shut behind him, Kraven met Peter's eyes one last time.

Peter found himself staring back long after the police van had driven off.

“Peter.” Peter flinched at the sound of his own name, but it was just Captain Stacy speaking in an undertone. “You did good.” He came to a stop at Peter's side, placing an arm on his shoulder. “Maybe I… did come off as a bit patronizing back at the hospital.”

But Peter shook his head. “No, you were just looking out for me. Thanks for the wake-up call.”

“Much obliged.” After that, smiles were exchanged and hands were shaken. “This is how things should be – Spider-Man working with the police. I can’t say I approve of the illegal vigilantism aspect, but maybe, in light of all the service you’ve done to this city, we could have you pardoned someday. In fact, you’d make a valuable asset to the force once you’ve come of age.”

“I’d love that,” said Peter, “for the look it’d bring to Jameson’s face, if nothing else. Except, y’know, I’d never unmask till I know my loved ones are all safe.”

“Trust me, I share your concern,” Stacy said with a smirk. “But we can cross that bridge when we get there.”

“Right, right.” Peter nodded, causing his bag to wobble. “For now, though, we’ve still got Mickey Mouse’s less popular cousin to deal with.”

“Edward Whelan? The one the media calls Vermin? My men already recaptured him, actually.”

“Really?” Peter gave a sigh of relief. “So New York doesn't have to worry about any R.O.U.S.’s anymore?”

Captain Stacy’s face remained a perfect blank.

“That's, uh, from a movie.” Peter cleared his throat. “So where’d Vermin come from, anyways? I thought we were done with new super-mercenaries now that Smythe’s behind bars?”
“Well, this particular mercenary had no vendetta against you, as far as we could tell,” Captain Stacy said with a shrug of his shoulders. “We believe he’s an escaped experiment of Vincent Stegron – a biogeneticist implicated in several cases of super-mercenary production. He’s still at large.”

Stegron, huh? Guess he was the latest addition to Spider-Man’s radar, then.

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Well, Aunt May didn’t look too suspicious. She only peered at Peter a moment before turning her attention to Gwen and her dad, the other two people on the Parker household doorstep.

“My apologies. Gwen and I didn’t mean to intrude at this hour.” Gwen’s dad nodded to the sunrise peeking over Forest Hills’s horizon, and then to May, who tugged her pale pink bathrobe farther over her pajamas. “We were just returning Peter to you.”

Peter shrank at his mention. Hopefully, Aunt May wouldn’t think too hard about why Peter was wearing a long-sleeve shirt and pants in the middle of summer. Well, at least May couldn’t see all the scratches and bites on Peter’s face thanks to the magic of Gwen’s makeup kit.

“I’d better get going.” Gwen’s dad turned to leave, but he was stopped by a voice.

“Actually, George—” May took a step out the front door. She brushed a strand of white hair from her eyes. “—would you like to grab a coffee?”

Gwen’s dad turned back, revealing a smile. “I guess I can spare a minute.”

After that, the Parkers and Stacys went inside, with the grown-ups gravitating towards the kitchen and the kids gravitating towards the staircase.

“Me and Gwen will be in my room. Oh, and guys?” Peter shot the adults a goofy smirk. “No hanky-panky, now.”

There was a four-person laugh, and then Peter and Gwen vanished up the stairs.

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The moment the kids were gone, May spun to gawk at George from across the coffee pot. “Was he wearing makeup?”

George shrugged. “Kids these days.”

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Alright, Mary Jane’s makeup was done, and after only four hours. New record. Now all that was left was to figure out what to do with her hair. Obviously, MJ’s overall appearance didn’t need to be something quite as, err, advanced as her Fourth of July outfit. No need to scare the poor girl when she was clearly still in the questioning phase.

What if MJ put her hair up? Maybe something more tomboyish? Mary Jane made her gorgeous red locks into a ponytail with her fingers, then examined herself in the mirror. Hmm. Yeah, this plus her black jacket and fingerless gloves wouldn’t be half bad. MJ hadn’t gone with that look since she’d dated that Japanese chick from her last school. Guess MJ tended to be the “guy” in these things.

Speaking of guys, MJ couldn’t help but picture the look on Peter’s face when he found out about this. His head was gonna pop right off his body. But… But he’d come around to it, wouldn’t he? He wouldn’t want Gwen to stay miserable and heartbroken forever. Besides, this was just one little
date. Purely experimental. For all MJ knew, nothing would come of it.

Bzzzt, bzzzt.

“Miss Stacy, I presume?” Instantly, the phone was retrieved from the side of the sink and pressed to MJ’s ear.

“Mary Jane. Hi. Uh…” Aww, listen to her. She was all nerves. “This is awkward.”

“Hey, there’s nothing to be awkward ab-”

“I got back with Peter.”

Oh. MJ had spoken too soon. “Seriously? That’s great!”

“You- You were right before. I freaked out over nothing.”

“Ah, I knew you lovebirds couldn’t keep away from each other for long.”

The phone speaker picked up an intake of breath. “You… might be more right than you realize. I love Peter. I love him so much, it scares me. And- And I know how crazy his life is on, like, a cerebral level, but I take one look at him, and suddenly it doesn’t matter. Not even a little.” There was a pause. “Maybe Peter’s not the one with a death wish…”

“Hey, you don’t have to justify a thing to me, girlfriend. You know I’m your wingwoman for life.”

“Well, I feel awful about waiting till the last minute to cancel the… the date.” The way Gwen said it, you’d think that was a four-letter word. Okay, it was, but you know what MJ meant.

“C’mon, no big deal. There were never any strings attached.”

“Thanks for understanding.” Gwen took another breath, then said, “Actually, I don’t suppose instead of canceling on you, I could just, uh… bring Peter along? We’d have to postpone it until he’s back from his web design job at the Bugle, though.”

“Sounds good to me. We’ll be a threesome, then.”

Radio silence.

“Not that kind of threesome.”

“Right, right. But, uh, MJ? Maybe don’t mention the whole, err, date thing to Peter. Or my dad. Especially not my dad.”

“Of course,” said MJ. “Our secret.”

After that, the conversation lulled, and the girls said their goodbyes. Even after the call ended, though, Mary Jane lingered a while in her bathroom, staring at her reflection.

Okay, this was gonna sound weird, but… Peter was happy. Not “adrenaline high from being Spider-Man” happy, but happy happy. He hadn’t thought he could be this happy less than twenty-four hours after getting buried alive, but here he was. It was like a pillar had been knocked out of his life, and now it was back into place. Now the world didn’t feel so heavy again. Yesterday, the words “Gwen Stacy” had sent pain signals through Peter’s brain, but now they flooded it with dopamine.
“I can’t believe it!” Peter was shaken from his thoughts by a certain loudmouth barging into the workroom. “We completely misjudged him! Here I’d thought he was some random superpowered loser, but look at this.” Jameson held up today’s front page headlines. “How big a loser can this guy be after the way he talked down that Kraven fella?”

Peter’s heart did a backflip into his stomach. He nearly tripped out of his computer chair as he ran to examine the headline. Was this for real? Was this for real?

“I want all of New York singing his praises, and they’re gonna hear about him first from the Bugle’s exclusive headline!” Jameson flipped the paper around so everyone could read its enormous, bold title: **BOMBASTIC BAG-MAN BAGS SPIDER-CREEP**.

Peter’s heart promptly crawled back up to its proper place. Of course.

“But isn’t he a masked vigilante?” spoke up Robbie from across the newsroom. “I thought you hated those?”

Jameson snorted. “Please, tons of eyewitnesses saw this guy shake hands with Captain Stacy – He’s obviously some kinda government-sanctioned superhero. Probably Captain America’s inbred grandson or something. That bag’s there to spare us all.”

Oh, for the love of-!

Peter rolled his eyes as he returned to his chair. Maybe he ought to retire Spider-Man for good and stick to being Bag-Man from now on. At least if Chameleon tried to copy that costume, it’d be really funny (Speaking of which, that guy was at large now, so add that to Peter’s to-do list).

Without Eddie and the Connors, the ESU lab had gone from warm and welcoming to cold and sterile. There was one bright spot, though – namely, the headband-wearing blonde hovering by Peter’s shoulder. They weren’t really interning over the summer, but Dr. Warren had asked for their help cleaning up the place after the number Kraven did on it.

Peter and Gwen huddled together, giggling and whispering as they tried their best to operate a broom and dustpan in unison.

“Hey, check this out.” Peter knelt down by a table, hovering his bare hand over the floor underneath it. “I can use my spider-sense to find the glass. Aaaaaand…” He pressed his palm against random tiles until a telltale buzzing rang through his head, leaving Peter’s palm mere centimeters from the ground. “-there it is.”

Gwen made an effort to stifle her laughter as she swept up the shards. “That- That still doesn’t make any sense. I don’t care how genetically-altered they are – Spiders can’t see the future.”

“I guess you could say my spider-sense doesn’t make any… spider-sense.”

“I will smack your face with this broom handle.”

“I’d dodge it with my spider-s-”

“Shh, shh!”

The giggling and whispering came to an abrupt halt as Debra Whitman walked past them. As soon as she was out of earshot, the giggling and whispering resumed.

“Sheesh, Kraven sure left us some work to do.” Peter shook his head as he emptied the dustpan.
into a nearby trash bag. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad all those spiders got destroyed before anyone else could get bit, but I kinda wish Kraven had found a less... colorful way to do it.” Kraven’s little all-you-can-eat buffet had been caught on security camera for the whole world to see.

“You know what this means, though, don’t you?” Gwen dropped her voice to an even softer whisper. “Kraven ate these spiders, and then he got superpowers. Sooner or later, Dr. Warren’s gonna piece that together. He could find out your secret.”

“Maybe,” Peter said darkly, “but I’m more worried about him pumping out an army of spider-powered mercenaries for Oscorp. Dude was besties with Norman ‘Green Goblin’ Osborn, remember? And I’m still not convinced the Morbius-slash-Man-Wolf ordeal was an accident...”

“I don’t know, Peter...” Gwen set her broom down for a second so she could slouch. “Last time you thought Dr. Warren was behind everything, it turned out to be that Smythe guy. Besides, Norman was always a bit of a creep – Warren’s not like that.”

Peter snorted. “He made the Connors move to Florida.”

“Only because you and Eddie kept stealing gene cleanser.”

“Yeah, but-”

“Is everything alright, you two?”

“Gah!” Peter and Gwen flinched in unison – Dr. Warren had spontaneously teleported behind them. Sheesh, the guy could give Harry a run for his money.

“Yes, everything’s fine, sir,” Gwen said, fiddling with her glasses. “We’re almost done here.”

“Excellent.” Warren gave Gwen an approving nod. “Keep up the good work, little lady.” He wet his lips, then walked away.

As soon as he was gone, Peter gave Gwen a look. “Tell me that wasn’t at least a little creepy.”

“Maybe a little...”

“Okay, this is the coolest thing ever.” Mary Jane had taken one half of the booth while Peter and Gwen took the other. “It feels like we’re the main characters of life.”

MJ wasn’t sure the lovebirds were listening to her, though. They seemed busy caressing each other’s hands and gazing into each other’s eyes. At this rate, they’d get themselves thrown out of the Silver Spoon for giving all the customers diabetes.

“And now that you guys’ silly argument is done with, we can all be, like, secret superheroes buddies.” MJ took a sip of her Coke. “We’re a power trio, like in all those books Gwen reads. Think about it.” She gestured to each of them in turn. “There’s the protagonist destiny boy, his redhead friend, and the brainy chick.”

“Why do you get to be Ron?” said Peter through a mouthful of burger. “I want to be Ron.” He gave Gwen’s hand another caress. “I mean, he is the one who gets with the brainy chick...”

“He does?” Mary Jane blinked. “I thought the brainy chick got with that Snape guy?”

Gwen nearly hacked up her latte. “MJ, that was just in the fanfic I showed you!”
“What?” Suddenly, Peter didn’t look so hungry for his burger. “What kind of screwed up fanfics have you been reading? I swear, those things can have the weirdest pairings…”

The three of them stood there a moment in silence, eating their food.

“Well, either way, I’m glad you guys worked things out,” said MJ. “Makes it a lot less angsty around here.”

“Yeah.” Peter nodded. “And hey, maybe next time we hang, you can bring Hobie along and make it a double date?”

If the discomfort didn’t bleed through to Mary Jane’s face, it sure as heck did to Gwen’s.

“It, uh, didn’t work out between us, actually.” MJ was proud of herself – She’d managed to keep her voice level. “I don’t think I’ll be seeing much of him anymore. Not my choice, but…”

“Oh, I-I’m sorry, I didn’t-”

“It’s cool. It was a learning experience for me, y’know?” MJ took another bite of fries. “I’m sure as heck never rushing into things like that ever again. In fact, I’m done with dating for good. The ‘free agent’ thing was the way to go, and I never shoulda strayed from-”

“Mary Jane?” said a voice. A voice that made MJ’s hair stand on end. “Your aunt said I’d find you here…”

No way. No way. Mary Jane sprang from their outdoor table. It couldn’t be- But it was. He was coming towards them down the sidewalk, wearing shorts and a t-shirt and- and a new haircut. As if nothing had happened. As if he’d never been molten gold a day in his life.

“Mark?” Mary Jane’s next attempt to keep her voice even was less successful than the last. “But you- How-?”

A grin crossed his perfect face as he neared them. “Sorry I didn’t you tell you, babe. I didn’t want to get your hopes up before I healed from the operat-”

It was hard for him to finish that sentence with a pair of lips blocking his mouth. The two of them held that pose, arms around each other, for- for MJ didn’t know how long. Long enough to earn some whoops and applause from their fellow Silver Spoon customers.

Eventually, MJ broke off so she could turn back to grin at Peter. “Good news, Tiger, that double date’s on the table after all.” But MJ couldn’t make it long before returning her attention to her boyfriend.

If she’d been more attentive, Mary Jane might’ve noticed the glance Gwen was trading with Peter.

“Whoo!” MJ cheered, pumping her fist in the air. “Happy ending for everyone!”

End of Lesson 3

Chapter End Notes

Next Issue: Black Cat crosses Spidey’s path!
“Alright, alright, I’m here. Now what’s this big surprise?” Peter descended the living room stairs to find Aunt May standing by the front door. She was practically hovering off the carpet, grinning from ear to ear. Wow. Peter hadn’t seen her this happy in forever.

“I wanted to introduce you...” Aunt May took a dramatic pause. “...to my new boyfriend!”

Peter had been punched in the stomach by supervillains before, so he was well acquainted with the feeling that suddenly arose in his gut. “Your...” He swallowed. “...boyfriend?”

“That’s right.” Aunt May gazed off into the distance, starry-eyed. “He has such a wonderful personality.” Knock, knock, knock. “Oh, there he is now.” She reached for the doorknob.

The door swung open… and Peter recoiled in horror. Standing on the Parker family welcome mat was a tall, angry-looking man with a cigar in his mouth and a Hitler mustache on his lip.

Aunt May’s new boyfriend struck a sexy pose. “Face it, Tiger... I want pictures of Spider-Man!”

“Aaaaaaaaagh-f!”

The next thing he knew, Peter was under the bedsheets in his pitch black bedroom, panting like mad and covered from head to toe in icy sweat. He instinctively dug his nails into his arm to make sure this was real. Oh, thank god, pain. Peter rolled over under the sheets, slowing his breathing as best he could.

In retrospect, those Carnage nightmares hadn’t been so bad.

The setting sun illuminated the figure of three teens, blonde, brunette, and redhead, sitting on the bleachers above the football field and huddled over a smartphone. Now, that wasn’t such an unusual sight in this day and age, but what was an unusual sight in this day and age was the video they were watching of Spider-Man battling a dinosaur.

“A friggin’ DINOSAUR?” Mary Jane looked dangerously close to floating off into the sky like a balloon.

“Well, technically it was a guy who mutated himself with dino DNA,” said Peter. “And get this, his name was Stegron. Not his supervillain name, but, y’know, his actual surname.”

“That can’t be a coincidence,” said Gwen. “That guy totally picked a stegosaurus on purpose.”

Peter’s gaze returned to the phone screen, which displayed low-resolution footage of Spider-Man duking it out with a dinosaur-man in the middle of Central Park. Yeah, third period biology had gone a bit differently for Peter today.

“You fought a dinosaur,” said Mary Jane. “You fought a dinosaur.”

“It’s not like he popped out of nowhere, though.” Peter paused the video with a tap of his thumb. “Stegron worked for Tricorp, and Foswell thinks those guys are Oscorp’s competition in the
supervillain-making business. Pretty sure they've only ever made the really lame ones like the Spot, though.”

“So Tricorp’s the knockoff brand?” Gwen said with a smirk.

“Heh, yeah.” Peter took a breath. “I’m just glad I got the Connors’ stolen research back to them, so no one knows Steggy was actually copying the Lizard…”

MJ blinked. “Lizard?”

“Oh, sorry, we never told you about that one.”

“This guy turned himself into a giant lizard by accident,” said Gwen. “It could, err, ruin his life if it got out, so, y’know, don’t tell anybody.”

MJ gave her a look. “C’mon, you know I can keep a secret.”

At this, Gwen flushed. “Y-Yep. Guess you can.”

“Geez, though…” But then MJ grew somber. “How many of you guys’ friends have become supervillains, exactly?”

“Too many.” Peter looked from one girl to the other. “Promise me you two’ll never turn into bad guys, okay?”

A goofy grin spread across Gwen’s face. “Aww, but I had such a good evil plan lined up.”

“Ha! Spider-Man saves the day again!”

Gwen leaned into his ear to purr, “My hero…”

After that, the couple was a bit too preoccupied with kissing and cuddling to continue the conversation, and Mary Jane was too preoccupied watching them out the corner of her eye with a growing smile.

But then another sight entered her peripheral vision – a big guy with messy dark hair coming towards the bleachers.

“Oop, my ride’s here. One sec, Mark!” Mary Jane rose from her seat, then huddled towards the other two. In an excited whisper, she asked, “Hey, guys… can I tell him?”

“What?” The kissing and cuddling came to a premature end. “No, you can’t tell him!”

“Come on, Tiger! I hate keeping stuff from Mark.”

“I’m sorry,” said Peter, “but I really can’t trust a guy who got himself mixed up with Oscorp supervillainy and- and the Green Goblin.”

MJ’s face went tight. “Mark made a mistake.”

“We’re not trying to accuse him of anything, Mary Jane,” spoke up Gwen from Peter’s side, “but the more people know Peter’s secret, the bigger the chances it’ll get blown. We’re already beyond lucky Kraven decided not to spill the beans thanks to his weird honor code.”

“But-”
“MJ.” Peter’s brow had creased. “You promised me that you knew being Spider-Man wasn’t a game.”

If MJ had any wind left in her sails, that remark knocked it out. “You’re right. I did. Sorry, Tiger…” And with that, she trudged away down the bleachers, leaving the lovebirds to resume the kissing and cuddling.

Their voices carried on the breeze:

“I love you.”

“I love you more.”

Mary Jane only made it halfway to the edge of the green before Mark closed the gap. Instantly, his arms were around her.

“Hey, babe,” he said, showing off his wonderfully non-golden teeth. “Miss me?”

“Oh, I couldn’t bear to be away from you,” MJ said with a flourish of her arm.

The two of them held the pose a second, which gave MJ’s eyes enough time to travel across the football field.

A couple yards away, the Midtown Mustangs were practicing… but one Mustang didn’t seem to be practicing quite as hard. Hobie shot MJ a sour look before slinking off hand-in-hand with Mindy the cheerleader.

“Mark?” MJ turned back to her boyfriend.

“Yeah?”

Her lips hit his cheek. “I love you.”

For a moment, surprise overtook Mark’s face. But only for a moment. “You, too, babe.”

“No, I love you more-”

The debate was still raging on by the time Peter and Gwen stepped through the Parker household’s front door. It was stopped, though, the moment the two entered the kitchen.

“Dad?” Gwen ran to his chair to hug him from behind. “What’re you doing here?”

Once again, Gwen’s dad was seated at the kitchen table across from Aunt May, a pot of coffee between them.

“What?” Gwen’s dad smiled at her. “I’m not allowed to spend time here? You certainly seem fond of doing it…”

“I hope my dad hasn’t been too much trouble, Mrs. Parker.” Gwen gave his pale blonde hair a ruffle. “He’s hard to get rid of.”

“Oh, I haven’t minded his presence too terribly much…” May laughed, sitting up in her chair. “Is there anything I can get you, Gwen?”

“No thank you.”
“Such a lovely girl…” May smiled at her. “You’re all Peter thinks about, you know.”

“Really?” Gwen turned towards the aforementioned boy, grinning. “I’d never have guessed.”

And with that, Peter and Gwen cut the chit-chat and made their way up the stairs. They had precious few hours before Peter had to run off to the Bugle.

Aaaaand here he was at the Bugle. Man, back when Spider-Man had fought a new supervillain twice a week, time had moved like molasses, but now that hardly any villains had shown their faces for two months (dinosaur-men notwithstanding), time zoomed by at breakneck speed. Here Peter was, tapping away at his keyboard while stealing wistful glances at the speedily setting sun out his desk’s window.

Hard to believe he was finally a senior. One more easy year, and Peter would be in college. Think, a year from now, Spider-Man would be swinging around the ESU campus (or, err, leaping from rooftop to rooftop, at least). Peter had never dared plan that far ahead when he first started his superhero career.

Better yet, Peter and Gwen had both turned seventeen back in August, which meant there was only one more year before Spider-Man could look into joining the NYPD’s ranks. Photography was nice and all, but Peter honestly saw it more as a hobby. Law enforcement, on the other hand… Peter could see a career there, especially with Captain Stacy helping get his foot in the door.

Man, though… Peter Parker, a senior. It felt like just yesterday, Peter had been a poor naive junior hitting on Sally Avril, and now look at him –He had a girlfriend who he wasn’t letting down on a regular basis, a job he didn’t suck at… Heck, all those rat bites had totally healed by now. After the Kraven ordeal, Peter had thought he’d be having more jam sessions of Carnage nightmares mixed with flashbacks of being buried alive, but it turned out he’d actually been sleeping well lately (with the occasional Jameson nightmare, that is). In fact, Peter had been feeling so good that he’d quit his therapy with Leo.

Though he might have to resume it if Aunt May ever found herself a boyfriend. Sheesh, Peter couldn’t even begin to imagine who she might pick. Probably someone gross like Dr. Warren…

Speaking of which, work had been fine. Dr. Warren had been marginally less creepy during Peter and Gwen’s internship at the labs, and life at the Daily Bugle was…

“SENSATIONALIST? HOW DARE YOU? THERE’S NOTHING SENSATIONALIST ABOUT ME!”

...normal.

“You call this objective?” Mr. Robertson stormed into the room, hot on the trail of a certain cigar-chomping loudmouth. He slapped down a fresh, hot newspaper onto a desk – nearly spilling poor Betty Brant’s coffee – and read out the headline: “Magic clay tablet holds the secret to immortality.”

Jameson replied with an earsplitting snort. “Look, magic is big right now. The public can’t get enough of that Doctor Weird guy.”

“Strange,” Mr. Robertson said flatly.

“I don’t care how unusual he is – He sells papers!” Jameson threw out his hands, wafting cigar smoke near enough to send Peter into a coughing fit.
Peter fanned himself and tried not to think about the fact that he was working for the print equivalent of BuzzFeed. But somehow, even that didn’t bother him the way it used to.

He was hesitant to say it, but Peter had to admit… life was pretty good right now. Sure, he’d had some rough patches for a while, but things were finally sorting themselves out. No more supervillains. No more hardships. No more loose ends.

Black Cat carefully loosened the end of the crystal necklace from around the mannequin’s neck, then slipped it into the pouch on her hip and quietly climbed out the skylight. She nearly alerted the guard by yawning too loudly.

Ugh, everything was so easy here. The buildings were smaller, the air was cleaner, there were no gun-toting gangs roving the streets… and the rooftops had a distinct lack of ruggedly handsome swashbuckling ones in skintight costumes.

No. Black Cat shook herself from her thoughts. She’d moved past that. New city, new life.

Without further ado, Black Cat pounced onto the window of a different building and crawled back into her penthouse. She almost wished someone had spotted her so there’d be some challenge.

“Felicia.”

Black Cat recoiled, hair on end. Camped out by the open window was an angry, bald, wrinkled man in a bathrobe.

“Oh, D- Daddy, I thought you were asleep.” Felicia casually locked the window behind her and tugged off her white wig, revealing a head of short black hair. Tragically, she’d been forced to ruin her hairdo once they’d assumed their new Canadian identities. Her dad, meanwhile, had opted to rip off the band-aid and shave his head.

“What were you thinking?” he snapped. “You know we don’t need the money anymore! I had more than enough stashed away.”

“Oh, Daddy, must you always assume the worst of me?” As she spoke, Felicia subtly turned herself to keep the hip pouch out of sight. “I was only stretching my legs. It’s so boring here.”

Her dad didn’t seem altogether convinced, but he let it drop.

“And look, I even brought you a present.” Felicia whipped something out of said hip pouch with a metallic clack.

Her father froze. Slowly, reluctantly, his gaze traveled down to the small handgun hovering before him, its barrel pointed safely away. “Felicia.” His face hardened. “You know how I feel about-”

“And you know how I feel about you staying here without any protection.” Felicia practically wrenched it into his hands.

Her father stared at the pistol like it was a parasitic growth. “I shouldn’t even be here.”

Felicia’s bubbliness vanished faster than actual bubbles. “Dad, for the millionth time, you made one mistake, and Spider-Man wanted you to spend the rest of your life rotting away for it!”

But her father failed to return her anger. Instead, he made for his bedroom, the pistol hanging limply at his side.
When it came to hissing, Felicia could outmatch any real cat. “I liked you better before you got old.”

Walter’s only reply was to slam the door behind him.

“Repeat offenders.” Captain Stacy was the kind of teacher who patrolled his auditorium as he spoke, dutifully swatting the heads of any students who dared be on their phones. “A distressingly high percentage of the criminal population. For many, simply being caught is far from enough to deter them from crime completely. To these people, crime is more than a means to an end. It’s addictive. Consuming. It becomes their lifestyle.”

Captain Stacy paced right past Peter, sending goosebumps down his arms. Sheesh, even when the dude was teaching, he still held himself like he was walking his beat.

“And it is for this reason that rehabilitation is equally important as incapacitation. You could fight crime every day until you die of old age, but you’ll have changed nothing unless you change the criminals themselves.” Was it Peter’s imagination, or was Captain Stacy giving him a meaningful stare?

But before Peter could dwell on this, the bell rang. “Class dismissed.” The auditorium emptied itself abnormally quickly. Midtown High had been eerily empty for Peter’s first week of senior year. More and more students were transferring out – Families were getting crazy idea to move to a school district that didn’t suffer daily supervillain attacks.

Of the students that remained, there were Flash and Sha Shan, who were once again going steady, Glory and Kong, who Peter was pretty sure were split up at the moment (though really, you’d need a flowchart to keep track), Rand, who for some mysterious reason had chosen to remain broken up with Sally in favor of some other girl, and then there was MJ, who now spent her days nipping at Mark’s heels. From what Peter understood, Mark himself had finished high school via private classes at the Vault – He’d been a senior last year.

“Peter. Gwen.” The two of them froze mere inches from the auditorium door. “A word, please.”

They promptly made like deer in headlights.

“Do you think he heard about the PDA?” whispered Peter.

“I told you we weren’t being sneaky enough,” Gwen whispered back.

“Hey now, need I remind you which of us was being too noisy, Gwendy?”

“…Don’t ever call me that again.”

“Sorry.”

The two of them practically tripped over each other on their way to the podium.

“D-Did you need something, sir?” Peter swallowed in spite of himself.

“I wanted to talk to you about your career,” said Gwen’s dad, folding his hands behind his back.

“My photography?”

Her dad chuckled. “Your other one.”
“Oh.” It took Peter longer to connect the dots than it really should’ve. “Uh, what about it? I’ve mostly been taking a break like you said.”

“Well...” Gwen’s dad glanced away. “...maybe I was wrong about that. It’s clear by now that you plan on being Spider-Man for the rest of your life.” Slowly, his eyes locked with Peter’s. “Now, I might not have any fancy powers, but think I can relate better than most people. I understand the compulsion to protect and to serve. How it can take over your life. Keep you from being with the people you care about.” His gaze shifted to Gwen.

“Dad...”

“But I learned long ago,” Gwen’s dad continued, “to accept this. I’d never have been able to live with myself working some desk job, even if it meant spending more time with my family. It’s not in my nature.”

“Dad, you know I don’t hold that against you.”

Her dad smiled at her. It wasn’t an expression Peter saw on him too incredibly often. It was a bit weary, but sincere. Warm. It brought to mind the way a different old man had once smiled at his nephew.

“I know you don’t, Gwen. And I love you for that.” His gaze returned to Peter. “Be good to her, Peter. You don’t find a girl like this every day.”


“I’m fine, Gwen. It’s just that-” Her father sighed, then reached into his jacket to retrieve what appeared to be a scrap of paper. “Do either of you know what this is?”

“Huh-? Yeah!” Peter recognized it almost instantly. It was a newspaper clipping, and Peter had overheard enough shouting matches to know the headline by heart: Magic clay tablet holds the secret to immortality. “They’re showing that thing off at the Museum of Natural History, aren’t they?”

Captain Stacy gave a slow nod. “That little clay tablet is immeasurably valuable. Scientists have been studying its text for generations. Back in the Forties, the Sub-Mariner claimed it contained a biochemical formula that ancient Atlantians used to restore their youth.” He looked like he could barely articulate the thought without smirking.

“Oh, well, if some buff guy in a speedo says so…” Peter returned the expression.

“It doesn’t matter if it’s true or not.” Gwen’s dad laughed, shaking his head. “What matters is that certain people believe it’s true, and those people are willing to pay top dollar to get their hands on it. The tablet hasn’t been on exhibit in New York for over thirty years. Its owners have been reluctant to display it after it was nearly stolen...” He took a breath. “...by an infamous thief known as ‘the Cat Burglar.’”

It felt like Peter’s spider-sense was going off in his stomach instead of his head. “Walter Hardy.”

Gwen gave Peter’s hand an instinctive squeeze. “What, you think he’ll try to steal it again? I mean, nobody’s that stupid, right? He must be halfway across the globe by now.”

“Like I said, crime is addictive.” Her dad bowed his head, solemn. “The clay tablet fiasco was the greatest failure of Walter’s career. Even if he himself doesn’t feel the need to even the score...”
Peter’s eyes narrowed. “...his daughter might.”

Alarms blared as a shadowed figure sailed down the halls of the Museum of Natural History, a small clay tablet in tow.

“Someone stop that thief!” A gaggle of security guards tailed behind, but the shadowed figure easily outmatched their speed thanks to its lithe, slender frame.

“Sorry, boys,” the figure said in a sultry voice, “but it’ll take more than that to stop THE VULTURE! BWA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!” The figure sailed past on open window. In the moonlight, shadows that had once seemed curvaceous were revealed to in fact be the ridges of his red, feather-rimmed flying apparatus. “With the power of this tablet at my disposal, I’ll be a young man again. Then we’ll see if I can’t accomplish anything. We’ll see how many successes I can put to my name!”

*Thwip.* But the old buzzard’s flight was impeded by an anchor of webbing on his legs. “Fair warning, dude, I hear that stuff freezes all the muscles in your face.”

“You again?” Vulture swooped into our lovable hero, slicing open the webbing and knocking him through the glass into the African exhibit – which had just been repaired from the time Kraven knocked our lovable hero into it.

“Ah, well, guess you’re not Black Cat.” As he ran his mouth, Spidey hopped to his feet and grabbed some nearby display models to lob at Vultch. The *Gypaetus barbatus* and *Gyps fulvus* models managed to smack Vulture right in his big, fat, bald head. “Not unless she really let herself go since I last saw her.”

“The rest of the Sinister Six was right. I should’ve gone out of my way to kill you!” If it wasn’t for his trusty spider-sense, Spidey would’ve totally forgotten that Vultchy had added laser blasters to his getup. Spider-Man managed to backflip out of the way in time, though sadly the *Evarcha culicivora* model got obliterated.

“Look, Vultch, I know you miss your hair, but you can make the bird motif work without it.” Hmm, there were no giant Christmas trees around, so it looked like the Web-Head would have to think up a new way to beat the Vulture. “All you’ve gotta do is change your codename to the Bald Ea—”

“Shut it, you insufferable brat!” The Vulture took one more dramatic swoop at our hero… and ended up face-planting into the massive web Spidey had woven inside the pit next to the *Galeosoma pallidum* model. The Vulture screamed and flailed with all his elderly might, but another layer of webbing kept him stuck tight.

“Ooh, bummer.” Spidey perched himself on the wall to inspect his handiwork from above. “But don’t feel bad, man. Sure, the Sinister Six rejected you from their latest team, but I hear the Legion of Losers has an opening.”

“Thanks for the help, Spider-Man.” Looked like the generic security guard guys had arrived to haul Vulture’s feathery keister off to jail. Now all Spidey had to do was return that clay tablet to the—

Spider-Man froze. Sprinting up the wall on the opposite side of the museum was a *second* shadowy figure. And this time, something told Spidey those curves weren’t a trick of the light.

“Cat.” The acoustics in this place gave Spider-Man’s voice more reverb than he’d expected.
Black Cat hesitated only a moment to look down on him. Lo and behold, there was the clay tablet resting in her slimy little paws. Vulture must’ve dropped it during the chaos.

Finally. Spider-Man’s heart was racing as fast as it ever had. He dove out of the African exhibit to give chase. And he wasn’t the only one.

“Freeze, Hardy!” A trio of police officers dashed through the museum’s doors and onto the scene, each of them aiming their guns at the feline figure above.

“Get down here and set the tablet on the ground.” The leader of the trio was, naturally, Captain Stacy, with Sergeants Carter and DeWolff flanking him.

Black Cat tried to scurry up to the skylight, climbing with those clawed gloves of hers, but a warning shot from Sergeant Carter made her reconsider.

“What do you even need that thing for?” Spider-Man called out to her. “Getting wrinkles already?” Black Cat’s only reply was a scowl.

With a sudden leap, she made it through the open skylight, the police’s gunfire missing by mere millimeters. Her pursuers were forced to run for the museum’s staircase – excepting those with spider-powers.

Black Cat hadn’t even made it to the far end of the roof when our spectacular hero popped out of the skylight to land across from her.

“I’m surprised at you, Cat.” Spider-Man crouched into a fighting stance. “I honestly didn’t think you’d be stupid enough to show your face in Manhattan again.”

“Out of my way.” Black Cat’s claws extended from her gloves with an audible *shing*.

“What, no flirtatious banter?” Spidey tried to inject his usual bounciness, but it came out as coldness. “I appreciate that, actually. No point pretending I’m the least bit interested in you after what you did.”

“Gosh, I feel so guilty about that.” As she spoke, Black Cat slipped the clay tablet into a pouch on her hip. Aside from the added fashion accessory, she looked much the same as Spidey remembered her. The moon wasn’t out tonight, but that didn’t stop the City That Never Sleeps from illuminating her. She had on the same white wig, the same skintight black jumpsuit with white fuzz trim… But somehow, Black Cat’s snarling face transformed her getup from seductive to menacing. It almost reminded Spidey of the mutated Kraven.

“Y’know, for a while there I actually thought you had feelings for me.” Spider-Man let out a bitter laugh. “But you were using me from the start, weren’t you? I’m not an idiot, Cat – I read the papers. I know the mayor’s tiger necklace thingy went missing right after you quote-unquote ‘helped’ me catch Chameleon.”

“Oh, grow up.” Black Cat was talking tough, but she was keeping a safe distance from Spider-Man. They both knew which of them would win in a fistfight. “Yes, I steal shiny rocks from rich people. Don’t you have any supervillains to be fighting?”

“Well, if that’s all you’d done, then, yeah, I’d probably be pestering Tombstone or something right now.” Spidey took a breath, forcing his fists to stop quivering. “But then you had the nerve to come back and break your dad out of jail *again* when I wasn’t there to stop you. I’d wondered where you’d learned that ‘emotional manipulation’ trick from. He was great at pretending to feel remorse. I bet you two had a real good laugh once my back was turned.”
“Ugh, I can’t believe I ever liked you!” snapped Cat. “You’re a little bundle of self-righteousness, y’know that? My dad made one mistake and now you think you know everything there is to know about him. Do you have idea how hard it was to keep him from turning himself back in? You—You messed with his head!”

“You’re a thief who broke a murderer out of jail! How could you possibly think you’re the good guy here, you walking femme fatale stereotype?” Spider-Man had abandoned his fighting stance in favor of digging his wrist into his forehead. “I never should’ve been so soft on you. You’re not less of a crook than guys like Vulture just because he’s a creepy old dude and you’re, like, the opposite.” He took a tentative step forward, and, to his surprise, Black Cat cowered.

Then again, it made sense. She was boxed in. Her only hope was either to jump down the skylight or leap off the roof, and either way, Cat was no match for Spider-Man’s superhuman speed. They weren’t fighting in a room full of security lasers this time, and Spidey wasn’t holding back whenever she made goo goo eyes at him anymore. He had this.

“S-Spider-Man! Don’t move!”

<insert "That voice..." here>

But oddly enough, that wasn’t what startled him. No, what startled him was that his spider-sense hadn’t gone off. And, seeing as there were no alien symbiotes in sight, that could only mean, despite all appearances, Spidey wasn’t in any actual danger. Whoever was holding that gun had no intention of firing it.

And Spider-Man didn’t have to look to know who was holding it. That voice had been burned into his skull for the past year. The Cat Burglar. Walter Hardy. And if he was aiming his gun without setting off Peter’s spider-sense, that could only mean Walter was bluffing to protect his daughter. At least, that’s the conclusion a calm, rational person would come to.

“You think you can come back here after- after everything you did and point that thing at me?” Spider-Man’s fists were quivering again, and this time, he didn’t have the faintest ability to stop them. It was all he could do to keep from screaming at the top of his lungs like a toddler throwing a tantrum.

Walter may have shaved his head, but Peter could never mistake that face. Walter was even wearing an all-black outfit again, complete with a beanie on his noggin. The same outfit he’d worn in his “Cat Burglar” days. The same outfit he’d worn… last summer. The only change was the modern-looking grappling hook in his hand, no doubt borrowed from his daughter. Walter may have been old, but he’d certainly managed to find his way onto this rooftop with no problems.

“Dad? How did you get here?” Judging from her face, Black Cat was as surprised as Spidey.


“The same reason you came here thirty years ago.” Black Cat sheepishly retrieved the tablet from her pouch, holding it up for her dad to see. “Because if this thing’s legit, you can be young again. You won’t have to carry a gun anymore. And if it’s not, we could at least sell it for a jillion dollars.” She gave a feeble laugh, but the other two failed to join in.

“You need help, Felicia.” Walter held his pistol with trembling hands. “I only stole when I needed to, not for fun. You’re a kleptomaniac.”
Black Cat gave an indignant huff. “I didn’t do this for fun – I did it for you.”

“Spider-Man, please.” But Walter ignored her, turning back to the quivering hero. “Felicia’s not as strong as she seems. I- I can’t stand the thought of her in prison. Please, let her go. I’ll turn myself in again. Just let her go.”

Spider-Man stared at him. Was he for real? Spider-Man didn’t have to do a thing this dirtbag said. He and his daughter both deserved to be in jail. Heck, it was probably her dad’s enabling of her that’d turned Felicia into such a piece of work in the first place.

Then again, if his spider-sense wasn’t going off… maybe Walter really did feel remorse? Maybe he would surrender himself without a fight?

Well, it didn’t matter. If it did come to a fight, Spider-Man could defeat, like, at least six supervillains at once. He could take a pair of normies. Sure, maybe Peter was shaking badly enough and breathing heavily enough to throw him off his game, but so what? This would be a cakewalk. He could do this. In a minute, these two feline-themed weirdos would be webbed up and on their way to prison where they belonged. Uncle Ben’s murderer would face justice once again. All would be right with the world.

Spider-Man’s fists clenched. “You think I’ve never had a gun pointed at my head before? I’ll have the barrel webbed shut before you’ve even pulled the trigger. Give me one good reason I shouldn’t haul the both of you to the police right this second.”

“Oh, I had a feeling you’d say that. That’s why I brought myself a little insurance...” As she spoke, Black Vat reached for the pouch on her hip. “...Peter Parker.”
Martyr

What?

Cat could’ve been going for a weapon, and yet Spider-Man remain paralyzed. He dropped his guard, though, once he realized what was really in Cat’s hand – a photograph. Spider-Man couldn’t quite make it out from across the moonlit rooftop, but three guesses as to what it was. Oh, this day kept getting better and better…

“The weird kid who takes my pics for the Bugle? That’s your best guess?” Peter tried his best to sound innocent. He really did. “They debunked that months ago. Parker was just-”

“-wearing a Halloween costume, I know.” Black Cat gave a wry smile. “Sorry, kid, didn’t fool me for a second. I went as myself for Halloween, too.”

“Oh, for the love of-”

“And this pic here? Not from Halloween.” Cat tossed the picture to Spider-Man, who caught it in midair.

Now that he could see it close up, Spider-Man took a good, long look. Crud. What Spidey had here was, naturally, a photo of a half-dressed Spider-Man plopped over on his bed, his mask tossed to the floor. When-? The Fourth of July. The Prowler thing. That night had left Peter so tuckered out, he’d… he’d let his guard down.

“There’s plenty more where that came from on my hard drive, Parker.” As she spoke, Black Cat moved towards her dad.

Spider-Man found himself crumpling the photo into a ball. Beneath his mask, his cheeks were growing hot. How could he have been so reckless? He’d always thought climbing into his bedroom window at night might be risky – especially after MJ’s revelation to him – but Peter had figured it was fine so long as his spider-sense didn’t go off. He’d never counted on the supervillain being armed with a camera.

“You really showed your hand with the way you treated my dad,” said Cat. “Between your hate-boner for him and Venom calling you out on the news, it didn’t exactly take Reed Richards to figure out you’re the Parker kid.”

Spider-Man said nothing.

“Look, I get why you have it out for my dad.” Black Cat gave a shrug. “But blood’s thicker than water. Sorry.”

“Oh, well, at least you’re sorry.”

Cat gave her white hair a toss. “Honestly, I’m disappointed. You went from rugged mystery man to dorky teenager in one fell swoop. But now that I’ve got your web-shooters in my purse… here’s the deal, jailbait.” From her face, you’d think Felicia had just had a canary for lunch. “If my dad or I get arrested, I’ll give the police an SD card full of incriminating photos of you, and then I’ll direct them to my hideout where the rest are stashed. Of course, you could cut the knot by simply killing me, but we both know how you feel about murderers. So if you want to keep your secret identity, your best bet is to let my dad and me escape.” She pursed her lips. “It won’t be very heroic of you, but I’d hate to think what would happen to your aunt if Tombstone caught wind of
these photos.”

Cat paused for a reply. She received none.

What was Spider-Man going to do? What could he do? He wished he could’ve stood here debating it for another half hour, but something told him he didn’t have all the time in the-

“Freeze.”

The trio of police officers burst through a door onto the rooftop. Even without his spider-sense going off, Spidey found himself flinching. He’d totally forgot these guys in the chaos.

Capatin Stacy fixed his pistol directly between Walter’s eyes. “Put your weapon on the ground and your hands in the air, Hardy. No one has to get-

Peter’s ears exploded. He was so disoriented and- and everything moved so fast that, even looking back on it, he wasn’t entirely sure what’d happened. Peter’s best guess was that Sergeant Carter had fired his gun – presumably a warning shot, seeing as no one got hit – and then Walter had gotten spooked and fired back.

Now, Spider-Man had been in the middle of his fair share of firefights before. Guns no longer frightened him the way they had on his first night out. In fact, Spidey had kind of developed a technique for dealing with them. Basically, if his spider-sense went off, then Spider-Man got the heck out of the way and disarmed his assailant from a safe distance with his web-shooters. But if his spider-sense didn’t go off, then Spidey could take a more direct approach.

-Crack. Everything had gone white, and when the world faded back in, Spider-Man was looming over the crumpled form of Walter Hardy. The man was nursing a broken nose and an even more broken gun barrel. For a second, Peter let himself feel relief.

There was a problem with his technique, though. See, Peter’s spider-sense only went off if he was in danger.

The shriek of DeWolff turned Peter’s head. Where the trio of officers had once been, now only two remained standing.

Peter’s breathing stopped. He wanted to sprint across the rooftop, wanted to make sure he was okay, but… Peter couldn’t move. This wasn’t happening. Not today.

Not to him.

Peter had never heard Uncle Ben’s last words. He’d been too busy waiting at the library, bitching and moaning about his ride being late. Uncle Ben was dead now. Murdered by a petty criminal – the pettiest Peter had ever had the misfortune of meeting – and if Peter had stopped being a cesspit of angst for two seconds, that petty criminal would be behind bars right now and Uncle Ben would still be alive. Uncle Ben was dead, and Peter could’ve easily stopped it, and no matter how responsible Peter acted from then on out, no matter how many other people were rescued by Spider-Man, nothing would ever, ever change that fact.

But Peter had at least thought, by being Spider-Man, he could prevent that evil from ever happening again.

For a dazed second, Peter thought the Carnage symbiote had crawled its way onto the museum rooftop. Whatever kind of bullet had been in Hardy’s barrel, it’d flown straight through the body
armor.

From Peter’s perspective, the other two officers were moving through molasses. The bullet had traveled far more quickly than any human being could possibly react. At least, any normal human being.

“Captain Stacy!” Peter was at his side in a heartbeat. The wound was sealed with webbing before he’d even realized what he was doing. It was okay, it was okay. Peter had saved countless other people before. He could do this.

“P… Peter.” Captain Stacy met his eyes. That was good. He still had some strength left. Dude was tough. And his voice was soft enough to not carry across the rooftop, thankfully.

“I’ve got you, sir. I’ve got you.” Peter startled himself with his own voice. It hadn’t sounded this shaky since… since last summer. “We’re gonna get you to a hospital.”

“Peter...” With a start, Peter realized that Captain Stacy was squeezing his hand. He’d even managed to sit up a little. See, everything was gonna be okay. Sealing the wound like that had really helped. “Be good to her, son.”

“Yes, sir.” Peter put a hand beneath Captain Stacy’s waist. He’d studied first aid in his free time. He knew how to carry injured people. Spider-Man must’ve rushed hundreds to the ER by now. Easy peasy. “Now save your strength, Capt- Captain Stacy?”

“She loves you… so… m...” Captain Stacy had kept his gaze fixed on Peter’s mask, but something about the man’s eyes was changing.

“No. No, no, no- You’re gonna be okay, sir. Sir, I- I...” The words trailed off. Captain Stacy wasn’t squeezing his hand anymore. After a moment, Peter slowly, gently returned him to the ground.

Back on the far side of the rooftop, Black Cat stood, hand over her mouth. “Dad? Wh-What do we-?”

“I surrender.” Without another word, Walter Hardy dropped to his knees and set his weapon on the ground. There was a clack as the pistol hit the pavement, followed by a second clack as the ammunition clattered to its side.

“Walter Hardy.” Nonetheless, Sergeant DeWolff kept her own weapon trained at his forehead. She took a tentative step forward. “You have the right to—"

Crack. Something fast and red collided with Walter’s gut.

“Why?” Crack. Peter’s other fist found its way into Walter’s chest. “Why do you DO this to people? WHY?” Crack. And a third time. “Look me in the eyes and answer me, dammit!” Crack.

DeWolff started to run towards them, but Carter held out an arm to stop her.

Crack. “Answer me! Is it for an old piece of clay? For a stupid CAR?”

If you’d asked him in that moment, Peter would’ve sworn he was still wearing the Venom symbiote. He could hear its voice loud and clear in his ears. By now, Walter Hardy was nothing but a misshapen, sniveling old man hobbled over on the pavement. Frankly, he was lucky Peter was restraining himself as much as he was, or else Walter would be nothing but a smear of blood and goo right now.
Peter raised his fist one final time. “Answer me-!” But before it could collide with its target, his spider-sense went off yet again, and he found himself dodging a claw-swipe.

“Don’t you touch him.” Now there was a snarling, hissing Black Cat standing between the criminal and justice.

“What is wrong with you?” Spider-Man would’ve been screaming at the top of his lungs if his throat wasn’t so hoarse. “You’re still defending him?”

“He was trying to protect me!” Cat snapped. “This is my responsibility, not his.” She bowed her head a bit, though her guard didn’t drop for a second. “I owe my dad. I owe him more than you’ll ever know. I’ll do whatever it takes to protect him.” She took a breath, then raised her chin back up, meeting Spider-Man’s scowl. “I knew you weren’t as high and mighty as you pretended. I knew you’d be out for my dad’s blood someday.” Her eyes. Peter had never seen them so... so feral. “Well, if you want to beat my dad to death, you’d better make sure you do it to me, too, because I’ve got a whole lot to tell these officers, kid.”

He couldn’t breathe. Peter couldn’t breathe. The whole world felt surreal. Like everything that’d happened since the spider-bite had all been one big, wacky dream, and he was fixing to wake up any second now. His secret identity had always felt so untouchable. Even when Venom had been accusing him, Peter at least had some wiggle room for an alibi. But now...

Behind his mask, Peter’s eyes traveled from the still form of Captain Stacy to the pair of officers gaping at him.

“So what’s it gonna be, Parker?” Despite her father’s groans, Black Cat retrieved the grappling hook from his belt. “Are you going to compromise your precious morals for once in your life, or are you going to put your loved ones in danger?” She aimed it at a faroff building. “We both know there’s really no choice.”

Peter bowed his head. “You’re right,” he said, hoarse. “There’s no choice.”

By midnight, a veritable galaxy of police cars had surrounded the Museum of Natural History. Officers swarmed the building from every angle, drowned in an ocean of howling sirens. And then, amid the chaos, the officers let out startled cries as a pair of humanoid figures tumbled down from the museum’s roof. Instead of completing their course to the ground, however, the figures ended up strung upside down from a lamp post. Upon closer inspection, they turned out to be a pair of unfortunate people, a man and a woman, wrapped tight in web-cocoons.

A couple officers yelled out and shined their flashlights on the museum’s wall. A red and blue figure was hanging off it, gazing down at the crowd below.


“What are you doing?” Felicia shrieked up at him. “Tombstone’ll kill everyone you know!”

Spider-Man remained in place on the wall, peering down at her. “And then,” he said simply, “you’d have even more blood on your hands.”

At first, Black Cat said nothing, simply bowing her head. But then, she hissed, “Fine. You’re right, I wouldn’t do that to you. There is no SD card. You called my bluff.”

On the last word, her web-cocoon was sliced open, freeing the clawed gloves beneath. What-?
Ugh, how had Spider-Man forgot those? *Stupid.*

Black Cat lunged for her dad, but the swarm of cops sent her dashing in the opposite direction. She ended up zooming for the rooftops via grapple line, narrowly twirling around gunfire. Of course, Spider-Man swooped after her, webs firing left and right from his wrists, but a quickly-dropped smoke pellet made aiming pretty much impossible, and by the time the air cleared, Felicia was long gone.

Alone on the rooftop, Spider-Man’s fist crattered the cement below.

Sergeant DeWolff had had a long day. The kind of day even the strongest cup of coffee couldn’t fix. On top of—of *everything else* that’d just happened, now she and a half dozen other officers had to spend the rest of their night hunting down some floozy in a fetish suit. This had become a distressingly common occurrence in Manhattan.

But usually, when this kind of thing happened… they had Captain Stacy there to direct them. DeWolff buried her eyes. That name alone was enough to give her a migraine.

“Heh. Maybe we could get some bloodhounds to track her down?” At DeWolff’s side, a smirk crossed Sergeant Carter’s face. “It’d be fitting.” He chuckled to himself.

DeWolff’s face hardened. “You won’t be laughing much longer, Stan. I have to report you.”

*That* wiped away his smirk. “For what?”

“You know damn well ‘for what.’” She had to stop herself from grabbing him by the collar. “Warning shots are against policy.”

“The suspect was armed!”

“You provoked him. We both know a man like Walter Hardy wouldn’t kill unless he absolutely had to.” DeWolff forced herself to take a steadying breath. “I’m sorry, Stan, but I have to do right by George. Even if it means your badge.”

“I…” Carter failed to meet her eyes. “I understand, Jean.”

The police van hadn’t left yet, and so Walter had nothing to do but sniffle and sputter alone in its closed-off back area. At least Felicia had escaped. Walter knew she’d be back, though. She’d drag him out of prison just as she’d done before. Her loyalty was astounding. Walter was only alive right now because Felicia had stopped Spider-Man’s assault.

He wished she hadn’t.

“God… please…” Walter fell to his knees, doing his best to hold his hands together despite the cuffs. “Forgive me, Lord.”

For a moment, there was no answer.

And then a cold, raspy voice said, “He can’t help you anymore, Walter.”

Walter stumbled backwards, crying out for the officers, but nobody came. The back of the van was filling with thick, neon green fog at a dizzying rate. Within seconds, Walter felt like he was floating in a featureless void. Alone.
Until a shadowy figure emerged.

“W-Who are you-?”

“Your sins are overpowering, Walter.” The figure was drawing closer… and closer… “I’ve hungered for so long, I can smell them. I can taste them...”

Walter screamed one final time, and then all was quiet.

A moment later, the police burst into the back of the vehicle, guns aimed and ready, but all they discovered was an empty van and a cold body.

Peter sat on a random, nondescript rooftop, hugging himself. His red and blue spandex did little to protect him from the autumn breeze.

A moment later, a figure in an identical Spider-Man costume dropped down before him in the darkness.

“Had your fill of swinging?” Peter started towards him.

“Yeah.” The guy yanked off his mask to reveal Hobie Brown’s face underneath. “Fun as it is, I’m not eager to risk falling to my death again…”

“Well, you did great,” said Peter, tugging his own mask on tighter. No need to mask his voice, though, seeing as Hobie barely knew Peter. “Sorry I can’t explain more, but trust me, you really helped me out.”

Specifically, Peter had paraded around in front of some officers by the police station, snapping pics while Hobie swung overhead in the spare costume. Sure, Black Cat had probably been truthful about her threat being a bluff, but it couldn’t hurt to go that extra mile with Peter’s alibi.

Yep. This was an integral part of preserving his secret ID and totally not an excuse to procrastinate on returning home.

“Just be sure to put that grappling hook back where you found it. Not a fan of stealing, but this was kind of an emergency.” With that, Peter extended a hand. “And Hobie? Sorry things went south with your girl, man.”

“It’s cool.” Hobie accepted the shake. “I’m over it.”

After that, Hobie returned the spare costume, Peter carried him down to the sidewalk, the two went their separate ways… and then Peter was out of excuses.

Head pounding. Vision blurry. Arms ready to fall off. Peter hadn’t even been hit once tonight, and he was hurting more than he’d ever hurt in his last battle with the Sinister Six.

Peter climbed through the window and collapsed to the floor, tossing his mask wherever it fell. On sheer impulse, he checked to make sure no one had spied on him. Guess tonight was his wakeup call about that…

The sudden tune of The Itsy-Bitsy Spider made Peter jump. Despite his aching muscles, he frantically fished his phone out his utility belt. What was currently on the screen was one of several dozen texts Gwen had sent within the past hour. Some of them were novels, but this one merely
Are you ok? Dads not answering either. Whats going on? News said there were gunshots. Pls text me back. I love you.

Peter stared at it for longer than he’d meant to. What should he say? What could he say? Peter couldn’t even bring himself to think about tonight.

At least Aunt May was asleep. Peter envied her.

May had wanted a child for as long as she could remember. She and Ben had continued their attempts long after the doctors told them to give up hope. They’d spent money they hadn’t had on dim promises and unproven treatments. In the end, it hadn’t happened. May Parker was not a mother.

But then Peter came into their life, and May cooked his meals and did his laundry and hugged him tight every time he came home crying from elementary school. So May was a lot like a mother.

But sometimes, when she woke up at night in a cold sweat, the imagined roars of police sirens still ringing in her ears, May couldn’t resist asking herself… what if she wasn’t supposed to be a mother? What if, no matter how hard she tried, May’s attempts would always end in failure because… because she wasn’t intended for it?

A mother wouldn’t lose her nerve in front of her child. A mother would’ve been the one consoling her sobbing son about Ben, not the other way around. And now… now May was struggling to even look at Gwen. The instant those terrible words had left the officer’s mouth… the instant an inconsolable Gwen had been guided to her doorstep, May had worried her heart would give out again.

Look at her. Here May was, struggling to compose herself when she was the adult who’d gone through this before. Gone through it more times than… than anyone should have to. How must Peter feel? He’d been in desperate need of a man like George, only to have him snatched away. What message did that send? What did that say about this world where people these days thought it was okay to put on strange costumes and run around causing anarchy?

These thoughts were but a fraction of the ones swirling through May’s head right now, but she couldn’t let herself dwell on any of them. Any but one – Right now, she needed to be with her… nephew.

“Peter, dear-” She gave his bedroom door a feeble knock. “-we need to talk. Something- Something’s happened. And… Gwen’s here in the guest room.”

Gwen had been thinking about orphans lately. Peter was an orphan. Eddie was an orphan. They’d been Gwen’s best friends since they were little. She’d seen the impact it’d had on them growing up. It’d kept Gwen up at night. Getting kidnapped by supervillains had been nowhere near as unpleasant as that bubbling sense of dread in Gwen’s stomach every time her dad came home half an hour late.

Her dad. The pain rocked Gwen’s chest again, and she had to turn over under the covers. Gwen stared at the bedroom wall and thought of nothing. She was staying in the Parker household’s spare room. Mrs. Parker had fixed a bed. It was the quietest Gwen had ever seen her.

What would happen to Gwen now? Was she going to England to be with her next of kin? Gwen couldn’t leave Manhattan. What about Peter?
Peter. More chest pain. It was the oddest thing. There was a person she wanted to see more than anything else on the planet right now, and yet Gwen couldn’t muster the strength to walk to his room.

In fact, she could hardly even muster the strength to turn over beneath the covers to keep her side from getting sore.

The sun had not yet risen when the guest room door creaked open. By the time the hallway’s light revealed the bed’s occupant, Peter could hardly think straight. Pure instinct took over, and the next thing he knew, he’d joined the girl on the mattress, hugging her as tight as he dared.

Blearily, Gwen said, “You’re not out… looking for Black Cat…?”

The hug became a degree or two more daring. “I’ve got other responsibilities now.”
The crash of a shattered window. The screech of an alarm. The thwip of three criminals being webbed upside-down to a lamp post, all of them inside one big cocoon. The crooks bobbed in the air, watching Spider-Man swing past a building and out of sight.

“Well, that was over fast,” said one of them.

“He didn’t even say a word to us,” said another. “Ain’t he supposed to be, like, jokey and stuff?”

“Yeah,” said the third. “I hope he’s okay.”

“...and so we return George Stacy to the earth which is mother of us all. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Amen.”

Two and a half months ago, Gwen had felt the impulse to hop this graveyard’s fence, bolt to a headstone, and frantically claw at the dirt underneath. She’d thought that if she dug hard enough, she could bring the one she loved back to her.

Gwen was feeling a similar impulse today.

The march to the cemetery had left Gwen’s legs burning. What she really wanted was to go home and lie alone in bed for a week, but instead here she was standing in the freezing wind, surrounded by a crowd of hundreds. Gwen had never seen so many police uniforms in her life.

Despite the crowd’s size, it remained as silent as the grave it’d gathered around. But it was a silence broken by gunfire. Gwen flinched, almost screamed, only to realize that they were blanks. Part of the ceremony. She was an idiot.

Gwen stared at her father’s grave and felt nothing. In fact, she felt so much nothing that it made her cry. How many more funerals was she planning on attending before she graduated high school? The one for Harry’s dad had happened just yesterday. Gwen was wearing the exact same dress and everything. Was there a point to putting it back into storage, or should she leave it hanging in her closet for quicker access?

Gwen’s feet crunched over red leaves beneath red trees until she was stopped by a head of red hair.

“Gwen.” Mary Jane’s voice was barely a whisper. Immediately, she trapped Gwen in her arms. Gwen couldn’t breathe, but she didn’t feel like saying this aloud. She didn’t feel like saying much of anything aloud lately.

“You alone right now?” Even in a funeral dress, MJ looked like she belonged on a magazine cover.

“My relatives from England flew in on short notice, but- but I’m not really close with them, to be honest.” Gwen managed to make her voice work, though it was a struggle to keep it from cracking.

“Where’s Tiger?” MJ turned to skim the crowd. “I haven’t seen him all day.”

Gwen shrank. “You know how Peter is. His... hobby keeps him away sometimes.”

“Well...” MJ turned back to Gwen, her face growing more somber. “I am your only other friend who know about Peter’s ‘hobby.’ If you ever need to talk about it, I’m h-”
“There you are!” The leaves were stomped into dust by a man with wild black hair, a scraggily beard, and eyes that bulged almost as much as his gut. The most thought he’d given to his attire was, apparently, a black t-shirt. “We’re leavin’, Mary. I got places to be.”

“Phil!” MJ spun towards him, hissing through her teeth. “I’m trying to talk to-”

“You already made me suffer through the proceedings. We’re leaving now.”

“Let me go! I know how to walk!” Mary Jane was forced to wrench her arm free of his grasp.

“You should be thankful I drove you here in the first place.” Their voices grew both fainter and more heated.

Gwen glowered in the man’s direction, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. Christ, she’d always thought MJ had been exaggerating about her dad. If Peter had been here, he’d have a dozen snarks ready to cut that creep down a peg. Maybe he’d even manage to make Gwen smile.

“Miss Stacy?” Gwen flinched at the sound of another man’s voice from behind her, though this one was considerably less grating. She spun to discover a stubble-chinned ginger, probably in his thirties, giving her a sad smile. His suit and hair were disheveled, but his posture was immaculate. Every part of his body language from the way he moved his hands to the shape he made with his eyebrows felt somehow calculated. It was such a weird detail that it took Gwen another moment to notice the circular, crimson shades and the white cane.

“H-Hello.” A greeting managed to escape Gwen’s throat.

“Matt Murdock.” The man extended a hand in her general direction. “I was an associate of your father’s. His work was inspiring. I’m very lucky to have known him.” Even the tone of his voice felt carefully planned. This guy must’ve been a door-to-door salesman or something.

“Thank you.” Gwen proceeded to give the limpest handshake of her life.

“I… lost my father, too, when I was a kid.” But then the man hesitated. His face soured, like he’d said more than he’d meant to. “You know that priest who gave today’s sermon? I’d point him out to you, but I’d probably end up pointing at a tree instead.”

Gwen laughed purely for the sake of being polite.

“Father Lantom helped me through a dark time in my life,” the man continued. “I sincerely recommend you talk to him.”

“Thank you.” Oh, good, just what Gwen needed, therapy from a Catholic. As if she didn’t feel guilty enough already.

It wasn’t until the conversation ended and the man was out of sight that Gwen realized all she’d done was dully repeat herself. Gwen’s brain was stuck on autopilot and she didn’t know how to turn it off.

“Miss Stacy!”

Gwen hadn’t had a minute to herself before another man ran up to offer condolences. It’d happened so many times today that Gwen barely registered it anymore – Even Peter’s grouchy old boss had muttered some apologies to her – though at least this time, the sentiment wasn’t coming from a total stranger.
“I can’t imagine what you’re going through right now!” Dr. Warren hugged Gwen even tighter than MJ had. The man was stronger than he looked. “Listen, if you ever need to talk, I’m here for you. Here, I can get you my phone number.” He released her so he could fish through his pockets.

“I’ll be alright, sir,” Gwen said hurriedly. “You don’t need to do that.”

Dr. Warren sighed. “If you’re sure.” He gave her one last pat on the shoulder before walking away. “Take care of yourself, little lady.”

“I will.” Gwen watched him go with a growing frown. Poor guy. He meant well, but his social skills were lacking, that was all. Truth be told, though, Gwen was getting more than a little tired of all these weird older men running up to her out of the blue.

“Gwen! I’m here!” Cute teenage boys, on the other hand, were totally fine. This one was finger-combing his short brown hair as he buttoned up his dress shirt.

“Peter!” For the first time that morning, Gwen felt something besides cold and dead. For once, she was the one who initiated the hug. “I was starting to think you wouldn’t show up.”

“Hey, I promised I’d come, didn’t I? What kind of jerk would I have to be to not keep a promise?” Peter gave her headband an affectionate stroke. “Sorry I didn’t get here sooner, though.”

Gwen leaned into his ear to whisper, “Did you save someone’s life?”

Peter glanced away, bashful. “Five people’s lives, actually.”

“I love you.”

Thwip. Spider-Man sailed past a skyscraper. He didn’t cast the next web-line until he was a mere handful of feet from the pavement. It was the morning after the funeral. Gwen had asked to be alone for a while, and so Peter had thrown on his spare costume and gone on patrol. It was the only thing he could truly focus on right now.

Without meaning to, Spidey found himself swinging to the NYPD’s main precinct and perching on the building’s side. It must’ve been an unconscious impulse. Normally, Spider-Man didn’t go within ten meters of any place swarming with armed officers happy to arrest him, but he guessed he’d been paranoid ever since the Black Cat ordeal.

Spider-Man didn’t know what he’d expected to discover by eavesdropping on the police station, but he’d at least been hoping that he wouldn’t get spotted. No such luck.

“Spider-Man.”

“Uh, hey, Sergeant DeWolff.” Spider-Man crawled towards the streets so he could meet the woman’s eyes (albeit his were upside-down).

“It’s Captain DeWolff now,” DeWolff said without a hint of joy.


“Spider-Man, listen.” DeWolff took a breath, rubbed her temples, and said, “I appreciate everything you’ve done for this city. I know the Bugle prints lies about you, and I know George worked together with you… but the NYPD can’t continue that.”

Spidey jolted. “You’re not about to try to arrest me, are you?”
DeWolff shook her head. “I’m only asking you to stop. Stop doing our job for us. You’re doing more harm than good.”

“I save people’s lives,” Spider-Man said tightly. “How am I doing more-?”

“Well, you didn’t save Walter Hardy’s life.” DeWolff retrieved a photograph from the folds of her uniform. “He was found dead in our police van. Coroner says it was caused by chlorine gas.”

“Yeah, I heard.” With everything else going on in his life, Peter had barely had time to think about that. Uncle Ben’s killer was no longer breathing? It was a lot to take in. Peter wasn’t about to shed a tear or anything, but it was a lot to take in.

“And Hardy’s not the only one,” DeWolff continued. “The same thing’s been happening to dozen of criminals over the past few days. The culprit’s not exactly secretive about it, either. He calls himself the Sin-Eater.”

Beneath his mask, Spidey raised an eyebrow. “What’s a ‘sin-eater’? Besides a great name for a metal album, I mean.”

DeWolff shrugged. “It’s some ancient ritual where a guy eats food to symbolize cleansing of sins.”

“You mean like those Jesus-crackers that Christians eat?”

“Sure.”

DeWolff turned the photo so Spider-Man could get a better look, but all he could make out was a humanoid figure covered in pea green fog. Who could that be? Mysterio? No, the Sin-Eater’s shtick didn’t sound nearly theatrical enough.

“I know you don’t kill, but not every Frank Castle wannabe follows your code of ethics. The Punisher was bad enough, but now we’re getting copycats with actual superpowers.” DeWolff shook her head. “Sin-Eater’s fog kills anyone who breathes it, and we think he can use it to teleport, too. He’s giving us a real headache, that’s for sure. So please, Spider-Man, if you really care about the people of New York, you need to lead by example and stop your vigi-”

DeWolff glanced upwards, only to discover she was talking to a blank wall.

“...Did he just do a Batman-Gordon disappearing thing on me? He did!”

The Daily Bugle’s elevator had required repairs following the Rhino’s visit to the building. The opportunity had, apparently, been taken to add a bit of music so that the passengers wouldn’t get bored on the journey to the Bugle’s headquarters. Peter must have listened to that music a million times, and yet he couldn’t for the life of him recall what it sounded like. Even right now, as he was listening to it.

That photograph… That green mist… Walter Hardy would never kill again, and yet Peter felt no less uneasy. Now the man who took Uncle Ben and Captain Stacy from them would never face justice. Instead, he was murdered in cold blood without a trial on the whims of some lunatic. Maybe DeWolff had a point, but what was Peter supposed to do about it? He’d long ago proven he couldn’t go ten minutes without trying to save someone’s life.

*Ding*. Peter exited the elevator and walked towards his desk on pure impulse. He’d been off in his own little world all morning, but his ears perked up at the sound of Jameson and Mr. Robertson having at it. That sound was as constant as the elevator music, but you tend to pay more attention
when people are talking about you.

“...make Spider-Man the most hated name on the planet!” Jameson was saying, shaking his fist in the air.

“Jameson, every eyewitness report says Spider-Man was on the cops’ side.”

“Oh yeah?” Jameson snorted smoke in Mr. Robertson’s direction. “Maybe you forgot the media blitz over that Punisher fella? I thought the talk shows would never shut up about him.”

Ah, yes, that. Half a year ago, the family of war vet Frank Castle had been gunned down by mobsters in Central Park, and Frank had decided to retaliate by gunning down every last mobster, crooked cop, and jaywalker in New York. The media had had a field day with it, calling him “the Punisher.” Spider-Man hadn’t done anything about the Punisher at the time – He’d been a bit preoccupied fighting scorpions, vampires, and Smythes – but when the guy moved his operation to Hell’s Kitchen, he reportedly ran afoul of the local masked crimefighter, Daredevil. Now Frank was in Ravencroft, and every other would-be murderous vigilante in Hell’s Kitchen knew they would not be tolerated.

...Well, shoot, that was exactly what Spider-Man ought to do to Sin-Eater.

Mr. Robertson folded his arms. “And your point is?”

“This Sin-Easter guy is no different!” said Jameson, waving his hands around. “No matter how much of a goody-two shoes Spider-Man pretends to be, he’s encouraging more and more dangerous behavior from others. All that menace does is make things worse! Heck, if he hadn’t been there, Hardy wouldn’t have been so spooked when the police arrived, and Captain Stacy would still be-”

He halted mid-sentence. Jameson, had, apparently, noticed Peter’s presence in the room for the first time, along with Peter’s trembling hands.

“Parker.” The cigar fell from Jameson’s mouth. “I didn’t realize you were- I- I know you were close with- I didn’t mean to bring it up-”

Christ, Jameson hadn’t sounded this gentle after Spider-Man saved his son’s life. Peter managed a slow nod. “It’s alright, sir. I’m okay.” By “okay,” Peter of course meant “not sure if I want to cry or just punch something, probably you.”

“Well, the important thing is that you showed up to work.” Jameson walked over to give Peter a pat on the shoulder. Peter had to keep himself from shuddering. “I’ll be honest, Parker, I wasn’t expecting you back so soon. That demonstrates real dedication. I’m proud of you.” Jameson’s Hitler mustache curled upwards. “You’ll make a fine journalist someday, kid. Lord knows America’s in need of those. In fact, since I’m such a nice guy, I’ll give you some time out of the office for once. How’d you like to take pictures of a charity event in Clinton?”

“Sure- I mean, thank you, sir!” Peter couldn’t nod fast enough. He hadn’t received an overabundance of hours lately, so Peter wasn’t in a position to turn his nose up at a paycheck. “Just lemme run to the bathroom first.” Hopefully it wasn’t too apparent that he needed in there solely to regain his composure.

As Peter walked away, Jameson’s voice resumed reverberating around the office: “No more buts, Robbie. The next headline’s decided – ‘IS SPIDER-MAN TO BLAME FOR POLICE CAPTAIN’S DEATH?’ Ha! Readers love rhetorical questions!”
Peter had to admit, he wasn’t super familiar with this particular chunk of Manhattan. Usually, he kept his patrols in Lower Manhattan in case he ever had to return to Queens on short notice. And also because he was real stingy with his web-fluid. You wouldn’t believe the price of liquid cement in this economy…

“It is my honor and privilege to foot the bill for this center’s renovations,” Wilson Fisk announced as he freed the crumpled hand of the homeless shelter’s owner. The two of them were standing together on its front steps, mugging the cameras. “With my contribution, the good people here can continue their excellent work towards providing comfortable living conditions for those who need them most.”

Well, this photo op wasn’t as cushy as the last one Peter had bumped into Fisk at, but Peter appreciated that he didn’t have to change into a stuffy suit. He much preferred his iconic blue t-shirt.

“Sheesh…” Looked like Peter would have to bust out the wide-angle lens.

Okay, he knew he liked to crack wise about Fisk’s circumference, but the dude seriously needed medical intervention. At the very least, Fisk didn’t deserve mockery. Sad as it was to admit, one rich guy handing out tiny fractions of his income to charity probably did about as much good in the world as all the work Spider-Man would ever do. The Web-Head was great at saving lives, but not so great at causing widespread social change.

Unless you counted the Bugle turning the public against him. Today’s headline was still floating behind Peter’s eyelids. The real kicker was that, even if Jameson himself didn’t know it, he happened to be absolutely right. Peter had made Captain Stacy promise to do everything in his power to bring Black Cat and her dad to justice. That was why he was there that night.

But Peter was shaken back to the present by the sound of screams. Out of nowhere, in broad daylight, a thick, neon green fog had accumulated at the foot of the homeless shelter. The crowd scattered, shrieking – though fortunately it hadn’t been very large to begin with. With the path cleared, a figure emerged.

“Wilson Fisk.” In the direct sunlight, he was no longer draped in shadows, allowing all the word to see his skeletal, green, gangrenous face and his tattered, dark violet cloak. “Your sins are beyond counting. You should have realized their scent would be irresistible to me.”

“Don’t just stand there! Call the police already!” Fisk, evidently, chose to respond to the crisis by barking orders at his underlings, most of whom had already fled. In the man’s defense, though, he didn’t exactly seem capable of sprinting anywhere.

“Any last confessions, pig?” The Sin-Eater raised his hand, causing a trail of gas to trickle towards Fisk, and then-

*Wham.* “Dude, come on!” -a certain spider-themed hero rammed into the crook, swinging on a web-line to add some oomph to his kick. First Hobgoblin, now this? Jameson really did have a knack for sending his photographers to the sites of future supervillain attacks. “You’re seriously trying to kill a philanthropist giving to charity? Who else is too sinful for you? Santa Claus? The Pillsbury Doughboy?” Spider-Man gave Fisk a hurried look of apology. “Uh, that wasn’t a fat joke.” Freudian slip…

“Spider-Man…” When knocked on his side, a skeletal, violet body was visible beneath the Sin-Eater’s cloak. The man- no, the creature pulled itself to its feet. “I thought you were a hero, and yet here you are defending this man. *This man*, of all people.” His glowing blue eyes narrowed. “I
understand now. You are every bit as sinful as he.”

“I’m sure that makes perfect sense inside the sea of spaghetti floating around where your brain should be, but-” Spider-Man didn’t have time to finish his amazing quip before a stream of gas shot from the Sin-Eater’s palms. His spider-sense gave him time to dodge, but Spidey hadn’t expected the gas to spread so fast. He sprang onto a nearby wall, only to tumble off in a coughing fit.

“That’s right, breathe it all in.” Sin-Eater took a step towards him. “It makes your sins more succulent.”

Ugh, how did Spider-Man make such a stupid mistake? DeWolff had warned him this gas was deadly. Recent events kept throwing him off his game.

“And now to finish what I started...” Sin-Eater turned his head, only to discover that Fisk had vanished and a limousine was speeding down the road. “Hmm. Another time, then.” He called out after the vehicle: “Run all you like, Fisk! No one can escape God’s judgment!” With another wave of his arm, he enveloped himself in his own gas.

Wait, DeWolff had also said Sin-Eater could teleport through that stuff. Maybe if Spidey hurried…? Yes! He dug into his utility belt and retrieved a handy dandy spider-tracer, managing to toss it onto Sin-Eater’s cloaks mere moments before it vanished in the fog.

Spider-Man had done it. “Alright! I-” Wham. He hit the pavement, hacking his lungs out. With that tracer, he could track the villain down, but… only if Spidey didn’t die first.

Everything went dark.

Spider-Man awoke to the wind on his face. He jolted upright, shielding his eyes from the evening sun. From the looks of things, he was on the shelter’s rooftop. But how had he gotten here?

“You’re lucky I reached you in time.”

Spidey spun to find someone standing over him. Someone tall, red, and musclebound. “Daredevil!”

Spider-Man had never seen the infamous Devil of Hell’s Kitchen before outside of blurry news photos, but he had no doubt this was him. The overlapping pair of D’s emblazoned on the dude’s chest were kind of a giveaway. Not to mention the blood red lenses on his mask’s eyes and the pair of horns sticking out its forehead. Whatever fabric the guy had made his costume out of, it looked thick enough to stop a knife. Some kind of flexible armor? Spidey ought to ask where he did his shopping.

“Should’ve known I couldn’t loaf around Hell’s Kitchen for long without bumping into you.” Spider-Man rubbed his head as he pulled himself to his feet. “I’m a big fan of your work, man. We could totally do a team-up if you-”

“Do you have any idea what you’re doing?”

Spider-Man flinched. He hadn’t expected Daredevil to be so… snarling.

“Sin-Eater emits an altered form of chlorine gas from his pores. Massive quantities of it.” Judging from his voice, Spidey could only assume Daredevil gargled broken glass every morning for breakfast. “A direct confrontation is a good way to get yourself killed.”

Spidey bowed his head. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I was just trying to save- Wait, how do you know
how his powers work? The police can barely get a close look at the guy.”

The question went unanswered. “You threw a tracking device on his cloak.”

“Well, aren’t you observant?” Spider-Man folded his arms. “That was one of my patented spider-tracers. Now I can follow the creep to his hideout. And I was going to invite you to come, too, make it into a raid, but-”

“I can trace the frequency without your help,” cut in Daredevil. “You should see a doctor. That gas burned the lining of your esophagus.”

Whoa. Spidey’s throat was kinda scratchy now that he thought about it. Did this guy have X-ray vision?

“I heal fast,” Spider-Man said with more than a little defensiveness. “What, you think I can’t handle myself, Hornhead? Which of us has beaten the most supervillains, again? I mean, I’m sure your victory over Stilt-Man was impressive and all...”

At this, Daredevil sighed and stared out at the horizon. Maybe he wouldn’t tick Spider-Man off so much if he’d at least look in Spidey’s direction when he talked to him. “Shouldn’t you be in school?”

Spider-Man jolted. Crap, he did have X-ray vision. “I-I sound younger than I really am. I get that a lot.” As he spoke, Spidey made a halfhearted attempt to shield his face with his arms. Though of course, the real reason Peter wasn’t in school was because he’d been given time off to cope.

“Kid, listen.” Daredevil’s exposed, stubbly chin had to do all the emoting for him. “I got my powers when I was young, too. I know how it feels to want to help people, but I’ve never regretted waiting until I was older to don the costume. This lifestyle isn’t something I’d wish on a child.”

“Your concern’s real touching, but I think I’ll take my chances.” Spider-Man turned away, firing a web-line at a far-off building.

“Yeah?” Daredevil snapped. “And how much good can you do if you fight yourself to an early grave? Your bones creak almost as loud as mine, I’ve met boys in gangs covered in less scars than you, and when you pounced at Sin-Eater just now, your pulse was racing like a kitten pouncing at its favorite toy. You’re still high on the adrenaline – I can smell it. Are you sure you only care about saving lives, or are you more concerned with making sure you’re on the front page every morning-?”

“I watched a cop die.” The words escaped Spider-Man’s mouth on their own.

“I’ve watched twenty cops die,” Daredevil countered without skipping a beat. “If you think all the tragedies in your life are freak accidents and it’ll be better soon, they’re not and it won’t. This is the life people like us live. You’re going to see friends put in the ground. You’ll be attacked in both your public and private lives. The media will crucify you. You will never feel safe. Never feel rested. I choose to live this way, but I won’t encourage other scared and confused boys to follow in my footsteps.”

With a quick gesture, he retrieved a white billy club from his belt, aimed at a building in the opposite direction from the one Spidey had picked, and clicked a button on his club’s side. A small cable erupted, attaching itself to the roof like a grappling hook, and then Daredevil swung off without another word.

Spider-Man watched him go for a second before turning to his own web-line. Man, those billy
clubs would save a ton of money on web-fluid. On the other hand, the thought of using any invention of Douchedevil’s made Spider-Man’s flesh crawl.

Spidey was about to swing away, but then he hesitated. Well… maybe Hornhead meant well, just like Captain Stacy had, and he was only trying to scare Spider-Man into a safer line of work. It did sound like the dude had been through a lot. Was Spider-Man going to end up as bitter as Daredevil someday? Was that the inevitable end result of costumed heroism?

Or maybe…

Peter shut his eyes. Before them flashed the image of the Sin-Eater, raving about God’s will as he murdered defenseless people. And of war hero Frank Castle, turned into a gun-toting lunatic.

...maybe the inevitable end result is something much worse?
There was an empty apartment in the heart of Manhattan – one of several throughout New York, in fact – that received a check for rent every month, despite the lack of any apparent residents. So long as he got his money, the landlord couldn’t care less, which was exactly how Felicia liked it.

She slipped into the room, gently shutting the window behind her. Then, in a single stride, Felicia made her way to a bookshelf and kicked it over, revealing a reinforced steel door. A quick scan of her thumb caused it to slide into the ceiling, allowing Felicia to strut inside.

She was met with rows upon rows of white wigs, black skintight catsuits, and, most importantly, gadgets. Her bolas, her clawed gloves, her goggles… her gas-mask.

Felicia stared at the mask a moment. Like all her wardrobe, it was sleek and black, and it combined with her yellow goggles to suggest the shape of a cat face.

Felicia snapped it into place. Alright, step one was complete. Now all that was left was to find the man who killed Felicia’s daddy. Hmm, but how to do it? Felicia supposed she could always wait around for him to find her. Surely she was sinful enough to meet his standards?

But… maybe there was a faster way. Felicia held a long fingernail above a pea-sized spider hidden in a dusty corner, then squished it.

Spider-Man’s pulse pounded in his ears as he swung another lap around the perimeter of Central Park. He’d spent the past hour following the spider-tracer’s signal, but it’d proved trickier than he’d hoped. Apparently, Sin-Eater liked to teleport every five seconds, and whenever he did, the tracer teleported with him. It didn’t look like the guy could travel more than a couple meters at a time, but it was still enough to make Spidey’s spider-sense all crisscrossed. It was starting to give him a major headache.

But then something caught Spidey’s eye that helped him regain his concentration.

“Ha! Look at him twitch!” A group of upstanding young gentlemen had gathered in a secluded alleyway to take turns kicking an old man in the spine as they passed his wallet around.

“My turn! My turn!” One of the boys readied a swing to the old man’s stomach… *(Thwip)*…only to have his foot caught on a web-line.

“Oh, you think that’s funny?” said a voice from the wall behind them. “Then you’ll find this *hilarious.*”

The thug was sent tumbling leg-first into his buddies, knocking them over like bowling pins. The first one barely had time to pull himself to his feet before a fist to the chest sent him back to the pavement.

“What’s wrong?” The thug made a different-pitched shriek each time Spider-Man kicked his stomach. “This joke made you laugh so hard a second ago!” Spider-Man raised his leg for another blow.

But he was stopped in his tracks by a scream. Spidey’s head spun around to discover its source –
the old man. The guy had grabbed his wallet and sprinted down the street with surprising speed, not even caring about the money the thugs had snatched.

“No, wait, sir, let me call an ambulance-” The man was already out of sight, leaving Spider-Man dazed. What… What had he been doing? Spidey glanced down to make sure his costume hadn’t turned black.

Beating up these thugs had felt… good. It still felt good. Spider-Man had to fight the urge to resume doing it. He’d been so frustrated because of Daredevil and Sin-Eater... Was this how Sin-Eater felt?

Spider-Man jumped back onto the wall. A while ago, Peter had mused that even Osborn must have once looked himself in the mirror in his goblin costume and thought, “Yes. This is the right thing to do.” Nobody thought of themself as the bad guy. Norman had thought he was getting even with his enemies, taking his rightful place in charge of Manhattan. Kraven had thought that hunting Spider-Man would prove his honor. Eddie had thought he was getting revenge for what Peter had done to him.

Spider-Man forced himself to take a breath. He’d considered all this before. This was why he used webs instead of billy clubs. Spider-Man wasn’t a grim, badass vigilante who beat people within an inch of their lives – He was a silly adventurer who wore a goofy costume and sprayed criminals with goop. That was all he needed to be. Friendly neighborhood Spider-Man.

While Spidey pondered this, the thugs attempted to quietly pull themselves to their feet and sneak away. Thwip. They were pinned to the pavement by an offhand goop-glob.

“Yes, sir. Yes, I’m doing everything you’ve asked. No, I don’t believe he does, sir.”

Captain DeWolff was just returning her cellphone to her pocket when she lurched into her apartment. She’d thought her shift would never be over. Jean tossed her uniform’s jacket wherever it happened to land. She’d never appreciated how much work George had done for the NYPD until he wasn’t there to do it anymore.

Jean plopped down onto her mattress without so much as taking off her shoes. If her mom had seen what a pig sty Jean lived in, she’d have gone berserk. Of course, she’d have gone even more berserk if she’d known that her daughter’s career would involve being shot at by gangsters on a regular basis.

Jean rested her head on a pillow sans pillowcase and tried not to let herself drown in her own guilt. Her eyelids grew heavy despite the street lamps burning outside her window. She hadn’t bothered buying curtains – Jean could sleep through anything.

Anything, that is, except the sound of footsteps from across the bed.

“Jean DeWolff.”

“What the hell?” Jean sprang upright to find herself in a pale green void.

“You have sinned.” There was a figure in the gas. “You can hide it from your fellow officers, but you can’t hide it from God. You can’t hide it from me.”

The pieces clicked into place – He’d found out she was leading the manhunt for him. Jean’s eyes darted to the spot on the rug where she’d left her holstered gun. So did the Sin-Eater’s.
There was sudden movement, ending with DeWolff thrown off the mattress and pinned to the floor, the Sin-Eater’s hand on her neck. Whoever he was, he was strong.

“Don’t try to struggle,” the Sin-Eater whispered in her ear. “You’re not blessed as the biblical Jacob was. You cannot prevail.”

Jean tried to hold her breath, to stave off the gas as long as possible, but his gloved fingers were crushing her neck. The gas was already burning her skin. She had no choice. She had to… had to open her mouth.

*Thwip.* “Okay, something tells me you guys aren’t being safe, sane, and consensual.”

The next thing she knew, Jean was on the ceiling, being held in the arms of a man clad in red and blue. The gas hadn’t yet risen this high, and so she risked some deep gasps of air.

“Sorry I didn’t get here sooner. Didn’t realize what our hungry friend was planning at first.” Spider-Man did an upside down nod towards a shattered window, which had presumably granted him entry. “I’m gonna be smarter this time. No direct confrontation. Let’s focus on getting you out of here.” Spider-Man made a sudden swoop for the window, sending Jean’s heart reeling, but at the last second, a cloaked figure blocked the way.

“You can’t run from God’s will, sinner.” Sin-Eater’s voice held an uncanny tranquility. He shot more gas from his palm, forcing Spider-Man to tumble out of harm’s way. “He sent me here to punish you for your transgressions.”

“Look, I *told* Thor I was sorry I couldn’t go drinking last Friday!” Spider-Man was forced to duck another gas-spray. “He is really overreacting.”

“If you knew what the woman in your arms has done, you wouldn’t be so quick to defend her.” As he spoke, the Sin-Eater crept around the room, waiting for Spidey to make a move. “Or perhaps you are aware, and you’ve chosen to defend her regardless. Either way, you must answer to God.”

“I try to keep my quips secular, but—” A line of webbing latched itself to Sin-Eater’s skeletal face. “—at the risk of sounding like a fedora-wearer, I’m almost starting to think you’re not really an angel of death sent by God to reap my soul.”

A quick yank sent the skull flying off Sin-Eater’s body – or rather, it sent the green skull mask flying off his head, revealing the face of an angel of death who looked suspiciously like a totally ordinary human.

“Stan!” DeWolff cried out in spite of the gas enveloping her. “But- But how- Why-?”

“Stan Carter is dead!” Naturally, the dude was immune to his own poison gas, so all removing his mask had done was encourage him to rant and rave even more. “He died alongside George Stacy so that his flesh could serve a higher purpose. I am the one who will make the world right again. I am the one who reaped the lives of Egypt’s firstborns. I am the Sin-Eater!”

“And I’m Emperor Nap—” Spidey’s quip turned into a coughing fit halfway through. “Okay, okay...” He turned to DeWolff. “Gas is getting a little thick for my liking. This’ll be the hardest thing I’ve ever done, but...” He took one last, burning breath. “I’m gonna stop talking now.” With that, he used each of his web-shooters to cover both his and DeWolff’s mouth and nostrils.

Of course, Spidey’s brain started freaking out the moment it realized he couldn’t breathe, but it was preferable to inhaling any more poison. Spidey set DeWolff down and swung his fists at the bad guy, but old Sinny merely teleported out of harm’s way again. It was no use. The fog was Carter’s
element. In here, he could be wherever he wanted, dodge as fast as he wanted. And what’s worse, Spider-Man had just come up with the funniest quip of his career! What a waste!

*Thwip, thwip, thwip.* Spidey frantically fired his webs, but Sin-Eater kept on teleporting. It was no good. Spidey’s head was getting woozy. He’d already held his breath for way too long. Maybe… Maybe Carter really was an angel of death… the way he moved… Spider-Man couldn’t focus… and he could only imagine DeWolff felt the same. He couldn’t fail her… He couldn’t… fail… again...

But then a second figure emerged from the fog. For a brief, frenzied moment, Spidey thought it was Daredevil. As thematically appropriate as that would’ve been, it actually turned out to be a certain slender lady in a tight black outfit.

“What-? Where did you-?” Carter fired his gas at her, but to no effect. Between the woman’s sleek black mask and glowing yellow goggles, she seemed totally unhindered by his powers. He tried to teleport away, but she moved like lightning. The *crack* of her heel colliding with his head reverberated around the apartment.

Black Cat probably said a really great one-liner at this point, but Spider-Man wasn’t able to hear it as everything went dark around him.

“Ugh,” said DeWolff, “I just had my place fumigated last week.”

Shortly after Sin-Eater was KO’ed, the whole apartment complex had been evacuated so that its tenants could be replaced with hazmat workers. Spider-Man and Captain DeWolff had gathered at the back of an ambulance in the parking lot to suck pure, precious oxygen from a matching pair of rebreathers (The rescue workers had been courteous enough to allow Spider-Man’s mask to remain on, merely rolling it back to expose his mouth).

DeWolff gave the Web-Head a look. “You sure you don’t need a ride to the hospital?”

“Nah, I’m good,” said Spidey. “I heal quick.”

“Well, thank you Spider-Man.” DeWolff met the white lenses of his mask’s eyes. “If it wasn’t for you, they’d be burying me next to George right now. Maybe…” She took a breath. “...he was right to trust you.”

“Well, don’t give me all the credit.” Spider-Man nodded to a certain catsuit-and-white-wig wearing woman standing across from the ambulance. “We’d both be dead if it wasn’t for Cat. Though I don’t know how she managed to find us...”

“I figured you’d be hunting Sin-Eater, too,” said Black Cat. “And you’re a lot easier to track than he is. I just followed the trail of webs you litter everywhere.”

“Hey, those disintegrate after an hour! I’m not a Captain Planet villain.” Spidey gave her a look. “Look, Felicia, it’s not that I don’t appreciate the save, but… you still need to go to jail.”

At this, Black Cat bowed her head. She’d removed her gas mask and goggles, revealing that she wasn’t wearing makeup for once. Maybe that was why she looked more… real, somehow. “I only wanted to ensure my father’s killer was brought to justice. I’ll be in my cage soon enough.” Cat nodded to the handcuffs around her wrists. “Two men are dead because of me. Because I was greedy and stupid.” Her voice shook. “This- This was the only way I knew how to atone, but I don’t feel any different now. Their blood’s still on my hands and I don’t know how to wash it off.”
Spider-Man hesitated. “You can’t,” he said, “but that doesn’t mean you should ever stop trying. A good man once told me that with great power comes great responsibility.”

At this, Black Cat let out a bitter laugh. “Who told you a boy scout thing like that? Captain America?”

“Close.” Behind his mask, Peter smiled. “What it means is, you should find a way to use your talents to help people. Something to think about while you’re serving your time.”

“Yeah, yeah...” After that, some officers led Black Cat away. She was given the honor of sharing a police van with Carter.

“Get this inhibitor collar off of me! I’m not a damn freak!” His voice was audible from the outside. “I was blessed with these powers by THE LORD.”

“Gosh,” came the voice of an officer, “then I guess God planted all these records we found in your apartment saying you let Tricorp experiment on you…”

Alone again, Spidey returned his attention to DeWolff. “Man, everyone’s a supervillain these days. Worst fad ever.”

For a moment, the pair sucked their oxygen in silence. “Stan was always a hothead,” DeWolff finally said, “but if he was letting Tricorp turn him into one of their super-mercenaries, I guess he’d gone off the deep end even before we lost George…” She bowed her head. “Stan’s the one who fired the warning shot that spooked Walter Hardy in the first place. He’s as guilty as Hardy’s daughter. I took away his badge over that.”

“And he wanted to kill you for petty revenge?” Spider-Man snorted. “Figures. Anyways, hopefully this’ll discourage any other aspiring Frank Castle wannabees.” With that, he tossed aside his rebreather and fired a web-line to a nearby building. “I gotta get going. Maybe we’ll grab a coffee sometime. Continue the relationship Captain Stacy started between the NYPD and the FNSM.”

DeWolff looked bemused. “FNSM?”

“The ‘F’ stands for ‘Friendly!’” Spider-Man called down as he swung away.

DeWolff was left shaking her head.

In the end, Black Cat wasn’t as far gone as Spider-Man had thought. She was at least capable of feeling remorse, and that was the first step to redemption. Spidey wished her well, but to be honest, he wasn’t sure he ever wanted to see her again. He certainly couldn’t think of her as a mere flirtatious burglar anymore. It wasn’t entirely Felicia’s fault, though. Her father had raised her to be a criminal, and Spider-Man knew that the influence of your father was a tough thing to shake off. Harry had taught him that.

Just as Spidey was swinging above the apartment building, he caught sight of someone on the neighboring rooftop.

“Daredevil!” Spider-Man touched down beside his fellow crime-fighter. “Where have you been?”

“I... struggled to find a proper gas mask on short notice.” Daredevil held up a flimsy hospital mask. “Spider-Man, the truth is, when it comes to supervillains, you’re more capable than me. I can manage local street-level crime, but I don’t have your strength or speed. I can’t swing from Chinatown to here in under an hour. If I tried to fight someone like the Rhino, I’d get myself
killed.” He let out another of his pained sighs. “Jean DeWolff would be dead right now if not for you. I can’t stomach seeing children endanger themselves, but…” He trailed off. “You sure you want to commit your life to this?”

“That’s not it at all.” Spider-Man shook his head. “I’ll admit it can be fun, but I don’t put on the tights because I want to. I do it because it’s my responsibility.”

“I see.” Daredevil looked out at the sunset over the Hudson. “So then nothing I do or say could change your mind?”

“Yeppers.”

“In that case…” For the first time, Daredevil’s red lenses met Spidey’s white ones. “I’ve heard you’ve crossed paths with a certain crime lord.”

“Oh?” Spider-Man’s ears perked up.

The Daily Bugle’s newsroom was awash with the upbeat humming of one J. Jonah Jameson. Robbie was resisting the urge to roll his eyes when someone came up behind him.

“What’s JJ so happy about?”

“Oh, hey, Rand.” Robbie turned to face his son, smiling. “Jameson’s all excited because Parker emailed him some photos.”

“Some photos?” scoffed Jameson from his desk. “I’ll have you know these are top quality pics of the Sin-Eater attacking that nice philanthropist Wilson Fisk!” In an undertone, he added, “With help from Spider-Man, obviously.”

“So, Rand, to what do I owe the pleasure?” Robbie gave his boy a pat on the arm.

“Well…” At this, Rand fidgeted. “You know how I broke up with Sally last March? And you know that really cool girl I met immediately afterwards?”

Robbie grinned. “You might have mentioned her once or twice.”

“Well… she’s my girlfriend now, and we thought it was time to introduce you to her.” With that, Rand ushered the girl into the room.

“Hey, Mr. Robertson.” She was pretty- no, beautiful. And rich. Her purple shawl looked expensive and her wrist jewelry looked expensive and her shoes looked the most expensive of all. Even the phone she was busy texting away on appeared to be the latest Osberry model. At a glance, she looked every bit as spoiled as Sally. Guess Rand had a type.

But that wasn’t what caused Robbie’s grin to vanish.

“Dad, this is Janice.” As he spoke, Rand’s hands interlocked with hers. “We, uh, actually didn’t come here just for introductions, though.”

“I’m having a birthday party on my daddy’s yacht this Friday!” Janice vibrated with excitement. “It’s gonna be great. But we wanted to ask your permission for Rand to come since we’ll be sailing around all weekend and stuff.”

The couple looked at Robbie expectantly.
“I—I’ll have to think about it,” Robbie managed.

“Cool.” Suddenly, Janice’s phone buzzed. “Ooh, that’ll be Daddy. He’s my ride home. Nice meeting you, Mr. Robertson!” She gave Rand one last hug before scurrying out the door.

Jameson had planted his eyes out the window. “Her dad’s got a limo down there.” He whistled. “She’s a keeper, kid.”

Rand, however, was busy giving his father an indignant stare. “What do you mean, you have to think about it?”

“No, son, I meant about our engagement.”

Rand, however, was busy giving his father an indignant stare. “What do you mean, you have to think about it?”

“Son, can I talk to you?” Robbie pulled him aside by the shoulder. Then he said in an undertone, “This girl of yours… you ever get her last name?”

“Yeah, Dad, I’ve only known her for months now,” Rand huffed. “She’s Janice L-” His breath caught in his throat. “Lincoln. Janice Lincoln. Oh.”

Robbie nodded. “Mmm hmm.”

“Heard you fought him last Valentine’s Day and lived,” Daredevil continued. “How do you feel about that crime lord?”

“I keep staring at his teeth,” said Spider-Man. “I feel terrible for his dentist.”

“He made bail last time.” The slightest hint of a smile crossed Daredevil’s face. “How’d you like to help me give him a more permanent trip to prison?”

Captain DeWolff glanced around at the ambulances. The rescue workers were preoccupied evacuating the residents of the apartment complexes. Perfect.

After a minute, DeWolff retrieved her phone from her pocket. “Sir? Good news, Sin-Eater won’t be bothering you anymore. Anything else you want me to make Spider-Man do?”

The chauffeur shut the limo door as Janice buckled her seatbelt. She smiled at the man seated across from her, who was putting away his phone.

“Well, aren’t you dolled up?” The man brought a pale hand to the jewelry on the girl’s wrist. “You look so much like your mother.”

“Thanks for the ride, Daddy,” said Janice. “I know the Bugle’s not your favorite place ever…”

“That’s nothing to concern yourself with, Janice.” The man grinned, revealing a set of teeth filed to points. “Anything for my little girl.”
“M-Many a morning hath he there been seen, with tears... aug-ment-ing the fresh morning’s dew, adding to clouds more clouds with- with his deep sighs.”

Kong stood trembling beneath a stage light. Every so often, he’d receive encouraging nods from Glory just offstage, though not nearly as often as the discouraging ones he received from St. Devereaux, the sole audience member.

“But all so soon as the all-cheering sun,” Kong continued, “should in the farthest west – I mean east – begin to draw the shady curtains from-” His eyes flitted to the script in his sweaty hands. “- Aurora’s bed, away from light steals home my heavy son, and private in his chamber pens himself, shuts up his windows, locks fair daylight out, and makes himself an artificial night.”

“All wrong, Mr. Kong. You have no style! You have no grace!” Devereaux’s voice carried farther from his seat than Kong’s did from the stage. “You are supposed to be fearing for your son’s mental health. Where’s the passion?”

“I- I dunno,” Kong managed, looking from his teacher to his script. “Uh, black and por- portentous must this humor prove, unless good counsel may the cause, um, remove.”

Devereaux sprang to his feet. “Your beloved child has locked himself in his room for hours on end, spiraling into the deepest trenches of depression! Imagine how you’d feel if such a thing were to happen to someone you really knew!”

“Gwen? I thought I heard you up.” Peter scarcely waited for Gwen’s reply before barging in. The sight before him left him taken aback. “Oh, Gwen...”

It was a clear struggle for her to so much as sit up on the mattress. Her shiny gold hair had been reduced to a frizzy mess, her glasses were who-knows-where, her eyes were almost as baggy as the black t-shirt and sweat pants she had on, and judging by the guest room’s scent, she hadn’t showered in days. Some sunlight was trying to enter the room, but the curtains wouldn’t allow it.

“P-Peter...” She sounded worse than she looked. “I’m sorry.”

“What’s wrong?” Instantly, Peter was at her side, squeezing her arm tight.

“I can’t do anything,” said Gwen. “Except sleep. Can’t read a book or check my phone or- or go to the bathroom.” Her voice dissolved into a moan. “Your aunt went to the store and I was alone for hours-”

“You’re gonna get bed sores.” It took Peter a conscious effort not to hug her to death with his spider-strength. “You can’t keep doing this to yourself, Gwen. I feel up to going to school today, and I was hoping you might, too...”

Gwen’s head shook with enough violence to startle him. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Peter. There’s going to be people there and criminology is canceled and everyone in the whole school knows why and they’ll want to look at me and talk to me, and I- I-”

“Shh... It’s okay, Gwen. It’s okay...”

“Oh g-god...” Her voice was muffled by Peter’s shoulder. “You’re the only good thing left in my
life.” But Gwen had to pull back to avoid getting snot all over him. “I—I’m sorry,” she said for the umpteenth time. “I know you and Eddie dealt with this when you were little kids. You must think I’m—”

“I think you’re in pain right now,” Peter cut in, “and absolutely none of it’s your fault, and you’re handling it the best you can. The best anyone could.”

There was a moment of silence, followed by a moment of sniffling.

“I saw you catch that Sin-Eater guy on the news yesterday,” Gwen finally said. “I’m glad you’re saving lives. It’s the only thing that makes sense anymore. You have a purpose. What do I have?”

Another sniffle. “I’m a senior already, and I’ve got no idea what to do with myself. I don’t think I can—can withstand college right now, but if I don’t go right out of high school, I’ll lose so much scholarship money…”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Peter said as smoothed Gwen’s hair. “Once we’re both eighteen, we’re gonna get married, and—then I’ll take care of you and Aunt May. You won’t have to go to college until you’re ready—”

He was cut off by the last sound he’d expected out of Gwen’s mouth right now – laughter.

“You want to marry me?”

“Well, yeah.” Now Peter was being the bashful one. “Of course. Why wouldn’t I wanna marry the woman I love? I mean, if… you want that, too?”

Suddenly, Gwen’s face was significantly closer to his own. “More than anything.”

Gwen’s mouth tasted a lot saltier than usual, but maybe now wasn’t the best time to point that out.

“Peter? Gwen?” There came a rap on the door, causing the two to split with a sound like a plunger. “Could you come to the living room? We need to talk.”

“Coming, Aunt May!” Peter turned his attention back to his girl. “Want me to carry you?”

Gwen hesitated, then said, “I’d like that.”

A minute later, Peter was depositing Gwen on the living room sofa. He had to at least pretend to struggle with her so as not to arouse Aunt May’s suspicion.

“I’m not THAT heavy—”

“Sorry, sorry…”

The lady of the house was seated in her favorite armchair, her glasses resting on the nearby lamp table. It was dim in here – The sun was only half-risen. Normally, Peter would be sleeping in, but he’d made himself promise to drag his butt to school.

Peter sat beside Gwen and held her hand, though doing that in front of Aunt May still made his cheeks hot. “What’s up?”

“Well, first off, I suppose you ought to know…” May took a breath, then said, “the man who—who murdered two of our loved ones… Walter Hardy… He’s dead. A vigilante broke into the police van. I didn’t want to trouble you two with it before the funeral.”

Oh, right. Time to bust out his acting chops. “Seriously? W-Well, that’s kind of a relief, isn’t it? I
mean, obviously, he deserved a fair trial and all, but at least he can’t hurt anyone ever again, right?"

“I suppose.” May steadied her fingers. “But this city’s grown so violent this last year. And now we have these super-people taking the law into their own hands?” She looked back up at them, eyes quivering. “Your school’s been attacked by monsters and robots and who knows what else. I wish we could move somewhere far away from all this, but we can’t afford it right now.”

May turned her attention to Gwen. “Which brings me to my next point. Gwen, dear, I’ve been speaking with your aunt and uncle, and we agreed that it wouldn’t be healthy for you to move to England with them. You need a familiar environment.”

“Thank you,” Gwen said without inflection. “I didn’t want to leave, anyways.”

“But this also means…” May took another, deeper breath. “…until you turn eighteen next August, I’ll be acting as your legal guardian. I want you here with us.” She managed a smile. “As far as I’m concerned, you’re family.”

“Mrs. Parker…” A smidge more emotion crept into Gwen’s voice this time. Peter smiled and held her tighter.

“But as long as you’re living here-” Even without her glasses, Aunt May could give the both of them a wicked “stern schoolteacher” look. “-no hanky-panky, you two. I mean it.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Of course, Mrs. Parker!”

Peter’s and Gwen’s eyes locked only a moment before darting away, but that moment was more than enough.

“Oh, and that reminds me, I have one last piece of news to share.” May sat up straighter in her armchair. “In light of everything that’s happened lately, you don’t have to meet him anytime soon, but I feel the two of you should know…”

Peter’s blood went cold. Him? Oh god no.

“I’m seeing someone.” The words echoed like church bells at an execution.

“Congratulations.” Gwen smiled at May. Was Peter the only one devastated by this? Why was he the only one devastated by this?

“Someone who’s brought me a great deal of comfort lately, in light of… of everything.”

“What’s he like?” asked Gwen.

“Well…” A strand of white hair twirled around May’s finger. “…he has a wonderful personality.”

A shudder rocked Peter’s body, earning him looks from the other two. “Sorry. Pavlovian response.”

“Go, girl, seek happy nights to happy days!”

Peter arrived in Midtown High’s auditorium right in time to watch MJ’s audition. He’d never in his life thought anyone could make Juliet’s nurse seem sexy.
At Peter’s entrance, though, half the student body dropped what they were doing to run up to him.

“Tiger!” MJ was, of course, first in line. “Good to see you. Is Gwen okay? She’s not answering my texts.”

Peter gave a strained smile. “She needs more time, that’s all.”

“Yo, Parker!” Flash was next in line with Sha Shan hovering behind him. “I’m sorry about what happened, man. Captain Stacy probably would’ve been your dad-in-law once you and Gwen got hitched and had geek-babies.”

“Flash.” This earned him a nudge to the ribs courtesy of his girlfriend.

“Sorry, sorry. All I’m saying is, Gwen’s dad was the coolest guy ever.” But at this, Flash’s face soured. “Can’t believe the stupid Bugle’s blaming Spidey for what happened. That’s a new low for them.”

Suddenly, Peter empathized with Gwen’s decision to stay home. “Y-Yeah, maybe,” he said. Then, in a voice only he could hear, he added, “Or maybe for once… it’s not wrong.”

Back on the stage, Seymour, one of the only kids to continue auditioning, suddenly read out:

“This day’s black fate on more days doth depend. This but begins the woe others must end.”

Returning to high school hadn’t exactly been fun, but Peter was glad he’d done it. Now all he had to do was convince Gwen to come with him next time. He knew how tempting it was to stay in bed all day, but the best way to deal with this kinda crap was to push yourself back into routine. Keep taking life one step at a time. Peter supposed he was used to dealing with death, sad as that was to admit.

Speaking of routine, with class over, Peter made his way into the office of the Daily Bugle.

“Hey, Miss Brant.” He walked over to her desk, though he frowned when he caught sight of her. “Is something wrong?”

“Oh, Peter, hi. Didn’t see you there.” Miss Brant had nearly dropped her phone in her coffee. As awkward as things had ended up between them, she was still kind of adorable. “I’m fine. Ned’s trial isn’t going well, that’s all...”

“What? That thing’s still ongoing?”

Miss Brant sighed. “That’s the legal system for you.”

“Well, I hope things work out for Ned.” Peter looked over at Jameson’s office, where he could make out the faint sound of a threat to fire someone in four-point-three seconds. “I don’t suppose the Jolly One’s got my paycheck yet? I risked my neck getting those Sin-Eater pics.”

For once, Peter wasn’t lying. Lately, he’d rigged up his camera inside his belt so he could take pics mid-combat. The shots were superb, but he had to be careful not to make it too obvious. One of these days, Peter swore he was gonna hand Jameson a pic with a fuzzy red thumb in the corner.

“I’m not sure. Let me ask him.” Betty turned on her intercom, but its reply was drowned out by the sudden sound of screaming.

“Huh? What?” Of course, heated arguments weren’t exactly uncommon in the newsroom (Ben
Urich had nearly stabbed Foswell with a pen once during a debate on whether to use passive or active voice, and then the dude really would’ve needed to wear an eyepatch). But what Peter wasn’t used to hearing was the heated argument of a younger, less sourpuss-ey voice.

“Dad, come on, he’s been out of the headlines for months! I just forgot about him! Her surname was the last thing I was thinking about-”

“I’m sorry, son, but I don’t care,” said a deeper, wearier voice. “You’re not going near her, and that’s final.”

“I’m not a little kid, Dad!”

“Seventeen’s still underage last I checked! You live in my house, you abide by my rules.”

Back at her desk, Betty brought a palm to her forehead. “They’ve been at this since last evening,” she told Peter. “I actually miss Jameson’s screaming.”

“How do you even know he’s really dangerous?” Rand snapped. “What if the Bugle’s wrong and he’s not the Big Man?”

“Well,” came Foswell’s tiny voice from the sidelines, “I did kind of stake my entire career on that...”

Mr. Robertson gaped at his son. “You think he’s harmless. Is that it, boy? You think Tombstone is harmless?”

Peter could testify on that point, but he opted to keep his mouth shut.

“Let me show you how ‘harmless’ he is.” All of a sudden, Mr. Robertson was tearing off his own jacket. The whole office was left gawking at him – Betty even gasped.

It was thick and pink, and it trailed from Mr. Robertson’s wrist to his elbow. He’d taken his arm out of his dress shirt’s sleeve to give Rand a good look at.

“Whoa. Dad, I never- H-How long have you had that?” Rand was more taken aback than anyone.

“Since junior year of high school,” said Mr. Robertson. “Tombstone and I attended one together in Harlem in the Eighties. Back then they called him Lonnie. Kids there hated him because of his skin. Because it wasn’t dark enough. Every time the teachers weren’t looking, they’d take turns hitting him.”

Really? Peter knew all too well that being treated like a freak wasn’t fun. Peter was tempted to say he felt sorry for the guy.

“I stood up for him,” Mr. Robertson continued. “I told a teacher what was going on, and this is how Lonnie repaid me. Because I made him look weak, he said.”

Wait, never mind, false alarm.

“After that, Lonnie dropped out, joined a gang... and got mixed up in Silvermane’s early super-mercenary experiments. Ones that gave people unbreakable skin. That’s when people started calling him a different name.” Mr. Robertson’s eyes narrowed. “Tombstone. Because that’s all that’s left after you cross him.”

“Well, uh...” It took Rand a second to devise a suitable reply. “He- He doesn’t really seem like a
“He’s gotten real good at pretending to be part of high society,” cut in Mr. Robertson, “but I promise you, son, if you knew a fraction of the things that man’s done behind closed doors, you’d keep far away from him.”

“I- But I-” Rand was running out of steam. “I love Janice. I mean that.”

At this, Mr. Robertson let out his heaviest sigh yet. “I’m sorry, Rand, but I really don’t care. You’re to end all contact with her. Your mother and I’ll be monitoring your phone. Call or text this girl again, and you’re grounded. And if you sneak out to that fancy-smancy yacht party and Tombstone doesn’t kill you…” He leaned in close enough for Rand to feel his breath on his collar. “…then I will. Do I make myself clear?”

It looked like Rand might yell back, but instead all he said was, “Yes, sir.”

This seemed to knock some of the fight out of Mr. Robertson. “I really am sorry,” he said, “but if Tombstone ever realized that his daughter’s boyfriend is the son of one of the men who helped halt his criminal empire last Valentine’s Day…”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.” And with that, Rand slinked to the elevator, hands in his pockets.

There was a brief moment of silence, and then every single staff member abruptly returned to work.

“Glad that’s finally over,” muttered Betty, taking a sip of cold coffee.

Peter’s eyes lingered on the elevator as Rand vanished behind its doors. Anything involving Tombstone earned a spot on Spider-Man’s radar. Rand wasn’t usually the hothead type, but still, maybe the Web-Head type ought to keep an eye on him?

“No she’s Capulet? O dear account! My life is my foe’s debt!” Flash paused, then blurted out, “Geez, my character’s sappy! Can we rewrite this so he’s less stupid?”

It was easy for Dad to dismiss Rand’s feelings. He’d never had an obstacle between him and his love before. Everything had always worked out perfectly for him and Mom. Dad could never understand. He could never get that Janice was smart and funny and insightful. Maybe it was just because her own life was so glamorous that his seemed banal in comparison, but Janice had never once cared that Rand was a football player. To the girls of Midtown Magnet, that was all Rand was.

Rand risked leaving his hiding place among the hedges, then tilted his head skyward. The Lincoln’s penthouse was at the top of a dizzying marble skyscraper. In the moonlight, it almost looked like a giant gravestone, fittingly enough. More importantly, it had a ritzy balcony jutting out of it. And most importantly of all, a gorgeous girl was standing at that balcony, gazing over the railing at the Manhattan skyline. She looked like an ant from all the way down here, but there was no doubt in Rand’s mind it was her.

God, she was beautiful. Sometimes her face was all Rand could think about. Of course, the other times, all he could think about were her-

Bzzzzzzz. Rand brought his phone to his ear.

“Randy?” came the pretty voice from the other end. “That you down there gazing up at me, or is it
just one of my stalkers?”

Despite his best efforts, Rand grinned. “Both.”

“One sec, sweetie, I’m coming down there.”

“Janice, wait-” She’d already hung up. Rand rubbed his palm against his shaved head. Great, his wonderful girlfriend had just earned him a grounding. Well, surely his dad would understand that he’d had to call her one last time to break up with her? Break up. The thought formed a pit in Rand’s stomach.

Janice emerged from the skyscraper sooner than Rand had expected. She told her bodyguards to hang back, then sprinted across the grass. She was hugging him before Rand had time to react.

“What’s with the visit, Randy?” Janice showed off her perfect white teeth. “Couldn’t stand to be away from me another minute?”

“Janice...” Rand’s head drooped. “I’m sorry, but my dad told me to break up with you. He hates your dad so much, he doesn’t want me coming near you.”

To his surprise, Janice laughed. “What, you always do what Daddy tells you?”

“I’m serious, Janice. If he sees I’ve kept in contact you, he could pull me off the football team-”

“I’ll buy you a disposable phone, genius.” Janice gave his arm a punch. “What your dad doesn’t know won’t hurt him. C’mon, man, don’t let yourself get all upset right before my epic yacht party-”

“How am I supposed to come?” Rand snapped. “You don’t think he’ll get suspicious if I’m gone all weekend?”

“Ah, right...” Janice pondered this for a moment. “Eh, I’ll just have my dad pay him off. That usually works.”

Rand’s brow creased. “Somehow I doubt he’ll want Tombstone’s money.”

“Don’t call him that.” The sudden fire in Janice’s voice made Rand flinch. “I know my dad used to be a bad person, but that’s not who he is anymore! He changed...” She faltered. “He changed when he had me.”

“I see.” For a while, there was silence. “Man, I had no idea you were his daughter, though. If you don’t mind me saying, you really don’t look like-”

“Albinism can skip a generation.” Janice paused, then added, “And the pointy teeth aren’t genetic, for the record. He filed them back before he cleaned himself up.” She smiled to herself. “When I was little, I thought he was a shark. I like to tease him about it.”

“Oh.” More silence. “And you’re really sure he’s not the Big Man?”

“Don’t you get it, Rand?” Janice met his eyes. “My dad’s, like, the greatest citizen in New York, and the Daily Bugle hates his guts, probably for the same reason it hates Spider-Man. People like Frederick Foswell are always looking for new scandals to profit off of.” Next, she squeezed his hand. “I knew your dad worked for that rag when we started dating, and I didn’t let that stop me from loving you.” And next, she squeezed something else. “Don’t you feel the same way?”
Rand stared at her. “Yeah,” he said. “I do.”

They remained there for several more minutes, but those were the last words they spoke to each other that night.

Of course, Rand and Janice weren’t aware of the red-and-blue voyeur on the penthouse wall. Okay, it was officially time to stop invading their privacy.

It hadn’t been for nothing, though. Now Spidey knew that Rand was planning on going to the party after all. Peter couldn’t honestly say he’d have done any different back before he learned about great responsibility and stuff. But if Rand would be at that party this Friday, then so would Spider-Man. He couldn’t let any other friends get hurt, especially not by a creep like Tombstone.

Spidey fired a web and swung off, doing his best to ignore the sounds of slurping and smacking from the ground below. When he and Gwen made out, it was super hot, but when other people did, it was just gross.

“Alas, that love, whose view is muffled still, should, without eyes, see pathways to his will!” Flash hesitated, blinking. “The heck does that mean?”

“It means love can make you do things you don’t wanna do,” said Sha Shan from offstage.

“Whoa.” Flash’s eyes went wide. “Shakespeare was a genius!”
Propitiation

Her beautiful city had become a pile of flaming, tank-tread wreckage. Grandpapa had warned her to stay away from the windows, but she’d risked enough of a peek to at least learn that much.

The girl huddled nearer to the old man. “Tell me the story again, Grandpapa.” The cold was not the sole reason her voice shook. “The one with the boy.”

Grandpapa nodded slowly, then recited, as he had countless times, “I hadn’t believed the stories before I came there, but by the time I left Auschwitz, I had a story of my own to tell. We had been ushering the prisoners to safety. At first, everything had been normal – Well, as normal as things could get in those days. But then, one of the men of our Wild Pack discovered a hidden doorway. It lead out to a staircase, taking us deep, deep below the compound into a new room. A prison cell, more like, made of solid stone.”

The girl looked into Grandpapa’s eyes. He wasn’t with her anymore. He was back there, in that secret prison.

“And in that cell was a boy. A little boy, no older than you are now.” Grandpapa stroked her hair. “He took one look at my men and started screaming. Now, that wasn’t so unusual, except that as he did, our guns flew out of our hands, as if there was a strong wind. And not just our guns, but our dog tags, pieces of our armor, the fillings in our teeth… they all began swirling around this boy like a hurricane. I thought we were going to die. I was still a boy myself, back then.”

He paused for a moment, then said, “But this boy wasn’t skeletal like the others. In fact, he was probably the only person we met that day who was well-fed. Best we could figure, the Nazis had wanted to use him as some kind of weapon.” He trailed off.

The little girl tugged at his sleeve, her brow creasing. “Finish the story, Grandpapa.”

“Ah, yes, of course.” The old man chuckled, then continued, “I thought we were going to die, and we probably would have if the Howling Commandos hadn’t arrived when they did. And at the head of them all, well, there he was.”

The girl held her breath.

“When you see him in the propaganda films, you think his costume looks silly,” said Grandpapa, “but if you’re lucky enough to see it up close, it looks right. I think because he’s the one wearing it. He wasn’t scared. Not for a second. He simply raised up his shield to protect himself from the whirlwind of metal, walked towards the boy, and with three words – ‘Ich bin hier’ – calmed him down. All that metal fell back to the floor like nothing had happened.” Grandpapa smiled to himself. “Rogers had that effect on people.”

The girl smiled, too, but then she grew pensive. “Why did he speak German and not English like the other Americans?”*

“Rogers could speak many languages,” replied Grandpapa. “He was incredibly smart – just like you.” He patted her head again.

*The current conversation is translated from Symkarian for your reading pleasure. – Ed

The girl mulled over this for a moment. Finally, she said, “It’s a great story, Grandpapa, but...” She bowed her head. “...it’s not real, is it? All these marvels... Captain America, the Sub-Mariner, the
Human Torch… They’re nothing but propaganda and tall tales made up to inspire hope, aren’t they?” She shut her eyes. “It’s alright, Grandpapa. I’m old enough now to know the tr-”

“It IS real.”

The girl flinched at his voice. Up until now, they’d been whispering. She’d expected him to be upset, but not like she’d just murdered his best friend.

“It’s real,” Grandpapa repeated. “All of it. Captain America was the greatest man I’ve ever known.”

“Then why isn’t he here to save us?” the girl snapped.

“He’s dead!” Grandpapa snapped back. When he saw the look on her face, he faltered. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want to tell you, but that’s how the story ends. He was blown up by Hydra. They lost the war, but they won that battle.” His eyes glazed over again. “Hydra’s still out there, hiding, quietly spreading the teachings of the Red Skull, and I can’t rest in my grave until I know every last one of those Nazi sons of bitches are in theirs, too.”

Now the girl’s face was somber. “Grandpapa, I promise-”

The rest of the sentence was drowned in fire and noise. She was prisoner in her own body, forced to watch the rubble bury Grandpapa until she was finally, mercifully, able to open her eyes and remember that she was a grown woman with her head on a pillow.

“Sable? Sable?” A man was shaking her bare back. “Wake up, Sleepin’ Beauty.”

“Ugh…” Sable pulled herself upright, rubbing her eyes.

The man frowned at her. “Symkaria again?”

Sable nodded. Sunlight was pouring in through the reinforced windows of the Manfredi safe house. The view of Manhattan was gorgeous, but Sable couldn’t take her eyes off the view lying beside her.

“It’s okay, princess, it’s okay…” He kissed her neck. “I’m here now.”

Sable sighed. “How do you keep ending up in my bed?”

The man replied with a grin, making his head look perfectly square-shaped. “Trade secret.” Alright, Sable admitted it, she had a thing for older men. Heck, she’d even grown to appreciate the flatness of his head. He was beautiful, and Sable was the only person on the planet who realized it.

“You ever think about leavin’ all this behind?” Hammerhead gazed into her eyes. “Forget usurpin’ the Big Man. So what if your daddy groomed you for it? It ain’t worth the trouble no more.”

Sable smirked at him. “I don’t remember you grooming me for anything.”

“Very funny.”

Hammerhead was right, though. Sometimes, Sable still questioned the chain of events that’d led her to Manhattan. Silvermane had been making an arms deal with the Symkarian rebels when he was attacked by mercenaries, and Sable had sniped every last assailant with a rifle she’d scavenged. Silvermane had been impressed enough to adopt Sable and raise her as his heir. She’d been six.
Hammerhead grinned at her, then continued, “We could board a plane tonight. Just say the word, and we can go back to Symkaria, fulfill that promise to your granddaddy.”

Sable raised an eyebrow. “You sure you want to make that commitment, Hamster? We’ll probably hate each other again by the end of the week.”

“Then I’ll savor every minute o’ this.” He pulled her face nearer to his.

Sable laughed, pulling back. “Funny how we reignited things right when you needed a place to hide from Tombstone’s hitmen, and now suddenly you’re all gung-ho about returning to Symkaria.”

“It ain’t like that, princess.” As he spoke, Hammerhead rolled on top of her, pinning Sable’s arms to the bed.

She couldn’t break free of his grasp if she tried. The thought made Sable’s heart beat faster. “Or maybe it is like that, and I just don’t care anymore.”

Their lips were some of the many parts of them that met.

“Oh, she knew well thy love did read by rote, that could not spell.” Immediately upon finishing his line, Kong gave Devereaux a hopeful stare.

“Very well, Mr. Kong.” Devereaux strummed his fingers against his armrest. “You can be Friar Lawrence. I suppose it’s the least melodramatic role, anyhow...”

Peter yanked his jacket’s hood farther over his head to protect himself from both blustering winds and airborne litter. Normally, he’d be eager to swing home – The winds gave him some incredible boosts – but whatever fluid remained in his web-shooters would have to last to his next paycheck. Besides, if he didn’t work out his legs sometime, he was gonna end up top-heavier than Venom.

Peter wished he’d at least had a companion to make the trek less lonesome. Gwen was still struggling to leave bed, and Peter wasn’t sure pushing her about it was a good idea.

And speaking of ‘lonesome,’ Peter was still reeling over Aunt May’s boyfriend announcement. He knew he was being totally selfish and Aunt May deserved to be happy, but Peter didn’t think he was ready to stomach the sight of another man at Uncle Ben’s spot at the breakfast table, eating his toast and drinking his orange-

“Other kids I know start their day with orange juice, but me? I get yelled at by a hundred-foot tall CRANKY-PANTS!”

“What the-?” Just as he reached the subway entrance, Peter did a double take. In the store window near the stairs was a television, and surrounding that television was enough red and blue to make his head spin. Action figures, bobbleheads, Pez dispensers, Legos, and even a Spider-Mobile playset. Right as Peter was starting to gawk, the television cut to cartoon footage of Spider-Man fighting some obscure, overdesigned supervillain. The animation was decent, but the fighting seemed a bit stilted compared to some past action cartoons.

“You’re TOAST, Wall-Crawler!” bellowed the villain as he flung a fireball at our hero. The cartoon Spider-Man promptly transformed into a literal piece of toast.

In the span of a second, Peter had gone from feeling flattered to having his intelligence insulted.
“This villain is tough!” said the cartoon Spidey. Sheesh, could they get a more shrill voice actor? “But he’s no match for my SPIDER-CYCLE!” He zoomed up the side of a building riding a two-wheeled toy commercial.

“Why would Spider-Man need a motorcycle?” He’d meant to resume his walk into the subway, but instead Peter found himself yelling at the screen. “He can already web-swing to places!”

“You’re probably wondering why I need a motorcycle when I can already web-swing to places,” narrated the cartoon Spidey. “Well, that’s because it saves money on web-fluid.”

“Oh.” Peter’s eyes traveled to the half-empty web-shooters hidden beneath his sleeves.

He was about to give the cartoon makers props for realizing his webs weren’t organic, but then he spotted the “Spider-Man’s Web-Shooters EXACT REPLICA” Silly String shooters displayed prominently among the merch. Great, now some stupid kid was gonna jump off a roof with those things.*

*DON’T DO THAT! YOU WON’T REALLY BE ABLE TO WEB-SWING! YOU’LL JUST FALL ON YOUR BUTT AND ALL THE OTHER KIDS WILL LAUGH AT YOU AND IT’LL BE HORRIBLE AND YOU’LL CRY! Or... so I’ve heard. – Bountiful Bandragoness

“Hey, teammates!” The camera panned down to the street to reveal four other superheroes that the real Peter had never seen before in his life, all of whom appeared to be lounging around on their phones. “Why don’t you give me a hand with this villain?”

“Nah,” said the teammate with a bucket on his head. He idly scratched his butt.

By the end of the episode, Spider-Man learned a valuable lesson about being more patient with his teammates and how he shouldn’t under any circumstances be a jerk to them. Okay, yes, Peter watched to the end, but only so he could feel more justified in his fury. This- This abomination couldn’t stand any longer. By jove, the REAL Spider-Man was going to do something about it!

Peter scurried off without noticing the two guys behind him, who had also watched the episode to the end.

One of them, a big, bald black dude, turned to his thin, white, blonde friend. “Was that supposed to be us on that show?”

“Hey, you’re the one who sold our likeness rights for a quick buck.”

The man in the skintight suit held the slip of paper in his big, meaty hands. “So... all I have to do is sign this contract thingy, and I’ll get the money?”

“That’s right, pally.” Beside him in the ring, a mustachioed man in a wrinkled penguin suit patted the strongman’s shoulder. “Of course, there are a few, err...”

“Caveats?” finished a third voice.

“Ahh!” The man in the penguin suit cried out, first from fear, then from joy. Above him, another man in a skintight suit was descending into the ring on a web-line. “Spider-Man! I always knew you’d come back someday!” The man let out a good-natured belly-laugh. “I knew ya couldn’t ignore wealth and fame for too much longer.” Before the strongman could sign, the man in the penguin suit yanked the paper from his hands and shoved it in Spidey’s masked face.
“Sorry, Sully,” Spider-Man said tightly. “I’m not here for a new contract – I’m here to ask about my old one. Y’know, the one I never signed?”

“Uh, of course I remember.” Sullivan Edwards straightened his bow tie. “What about it?”

“Did one of its ‘caveats’ happen to include merchandising rights, by any chance?”

“Oh yeah, the merch rights!” Sully perked up at the memory. “Funny thing, we didn’t actually need you to sign the contract to get those from ya. When you hopped into the ring to take on Crusher Hogan, you implicitly gave us the right to air your fight on TV, and thus the right to sell merchandise based off-”

“Why you underhanded little-!” Spidey’s web-line bobbed towards him.

“But I don’t got your merch rights no more!” Sully hurriedly added. “They were bought out a couple months back.”

“Really?” This gave Spider-Man pause. “By who?”

“Gee, what was that guy’s name again?” Sully strained to remember. “Real distinct appearance. Had kind of a vampire-shark thing going on. I think he was called Mr. Washington…?” He snapped his fingers. “No, I got it! It was-”

“L. Thompson Lincoln.”

From behind his desk, Tombstone’s eyes slowly traveled from the bodyguards webbed to the ceiling to the masked man standing below them.

“You really need to stop doing that,” Tombstone deadpanned.

“Yeah? Well, you know what you need to stop doing?” Spider-Man pointed an accusing finger at him. “Selling toys with my face on them! That’s- That’s my face! Use your own! What, you’re not confident Tombstone-themed Underoos will sell?”

“Ah, yes, the merchandise. I was wondering when you’d notice that.” Tombstone folded his fingers together, keeping his gravelly voice even as always. “You see, ever since you brought the government down on me last Valentine’s Day, I’ve required a more inconspicuous source of income. Then, as if by providence, while my men were looking into your past, I learned that you made your world debut on a wrestling program.” Slight traces of a smile appeared on Tombstone’s pointy mouth. “The company was too incompetent to realize they were sitting on a gold mine, and so I took it off their hands at a bargain price.”

“And now every penny of spider-merch sales funds your criminal empire?”

“I’ll leave that to your imagination,” said Tombstone. “But I will say that I find this situation fitting. You refused my generous offer to pay you, and so now instead, you’re helping me make money. I was even able to snatch up the rights to a handful of D-list superheroes. Of course, they didn’t sell at all until I packaged them with your toys.” He leaned back in his chair. “I told you before, Spider-Man, the Big Man has nothing against heroes. The more people you save, the more crime you thwart, the more the public will buy your action figures – which reminds me, I was serious about you needing to stop webbing up my guards. It will reflect poorly on sales.”

Tombstone shook his head. “My point is, if you want to dent my income, you’ll have to abandon your ideals – in which case, incidentally, my previous offer to you still stands.”
"Thanks but no thanks." Beneath his mask, Peter was glowering Tombstone to death. "As much as I hate to admit it, it doesn’t sound like you’re on the wrong side of the law for once. At least you’re selling kids toys and not drugs."

“I do that, too,” said Tombstone.

“OH #$% YOU!”

Prolonged exposure to creeps was bad for Spidey’s blood pressure, and so he dived out the nearby open window without another word, leaving Tombstone alone to brood. This development did, of course, mean war. Well, actually, Spider-Man had already declared war on Tombstone, so it meant double war.

Thwip. There wasn’t a flagpole to grab onto, so Spider-Man was forced to use up some of his precious web-fluid to swing himself onto a wall. Dang it, now he wanted that motorcycle.

Stupid cartoon… Stupid Tombstone… Well, to be fair, at least it wasn’t as bad as that time the Fantastic Four sold their film rights to a buncha hacks.

A little over a year ago, Manhattan’s fire department had strained its budget with a mandatory equipment upgrade to all units. Specifically, they’d replaced the firefighters’ bolt cutters with a newer, unfathomably more expensive model made with trace amounts of an imperfect, synthetic adamantium. From what Tombstone understood, these stronger bolt cutters served only one purpose.

“Hold still, sir. We’ll catch you.” Snip.

“Gah!” The last bodyguard dropped from the ceiling into the arms of some firefighters.

“Spider-Man probably used the type of webs that dissolve in an hour,” said the firefighter at the foot of Tombstone’s desk, “but if he didn’t, our website has a list of cleaning fluids that won’t leave stains.”

“No need to worry, officer,” said Tombstone. “This isn’t the first time Spider-Man’s made a mess of my office.”

“Sorry to hear that, Mr. Lincoln. There’s a warrant for his arrest, but everyone knows the NYPD’s soft on him…”

None of Tombstone’s bodyguards were hurt, and so they and the firefighters soon filed out of the office, leaving Tombstone in merciful silence. For a moment, he simply sat in his chair, strumming his fingers. Truthfully, he had work to be doing, but the interruption has decimated his concentration.

Instead, Tombstone pressed a button on his desk’s intercom. “Mr. Mason? Show me that merchandise you had for sale. I’ve had a change of heart.”

A few moments later, one Phineas Mason, alias the Tinkerer, strolled into the room. As always, he had squarish glasses, a squarish lab coat, and even a gray, squarish goatee.

“I was hoping you’d say that, sir,” said Tinkerer in his somewhat effeminate voice. He set a briefcase on Tombstone’s desk.

“Spider-Man just invaded my private office again.” Tombstone’s fists clenched. “He may not
represent a threat to my safety, but many other superhumans have been inspired by his vigilantism, and not all of them share his lofty ideals.”

“Ah, yes, I heard about Sin-Eater,” Tinkerer nodded. “All the more reason to hire yourself a super-mercenary bodyguard, I’d say. I’ve got just the thing.”

The briefcase popped open, and resting within was a round, metallic, silver-and-violet object slightly larger than a football. Its markings gave it the appearance of a bug hiding in its shell.

“Say hello to the Beetle armor.” Tinkerer gave it a proud pat. “You wear it like a backpack, and it unfolds to create an instant battle suit.”

“You already outfitted the Enforcers with battle armor,” said Tombstone. “It didn’t fare well against Spider-Man.”

“Yes, but I think you’ll find this armor to be far superior to the previous models.” Tinkerer counted off on his fingers. “It can alter itself to fit on all but the morbidly obese, it can be worn beneath clothing for the element of surprise, it comes equipped with an on-board AI so that even the most incompetent mook can pilot it, and, oh yes, it can fly and shoot laser beams.”

By now, a pointy smile had crossed Tombstone’s face. “Let’s have a demonstration, then.” He buzzed his intercom again, calling one of the previously webbed-up bodyguards back into the office. “Mr. Jenkins?”

“You rang, boss?”

“Here.” Tombstone tossed the Beetle into his hands. “Put this on.”

“Uh… Sure thing.”

With a bit of instruction from Tinkerer, Jenkins was able to slip the Beetle armor on his back and, with a quick voice command, cause it to unfold around him. Each piece enclosed over his body, snapping and interlocking until every inch was covered. In an instant, Jenkins had gone from an average thug to a tall, steel-clad, silver-and-violet creature with a pair of antenna, bulging neon green eyes, and a set of four plasma wings of the same green color.

“Dang. I could get used to this.” The armor even scrambled Jenkins’s voice, adding a robotic quality to it.

“Now, then, ‘Beetle,’ before I purchase your new armor, I’d like you to take it on a test run.” As he spoke, Tombstone stood from his desk to gaze out the window. “You see, for the past several months, I’ve been searching for a certain target. A target that my spies have finally closed in on. And so I want you to bring me a hunk of adamantium—”

“Adamantium?” Even with the voice scrambler, the Beetle sounded lost. “Um, sure, I know a seller—”

“-attached to Hammerhead’s skull.”

An armored car sped down the streets of lower Manhattan. Passerby likely assumed it belonged to the NYPD, but in actuality, the car’s owners resided on the polar opposite side of the law.

“This is too easy.” Hammerhead was seated in the car’s storage area, his eyes on his lover’s. “It ain’t ever this easy with Tombstone.”
“This baby can withstand a blast from Shocker.” Sable banged on the wall to punctuate her point. “You worry too much, Hamster.”

“Guess you’re right. I’d like to see him try and attack us.” Hammerhead patted the souped-up Tommy Gun in his lap.

“Oh, trust me-” Silver Sable patted her own firearm. “-this one doesn’t shoot staples.”

A moment of silence passed between them.

“So,” said Sable, “ten bucks says he makes his move before we reach the airport.”

As it turned out, the car didn’t even make it to the Queens–Midtown Tunnel before something dented the roof.

“Babe, get down-!” Hammerhead instinctively shielded his woman from the rain of shrapnel.

A fresh hole had been blown in the impenetrable armored car, and looming above it was what appeared to be a giant, metal bug-man.

Sable scoffed at the sight of him. “What are you supposed to be?”

“The name’s Beetle.” Their attacker held a palm out at them, which started emitting a neon green glow. “And I got a severance package to deliver.”

Thwoom. Now it was Sable’s turn to tackle her man out of the path of a green laser beam. The attack blasted clean through the floor and into the pavement below, which was apparently enough to make the driver swerve into a building.

“What is it with this city and fruits dressed like bugs?” Hammerhead sprang out the car, followed by Sable. The two of them were quick to retaliate with their own weaponry.

Dink dink da-dink dink. Unfortunately, their bullets left nary a dent in Beetle’s armor.

“Will you look at that?” The Beetle cackled to himself as he zipped into the air, held aloft by his plasma-wings. “Tinkerer’s got an eye for quality!” The next second, he was swooping towards Hammerhead again, firing a nonstop barrage of green lasers from his fingertips.

Hammerhead dived out of the way in the nick of time, but the armored car wasn’t so lucky – A stray blast set it ablaze. Even worse, this little tussle in the streets had resulted in a number of other cars swerving to avoid the chaos, meaning Silver Sable and Hammerhead were locked between a wall of flames and a traffic jam.

“Nowhere to run.” The Beetle hovered in midair, prepping another palm-blast. “You shouldn’t have left your girlfriend’s safe house, freak. That mistake’s gonna cost you.” Hammerhead winced, Beetle’s palm grew even brighter, and then-

“Heads up!”

-he was kicked in the face by a red-and-blue blur at the peak of its pendulum swing. Beetle’s laser was sent into the side of a building, causing it to scatter rubble as opposed to Hammerhead’s innards.

“Lemme guess... Butterfly-Man?”

The Beetle soon reoriented himself, aiming his palm at a certain spandex-clad do-gooder perched
on the building across from him. “I’m a beetle!”

“Please don’t tell me you want to hold my hand.” Spider-Man dived off the roof to avoid the incoming laser blast. He landed next to the flaming car, taking the time to rip open the door and web-yank the unconscious Manfredi goons to safety before turning his attention to Hammerhead and Sable.

“Man, I hate bad guy on bad guy fights.” A quick glob of web blinded Beetle, giving Spidey a second to chat. “I never know who to root for.”

Hammerhead scowled at him. “Then why don’t you butt out?”

“Oh, no need to thank me for saving your life. I just happened to notice Dung Beetle flying out of Tombstone’s tower, that’s all.” Just then, Spidey’s white lenses traveled from Hammerhead to the silver-haired strumpet at his side. “Wait, don’t tell me you two are an item again?”

“That’s always subject to change,” Sable said dryly.

“So when I webbed you two together before, it actually worked? That’s so sweet!”

“Looks like Beetle freed his eyes already.” Sable fired a couple more rounds at the villain, but to no effect. “Our weapons are clearly useless, so why don’t you fight him for us while we run away? You hero types love that kind of thing, right?”

“If I save you, can I be best man at the wedding?”

“Just fight him.”

“Alright, alright...” Spider-Man bounded into the air, flipping around lasers until he’d landed a kick in Beetle’s gut, knocking him into another building.

“I’m starting to see why the Big Man hates you so much.” From his crater within the wall, Beetle brought his hands together to generate a glowing ball of plasma.

“Dude, is that a kameh-?” Wham. Spidey’s sense scarcely had time to tingle before said ball slammed into him. The Web-Head was sent sailing, but his path was eventually blocked by a massive billboard looming over the battlefield – which, incidentally, depicted the cartoon Spider-Man holding up a beverage beneath the words “How ’bout a taste of SPIDER-PUNCH?”

Spider-Man groaned.

Sable ran as fast as her legs could carry her, but Hammerhead wasn’t so speedy. She glanced back to discover she was a good few feet in the lead. But she also discovered that Spider-Man was struggling to free himself from a crumpled billboard... and that the Beetle was right on their heels.

“Hamster, behind you.” Sable shot Beetle’s arm – She’d always prided herself on her aim – and sent his plasma-beam cascading into another rooftop. For a moment, Sable allowed herself to think Hammerhead was safe.

But then the corner of the roof exploded, creating a meteor shower of stone and fire.

“Hammerhead!”

“Stay back! Princess, I-” The rest of the sentence was drowned in fire and noise. Sable was prisoner in her own body, and this time her eyes were wide open.
“Joseph!”

The next few moments were a blur. It was hard to focus on anything except the ringing in her ears. Beetle had flown off laughing – She distinctly remembered that. Off to report his success to the Big Man, no doubt. And at some point, Spider-Man had arrived to frantically claw through the wreckage, tossing aside hunks of concrete like they were hollow props.

“No no no no no.” Spider-Man muttered to himself. “Not again. Not again.” He tossed aside the last hunk, and for one beautiful second, Sable thought everything would be alright. There was his square head, those deep black eyes…

“Joseph! Joseph, I’m here!” She cradled him. Held him close enough to hear the words fighting to escape his lips.

“Hey, princess, it’s funny… My head’s fine. Too bad ’bout… the rest…”

“Stay with me, Joseph. Don’t do this. Don’t-”

She continued to hold him until the sirens hit her ears.

“Oh- Oh, God, I’m sorry.” Spider-Man’s voice came from somewhere behind her. Sounded like the kid was crying. “I called an ambulance for him-”

“He needs a mortician, you little idiot.” Against her own volition, Sable freed her arms and spun to snarl at him. “Damn you! You and every other self-professed hero in this godforsaken city.”

She expected the kid to retort with his famous wit, but he remained silent.

After a moment, Sable retrieved her rifle from the pavement and wordlessly walked towards the center of the street – where a helicopter was touching down.

Out emerged a squad of armed men. “Miss Manfredi-”

“Shut up and get us out of here.”

“But ma’am, where’s Hammer-?”

“I said get us out of here.”

“Wait, you can’t just leave-” Spider-Man tried to swing after them, but a barrage of bullets sent him scampering for cover until the copter was safely above the skyline.

Silver Sable stood at the window, watching the flaming wreckage beneath them shrink and shrink until she could almost convince herself it was insignificant. And there, at the forefront of it all, a little red dot was explaining everything to the ant-sized rescue workers emerging from their pea-sized ambulance.

Sable forced herself to look away. No matter how much of a boy scout he pretended to be, Sable knew the real reason Spider-Man saved people. She’d seen how much merchandise he sold.

“A plague o’ both your houses! They have made worms’ meat of me!” Flash bellowed his lines with enough force to nearly knock Sha Shan over. “How was that?”

“Stick to being Romeo.”
The only car on the Queensboro Bridge not busy honking at another car was a dull, yellow, beat-up Oldsmobile. In fact, not only were its passengers not honking its horn, they weren’t making any noise whatsoever.

That is, until the white-haired lady in the driver’s seat worked up the nerve to speak. “Do you want to talk about it?” She looked into the rear view mirror to see a blonde-haired girl huddled in the back. The girl had traded her ratty black t-shirt for her traditional glasses, headband, and salmon-colored jacket combo, and yet she looked no more like herself than before.

May allowed her question to hang in the air a while, then finally said, “Gwen, dear, I’m sorry, I know I shouldn’t have pressed you to go back to school today, but... what happened? I’ve known you since you were in middle school and I’ve never heard anything but glowing praise from your teachers, and now—now you’re suspended? Now you’re picking fights?” She returned her focus to the road for a second, inching the car ever so slightly forward. “I want to help you Gwen, but I can’t if you don’t tell me what happened.”

Gwen chewed her lip, careful to keep her eyes from meeting those of May’s reflection. May thought she’d be met with more silence, but then Gwen muttered, “There was this girl... I heard her say ‘cops are pigs.’”

“I see.” Despite the heater blowing in her face, May shivered. “Honey, I know it’s tempting to hit someone when they offend you. Trust me, I know exactly how that feels. Sometimes I think Anna Watson’s brother could use a good—” She caught herself. “I shouldn’t say that. But Gwen, solving problems with violence only begets more violence. If we did that, we’d be making the world a scarier place to live in.” She returned her gaze to the mirror, and this time Gwen met it. “And then we’d be no better than that horrible Spider-Man.”

Spider-Man felt horrible. The sun was setting, so it was utterly freezing on this rooftop, and he’d forgotten to wear his thermals, so for all intents and purposes he was buck naked – which only made him feel the same on the outside as he’d already felt on the inside.

It kept happening. First it was Mom and Dad, then Uncle Ben, then Harry’s dad, Flint Marko, Gwen’s dad, Walter Hardy, and now Hammerhead, of all people. And that wasn’t even mentioning Eddie was in a coma and Harry was back in intensive therapy overseas. At this point, it was hard to believe that Spider-Man had once held a perfect record at life-saving heroics.

Spider-Man leaned back against a smokestack, digging his glove-covered nails into his arm to keep from going numb. At least Gwen had agreed to go to school today. Granted she’d left halfway through according to a text from Aunt May, but it was a start.

Peter would give anything to be curled up on the couch with Gwen right now, but he’d promised Daredevil he’d meet him here at the outskirts of Hell’s Kitchen.

After an eternity longer than he’d have liked, Spider-Man heard the patter of feet landing on the roof. He turned his head to discover a slender-yet-muscular dude in a devil costume with Donald Duck’s initials printed on the chest. But Daredevil wasn’t alone.

“Spider-Man.” The stern-faced policewoman freed herself from Daredevil’s arms while he retracted his cables back into his billy clubs.
“Hey, Captain DeWolff.” Spidey waved at her. “Wasn’t expecting to see you here.”

She didn’t wave back. “I’ve been in contact with Daredevil for a while now.”

“What?” Spider-Man brought a palm to his chest. “I thought we had something special!”

“The NYPD needs your help to stop this city’s gang wars. It’s… not something we’re eager to share with the public, but our officers just can’t deal with these problems the way you metahumans can.”

“Tombstone’s been regaining power ever since last Valentine’s Day,” added Daredevil. Poor guy was shivering way more than Spidey. Guess the cold really got to him. “The longer we wait to make our move, the less the feds will watch him, and the closer he’ll get to restoring his criminal empire to peak strength. We need to strike now, while he’s vulnerable.”

Spider-Man cocked his head. “Vulnerable? Tombstone? Dude crushed a pool ball with his bare hand once. If you kicked him between the legs, you’d break your foot.”

This earned him a hint of a smirk from DeWolff. “Everyone has a weakness, Wall-Crawler. Tombstone’s is named Janice Lincoln.”

“His daughter?”

DeWolff nodded. “Normally, Tombstone’s careful never to let anything slip that could be traced back to him.”

“Yeah, I had to dehydrate a turtle just to learn his name. True story.”

“-but tomorrow, he’s holding a yacht party for his daughter’s eighteenth birthday, and, at the same time, striking a business deal with Roderick Kingsley.”

Spidey scratched his chin. “What, is he getting Janice a lifetime supply of perfume?”

“Better,” said Daredevil. “He’s getting himself a lifetime supply of super-mercenaries. Kingsley’s offered to replace the service Osborn once provided.”

“Which means more animal-themed weirdos trying to kill me. Great.” Well, Kingsley had been one of the bidders at the Rhino suit auction, so it figured he was in the super-mercenary business.

“Tombstone doesn’t want to miss his precious baby’s birthday, but he also doesn’t want to delay the commission any longer.” DeWolff laughed to herself. “Idiot’s doing the deal on the yacht.”

“He thinks he’s invincible,” said Daredevil. “His kind always succumbs to hubris.”

Hmm, weird that the yacht party Spidey had learned about the other day was coming back into play so perfectly. The Baader-Meinhof phenomenon strikes again.

“Problem is, we only know about this because Daredevil eavesdropped on Kingsley,” said DeWolff. “And the testimony of some anonymous guy in a stupid costume isn’t gonna fly in court.”

“Right,” nodded Daredevil, “but if that guy in a stupid costume happened to, say, record an illicit business deal and then hand the tape over to the media, then that would be admissible in the state of New York.”*

*I’m pretty sure this isn’t true in real life, but let’s just assume the American legal system is a bit
different in the Marvel universe. Trust me, it’s more dramatic this way. – Blunderin’ Bandragoness

“Oh, oh!” Spider-Man bounced in place. “Do we get to wear wires? I’ve always wanted to wear a wire!”

With their little chat over, Spider-Man swung as fast as his webs could carry him. Luckily, the trip from Hell’s Kitchen to Midtown High was a straight shot across the skinny part of Manhattan. Peter dropped down behind an alley, tossed on a long-sleeve shirt and blue jeans, and then stuffed his mask and gloves in his backpack as he scrambled for the football field.

“Rand! Rand!” Peter caught the guy mere inches from his car.

Rand smiled at him, though a couple other players gave Peter funny looks (They’d never quite known what to make of him after he’d aced his first tryout and flubbed his second). “What’s up, Pete?”

“I- Uh, sorry I didn’t say anything sooner-” Peter had to pretend to be out of breath. His sprint had been a little too impressive. “-but I overheard that whole thing with your dad at the Bugle.”

“Oh, that.” Rand’s face soured. “It’s nothing you got to worry about, man. I’ll be fine.”

“Well, yeah, but I- I wanted to let you know that I’m totally on your side, and it really sucks that your dad won’t let you go to Janice’s yacht party, and, uh…” Peter trailed off. This was a bold-faced lie, for the record. Peter trusted the Lincoln family about as far as he could throw Wilson Fisk.

Rand raised an eyebrow. “Are you just saying all this because you want an invitation?”

Peter shrank. “I… wouldn’t object to one…”

Luckily, Rand replied with laughter. “Alright, alright, you don’t have to get on your knees.” He slapped Peter’s shoulder hard enough to make his spider-sense tingle a bit. “Janice is basically inviting anyone who friends her on Facebook, anyways. She won’t even notice you.”

“Cool! Thanks, man!” Peter thought a second, then added, “So can I expect to see you there, or…”?

“Yeah.” The sudden look on Rand’s face made Peter’s sense tingle even harder. “But if I find out my dad put you up to this-”

“What? No way, I just-”

But Rand was just as quickly back to laughing. “It’s alright, man, I know you’re legit. You never could keep a secret.” And with that, Rand entered his car, but not before adding, “By the way, nice Spider-Man socks.”

Peter’s face went as red as his footwear. Not again. Now his pulse really was racing. He’d finally done it. He’d finally flushed his secret ID down the toilet.

“Ha! My five-year-old sister’s got a pair just like that!” yelled another football player. The remark had, apparently, drawn the rest of the team’s attention.

“Hey, everyone!” bellowed Kong. “Puny Parker shops in the kid’s section! Bwa ha ha ha!”

Oh. Peter’s heart slowed back down. At least Tombstone’s merch had done something helpful...
Curfew had ended half an hour ago, but Peter hadn’t even noticed. The instant the door shut behind him, he blurted out, “How’s Gwen?”

Aunt May had been taking a basket of laundry to the basement’s washer, but she paused to give her head a dejected shake.

“What happened?”

“She made me promise not to tell you,” said May. “The poor dear’s sound asleep. Maybe she’ll tell you herself in the morning.”

“Yeah. Maybe.” Peter’s eyes fell on the locked door to the guestroom. He wished he had more time to be there for Gwen, but balancing the lives of Peter Parker and Spider-Man had been a struggle even when he was single. He needed to be up bright and early tomorrow to get the wire from DeWolff, and Gwen had gotten in the habit of sleeping to noon.

With any luck, though, Tombstone would be behind bars this time tomorrow, and with the Big Man gone, well, Peter would have all the time in the world for Gwen.

The night came and went, and the morning finally arrived where Peter found himself sitting in the lap of luxury. This thing made Mayor Waters’s boat look like a pool toy – It was a wonder it managed to fit in New York Harbor. And that was just width. Height-wise, well, let’s just say Peter could web-swing on this puppy.

But more impressive than the yacht’s size was the fact that it was crowded. The sun deck was bigger than Peter’s high school, and yet it was crowded. Rand hadn’t been kidding about Janice inviting anyone who blinked at her.

It hadn’t escaped Peter that a fraction of the money Tombstone must’ve spent on this thing’s upkeep would let Peter, Gwen, and Aunt May live comfortably for the rest of their lives. And at any moment, all Spider-Man had to do to get that money was accept Tombstone’s offer… Sometimes, being the good guy really stung.

Man, though, this place had everything. Jet skis, glass bottom boat rides, massive swimming pools both indoors and outdoors (heated to ward off the autumn chill), a bar on every story, hundreds of bedrooms all equipped with the latest video games… Peter would give anything to stay the full week, except that he’d cut more than enough classes this semester and he hadn’t asked off of work – Peter really didn’t need to be giving Jameson more reasons to fire him. And more importantly, Gwen needed Peter at her side tonight. Peter had no choice but to take the return boat to the mainland this evening with all the other losers ditching on the first day.

Plus, if he was gonna record Tombstone’s and Kingsley’s illicit deal, it was probably best to get off the boat as soon as possible. Spider-Man’s neck wasn’t nearly as sturdy as that pool ball… Peter fidgeted with the wire beneath his t-shirt and spandex.

It’d been getting colder lately, but September had enough sunny days left for one more cruise, Peter supposed. He leaned back against the railing and did a bit of people-watching. Man, look at all these kids talking and laughing with each other. When was the last time Peter had been that carefree? Maybe Daredevil had a point about Peter being awfully young for the superhero business. He’d been growing up at mach speed ever since the spider bite.

But then a duo passed Peter’s eyes who were most certainly not kids – They were a pair of dudes in
their thirties by the looks of it, and their penguin suits made them stick out like sore thumbs against
the crowd of millennials. Tombstone’s goons, maybe? Peter thought it best to sneak after them,
though he couldn’t turn on his hidden camera until he was in costume, lest he inadvertently reveal
his secret identity to the police.

One of the men was blond and pudgy, while the other was a thinner redhead. The redhead seemed
to be fiddling with something as they strolled along, but it was hard to tell with their backs turned.
A walking stick, maybe?

“So what’s with the change of heart?” asked the blonde guy.

“What do you mean?” replied his buddy.

“What do you mean, what do I mean? Lincoln offered us a truckload of money to defend him last
February, but you had to be all high and mighty about it—”

“I told you, Foggy, I don’t defend bad guys.”

“Well, you didn’t have any hangups about us defending that sand dude.”

“He was starving to death. The guards even taunted him with sandwiches—”

“And the rhinoceros?”

“They were letting Connors experiment on him.”

“So what, you’re defending Lincoln now cuz you feel sorry for him?”

“We’ve been over this, Foggy. The feds have been on his back for months now, and they still
haven’t found anything incriminating enough to—”

“Oh, c’mon, Matt, we both know why you’re really doing this.”

“W-What do you mean?”

“This is all a front for us to sneak into this kickass party. Race you to the buffet table!”

“Foggy, I can’t see the buffet table.”

“Eat my dust!”

The blonde guy only mockingly ran off before returning to guide his friend by the arm. It occurred
to Peter that ditching the redhead for real might have been a little tasteless, given his impairment.

Peter thought about following them, but he decided against it. Didn’t seem like they were directly
involved in the deal after all. Hmm, what would Tombstone need with lawyers, though? What,
were they the only people scummy enough to be his friends?

But it turned out Peter didn’t need to follow them because a couple minutes later, he managed to
spot another familiar face in the crowd. It was Rand, looking distinctly guilty and uncomfortable,
and the gorgeous lady in the ritzy violet dress at his side was undoubtedly Tombstone’s daughter.

“Thanks for coming, sweetheart.” Janice gave Rand a quick smack on the lips, smearing her
lipstick in the process. “I couldn’t have enjoyed all this knowing you were miserable at home.”

“I’m glad you’re happy, but...” Rand was glancing around as if Mr. Robertson was fixing to spring
from the shadows. “...my dad’s definitely gonna kill me for this.”

“Randy, I told you, you’ve gotta relax.” Janice got behind him to rub his shoulders. “You can worry about consequences when you’ve actually gotta face them. If your dad’s really gonna give you a hard time, then let’s make every minute of that worth it.” She shoved a champagne glass in his face. “Here, this’ll help you loosen up.”

“Janice. I’m not twenty-one! And neither are you, for that matter-”

“Oh, yeah, I’m sure the chaperones are being super careful to check all ten billion guests.”

“Janice… You’re starting to sound like Sally…”

But Janice was, apparently, too preoccupied wetting her whistle to notice the remark. She tossed the empty glass overboard and dragged Rand off by the arm.

Peter felt a little worse about stalking Rand, but it payed off – Eventually, Rand and Janet crossed paths with her dad.

“Daddy!” Janet dashed over to kiss his no-doubt clammy cheek. “This party is amazing. Thank you so much!”

“No need for thanks, my dear.” Was- Was Tombstone smiling? And was he hugging his daughter as if he was an actual human being with a sense of empathy and everything? This was more than his poor little spider brain could process. “I only wish your mother was here to see what a beautiful young woman you’ve become.”

“Me, too.” At this, Janice grew somber.

Tombstone seemed to notice – Suddenly, he was ushering Janice off towards a massive stage set up at the back of the deck. “Follow me.”

Rand scrambled after them, and Peter scrambled after him, doing his best to make sure a red exclamation point didn’t pop up over any of their heads.

“What is it, Dad?”

“I want to show you your present.”

The curtains pulled back, causing Janice to squeal at a pitch only teenage girls are capable of. Onstage was a group of pretty boys led by a slightly-less-pretty girl. The crowd went wild at their appearance, but Peter didn’t recognize them – He was a bit too busy saving lives every day to stay current.

“Ohmigod, Dad, they’re supposed to be touring in England right now! How did you-?” Janice looked at her father like he’d parted the Red Sea.

Tombstone smiled again – a gesture that made Peter retch. “I told you, anything for my little girl.”

Back onstage, the lead singer announced over a mike: “This one goes out to the birthday girl, Janice Lincoln! You guys are gonna be the first fans in the world to hear our brand new hit single, inspired by real events! I call it ‘I Let My Baby Drive My Car!’” Behind her, the drummer started a beat, and the next instant the yacht was filled with pop music.

Eh, it wasn’t Peter’s favorite, but then again, after Hyno-Hustler, all other music sounded a little
Janice ran off to see the band up close – so close, in fact, that they let her on the stage as they performed. Rand, meanwhile, was left alone with old Toomby.

“So,” said Tombstone, staring him down, “you’re the one who’s been seeing my daughter.”

“Y-Y-Yuh-Y-Yes, sir.” Geez, Peter had never seen Rand so uneasy, even when the guy had spotted Gwen dangling from a balloon last Thanksgiving.

“Robbie’s boy.” The name made Rand flinch, but if Tombstone noticed his discomfort, he didn’t let on.

“I’m sorry, sir!” Rand blurted out. “I know my dad helped print all that horrible stuff about you in the Bugle, but I don’t believe any of it, I swear!”

“Interesting.” Tombstone chuckled to himself. “Actually, your father is an old… pal of mine. Though what his paper printed about me is unfortunate, I bear no ill will towards him or his family. In fact, if you’re looking for a job, I have a position available. I’m sure Janice would enjoy seeing you around the building more often.”

“Really?” Rand’s voice cracked, and that dude’s voice was deep. “That’s great! Thank you so much, sir!”

Peter fought the urge to spring out from the crowd and scream, “DON’T DO IT, HE’S EVIL!”

“What kind of job, exactly?”

“We can discuss the details later. You should focus on enjoying the party for now.” And with that, Tombstone walked away. “It was nice meeting you, Mr. Robertson.”

Peter would love to stay behind to give Rand a little heart-to-heart about Tombstone and the sleaziness thereof, but he had a mission. Peter scurried after the walking marble nutjob, always making sure to stay buried in the crowd.

Eventually, Tombstone came to a stop beside a familiar white-haired man. “Now then, Mr. Kingsley, I believe you wanted to discuss something with me?”

“Indeed I did,” nodded the man. “But let’s say we find a more private venue first?”

Peter’s heart skipped a beat. This had to be it, and that meant it was hidden camera time.

Tombstone and Kingsley went off to a secluded part of the deck – By now, almost everyone was gathered at the stage. Following those two crazy kids was gonna be a mite trickier now, but Peter was on top of it. First he webbed up a security camera before it had the chance to spot him, and then Peter bounced over the ship’s railing. Fun fact, Peter’s butt could stick to walls, too. He could only imagine those little spider-hairs were not exclusive to his hands and feet, but he’d as of yet been unable to confirm this in his microscope.

Peter stuck himself to the ship’s side so he could throw on the rest of his costume, webbing up his civvies in a cocoon. Spidey even webbed his camera to the rails – No reason he couldn’t get Tombstone busted and make a little money from the Bugle at the same time.

Spider-Man turned on his wire, and then he crawled along the boat’s exterior and waited. He’d expected Kingsley to say something to the effect of, “Psst, hey, you, wanna buy some super-
mercenaries?”

But instead Kingsley cried out, “What’s that?”

“Not one of mine,” said Tombstone.

Spidey’s spider-sense sent his head upwards. The crooks were no doubt referring to the white helicopter growing larger above the waves. And the closer it got, the harder Spidey’s sense buzzed.

Wait a tick, Spidey recognized that copter. He’d seen it before during the Rhino suit auction, where it had… fired a machine gun attached to its bottom. Oh boy.

As the copter got closer, a figure became visible hanging off its side – a silver-haired woman with eye black, a white combat suit, and a gun in her hand that looked like it belonged in Ratchet & Clank.

“We were leaving this country, Tombstone.” The music came to a screeching halt, replaced by Silver Sable’s booming voice over a megaphone. “We were going to concede the title of Big Man to you, but you couldn’t let things be, could you? You killed the one I loved.”


“And now…” Sable aimed her weapon. But not at Tombstone. “…I’m going to return the favor.”
Pilgrimage

You probably don’t need to be told that Silver Sable had aimed her giant gun right at the pretty face of one Janice Lincoln. Janice was still onstage, making her stick out like a sore thumb. She didn’t even have the mental fortitude to run for it – Poor girl was like a deer in the headlights.

“Happy birthday.” Sable pulled the trigger, launching a missile the width of a basketball.

*Oh crap. Oh crap oh crap oh crap.* Losing Hammerhead had been bad enough, but Janice was innocent. Spoiled, yes, but innocent. The fact that he was surrendering his hiding spot didn’t even cross Spider-Man’s mind as he sprang back over the railing. That missile was fast, but it didn’t have spider-reflexes. Spidey sprinted up a smokestack and fired his shooters, snagging the rocket mere feet from the stage. Spider-Man managed to yank it towards the ocean moments before it ripped the web-lines out of his wrists. The resulting explosion killed some unfortunate fish but no people.

“What are you out of your mind, Sable?” With that taken care of, Spidey wasted no time launching himself off the pipe, then firing a web onto the copter so he could tug himself skyward. “It is after Labor Day!”

Spidey landed next to Silver Sable on the copter’s opened side, taking advantage of her surprise to kick her rocket-launcher into the ocean.

“You again?” But as it turned out, Sable was a formidable threat even without a weapon. The old spider-sense tingled, but Spidey was too winded from the journey up here to react in time. Next thing he knew, Sable busted out some kinda kung fu and knocked Spidey out of the copter. “Why are you always in my way?”

Then, just to be thorough, the helicopter’s machine gun opened fire on him.

“I can’t lie to you, Sable.” Spider-Man had to do some quick midair contortions to keep from becoming Swiss cheese, followed by a blast of webbing over the turret. “I’m actually a figment of your imagination. Think Fight Club.” He swung and landed onto the turret itself. The mix of the added weight and Spidey’s punches were enough to rip the gun off the copter and send it plummeting to the deck.

Spider-Man didn’t go with it, though, because he’d stuck himself to the copter’s underside. Okay, he was safe for the moment. Now all Spidey had to do was figure out a way to bring down the helicopter without killing any of the people on the ground or inside the thing. Geez, the Punisher had it so much easier.

This was gonna be murder on the web-fluid budget, but Spider-Man had an idea. With a sudden leap, he sprang towards the top of the copter and unloaded a web-cartridge onto its blades. Naturally, the helicopter fell like a stone, but not before Spidey had time to use the cartridge on his other hand to spin a nice, comfy web between the deck and the smokestack.

*Ker-SMASH.* The web cushioned the fall, but it didn’t stop the copter from crashing into the deck and shooting splinters every which way.

“Ugh... I shoulda skipped the buffet table.” Spider-Man pulled himself free of the wreckage. He didn’t suppose it was too much to expect all the Manfredi goons to have been knocked out by the crash?
“Don’t even think about moving!” As it turned out, a good dozen had remained awake, including Silver Sable herself. She’d freed herself at lightning speed, snatched one of her thug’s pistols, and pointed it at Spider-Man’s head before he’d even gotten his bearings. The rest of the thugs, meanwhile, poured out of the copter to hold up the screaming crowd. “Any last words, freak?”

“Yes, tell Jameson I’ve secretly loved him all along.” Spidey stuck his hands in the air. Alright, alright, this was fine. This was manageable. His spider-sense hadn’t gone off yet, meaning Sable was hesitating. All Spider-Man had to do was find an opening to web her gun, and- and… There was no opening. Even if he got Sable’s gun away, all her goons would just unload their own into the hostages. Spider-Man had nothing.

Crack. But someone else had something! A crimson blur darted across the deck, whacking mook after mook before they had time to blink. One of them tried to open fire, only to have his gun knocked away by a thrown billy club.

“Daredevil!” And, of course, Spider-Man seized the opportunity to backflip onto a thug’s shoulders and give him a good smack in the head. “Thanks for the assist!”

Daredevil was too focused on combat to respond. His fighting style was totally different from Spidey’s. Spider-Man fought like a drunken lunatic, bouncing around to disorient and outwit his opponent. It was kind of his own in-house fighting style he’d developed. Daredevil, on the other hand, fought like a ninja mixed with a ballerina mixed with an MMA fighter. Every move was quick, powerful, and deliberate. He struck each and every mook in just the right places to make them go night-night. Fighting alongside him kinda made Spidey self-conscious.

Between the two of them, the Manfredi goon were no match. But there was one person who’d fled the fight… Silver Sable was sprinting across the deck, making a beeline for the stage where a crowd was still gathered and where Janice was still cowering.

“No you don’t.” Suddenly, a new figure entered the chaos – It was Tombstone, and he was running faster than Spidey had thought humanly possible. He might’ve even caught up with Sable if his path hadn’t been blocked by more thugs. Of course, Tombstone went through them like a bowling ball through pins, but by the time he, Spidey, and Daredevil reached the stage, they were too late.

Most of the crowd was scrambling for the lifeboats, but Janice had frozen halfway down the stage’s steps. Pointing a gun at someone’s face has that effect on them.

Out of the corner of his eye, Spidey caught one other person lingering near the stage – Rand had taken cover behind one of the giant speakers, and he was cautiously peeking over the side to check on his girlfriend. Idiot. But Spider-Man didn’t have time to ferry him to safety right now.

From the looks of things, Tombstone was frantically mashing a miniature radio on his collar. “Jenkins, where are you? What do you think I’m paying you for?” His face… Spider-Man had never seen Tombstone look so terrified. It was unsettling.

Tombstone lifted his head back up. “Janice? Janice, listen to me, it’s going to be okay, dear!”

“Daddy?” Janice was trembling, both her body and her voice. “What’s going on?”

“It’s alright, dear. You’ll be safe.” Tombstone was trembling a bit himself. He looked over at Sable. “Manfredi, please, she has nothing to do with this. If you want to avenge your lover…” His eyes squeezed shut again. “…then you need to kill me.”

Silver Sable merely smirked at him. “Nice try. Maybe I can get you on your hands and knees next.”
Behind his mask, Peter’s eyebrow had sprung right up his face. He’d never thought he’d see the day Tombstone groveled to someone. Under less severe circumstances, Spidey would’ve felt a wave of schadenfreude.

“D-Daddy?” Even Janice seemed disquieted by her dad’s submission. “What did you do to this chick?”

Silver Sable laughed. “He hasn’t told you? Sweetie, your dad is the Big Man.”

“That’s a lie!” Janice snapped with sudden vigor. “The Daily Bugle made it up to sell papers!”

“Is that so?” Sable turned to Tombstone, though she kept her gun trained on Janice. “Tell her, Tombstone. Tell her whether it’s true or not.”

Janice’s gaze fell on her father. “Dad…?”

Tombstone closed his eyes. “It’s… It’s true, Janice. I am the Big Man of Crime.”

“Oh, that’s a good start, but we wouldn’t want to let her think you’re only saying this under duress, now would we?” Sable gave her gun a little shake. “Tell your baby girl the whole story. Give her all the juicy details, the ones only the Big Man could know.”

Tombstone looked like he wanted to rip Sable in half, but he continued, “I had Sable Manfredi’s boyfriend assassinated after he double-crossed me.”

Janice took this in silently.

“And I carried it out,” Tombstone continued, “with a super-mercenary.”

*Wham.* In the blink of an eye, something violet and metallic dived in front of Janice. Silver Sable impulsively fired, but the bullet bounced right off. The thing swooped at her, forcing Sable to tumble out of harm’s way and giving Spidey and DD a chance to figure out who her attacker was.

“*Beetle.*” With the standoff resolved, Spidey could jump into action. “You’re not killing anyone else on my watch!” A flying kick redirected one of Beetle’s palm-lasers, making it hit a few inches west of Sable’s foot.

“Where do you think you’re going, birthday girl?” But the downside of Spider-Man’s heroics was that it gave Sable time to chase after a fleeing Janice. Sable fired more shots, but Janice dived through a doorway in the nick of time.

Sable dashed after her into the yacht’s interior. Spider-Man, Daredevil, and Tombstone gave chase, too, but they were put to shame by Beetle. He zoomed straight past the heroes with enough force to leave a gaping hole where the door had been.

So now Spidey, Double D, and Toomby were chasing Beetle who was chasing Silver Sable who was chasing Janice. Oh, what fun.

As they ran (with Spider-Man running upside down on the ceiling, naturally), Spidey gave Tombstone a death glare. “It never occurred to you to reschedule the party in light of the crime boss you’d ticked off? Or could you not stand to ruin your princess’s special day?”

“Beetle was *supposed* to be keeping watch over the boat,” Tombstone said tightly. “When this is over, he and I are having *words.*”
“We’ve got bigger problems,” spoke up Daredevil. “When you crashed that helicopter, Spider-Man, it cracked the ship’s hull. There’s water flooding in at the lower levels.”

“How-?” Spidey caught himself. Right, right, X-ray vision. “Okay, so now on top of rescuing Janice from Sable and Sable from Beetle, we’ve also gotta make sure all the people inside evacuate. Plus all those thugs we knocked out.” He threw his hands up (or, uh, down, in this case). “And I didn’t even get to draw Sable like one of my French girls! This is the worst shipwreck ever!”

Daredevil’s head snapped towards him. “Is now really the best time for jokes?”

“Sorry. I quip when I’m nervous.”

Now that DD mentioned it, the floor was getting awfully slanted. And as they descended further into the depths of the boat, the floor grew progressively damper.

It was a maze down here, meaning Mr. X-Ray Eyes took the lead. But suddenly, Daredevil paused. “Hmm. That’s interesting.”

“What?” Spidey halted his progress, followed by Tombstone.

“The Beetle fired some sort of plasma weapon that knocked Sable out,” said Daredevil, “but because they were in such close quarters—”

Zoom. Before the dude could finish, Beetle burst out of a doorway and zipped above their heads.

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha! Oh, and he was laughing like a maniac. That was new.

“Where’s Janice?” Tombstone asked his lackey. “Is she safe?”

“Oh, yeah.” Beetle’s voice-scrambler made him sound extra demented. “She’s doing great.”

For the first time since Sable’s attack, Tombstone exhaled. “Excellent. In that case, as long as we’re down here with no witnesses...”

Daredevil pounced out of harm’s way at the exact moment the Web-Head’s spider-sense went off.

Spider-Man scarcely had time to process this before he became a smear on Beetle’s windshield. Beetle had flown right into him, and not only did he knock the wind out of our poor hero, but he knocked him clean through the ship’s walls, sending the two of them back out onto the deck.

“Ugh... When did my life become a NetherRealm game?” Spider-Man forced his screaming muscles to cooperate, jumping off of Beetle and into a fighting stance. “Listen up, Beetle Bailey! I will not let you take another life, and that includes my own. Understand?”

“Whee hee hee hee hee!” Beetle did not. He was more preoccupied, evidently, with making loop-de-loops around the smokestack. “This is the funnest thing ever!”

“...Huh.” Spider-Man watched him go. “Did Sable hit his head?”

“Give me a case to put my visage in! A visor for a visor – What care I what curious eye doth cote deformities?”

Seymour O’Reilly’s line reading had been the only one that evening to put a smile on Devereaux’s face.
“Here are the beetle brows shall blush for me.”

Daredevil had dodged the Beetle’s attack, but he hadn’t accounted for the other attacker. Wham. A fist sent him flying through a doorway and into an empty, private dining room. By the time Daredevil pulled himself to his feet and snorted seawater out of his nose, Tombstone had already locked the door behind them.

“The Man Without Fear.” Tombstone waded towards him. “The only vigilante to put close to the same dent in my business as Spider-Man. Let’s find out if your title is a misnomer.”

Spider-Man probably would’ve made a lame joke by now, but Daredevil kept quiet. He didn’t like jokes. They made it hard to concentrate.

In this waterlogged arena, smell was off the table – Everything just smelled like the ocean now – but hearing was more useful than ever. Every move Tombstone made was punctuated by sloshing. Better yet, Tombstone was so heavy that the water slowed his movement. It only went up to their ankles right now, but that was rapidly changing. Daredevil had to get to a higher elevation.

He took a step backwards, listening for the spots where the water’s ripples were disrupted. Bingo. Daredevil leaped onto a nearby table, then used it as a springboard to launch himself at Tombstone.

Daredevil could tell before the attack even collided that it’d do no good. Tombstone’s muscles were thick and rigid, and the billy clubs practically bounced right off his neck. Daredevil landed back in the water, giving Tombstone a chance to retaliate.

Daredevil ducked (He wasn’t eager to get punched again – The last one had felt like a freight train), and then he seized the chance to kick Tombstone’s shins. Still no dice. The two of them traded blows for a second, but eventually Daredevil had to back off and catch his breath. No matter how hard he hit, Tombstone wasn’t phased, whereas one good strike from Tombstone could shatter Daredevil’s bones.

“Truth be told, you’re a far more skilled combatant than I,” said Tombstone, cracking his knuckles, “but it’s obvious you lack any sort of superhuman strength. Spider-Man’s struggled against me, and he can lift a truck above his head. What chance do you have?”

Daredevil grit his teeth. Tombstone was right – If he kept this up, Daredevil was going to get himself killed. But Tombstone was blocking the exit. Daredevil could try to swim out through the helicopter-hole in the room, but by the sound of it, the water was gushing in with enough force to give him a concussion.

There had to be something… That’s when Daredevil felt it. There was a warmth above their heads, and it made a faint creaking noise as the ship rocked it back and forth. That had to be an overhead lamp. This could be his only chance.

Before Tombstone could wade any closer, Daredevil launched his club through the air, smashing the bulb. Between that and the torrent of water filling the hole, there couldn’t be much light pouring in. Water might not have been Daredevil’s element, but darkness was.

The billy club returned to Daredevil’s hand thanks to a special cord and motor attached to the other club, like an automated fishing line. Then, with newfound confidence, Daredevilsprang off a chair and landed on Tombstone’s shoulders. The door was too thick to kick down, but maybe if he could knock Tombstone into it…

Truth be told, though, Daredevil wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to run away from this fight. He’d
have to endure the sound of Tombstone’s face muscles stretching in condescension.

But it didn’t matter – Tombstone wouldn’t budge. In desperation, Daredevil struck the back of Tombstone’s head again and again, but all it did was shatter his clubs.

Then, almost that same instant, Daredevil felt a warmth from the ceiling. The lights had flickered back on – The bulb must’ve only been cracked, and the movement of the ship had gotten it working again. Well, he’d tried.

_Crack._ This time, Tombstone hit less like a freight train and more like a nuclear missile. Daredevil tumbled off Tombstone’s shoulders and into the water, completely submerging his head.

The world disappeared. Daredevil was alone, floating in a cold, weightless void. But only for a moment.

The next moment, he was yanked above the water and back into the world, sputtering for air. It took Daredevil a frenzied second to realize that he felt cool air on his face, which could only mean his mask had been removed.

Of course, had Daredevil’s eyes still worked, he’d have been able to see it dangling in Tombstone’s pale white hand.

“Well, isn’t this unexpected?” A laugh traveled up Tombstone’s belly and out his throat. “All along, the Man Without Fear has been the blind lawyer from Hell’s Kitchen.”

Then he used his free hand to make Matt’s ribs go concave.

Something was seriously off here. Last time they’d tussled, Beetle had been evil, sure, but the normal kind of evil, not the giggling maniac kind.

Beetle’s laughter finally quieted as he came to a halt in the air, hovering by one of the yacht’s smokestacks. “This armor thingy is incredible! I feel so- so alive! I’m never taking it off again!” He paused, thinking. “But for that to happen… I have to prove to the Big Man that I have what it takes to wear it.” His head snapped to Spidey.

“You ‘armor thingy’ had _better not_ be an alien symbiote. Let me tell you-” Spidey and Beetle played a game of leapfrog, with Beetle swooping and Spidey bouncing over him. Spidey landed on the smokestack and turned his head in time to see a miniature sun forming between Beetle’s front wings.

_Dude._ Your wings make a miniature tritium-bomb? Those were banned by the U.N.! The fusion process sets off a chemical reaction that can level a whole-” Spidey was forced to sprint up the pipe to avoid said reaction. “Oh, I see you’re already familiar.”

The problem was, while the top half of the smokestack still existed, the bottom half… wasn’t so lucky.

“I suppose the obvious question here is how a blind man is able to fight so well.” As he spoke, Tombstone dragged Matt through the water by a leg. “Is that an elaborate ruse? Or perhaps you simply have some superpower? I suppose I’m not one to talk, though. My vision’s not the best, either, thanks to my own condition.” He gestured to his colorless skin.

Matt coughed up more water, struggling to stay above it.
“And then there’s the devil motif.” Tombstone glanced at the crimson mask in his other hand. “Fitting. As I recall, your father earned himself the name Jack ‘the Devil’ Murdock. He always did fight like hell.” He climbed onto a table to escape the rising tide, tossing Matt up after him.

Matt wiped the blood from his chin. “Surprised you remember him.”

Tombstone chuckled. “Of course I remember Jack. I remember everyone I kill.”

Spider-Man dashed up the pipe at double speed, and when he reached the top, he bounded into the air… only to once again get rammed in the stomach.

“I don’t know what half this stuff even does.” As he spoke, Beetle flew Spidey farther and farther out to sea. “But- But I’m sure there’s something in here that’ll kill you.” Every so often, rocket launchers unfurled from his armor. They probably would’ve incinerated our lovable hero if Beetle had actually aimed at him. Instead, they all flew into the ocean, ruthlessly slaughtering any surviving sea life from Sable’s missile.

“FYI, this is why you read the manual first.” Spidey punched Beetle’s helmet, but the only things it dented were his knuckles. “Trust me, I got into some wacky antics with my web-shooters at first.”

“I thought your webs were organic?”

“I’m not even going to respond to that.”

But speaking of webs, the Web-Head did have one last trick up his sleeve. Before they could get out of range, he fired a web-line back onto the smokestack. This enabled him to swing Beetle around like a tetherball-

“Yeeeee-haw!” Ker-SMASH.

-and clean through the side of the yacht.

“Yes, I remember Jack well.” Tombstone pressed a soaking wet dress shoe to the side of Matt’s head, pushing down like the weights of a bench press. “He had a gift for boxing but not little else. Always taking care of his poor blind kid. Jack was a good man, to be sure, but he never was very bright. He was even stupid enough to win a match he was supposed to throw.” He smiled, showing off his rows of filed teeth.

“At least he wasn’t a coward who only attacked when his opponent was already exhausted,” Matt replied, strained.

The smile vanished. “Well, that was during my less sophisticated days.”

“You mean before you learned to pretend you weren’t a thug?”

“That’s one way to put it, yes. Allow me to give you a taste of what I was like.”

The pressure on Matt’s skull increased exponentially.

And that would’ve been the end of the Man Without Fear… if Spider-Man and the Beetle hadn’t crashed through the wall at that exact moment.

Wham. The duo made a high-speed collision with the dining room floor. The fresh hole they’d
created prompted most of the water to shortly drain out.

Spidey jumped off moments before Beetle skidded into the bar, causing countless bottles of alcohol to shatter on top of him. A robotic voice declared, “Systems compromised. Initiating safe eject sequence.”

After that, the Beetle’s armor retracted and folded in on itself until it was nothing more than a beetle-shaped backpack that shot off of its wearer. Spidey wasted no time snatching it from midair and squishing it in much the same manner as one would an actual beetle. “There, I did it! Granted, I’ve got no idea how I did it, but that applies to like ninety-nine percent of my wins, anyways.”

But Tombstone hardly noticed. He seemed far too busy gawking at the person lying where the Beetle had been a moment ago. “Janice?”

At that word, Spidey’s own attention turned to the person before him. Whoa, Tombstone wasn’t kidding. There she was in a disheveled, soaking wet party dress, looking considerably less sane than she had prior to today’s battles.

“Hey, Daddy.” Janice grinned from ear to ear, struggling to sit up straight. “Guess it was my turn to surprise you, huh?” She let out another fit of uncontrollable laughter.

For probably the first time in his life, Tombstone was at a loss for words. “I- I don’t understand. How did you-? Where’s Jenkins?”

“He and Sable knocked each other out,” Daredevil said from beneath his foot. “That armor folded back up, and your daughter took it for a joyride. That’s what I was trying to tell you before you decided to murder me.”

At this, Tombstone went from baffled to enraged. “Is that true, girl? Why would you do something that- that stupid?” He climbed down the table so he could slosh towards her through the what was left of the water.

“Yu kidding?” Janice grinned at him, eyes bulging. “Because I just found out my dad is the coolest person ever! I didn’t want to believe what the Bugle said about you, but- but now- You’re the top criminal in all of Manhattan? You pay people to create supervillains to fight Spider-Man? And then I saw this sick armor, and I thought, hey, I can be a supervillain, too! I can finally do something with my life besides text and drink and fool around with my dozen boyfriends.”

Janice started laughing again, and to Spidey’s surprise, it sounded even freakier than it had with the voice amplifier. He got the impression Janice couldn’t stifle it if she tried. Her lungs must’ve burned by now.

Everyone else was distracted by Janice’s little display, but Spider-Man caught something out of his peripheral vision. The door to the dining room had been opened a crack, and peering out of it was the wide, quivering eye of Rand Robertson. The instant Spidey caught sight of him, the door shut back. If Rand had any sense left, he’d start running for a lifeboat.

Poor guy. Sure, Spidey had had his fair share of girl troubles, but at least none of his had turned out to be aspiring supervillains.

“O serpent heart hid with a flowering face! Did ever dragon keep so fair a cave?” For all the respect Seymour had earned from Devereaux, Sha Shan’s line reading blew his out of the water. “Beautiful tyrant! Fiend angelical! Dove-feathered raven, wolvish-ravening lamb! Despisèd substance of divinest show, just opposite to what thou justly seem’st. A damnèd saint, an honorable villain!”
Flash watched her from just offstage, mouthing the lines alongside her.

“O nature, what hadst thou to do in hell when thou didst bower the spirit of a fiend in moral paradise of such sweet flesh? Was ever book containing such vile matter so fairly bound? Oh, that deceit should dwell in such a gorgeous palace!”
Tombstone remained standing in the ever-rising drink, chest heaving, gaping at his daughter like he’d never seen her before in his life. “You’re supposed to be studying to become a defense attorney.”

That only made Janice’s eyes roll. “Seriously, Dad? Still with the lawyer stuff? That’s got to be the lamest job you could think of.”

(“It’s not that lame…” muttered Matt.)

“Don’t you get it, Dad? Learning you’re the Big Man is the greatest thing that’s ever happened to me!” Janice tried to pull herself to her feet, but her leg gave out. “I need this life.”

“You need psychiatric help.” Desperation had crept into Tombstone’s voice. “We’re not supposed to be involved in these battles. You’re not supposed to be involved. I grew up on the streets – I know what this life can do to a person. But then you came into this world, and I held your little hand, and.” His faltered. “—everything was different. You deserved better than me. And so I learned to speak properly and wear a suit. I clawed my way to the top. I became the Big Man.” He met her eyes. “I lived that life so you wouldn’t have to. Everything I built, I built for you.”

Janice had no response to this.

But Spider-Man did. “Oh, it must feel real great to learn your daddy sells kids drugs in your name. Congrats, Janice, you’re basically the real life Walter Jr. Must be so proud.” He used the last of his webbing to spin a cozy little cocoon around her, complete with mouth gag (webbing that was supposed to last until his next paycheck, but whattaya do?). “Don’t worry, I’m sure they’ll serve you plenty of breakfast in your padded cell.”

But then his spider-sense blared, and Spidey found himself ducking a pair of marble wrecking balls.

“You can web up my guards. My super-mercenaries. But you do not. Touch. My. Daughter.” Tombstone’s fists moved so fast, Spidey barely managed to dodge them with each swing. Spider-Man hurled a dining table at him, but Tombstone smashed it in two with his forehead like a giant karate board. If Spidey found out Tombstone had a steel-plated head, too, he was gonna scream.

Tombstone charged, and Spider-Man impulsively tried to kick his legs out from under him. Big mistake. Spidey had been hit by a semi once during a web-swinging mishap, and Tombstone’s impact wasn’t dissimilar.

Spider-Man tried to jump away, but a punch to the chest sent him back to the floor. No good… Spidey had barely been able to beat Tombstone last Valentine’s Day, and that was when his webshooters were full and Ock and Silvermane had worn the dude down. This… wasn’t gonna end well.

“I don’t like to make things personal.” Spider-Man could feel his bones popping as Tombstone spoke. “But you hurt my little girl.”

“I hurt her?” Spider-Man spat through gritted teeth. “Look at yourself, Lincoln. If you really cared about her safety, you’d have never gotten involved with gang wars and supervillains in the first place. You could’ve become an honest man, but instead you chose to be the big one. That girl’s your responsibility, and you failed her just so you could get more power. You can squish my head
like a grape, but that won’t make me wrong.”

Tombstone froze. For a brief second, Spider-Man thought he’d actually gotten through to the guy. But then Tombstone spoke in a voice that froze Spidey’s blood: “Killing you isn’t enough anymore. First, before I make it unrecognizable, I’m going to rip off that childish mask and take a good, long look at your face, just like I did your friend over there.” He pointed with his eyes to where a crippled Daredevil lay. “I’m going to have the law office of Nelson and Murdock firebombed, and then...” He knelt down until his mouth was millimeters from Spider-Man’s spandex-covered ear. “...I’ll find out where you go to school and have it firebombed, too. While class is in session.”

Beneath his mask, Peter shut his eyes. This was it. His spider-sense was blaring like mad, but he couldn’t do a thing about it. No matter how much he squirmed, Tombstone had him pinned. But then his spider-sense abruptly stopped, and in its stead came the sound of muffled screams.

“What-?” Tombstone’s head spun towards the web-cocoon beneath the bar. Janice was no longer alone. Matt had, evidently, found the strength to crawl across the floor, return the discarded devil mask to his face, retrieve the jagged remains of his billy clubs… and then twist their cords around Janice’s neck.

“One more move, Tombstone,” Daredevil hissed. “Make one more move.”

Words failed Tombstone. Though there was still plenty of murder in his eyes, he released Spider-Man from the headlock and backed away.

“Remember that deal you were striking with Sable before Beetle showed up?” Daredevil asked. “Let’s renegotiate those terms.”

“W-What do you want from me?” It boggled the mind how Tombstone could go from monstrous to timid with the bat of an eyelash.


Janice’s eyes bulged – the only part of her body she could safely move – while her forehead dripped with sweat.

For a moment, there was silence. Then Tombstone turned around. Took a step towards the gaping hole in the wall.

Thwak. And then a red-and-blue blur sailed through the air – though it was currently more red than blue – and collided with Daredevil’s chest, sending the Man Without Fear skidding across the soggy floor.

“Hold still.” Spider-Man carefully unraveled the cords from a squirming Janice’s neck. “Breathe through your nose.” He heard a muffled “thank you” from Janice’s web-covered mouth.

But then Spidey heard something else. Laughter, and not from Tombstone. Somehow, Daredevil had managed to drag himself back to his feet. His shoulders were shaking. Christ, the guy would make a terrifying supervillain.

“Uh... Double D?”
“I should’ve known.” Daredevil grinned, wiping blood from his chin with the back of his hand. “It’s such a tempting offer, isn’t it? All you have to do is not fight crime for a week. Prove you can behave.”

“Wha-? Oh.” That sounded familiar...

Spider-Man knew they were just lenses, but he’d swear Daredevil’s red eyes were burning. “How much is he paying you?”

Now, obviously, Spider-Man wanted to explain everything to Daredevil in a calm and rational manner, but that was a bit tricky when he had a two hundred pound man charging at him.

“Daredevil-? Dared-!” Spider-Man had to duck a barrage of fists, feet, and clubs. He’d give Daredevil this – For someone who’d had the snot beaten out of him, the dude could fight.

Normally, Spidey would’ve more than held his own against a guy with no super-strength, but he was so exhausted from Tombstone’s beating that one wrong move left Spidey on the floor, seeing stars.

“After everything he just said, you still defend him?” Daredevil loomed over Spider-Man, hoisting his jagged clubs above his head like an executioner’s blades. “Maybe Tombstone’s not the only one who ought to-?

“Matt, listen to me!” The use of his real name was enough to make Daredevil hesitate. “I don’t work for Tombstone!”

Daredevil’s clubs fell to the ground. “You’re… telling the truth. But then why-?”

“Rebellious subjects, enemies to peace, profaners of this neighbor-stainèd steel!”

Don’t get Devereaux wrong, there’d been plenty of good auditions today. But sad as it was, thanks to the constant supervillain attacks, the student population of Midtown Magnet had been stretched painfully thin.

“Will they not hear? What, ho!”

Which was why it was only appropriate that Devereaux play the role of the prince himself.

“You men, you beasts, that quench the fire of your pernicious rage with purple fountains issuing from your veins, on pain of torture, from those bloody hands, throw your mistempered weapons to the ground and hear the sentence of your movèd prince!”

“Why?” Maybe it was just from the pain, but Peter’s eyes stung. “Because a good man once told me that times like these… these are the times when we change into the men we’re going to be for the rest of our lives. And I don’t know about you, Matt, but I don’t want to be that kind of man.” He took a breath, then added in an undertone, “There are enough Frank Castles running around in the world.”

Those red eyes weren’t burning anymore. Now they just looked like lifeless pieces of plastic. “God forgive me.” Daredevil fell – collapsed, more like – to his knees. “After everything I preached to Frank...”

Now that he wasn’t about to be whacked in the head with a broken billy club, Spider-Man turned his attention to Tombstone. Or rather, where Tombstone used to be. “Oh, great-”
But Spidey didn’t have long to worry about this. The next instant, the dining room door was kicked open, and Tombstone returned, flanked by a small army of New York’s finest.

“There they are, officers.” Tombstone made sure to point the two masked heroes out in case their bright red costumes had blended into the shadows. “The ones who threatened my daughter.”

“No, wait!” Spidey put his hands in the air, followed by Daredevil. “That’s only technically what happened!”

While no one else could see, DeWolff gave the two a look of apology. “Spider-Man, Daredevil, you have the right to-”

“Hey, random question,” cut in Spidey, “anyone ever seen Monsters Inc.?” He pressed down on a slight bulge near the front of his shoulder.

“-find out where you go to school and have it firebombed, too. While class is in session.”

The whole police squad froze at the unmistakable sound of Tombstone’s voice coming from beneath Spider-Man’s costume, near his shoulder.

“Ooh, scandalous!” Spider-Man fished the wire out of his costume. “Hmm, what else did I get on here…?”

The tape rewound a bit (“-loohcsotoguoyerehwtudnif-”), then declared, “It’s… It’s true, Janice. I am the Big Man of Crime.”

“Hey, that’s a good one.” Spidey hit rewind again.

“I am the Big Man of Crime.” Rewind. “I am the Big Man of Crime.” Rewind. “I am the Big Man-”

“This,” said Spider-Man, “is going to make a fantastic dance remix video.”

One by one, the officers changed their sights from the vigilantes to the Big Man.

“Mr. Lincoln,” said DeWolff, “you have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be-”

“Get. My. Lawyer. On. The. Phone.” Tombstone’s sharpened teeth were coming dangerously close to breaking the skin of his gums.

After that, a couple officers heaved the Janice-cocoon over their shoulders, and then the procession of cops, Tombstone, and the battered and broken duo of Spidey and Double D made their way above deck before any more water had the chance to seep in.

As they left, Spidey jogged up to the handcuffed Tombstone to tap his shoulder. “Heeeeeey, Lonnie.”

If looks could kill.

“Before the police haul your pale white keister off to jail, I feel I should point out – You made a big scary speech about how you were going to expose my secret identity and ruin my life, but now instead I’ve exposed your secret identity and ruined your life.”

Spidey gave Tombstone’s shoulder a friendly pat. “Now that, my villainous friend, is a little something we kids call ‘irony.’”
“I’m sorry, you’re saying Daredevil is a blind man?”

“He’s faking it, or else he’s a metahuman. I know what I saw!”

The officers traded glances. Behind Tombstone’s back, one of them spun his pointer finger around his temple in the universal sign for “This guy’s not all there.”

“Well, hey,” said DeWolff, “maybe Murdock can defend himself in court?”

“Huh, I’m sorry, what’s going on-?” That very instant, Matt stumbled out from the yacht’s interior, guided by an officer.

“Oh, there he is now.” DeWolff shook her head. “Speak of the devil.”

A pudgy blonde man rushed out the crowd and to Matt’s side.

“Matt! Oh my God, I’m sorry! I lost you in all the confusion, and- and I thought you were-”

“It’s alright, Foggy.” Matt pressed a hand to his bandaged scalp. “The police managed to fish me out in time. I think I was swept into the kitchen or something, though. That debris made a real mess of me. May need to spend some time in the hospital.”

“Does that mean we’re suing Lincoln for all he’s worth?”

“Oh, yes.”

On the other side of the deck, Peter had blended in among the horde of teenagers being ushered into rescue boats. Many of them were gawking at the sight of the police hauling people away in handcuffs. Pretty much all of the Manfredi thugs had been rounded up, but Sable herself had been more elusive. Some partygoers were reporting seeing a white-haired lady climbing onto a second helicopter, though, so Peter wasn’t holding his breath over Silver Sable’s impending arrest.

And then there was the pair of Beetles being dragged away. As it turned out, the reason Beetle had arrived late to the battle was because Jenkins had opted to slip away and grab a drink. He was still a bit wobbly now, but Peter wasn’t sure if he was tipsy or if Sable really had hit his head too hard.

And lastly, there was Janice. She’d needed a straightjacket.

“Janice...” Rand met his girlfriend’s – let’s get real, ex-girlfriend’s – eyes as she was led away.

“H-Hey, Rand.” Janice let out an anxious giggle. “Um, I can explain this-”

“Will you have to explain it to your other boyfriends, too?”

“No, babe, you’ve got it all wrong! The other eleven aren’t special to me!”

Rand stared at her. “I hope you get the help you need, Janice. Have fun in Coral Moon.”

As Rand watched Janet go, a certain voice wafted his way:

“Sir, no reporters, please-”

“I’m here for my son!”

The voice’s owner pushed his way through the crowd. When Rand spotted him, he ran into his
“Dad! You were right...” Rand’s quivering eyes squeezed shut. “You were right about everything.”

“I know I was, son,” Mr. Robertson said softly. “I know I was.” Father and child held one another beneath the sunset. “Also, you’re grounded until you’re thirty.” And with that, the two of them walked off towards a rescue boat.

But Peter, eavesdropping as per usual, caught something that Rand didn’t. As she was led away, Peter was pretty sure he heard Janice whisper, “Bye, Randy. You really were special.”

Devereaux was always one to lead by example. His voice projected across the auditorium, audible all the way from the farthest seats:

“And for that offense,

Immediately we do exile him hence.

I have an interest in your hearts’ proceeding.

My blood for your rude brawls doth lie a-bleeding.

But I’ll amerce you with so strong a fine,

That you shall all repent the loss of mine.

I will be deaf to pleading and excuses.

Nor tears nor prayers shall purchase out abuses,

Therefore use none. Let Romeo hence in haste,

Else, when he’s found, that hour is his last.

Bear hence this body and attend our will.”

The final line, while no less projected, was considerably softer in its delivery:

“Mercy but murders, pardoning those that kill.”

“Miss Manfredi?”

This time, Silver Sable made it to the airport unimpeded.

“Shut it,” she hissed from beneath the collar of her white trenchcoat. “It’s ‘Sabinova’ now. They’ll be searching for Sable Manfredi.”

“Right, right.” The Manfredi goon shrank, embarrassed.

On an overhead speaker, a voice declared, “Now boarding for Symkaria.”

And with that, Silver Sable hurried towards their plane. Trailing behind her, carrying her luggage, were the remaining Manfredi mobsters.

Only they weren’t mobsters anymore – They were mercenaries. Her Wild Pack.
Peter had to admit, he’d never have guessed Daredevil was that blind lawyer guy. But by far the biggest shock of today was the fact that he’d made it home an hour before curfew.

“Well, that party was over fast.” Peter wasn’t two feet through the doorway before Gwen was hugging him. Aunt May had likely gone to bed by now, but it seemed Gwen had stayed up to unpack some boxes of her things. Upon Peter’s arrival, though, she’d let them fall to the floor.

“I saw the news.” Gwen nodded to the nearby TV, which was showing footage of a certain blind redhead on the front steps of an apartment complex. The guy was absolutely flooded with reporters (though, not to brag, but it wasn’t nearly as many as Peter had gotten when Venom let slip his secret ID).

“This information,” Matt was saying, “is one hundred percent untrue. My law office has filed a four hundred million dollar libel suit against...”

Gwen ended the hug before Peter asphyxiated. “You caught Tombstone threatening to blow up our school on tape?”

“Well.” Peter grinned. “The Web-Head already dropped a copy off at the Bugle. Foswell thinks this is the linchpin we need to get Tombstone’s whole operation shut down.”

“Aww, so I still have to go to class on Monday?” Gwen tried to grin back, but hers wasn’t quite as wide.

Peter took a breath. “Speaking of class, I heard you left early yesterday.”

The humor left Gwen’s face like water down a sink. “I… got into a fight with Sally.”

“Hey, it’s alight.” Peter kissed her forehead. “I know it’s hard to believe, but I’ve gotten in a fight or two myself.”

Gwen managed a smile. “My intentions weren’t quite as noble. Sally said cops were pigs, and I guess I flipped out.” She shook her head. “I was so worried I’d cry in front of the class or something, I never thought I might do that.”

“You’ve got the right to be touchy when it comes to cops,” said Peter. “Was anyone hurt?”

“Not really. I gave her some nasty scratches, though.” Gwen held up her chipped fingernails.

“If it makes you feel any better, when I first got my powers, I broke Flash’s hand.”

“Seriously?” Gwen was left gawking. “That does make me feel better, actually.”

“And you know what Uncle Ben said? It was one of the last things he ever told me.” A distant look overtook Peter’s eyes. “He said that just because you can beat someone up doesn’t give you the right to. Stuff like that, you know, it changes you, and you’ve gotta be careful what kind of man- err, person, you change into. I was just telling that to another friend earlier, oddly enough.” He paused, then added, almost to himself, “The important thing is no one died today. There’s been enough of that lately.”

He winced at his own words. Peter had been talking about Hammerhead, but Gwen couldn’t know that.

“Peter...” She touched his cheek. “Please don’t blame yourself.”
Peter went pale. “I- Well- The thing is-”

“Listen to me. It’s no one’s fault but Walter Hardy’s.” As she spoke, Gwen’s fingers traveled from Peter’s cheek to his hair.

“That’s not what the Bugle says…”

“Well, it’s hard for Jameson to see the real story with his head so far up his butt.”

“Heh. Yeah.” The next several seconds were spent gazing into Gwen’s sea green eyes. Somehow, whenever he did that, Peter always felt safe. It was about the only time when the whole world wasn’t unraveling around him.

Gwen brought a hand to Peter’s dampened sleeve. “Now let’s get you patched up before you break today’s ‘no death’ streak.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve spent enough time in a coffin already.” Peter laughed as their lips drew nearer. “Not a fan.”

Stupid straightjacket. Janice really wanted to hit herself, but she couldn’t because the darn thing was in the way.

The urge might have stemmed from the fact that she had to share the police van with a bunch of loons who actually needed their jackets.

“This is perfect!” one of them was gushing. “We’re all aspiring supervillains, too! I heard the police say your codename is Beetle. That’s so cool! Mine is Boomerang! See, because I attack with boomerangs, and my mask’s got a boomerang on the forehead. We could form a team! We could be the new Sinister Six!”

Janice’s eyes flitted about the van. “There’s five of us,” she said dryly.

“That’s what’s so genius about it! The heroes will think we have a secret sixth member. They’ll always be on edge! Think about it. The sixth member could be anyone. Venom, Doctor Doom, Dormammu-”

“It’s always Dormammu with you…” another guy muttered.

Janice groaned. She missed Rand already.

Gwen shut her locker to discover a sullen blonde girl lurking beside it, dressed in a crooked and slightly smelly cheerleader uniform. Not that Gwen was one to throw stones at the moment. Yes, she’d felt up to going to school, but that didn’t mean she’d felt up to practicing personal hygiene.

“G-Gwen.” The word sounded utterly alien coming from Sally Avril’s mouth. “Look, about what happened… You gotta know I neva meant- I- I was just bitchin’ about my speedin’ ticket. I’d totally forgot about…” She trailed off. Slowly, Sally touched a hand to the bright red scratches on her cheeks. “Well, point is, I had it comin’. I’m not pressing charges or nothin’. In fact, I kinda think I needed that.” She paused for a reply.

Gwen took a breath, mustered an incredible force of will, and said, “Thank you, Sally. It’s okay. I forgive you.”
She didn’t stick around much longer after that, instead leaving Sally as the sole person standing before the lockers. Well, sole person with one major exception.

“Sally.” A deep, calm voice turned Sally’s head.

“Oh, R-Rand.” A welt traveled down Sally’s throat. “You heard that?”

“Yes.” Rand was leaned the row of lockers in his usual football jacket. His hygiene, too, was somewhat subpar. In fact, it was rare to find the guy so disheveled. “Not judging, though. I feel your pain, actually.” A sigh escaped his mouth. “I haven’t been making the smartest choices lately, either.” The sigh was followed by a steadying breath. “Wanna talk about it? I was thinking we could catch up over dinner…”

A smile crossed Sally’s scratched face. “Dat sounds perfect.”

It felt weird to know Tombstone was going to jail. No matter how many times Peter repeated it to himself, he still wasn’t sure he believed it. He kept expecting himself to open up the paper (or, more realistically, check his Reddit feed) one morning and discover that Tombstone had made bail again, that the evidence was inadmissible in court, that Tombstone had hired Chameleon to concoct an elaborate alibi. But it never came. Dude was going to jail.

Of course, the three dozen Spider-Man jackets, t-shirts, and backpacks Peter passed in the halls of Midtown Magnet today didn’t inspire confidence.

Class had been a drag – Monday. ’Nuff said. – but if there was one silver lining, it was walking to the subway at the side of the prettiest (and smartest) girl in school.

“Maybe you can buy your merch rights back once you’ve got a job?” Gwen was saying.

“Yeah, I’m not holding my breath-”

“Peter.”

A sudden voice made Peter flinch. He and Gwen turned to discover someone standing at the sidewalk. Peter would’ve assumed he’d been watching them if not for the dark glasses and white stick.

“Oh!” Gwen seemed the most startled at his appearance. “It’s you. Err, sorry, I haven’t visited that priest. The truth is I’m not really a Christian, so it’s a little weird to-”

“That’s alright, Miss Stacy,” said Matt. “I’m sure Father Lantom would remain secular if you preferred, but I certainly wouldn’t want to pressure you... But truth be told, I came here to speak to your boyfriend.”

Peter froze. Dang it, the guy really had seen through Spidey’s mask. Somehow. “Uh, I don’t think we’ve met, and I don’t really need an attorney. Unless I get caught, of course-”

“We did meet, actually,” cut in Matt. “On the yacht. Apologies for eavesdropping, but I know you’ve told Miss Stacy all about it-”

“I won’t tell anyone, I swear!” Gwen blurted out. “And even if I did, they wouldn’t believe me-”

“It’s alright.” Matt gave a reassuring smile. “I can’t talk long. Lately, I haven’t been able to go five minutes without a reporter trying to trick me into saying what color shirt he’s wearing.”
“Yeah, the press can get pretty shameless.” Peter winced at Matt’s pain. “Back when Venom outed me, they aired a three-hour interview with my kindergarten teacher.” He paused, then added, “You, uh, you are really blind, right?”

Matt nodded, though it was a bit stiff with all the bandages in the way.

“So then how do you do all the, err, ninja stuff?”

Matt’s crimson glasses twinkled in the light. “You have your powers, I have mine.” Hmm. Maybe the dude had his own spider-sense – or rather, devil-sense? Eh. Wasn’t quite as catchy.

“I made sure to cut out all the mentions of your secret ID before dropping off that tape with Foswell, by the way.”

“I never doubted that,” Matt said, “though I gave my copy to Urich. I trust him a bit more. But really, I only came by to say…” He hesitated. “…well, thank you. I brushed you off as a child at first, but if not for your maturity, I’d be a different man today. And Frank would probably think I was the biggest hypocrite in the world…” He’d grown solemn for a moment, but then he chuckled, adding, “Maybe it’s because of your age. The world hasn’t had enough time to make you cynical yet.”

“I like to think I’ll always be this fun,” said Peter.

“We’ll see.”

“Well, it’s not like there are any major bad guys left to worry about,” spoke up Gwen. “I mean, the Tombstone and Manfredi gangs were just shut down in one night, so that only leaves D-listers like Chameleon and Tinkerer, right?”

“I wish it was that simple.” Matt turned away, though Peter supposed it didn’t matter as much where his head faced. “Tombstone killed my father, but even with him behind bars, my vengeance isn’t complete. See, Tombstone didn’t do it of his own volition. Back then, he was a hitman working for a crime lord. Even that far back, mobsters were fighting Silvermane for the name of Big Man.”

Somehow, Matt’s rounded glasses had grown even scarier than the eyes on his devil mask. “I never found out who that crime lord was, but I was hoping, now that the Big Man title is up for grabs, he would finally show himself.”

Another aspiring mob boss jumping at the chance to fill the Big Man’s big shoes, huh? That reminded Peter of something Gwen’s dad once said to him...

“Nature abhors a vacuum.”

The office itself was vacuumous. Its wide glass windows showed off the heart of Manhattan as if it was this man’s property.

“I did what you asked.” A woman stood across from him, still in her police uniform, gazing out at the skyline. “There’s no way Tombstone’s avoiding jail this time. Our hero friends suspected nothing, even with Daredevil’s lie-detecting trick. He probably just thought I was nervous about conspiring with vigilantes.”

“Excellent, Captain DeWolff,” said the man. “I’ve been quite relieved by your cooperation. I shudder to think what would’ve happened had your family learned of the affair.”
DeWolff scowled. “So I take it you’ll be filling the vacuum now? This city can’t go a day without getting a new Big Man.”

“Please, Captain.” The man gripped his pole-sized cane with his massive, meaty fingers. “‘Big Man’ is such a blunt, crude title. I’d prefer something more… regal.”

End of Lesson 4
Lesson 5: Psychology 101

Manhattan was over twenty square miles large with a population of over one and a half million. It was one of the most famous places in all the world, and that fame had only grown since it became the superhero capital of America. So when it came to locales to serve as backdrops for dates, the possibilities here were endless.

Gwen leaned back in an outdoor booth of the Silver Spoon, picking at the same salad she always ordered. Across from her, MJ chewed on her chicken wrap.

“Sheesh,” MJ said, “I get why Pete’s always late, but what’s taking Mark so long? Hope he’s okay.”

“I’m surprised you and Mark didn’t come here together,” said Gwen. “I thought that’d be one of the perks of sharing an apartment.”

“Oh yeah, Mark had to go do a thing. Something about his job, I think.”

“Mmm.” Gwen took another bite of salad.

“Don’t worry, though, sharing an apartment with a buff Latino guy’s got more than enough perks already.”

Gwen was forced to take a gulp of Sprite before her face turned blue.

“Too much?” MJ gave her a look. “Sorry, forgot you’re squeamish. Not used to that. You couldn’t get the girls at my old schools to shut up about boys…” After a moment, she slid a bottle across the table. “Hey, want some virgin dressing for your salad? It suits you.”

“Ha ha.”

A couple minutes later, Mark finally arrived – tidy dark hair, a clean dress shirt – to sit down beside MJ. And a couple dozen minutes after that, Peter arrived – hair sticky with sweat, the tag of his blue t-shirt sticking out above his chest – to plop down beside Gwen.

“You holding together, there, Parker?” Mark was the only one to draw attention to his arrival.

“Yeah, I just, uh, had to take some pics for the Bugle.”

“Ah, still chasing the Web-Head around with a camera?” Mark shook his own, non-webbed head. “Maybe you ought to find someone more pleasant to shoot?” He traded flirty looks with MJ. “I know at least one lucky photographer has already…” Ah, that’d be an allusion to Mary Jane’s modeling career. Apparently, it’d really taken off these past couple months – hence the apartment MJ was now able to pay half the rent of.

Anyways, once the sun started to set, the couples said their goodbyes, and then Mark and MJ escorted each other out.
“How ’bout we head home, chika? Wouldn’t want to miss a perfectly good chance to…” As they strolled away down the sidewalk, Mark murmured something in MJ’s ear that left her blushing and giggling.

Peter and Gwen remained at the booth, watching them go. Sheesh, those two were on the brink of forming cartoon hearts above their heads.

“I really don’t like that guy,” said Peter.

“Oh thank god,” said Gwen. “I thought it was just me.”

“There’s something about him…”

“He’s all wrong for her.”

“I know! Like, MJ’s so cool and different, but she ends up dating a- a-?”

“-a guy?” offered Gwen. “Not just a guy, but, y’know, a guy.”

“Yeah.” Peter’s nodded. “I mean, I’m not gonna say anything to her, obviously, but I kinda wish MJ had stayed with Hobie. Seemed to me like Hobie really liked her, but with Mark, well, when he’s not busy telling MJ’s she’s hot – like she seriously needs to be told – he hardly pays her any attent-” It was at this point that the distant sound of a sirens hit their ears. “Oh, that could be trouble! I’d better go!” Peter hurried off without any word.

Gwen was left alone to stare at the virgin oil dressing resting by her salad bowl.

“No, no, mesa stay!” cried the Gungan, running after the Jedi. “Mesa called Jar-Jar Binks. Mesa your humble servant.”

Liam Neeson was weighing the virtues of impaling himself with his own lightsaber. “That won’t be necessary.”

“Oh, but it is! ’Tis demanded by the gods, it is!”

On the other side of the TV screen, Gwen seemed to be sharing Liam’s sentiment.

“Peter,” she began, “I still love you, so for the health of our relationship, I’m going to word this very carefully, but… do we have to rewatch every Star Wars movie tonight?”

“Look, I’m sorry,” said Peter, stroking her headband, “but if you haven’t seen the prequels, the Clone Wars show’s not gonna make any sense-”

“You’re a crazy person.” Gwen’s head sunk into the couch cushions. “I am dating a crazy person.”

Right as the Jedi were whipping out the underwater breathing devices they’d so happened to have on hand, the tape mercifully skipped a few minutes.

“I didn’t even know VHS’s still existed,” said Gwen. “I thought the government had them all rounded up and burned years ago.”

The tape wasn’t the only relic they’d excavated. A musty old tree covered in cracked ornaments had been dragged from the attic to this very living room. You couldn’t really tell what it was supposed to be anymore, but Peter was still pretty fond of it. The thing had become something of a Parker household tradition, even if it did look hideous (The Charlie Brown special lied, for the
record. No amount of love and care could save a tree like this).

Not only was there a tree, but speckles of snow swirled outside the window, and a trio of stockings hung above the fireplace, labeled “May,” “Peter,” “Gwen.” That was the part of the decorations Peter was happiest with – Last year, there’d only been two stockings. It’d seemed lonely.

“Phbbbb-bbbb-bbb-bb-bb-bb!” A sudden noise from Boss Nass made Gwen flinch out of her seat.

‘I, uh, don’t suppose it’d be against the spirit of your marathon to fast forward past the underwater city part?’ She failed to mask the desperation in her voice.

“Otoh Gunga,” Peter blurted out.

This earned him The Look.

“I mean, uh-” Peter cleared his throat. “I heard that once somewhere. I’m probably wrong. I- I don’t really know that much about it. Star Wars is for losers.”

This, in turn, earned him a laugh. “I’m just teasing, Peter.” Gwen ruffled his hair. “Actually, I think it’s great you’re so passionate about this stuff. So many guys have to, y’know, wrap everything in five layers of sarcasm, but you let yourself unironically love something. It’s cool. I-” She faltered, glancing away. “I really like that about you.”

The heat had been turned down to save on the bill, meaning Peter and Gwen had no choice but to huddle closer under their blanket.

“You know you’re the best girlfriend I could possibly have, right?” To be honest, it was hard for Peter to keep his eyes on the screen. “If I’d asked Liz to watch the prequels with me, she’d have dumped me on the spot.”

A smirk crossed Gwen’s face. “That wouldn’t have been totally unwise of her...”

Peter laughed. “Yeah, I know the prequels are garbage, but, well...” His smile shifted from earnest to somber. “Uncle Ben was big into Star Wars. Every time a new one released, he’d take me to this theater down in Brooklyn. It was practically a holiday for us. Course, I was, like, nine when Episode Two came out, so I fell asleep halfway through. Actually, so did Uncle Ben.”

“Oh no.” Gwen grabbed the remote from off the rug. “You’re guilt-tripping me into sticking through your marathon, aren’t you?”

“Moi? I am hurt you’d think that!” Speaking of hurt, Peter’s cheeks were starting to ache.

“But what about ‘with great powers comes great responsibility?’”

“Technically, it’s ‘with great power, there must also come great responsibility,’ but that doesn’t roll off the tongue as well.”

“What if the Grizzly’s out there eating people, and they’re all screaming for Spider-Man to save them, and now you’ll have to explain to their families that you were too busy watching Phantom Menace-?”

“Now who’s guilt-tripping who?” Peter batted her headband down over her eyes. “ Seriously, the streets have been deader than all those Padawan younglings ever since Tombstone got arrested, and that was months ago.”
“You never know,” Gwen laughed again, fixing her band, “What if Sandman comes back somehow?”

“Oh, I hope not. I don’t like Sandman. He’s coarse and rough and irritating-”

“I walked right into that one, didn’t I?”

“Seriously, though,” said Peter, “if you have anything better for us to do, I’m all ears.”

“Reeeeeally?” Gwen paused the movie right on a frame of Ewan McGregor making a goofy face. “Hmm, I’m sure I could think of something…”

Peter stifled a yelp. A hand had been placed on his thigh. “G-Gwen, I-” The rest of that sentence was muffled by her lips.

Don’t get him wrong, Peter had had plenty of experience making out with Gwen, but this was different. It was… more. She ended up pinning him against the couch – though Peter wasn’t exactly struggling against the weight as hard as he had back in the Master Planner’s lair.

“Gwen.” Peter finally mustered the willpower to remove her face from his. It’d proved surprisingly difficult. “We did promise no hanky-panky-”

Gwen lifted her head, causing her glasses to fall askew on her nose. “So? Your aunt’s Christmas shopping with MJ’s. She won’t be back for hours.”

“Yeah, but-” Peter’s face fell. “But we’re keeping enough secrets from her, don’t you think? Aunt May’s already upset we can’t meet her mystery boyfriend for Christmas.”

“Oh. That’s right.” Now that her momentum had been canceled, Gwen’s modesty returned. She climbed off, putting a couple inches between them, and straightened her t-shirt. “Guess that was pretty selfish of me.” Her cheeks could put Molten Man’s to shame.

“No, no, it’s not your fault!” Peter said hurriedly. “I mean, I get it. I’m a teenage boy, so I’m pretty much constantly thinking about… about…” He trailed off.

The two of them stared at the paused TV screen.

“I mean, we’re getting married as soon as we can,” said Peter, “so we’re gonna do it eventually.”

“Yeah, thanks, I kinda figured.”

“Right, right.”

Minutes passed.

“Y’know what?” Peter stood up. “I need to go take a shower.” He caught himself. “Not because of-! I mean, I just haven’t had one all day-”

“It’s alright,” Gwen said flatly. “You should probably get that taken care of before you go swinging around in your tights in front of all Manhattan.”

“I wear a cup, for your infor-” Peter buried his head in his hands mid-sentence. “Oh my God why am I telling you this I just wanna watch Phantom Menace.”

It was at this point that Gwen broke down into hysterics. “I’m sorry, I’m teasing you again!”
“Right. I knew that.”

Gwen managed to contain her giggles long enough to add, “Go take your shower, superhero.”

“Of course, of course. Be back in a minute.” By now, Peter was anxious to escape, but he did pause at the doorway to say, “Hey, Gwen? I unironically love you.”

He’d gotten her grinning bigger than he’d seen for—well, for too long. It was a welcome sight to say the least.

“I unironically love you, too.”

Y’know what Peter loved about New York? Even after a rhinoceros-person smashed the Daily Bugle, even after Peter’s school had been attacked by a parasitic alien slime and an army of killer robots, this little spot at the border of Queens and Brooklyn looked exactly the same as when Peter was a kid.

“You sure you know where we’re going?” Gwen asked as they rounded the same street corner for the third time.

“Of course,” said Peter. “Spatial memory is, like, the brain’s best kind of memory. That’s why you can still remember the layout of your elementary school. Stuff like that. I got this.”

“If you say so...”

Peter raised an eyebrow. “Why, Gwen Stacy, are you expressing less than the utmost confidence in me?” The two shared a sensible chuckle. “In my defense, I did bring the spare mask, so I can carry you while I swing if you wanna get there sooner.” The spare mask was, of course, meant to prevent people from thinking Spider-Man had stolen Peter’s girl.

“No thanks.” Gwen’s eyes drifted to the sidewalk. “I’ve spent enough time in the upper atmosphere.”

“Guess I can’t blame you...”

After that, they continued their journey in silence. But the fourth time around the corner, Peter suddenly got all excited. “Hey, there it is!”

“Wha-?” Gwen rubbed her eyes behind her glasses. “But we’ve been walking in circles! How-?”

“I think Brooklyn is Hogwarts and the theater’s the Room of Requirement.”

The couple strolled up to the ticket desk, pulling up their jacket hoods to protect from the icy wind. Peter held out his wallet. “Two for-”

“-the Space Wackos remake,” finished a pockmarked employee.

“Hey, you don’t know!” said Peter with an indignant gasp. “We could be seeing Alvin and the Chipmunks Two.”

“Yes, sir, you’re very witty.” The ticketer tucked Peter’s cash into the register, muttering, “Definitely never heard that one before...” He handed them their tickets through the glass. “Enjoy your movie.”
A moment later, Peter and Gwen were scrambling into the theater’s darkened hallways.

“Hey, which number are we, again?”

“I don’t know. Gimme a second, I always have to pee during these things.”

Gwen pushed past a crowd towards the women’s room. Peter was tempted to go grab a good seat while there were still some left, but he didn’t think Gwen would appreciate being ditched. He found himself leaning against the wall, tapping his foot.

Man, though, Peter never would’ve dreamed they’d make another Space Wackos. Maybe someday Star Wars would get the same treatment? Peter couldn’t wait to see all his favorite characters like Mara Jade and Jacen Solo on the big screen… But still, could today get any more exciting?

“BEWARE, EARTHLINGS!”

“Guh-? Wha-?” Peter had been spacing out, but the sight of green smoke snapped him back to reality.

“This Earth film may have preyed on your nostalgia, but rest assured it is nothing but a soulless marketing ploy!” Oh, of course. Standing in the center of the fog cloud was none other than the Bulb-Headed Wonder.

“Come on!” Of all the theaters Mysterio could’ve pestered… Peter couldn’t watch one stupid movie without some C-lister showing his ugly mug, could he? Besides, wasn’t Mysterio supposed to be imprisoned at the Vault right now? No, wait, let Peter guess, robot double.

“On my planet, the public demands a higher caliber of entertainment!” Mysterio did a dramatic flourish with his cape. “Never do we settle for cheap CGI! No matter how realistic it is, the human- I mean, alien eye can always tell it’s fake!”

“Um, actually,” spoke up a somewhat chubby and unshaven bystander, “this movie is using puppets and practical effects for a lot of-”

“SILENCE. Clearly, the public is in need of a demonstration of the superior special effects of the M.Y.S.T.E.R.I.O. hive mind.” With another flourish, Mysterio called forth an army to terrorize the screaming crowd – an army comprised entirely of iconic movie monsters. There was the Jaws shark swimming in midair, the alien from, um, Alien sticking that miniature head thingy out its mouth, and even King Kong pounding his chest, though his head clipped through the ceiling a bit. Mysterio would have to fix that in the next patch.

The crowd of casual moviegoers screamed, but Peter stayed calm. Maybe he’d be more worried if his spider-sense had actually gone off. In fact, some of the pedestrians had already made the discovery that the monsters were mere holograms.

“Hey,” said a lady as she stuck her hand through the Xenomorph’s face, “this is actually really cool.”

“Really-? Erm, that is to say, of course my mind-bending wonders fall in line with your human conception of ‘cool.’”

Okay, Peter saw what was going on here. Mysterio wasn’t trying to rob or hurt anyone. He was just grandstanding. Shamelessly, shamelessly grandstanding. Sheesh, at least when he’d been doing crimes, the guy had had an iota of dignity about him.
Peter could feel the quips begging to escape his tongue, but he held back. Thing was, he was kind of in a hurry – the previews would have started by now – and it wasn’t like Mysterio was posing any threat. The dude didn’t even have super strength, so… was there really any need to change into costume when it’d be a lot easier to just sneak up behind the guy and give him a good whack?

Peter started to execute this plan- “Gah!” -but Mysterio spun around mere inches away from collision with Peter’s fist. “Stay back, boy! Come any further and I’ll plunge you into my WORLD OF ILLUSION.”

This time, Peter’s spider-sense actually did tingle. Mysterio thrust a gauntlet, and the next thing Peter knew, he’d gotten a faceful of gas...

Pssssss.

...but Peter had been quick-witted enough to hold his breath. Mysterio’s bubble-helmet ran afoul of Peter’s fist.

“Ack-!” The helmet cracked against the tile floor. Sheesh, Mysterio was out cold from one punch. How the mighty had fallen. The instant the guy hit the ground, his gauntlets shorted and the holograms flickered out.

“Hey!” The moviegoers all booed. “You ruined the show!”

“He- He was an escaped criminal!” Peter stammered.

“Peter?” It was at this point that Gwen emerged from the restroom. “What happened? Is that Mysterio?”

“It was, uh… I’ll explain in the theater.” Peter caught some officers approaching out of the corner of his eye, and so he hurriedly ushered Gwen inside.

Finally, after months of hype, Peter got to sit down and watch this thing. It was everything he’d imaged it’d be. Even as he and Gwen left the theater, Peter struggled to believe he’d really watched it. The whole world felt dreamlike. It’d been so perfect.

Peter and Gwen gushed about it all the way from the subway back to Queens. They still hadn’t quieted by the time Aunt May opened the door.

“Oh, you’re back from shopping-”

“So?” May gave a warm smile. “How was the movie?”

“It was great, Mrs. Parker.”

“Well, I’m glad you two had fun. And now I’ve got a surprise for you.” Aunt May led them into the living room. “I know we thought you wouldn’t be able to meet my boyfriend over Christmas, but there’s been a change of plans.”

“Wha-?” Peter’s heart splashed into his stomach. In an instant, today had gone from the best day of his life to the worst.

“Peter, Gwen, I’d like you to meet Mr. Erio!”

Sitting at the loveseat was a strapping young gentlemen in a two-piece suit with a big, round fishbowl for a head.
“Pleased to meet you, sir!” Gwen smiled and shook his hand.

“Wait.” Peter, however, took a step back. “Something’s wrong.” It was hard to put his finger on, but something was seriously… off about this.

“What’s the matter, kiddo?” Peter bumped into someone, then spun around to discover Uncle Ben giving him a big old smile. “Why so surprised? May’s been needing a replacement husband ever since you killed her last one.”

But something was off about Ben, too. Something seeping out of his stomach. Something that stained his shirt red.

“Uncle Ben, no, I’m sorry!” Peter stumbled backwards. “I- I’m, responsible now. Please-”

“Oh, it’s too late for that, Peter.” The symbiote wrapped itself around Ben’s mouth, turning his voice into something distorted and alien. “It’s always been too late.” An ax-shaped hand pointed to May and Gwen.

Peter tried to run for it, but in the blink of an eye, May and Gwen vanished, replaced by half a dozen new, shadowy figures. Sandman, Hydro-Man, Morbius, Hammerhead, Walter Hardy, and at the back of the room behind them all in a maskless goblin costume, Norman Osborn. Mr. Erio reclined in his seat, watching Peter get buried up to his neck in sand and water.

Morbius barred his fangs, Hardy and Hammerhead aimed their guns, and Osborn merely stood, arms folded behind himself, watching. Peter squirmed against the sand, but it was hopeless. Geez, this stuff really was coarse and rough and irritating.

Peter stared down the twin barrels, and then-

Blam.

The living room was empty again, and Peter was sitting on the couch, huddled beneath a blanket.

“Huh? What?” Peter’s eyes darted about the room. They spotted the TV.

“No, no, mesa stay! Mesa called Jar-Jar Binks. Mesa your humble servant.”

Oh, right, the marathon. Peter must’ve spaced out for a second.

“Peter?” Beside him on the couch, Gwen turned his way. “This is kinda boring, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Peter wiped his brow. Why was he sweating? It was freezing in here. “If you have anything better for us to do, I’m all ears.”

“Reeeeeally?” Gwen paused the movie right on a frame of Ewan McGregor making a goofy face. “Hmm, I’m sure I could think of something…”

She’d put a hand on Peter’s thigh. Oh god, that drove him mad. He wasn’t sure he could resist much longer. She was climbing on top of him and doing things she’d never done before, things he’d been embarrassed to request, and her jacket had been thrown to the carpet, and- and-

“Ooh, looks like fun. Got room for more, Tiger?” And then Mary Jane was there, too, caressing Peter’s chest as Gwen continued to kiss him. And not just Mary Jane. There was Miss Brant, Liz, Sally, Black Cat, Captain America… and every last one of them was nude as the day they’d been born (except Cap, who still had his mask and shield).
Peter tried to struggle, but the group had him pinned down.

“What’s wrong, superhero?” A devious smirk entered Gwen’s face.

A part of Peter wanted to take in every inch of the sight before him, but he was so embarrassed, his eyes ended up flitting towards the living room doorway… and there stood Captain Stacy. Staring. And like Ben, his stomach was growing damper and redder by the second.

Gooey white eyes replaced Captain Stacy’s own. His teeth were jagged and yellow. “You said you'd be good to her.”

Peter tried to hold on to Gwen, but suddenly the couch gave way beneath him, and Peter was in his Spider-Man suit, and Harry was circling overhead on his glider, and-


“Gwen!” Peter fired a web, but no matter how far it flew, it never quite reached. “Gwen, Gwen, hold on! I can do this! I can-”

A thick, black arm grabbed his own. A lanky tongue slobbered on his shoulder.

“Let go of me, Eddie-!”

“We know who you love the most.”

Peter thrashed and flailed and flailed and thrashed until suddenly his fist hit a strand of web. Like a rubber band snapping, the world had changed again. Peter was back in his Spidey suit, and he was hanging off a massive spider web suspended in an endless black void.

“Interesting. Most interesting.”

Where was that withered old voice coming from? Spidey searched the web until he saw what might have been its center, though it was hard to know for sure when it seemed to stretch endlessly. Tied into its very foundation was a woman. At first Spider-Man thought it was Aunt May, except this lady was way more wrinkled. Her eyes were wrapped in a crimson cloth, the same color as the skintight suit that covered her frail body, and a white pattern trailed up her torso. It almost looked like a big spider, but maybe Spidey was biased because of his own chest emblem.

“What’s interesting?” Spider-Man climbed towards her on the web. “Who are you? What’s happening to me?”

“You can hear me?” The lady turned her head in his general direction. “Phht. Took you long enough. Here I’d assumed you’d rather focus your thoughts on naked people.”

“You saw that-?” Spidey quickly gathered himself. “So this whole psychedelic trip is your doing?”

“Please, as if I’d encourage such degeneracy.” The woman waved a bony arm. “This is why I never read the minds of teenagers.”

“You’ve been reading my mind?”

“I do apologize for the invasion of privacy-”

“Yeah, you sound real torn up about it.”

Even with the cloth over her eyes, Spidey could tell the lady was scowling. “It would behoove you
to wait your turn before speaking, young man. As I was saying, I apologize for the invasion of privacy, but I needed to know if you were trustworthy. I simply did a quick skim of your ideals, your fears, your fantasies...” She paused, then added, “Captain America, huh?”

“I- I have no idea what you’re talking about…”

“Well, no matter. The point is, you’ve been fed some sort of hallucinogenic.” In an undertone, the lady added, “You must’ve, or you wouldn’t be seeing me right now.”

“Oh, that’s reassuring.”

“I don’t know when you’ll awaken,” the woman continued, “but thus far, I’ve only been able to make contact with junkies and lunatics. You are the best hope I have of being rescued. I’ve seen your memories, Peter. You’re a good boy.” A brief montage appeared in the black void—memories from Peter’s point of view, and in every last one he was saving a life. There were so many, Spidey could scarcely catch one before another faded to replace it. “I know you can save me.”

“You’re right about that, at least. Saving people is what I do.” Spider-Man crawled over and started to rip her out of the web.

“Not in the dream, you dolt.” But before she could be freed, the lady vanished from Spidey’s hands and reappeared at a different section of web a few feet away. “You need to find my physical body.”

“Please, lady, tone down the gratitude. I’m blushing.”

“You will address me as ‘Madame Web.’”

“And here I thought I’d cornered the market on spider motifs...” Spider-Man was glad she didn’t know he was rolling his eyes under the mask. Or, err, maybe she did. “So where is your physical body?”

“I’m being held captive in a secure facility owned by-” Before Madame Web could get a dozen words in, the dream world started to shift again. It was twisting, morphing, and growing brighter by the second. “Of all the times you could choose to wake up-!”

“Hurry, hurry!” Peter could feel himself slipping back into reality. “Who’s holding you hostage?”

But Madame Web had already vanished. Peter saw only one last image before opening his eyes. It was a cackling face so pretty, it could only belong to... a goblin. But it wasn’t green—Peter was sure of that. It was pale yellow, complete with an orange hood.

But Peter barely had time to process it before his eyes opened.

“Peter?” Gwen was looming over him.

“Whuh?” For a second, he thought he was still dreaming, but then he realized Gwen was a little too clothed for that.

“Good, you’re awake.” Gwen helped him to his feet.

“What just-?”

“Mysterio’s robot doubles have been terrorizing every theater on the map.” Even when he was standing, Gwen didn’t release Peter’s hand. “The emergency workers said his gas is harmless,
especially in such a small dose. Heck of a high, though.” With a smirk, she asked, “How was it?”

Peter smiled back. “Not the best trip I’ve ever had. Mysterio obviously didn’t spring for the good stuff.” As he spoke, he took in his surroundings. They were still in the theater hallway, though now it was full of rescue workers checking anyone who’d been gassed.

“Gosh, that was really brave of you to punch out that supervillain.” Gwen nodded to Quentin Beck, who was being led away in cuffs. Or one of his robo-doppelgangers, at least. At this point, Peter was just gonna have to accept that possibility.

“Yeah,” said Peter, “it’s almost like the kinda thing Spider-Man would do.”

“No prison can hold me, you fools!” Beck still hadn’t dropped that phony accept. His head was poking out of his shattered helmet, revealing a chin full of stubble, and he seemed to be having trouble standing straight. “The great Mysterio’s robotic doubles make the Life-Model Decoys look like Barbie dolls!”

“Oh, we’re well aware,” said the cop leading him away. “That’s why we’re gonna be real thorough when checking you this time. You’ve been pretending to be an alien, so you’re probably already familiar with what the probing will be like...”

Well, that was one more loose end tied up. Man, though, what a trip... Peter held his forehead. Already, the visions were blurring together in his brain. There’d been, like, Mysterio in a suit, and, um, some old lady, oh, and an orgy. Peter definitely remembered the orgy.

“Well, this has been an experience-” Peter tried to enter the theater, but Gwen stopped him.

“We already missed the first fifteen minutes,” she said. “Wanna wait for the next one?”

“Yeah, that’s cool. Actually, one sec.” Peter caught the attention of a passing employee. “Hey, uh, your theater was attacked by a supervillain. Can we get, like, a bunch of free tickets, or...?”

The employee gave a dry stare from beneath his uniform’s hat. “Sir, if we gave out free tickets every time a supervillain attacked, we’d be out of business. Here, just hand me yours and I’ll let you into the next showing.”

“Thanks. Here ya go.” Peter fished through his pockets, then handed the guy the ticket.

“Alrighty.” The guy tore it and handed it back. “Enjoy Alvin and the Chipmunks.”

“What the-?” Peter checked his ticket stub. In bold letters, it proclaimed, Alvin and the Chipmunks: The Squeakquel. “No, this isn’t- That ticketer must’ve-”

“No refunds.” The employee was already walking away.

“Oh come on!”

Chapter End Notes

Next Up: Spider-Man, Hobgoblin, and even Aunt May’s mystery boyfriend, all will find themselves tangled in the twisted weavings of Madame Web!
DIABOLICAL DAREDEVIL ELOPES WITH EVIL EEL, the headline proclaimed. Wow, seriously? Jameson had gotten so desperate, he’d started making headlines about other masked vigilantes? It was almost enough to make the Web-Head jealous. Not like there were any Spidey-related headlines to be had, anyways. Ever since Tombstone’s long-overdue arrest, the Web-Slinger’s neck of Manhattan had been quiet as, well, a tombstone.

Hmm, weird that Daredevil was grappling a dozen new supervillains a week while Spider-Man was struggling to find a single purse snatcher. Guess it was someone else’s turn to deal with the craziness for once. Maybe Spider-Man ought to go help old Hornhead out sometime? Life had been pretty boring around here lately.

“How was that? Peter?”

“Huh? Wha-?” Peter’s head shot up from his newspaper to discover Gwen peering at him from across the band room. “Oh, yeah, that was great!” Well, Gwen was always great on the saxophone, so it stood to reason…

“Phew, that’s good to hear. Thought I missed a couple notes.” Gwen took a deep breath before returning her attention to her brass. “Truth is…” She glanced around, double-checking they were alone in here. “…I get really bad stage fright. Remember the Valentine’s recital this Sunday? Usually, my dad would be in the audience. That always helped me keep my cool. But…” She spent the next several seconds studying her sheet music.

A sudden hand on her shoulder made her flinch. “Hey.” Her eyes met Peter’s. “For what it’s worth,” he said, “I’ll be in the front row.”

Oop, there was her pretty smile. Peter had started doing this thing a while back where he counted how many days in a row he could get her to show it, but he’d lost track somewhere back in December.

The sun was setting by the time Peter and Gwen left the ESU labs. This had become a part of their routine over the last few months – school, band practice, internship, then back home. And on the days Gwen didn’t have band practice, she had work. Sure, it was a little on the tedious side, but Peter could handle tedious if it meant Gwen wasn’t spending her days in bed anymore.

The two of them walked hand-in-hand down the campus sidewalk. Peter could never get over how gorgeous this campus was. Some of them were nothing but dull gray buildings, but Empire State had an even distribution of grass and trees... sandwiched between all the dull gray buildings. It was Manhattan – What couldya do? But hey, not too shabby a place for Peter and Gwen to spend the next few years after Midtown Magnet.

“Man, Dr. Warren really grilled me today.” Peter winced at the memory.

“He’s actually pretty nice if you don’t get on his bad side,” said Gwen.

“Well, he goes easy on you.”

Gwen laughed. “Because I do a better job than you?”

“No!” In an undertone, Peter added, “Because you’re blonde.”
“What was that?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

Suddenly, their march out of campus was halted. Coming towards them from a taxi was none other than a white-haired beauty.

“Aunt May!”

“Mrs. Parker!”

The two tackled her with hugs.

“What’re you doing here?” asked Peter.

“Oh, the soup drive ended early,” said May, fiddling with her glasses, “and I wanted to talk to you two. Remember that restaurant Harry took you to last year?”

“Jazzy Gianni’s?” said Gwen.

“Yes, that’s it. How would you like to go there for breakfast tomorrow?”

“Whoa there, cowgirl!” Peter could hear the Parker household budget’s shrieks of protest in the distance. “What’s wrong with good old fashioned hamburgers? Gwen can get us a discount where she works-”

“That’s right, Mrs. Parker,” spoke up Gwen. “I’m already an extra mouth to feed. You don’t have to-”

“I’m not, actually.” May gave a strained smile. “My boyfriend’s footing the bill. We were hoping… now was the time for you to finally meet him.”

Every so often, Eddie’s chest would rise and fall, and Gwen would start to jolt from her bedside chair, only to realize it’d just been a sudden influx of air from the tube in his throat. Between the weight he’d lost and the sloppy haircut the hospital staff had given him, the guy was almost unrecognizable.

Peter found himself watching the skyline out the window instead. He couldn’t look at buildings anymore without subconsciously judging whether they were good for swinging.

There hadn’t been any change from Harry’s end, either. Peter and Gwen had heard nothing since he was sent back to Europe. He may as well have dropped off the face of the earth.

“You feeling good about May’s mystery boyfriend?” asked Gwen, eyes fixed on Eddie.

“Guess so,” Peter managed.

“You realize she’s been dating him for almost half a year now, and we’re only just now being introduced? Isn’t that weird?”

“Yeah, well, I mean…” Peter’s eyes, meanwhile, remained firmly planted on the window. “…we’ve kept bigger secrets from her for longer.”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” Gwen said, almost to herself. “Really, how bad could he possibly be?”
It felt kinda weird to be coming back to this restaurant with such a smaller crowd. MJ didn’t even go in with them this time. As soon as they pulled up in her aunt’s car, she merely gave Gwen a wink and said, “You’re lucky I do emergency calls.”

Peter wasn’t sure if MJ was referring to the ride or the fact that Gwen was once again looking like a knockout. Moreso than usual, that is.

“I meant what I told you last time,” Peter said as the happy couple exited the vehicle. “You really do look like an angel.”

“You’ve been watching way too much Phantom Menace.” Even when she was being sardonic, Gwen made his heart pound.

Peter really had meant it, though. That pink dress, those black gloves, that uncharacteristically tidy hair… Don’t get him wrong, he thought she was super cute with glasses, but he could get used to Gwen wearing contacts. In fact, Peter couldn’t help but be self-conscious of his own wrinkled penguin suit every time he glanced at her.

Peter tried not to drool too much as they thanked MJ and then made their way inside. Peter wasn’t gonna lie, seeing the aforementioned angel wrapped around his arm and not Harry’s… made him smile.

Well, this place was as ritzy as Peter remembered. And everything from the tablecloths to the carpet to the couch-sized seats was red, seeing as Valentine’s was only a couple days off.

“Bonsoir, monsieur, madame.” Peter and Gwen were greeted at the door by a man sporting a pencil-thin mustache. “Avez-vous une réservation?”

“Uh, yeah, under ‘Parker.’ Wait.” Peter squinted at him. “Aren’t you the guy from the chemistry emporium?”

“You must be mistaken, monsieur, for I am a Frenchman, and that man is not a Frenchman, oui?”

“Uh, sure.” Peter thought it best to head to the table without further question. “Weirdo...”

“I think I see May over there.” Gwen squeezed Peter’s hand as they neared.

“Hey, hey, it’s gonna be alright,” he murmured in her ear. “Don’t worry about whether or not you like this guy – just focus on your sax solo tonight. I already bought a front row ticket.”

Her grip loosened. “That’s good. Thanks. Let’s just… Let’s just get this over with...”

With one last collective deep breath, they rounded the corner to discover Aunt May seated at a table, and in the seat beside her was...

“Dr. Bromwell?” The bald-headed Parker family physician? Peter’s relief was palpable. He’d always seemed like such a great guy. “You’re Aunt May’s boyfriend?” Peter reached out to shake the man’s hand.

“Boyfriend?” Dr. Bromwell laughed. “Goodness, no! Your aunt left her purse at my office during her physical yesterday, and I was just returning it. I believe that’s her boyfriend sitting behind me.”

He hurried off, revealing the man at Aunt May’s side.

“Peter, Gwen...” May’s fingers intertwined with her boyfriend’s. “I want you to meet Dr. Otto Octavius.”
After that, they needed to call in some janitors to mop the splattered insides of Peter’s skull off the carpet.


Gwen, on the other hand, had a few choice ones. “We’ve met before, actually,” she said in a voice that made Peter fear for Ock’s life.

“We knew this was going to be difficult news to take in.” Ock held May’s hand tighter – Dear lord, what series of poor life choices had led to Peter having to narrate that sentence? Ock may have put on a regular, non-villainous suit and traded his pointy goggles back for his old square glasses, but he wasn’t fooling Peter for a second. “Miss Stacy, I’ve spent the past months of my life dreading this day. I don’t blame you if you hate me, but- but the person who held you captive wasn’t *me*. I’m not asking you to forgive me, only to understand the truth.”

Of course, like Gwen, Peter more than a few gripes with Ock, but he couldn’t exactly share those with the present company.

“Why did this have to be *now*?” Gwen had put Peter’s hand in a vice grip. “I have to perform in front of all those people on Sunday! How am I supposed to- to *focus* now?”

“Oh dear heaven.” May rose to give her a hug, but that only drew more pedestrian eyes on Gwen, which only made her trembles worse. “I’m so, so sorry, Gwen. I hadn’t- This was thoughtless of us.” She turned back to Otto. “We should go-”

“No, no! Everyone got all dressed up. If Doc Ock-”

“Please refrain from calling me that,” Ock said softly.

“If *Dr. Octavius* has something to say to me, I want to hear it.”

“Very well.” Ock took a breath, then continued, “The night of my accident... that horrid night when my harness was fused to my body... the inhibitor chip was destroyed.” He touched the back of his neck. “Its remnants exist inside my spinal cord even as we speak. The neurological damage the chip caused only exasperated the head trauma I received. In short, Miss Stacy, I lost my sanity. The arms controlled me, not the other way around.”

*Hmmph.* He was definitely speaking more gently than usual. Peter kept expecting Ock to throw in some self-praise, but he never did.

Gwen, for her part, remained silent.

“Show them the video, Otto,” spoke up May.

“Ah, yes, thank you, my dear. It’d slipped my mind.” Ock fished a phone from his pockets, pulled up a video, and held out the screen for them to see. “S.H.I.E.L.D. had my arms melted. I believe they’re being used to produce soda cans now.” The phone did, indeed, show footage of Ock’s arms being lowered into a pool of molten steel. The things writhed like worms as they went down. Peter couldn’t help but shudder.

“See, Gwen, Otto is harmless,” said May. “He only did such vile things because he was sick, but now he’s recovering. The man I know never would have hurt you.”

Finally, Gwen looked to Ock and said, “And you don’t have an extra set of arms stashed away somewhere? You’re not gonna build more?”
Ock shook his head. “That would be immensely impractical. I have no way of acquiring the resources when my activity is being so closely monitored by S.H.I.E.L.D.” He caught himself. “And even if I could rebuild them, I would never subject myself to that horror again.” Ock shut his eyes. “I want my old life back, Miss Stacy. The life of Doctor Octopus brought nothing but pain and hardship, but I am a man of science. I only want to continue my work.”

“There are agents tailing Otto.” May pointed out some men-in-black types seated at the surrounding tables. “Even if he were to regress to old habits, God forbid, we would be perfectly safe.” She placed her hand over Gwen’s. “I would never put you in danger, dear, I promise you.”

“The doctors at Ravencroft want me to reintegrate myself with public life,” added Ock. “I haven’t fully recovered – I may never – but I have been declared sane.”

Yeah, well, Ravencroft had declared Jameson’s son sane, too, and that situation had still gotten hairy, pun intended. The problem was, Peter couldn’t point that out without breaking his promise to Jameson.

“But- But how did this happen, Aunt May?” Peter stammered. “Ock... tavius gave you a heart attack. If he hadn’t been parading around the city with his Sinister Six chums-”

“That’s what brought this about, actually.” May gave a halfhearted smile. “Seven months ago, Ravencroft began a program where patients were encouraged to reach out to people they’d wronged and make amends. Otto chose me.”

“Indeed I did.” Ock shared her expression. “I never forgot the sweet woman I’d terrified. When I heard about the cardiac arrest, I... Well, I couldn’t sleep.”

Oh, that was convenient. Out of all the people Doc Ock had terrorized...

“You were sick, Otto. I forgive you.” May spent a while gazing into his eyes. Peter had to fight not to retch. “And you know what? You may have frightened me, but you were still a gentleman. You could have attacked me with your arms so easily, but instead you asked me to step aside. Even then, I believe the good man you truly are was fighting to escape.”

“May...” Ock placed a palm on her forearm. “You mean the world to me.”

Okay, Peter’s fight had been in vain.

Ock returned his attention to Gwen. “Miss Stacy, I wish I could articulate how truly, deeply regretful I am for the pain I’ve caused you. I realize nothing I could ever say would undo it, and so the most I can offer... is an apology.”

“Don’t forget Coney Island,” said a particularly venomous Peter. “You dropped Liz off a roller coaster, just off the top of my head.”

“Yes...” Doc bowed his own head. “I regret and apologize for that as well. I fear that the sheer number of my crimes has created a gravity that I cannot break free of.”


May and Ock nodded, and so Gwen pulled Peter aside, taking him a safe distance from the table.

“What do you th-?”
“We have to get you far away from him.” Peter’s hands grabbed her shoulders of their own accord. “Far away-”

“Peter.” Gwen sighed. “You’re sweet, but there are S.H.I.E.L.D. agents watching him already. Besides...” She stared at her shoes. “...he only kidnapped me because of my dad. Not exactly an issue anymore.”

“But if he’s not after you, then...” Peter hesitated. He didn’t want to scare her, but Gwen was more than smart enough to have pieced it together already. “…he wants me. He knows.”

Gwen nodded. “I can’t think of any other explanation.”

“So then we have to stop him!”

“Stop him from what?” countered Gwen. “He hasn’t done anything wrong yet. We can’t have him arrested because we think he’s going to break the law.”

“I just...” The shoulder-squeeze transitioned into a hug. “…I don’t want this to turn into another ‘Venom’ situation. I almost lost you and Aunt May that time. That would’ve... That would’ve destroyed me. But I don’t know how to get Doc Ock out of our life-”

“I have a way,” cut in Gwen, pulling away, “but you’re not gonna like it.”

“Hit me.”

“We tell May the truth. The whole truth. Like my dad had wanted.”

She really had hit him. Peter swallowed. That hadn’t even crossed his mind. To be honest, he’d gotten so used to hiding his secret ID from May, it’d become second nature to him. “You’re right. She has to know. We can’t keep it from her when she’s in danger like this.”

“Well, we’ll have to wait until we’re in private with her.” Gwen turned for the restrooms. “Look, sorry to ditch you, but I can’t go face that man again until I’ve had time to compose myself.”

“It’s okay.” He didn’t blame her – Peter was trembling, too. “Take your time. Love you. Be careful.”

“You too.”

They kissed, and then Gwen hurried to the ladies’ room as Peter returned to the table.

“Gwen had to use the bathroom.” He seated himself across from Doc Ock.

“Understandable.” Ock had actually been focusing his attention on Gwen, but now his eyes were on Peter. “Your aunt’s told me much about you, Mr. Parker. I hear you’ve a promising scientific mind.”

“Uh, yeah.” Peter fought not to sound too antagonistic. There was always the chance Ock didn’t know his secret ID after all. “Guess I take after my dad.”

“Ah, yes.” Otto nodded. “I have nothing but respect for Richard Parker. I’ve read all his work. A brilliant man, lost too soon.”

“Yes.” There was gonna be another brilliant man lost too soon if Ock didn’t put more space between himself and May...
“Ah, you are ready to order, no?” It was at this point that the French guy approached them. So now he was a waiter, too?

“We’re waiting on someone, actually.” May stood up. “In fact, I’ll go check on her.” She scurried off into the lady’s room after Gwen.

Peter was tempted to beg her not to leave him. Now he and Doctor Octopus were sitting across from each other in dead silence. Before, Ock had been looking at Peter in, y’know, a normal kinda way, but now he was flat-out staring.

“Yes,” he said, “your father was quite gifted. I was particularly impressed with his work on adhesive fluids.”

“Ha ha, yeah, that was my dad.” Peter held a menu over his face. “Always working on his crazy glue. The artificial kind, y’know, not the organic stuff like what Spider-Man uses.” He mentally kicked himself.

“That reminds me,” continued Ock, “I hear you’re also well on your way to a career in photography, and you focus on such an interesting subject...”

“Oh, y-you mean the Web-Head? I haven’t-” Peter’s voice cracked, so he had to start that over. “I haven’t done that in forever. Guess the guy got sick of the spotlight.”

“That’s one hypothesis, yes.” Remember how Peter had noticed Ock was speaking more gently earlier? Well, that trait, um, might not have been as pronounced anymore. “But aside from science and photography, a friend of yours mentioned another of your hobbies to me. Striking fellow. If only I could recall his name... Ah.” His face was growing more punchable by the second. “That’s right, Edward Brock, Jr. A fellow patient in Ravencroft. I understand he’s comatose now, for which you have my condolences.”

“Th-Th-Th-Thanks. We’re, y’know, we’re all pretty upset about Eddie. I don’t really like to talk about it.”

“Is that so?” Ock raised an eyebrow. “But don’t you want to know which hobby he told me of?”

“Embroidery?”

“No, actually,” said Ock. “He told me you were Spider-Man.”

Peter choked on air. It felt like he was skydiving without a parachute, flailing helplessly as he tried to figure out what the heck he was supposed to do. Finally, he decided on the only thing he could think of: laughing. “Ha! What?” It was a little on the, err, forced side, but image Peter’s relief when Ock joined in on it. And it wasn’t the typical diabolical kind of laughter coming from Doc Ock, either. It was pure, hearty laughter.

In hindsight, Peter was an idiot for getting so worked up. If Eddie had told Doc Ock that Peter was Spider-Man, and Ock really believed it, then why hadn’t he acted on that info the last time he’d formed the Sinister Six?

“We shouldn’t laugh.” Peter pretended to calm down. “Eddie said a lot of crazy things. I only went as Spidey for a Halloween party.”

“Yes,” said Ock, stifling his own laughter, “though I suppose that Venom creature would corroborate the claim, wouldn’t he?”
“Oh yeah, not a fan of that guy. You wouldn’t believe how many reporters came to my house, but in the end, they all confirmed I’m not—”

“Intriguing black costume he had.” Peter risked lowering the menu to verify that Ock was indeed still staring at him. “Remarkably similar to one Spider-Man wore the first time he defeated the Sinister Six.”

In post-hindsight, Peter was an idiot for thinking he was an idiot for getting so worked up.

“I must say,” continued Ock, “it’s relieving to know that you’re not, in fact, the arachnid. You see, your aunt and I have a mutual distaste for him. It was Spider-Man who caused the accident that fused my harness to my body in the first place.”

“I know Spider-Man well enough to know he’d never do that,” Peter said tightly. “Remember, that was back before Ravencroft declared you sane—”

“Even so, if your aunt was ever to learn that her cherished nephew was Spider-Man… If she was to learn her nephew was responsible for hurting the man she loved…” In a blink, Ock’s smugness vanished, replaced by something less benign. “…I hate to think how a lady with such a delicate constitution would take such news. And I shudder to imagine what would happen to the person who delivered it to her.”

Ock had said a lot of words to Peter just now. But the only ones he heard were: responsible for hurting the man she loved… responsible for hurting… responsible…

Doc Ock didn’t even know how much of a snake he was being.

Peter opened his mouth.

“We’re ready to order, dear.” But then Aunt May returned with Gwen in tow. Gwen seated herself beside Peter, practically huddling against him.

She gave Peter this look with her eyes, like she was saying, We’re telling May soon, right?

Peter looked away.

“Oh, yes, Otto, before I forget, let me get you your present.” Aunt May reached into her purse to retrieve a small gift bag.

“You’re too kind to me, May.” Ock smiled, then removed the colored tissue paper to reveal a pea green mug.

And printed on it in red were the words “EVIL GENIUS.”

“I know you were upset that Peter accidentally broke your old one,” said May.

“Why, May…” Ock kissed her hand. “I’m touched.”

“Oh, stop it!” May’s face had gone redder than Peter had ever seen. She pulled away, then held up the mug for the kids to see. “Look, isn’t that funny, Peter? It’s ironic!”

In the long and studied history of awkward breakfasts, Peter was confident that the one they were currently leaving ranked pretty high up there. He wasn’t sure what made him angrier, Ock’s veiled threat or the fact that the food had been absolutely delicious yet Peter hadn’t been able to keep it down due to the constant sight of Ock and May making eyes at each other.
But what made Peter even angrier than that was the way that the four of them so naturally divided into groups when they left, with Peter and Gwen going one way and May and Ock going the other. Peter wanted more than anything to throw on his costume and give Ock a nice flying kick… but that would only prove the Web-Head was a menace in Aunt May’s eyes.

“Peter?” Gwen took his hand again as they walked to the subway. “Do you want to plan out how we’ll break the news to your aunt?”

There was that old familiar pain in Peter’s chest again. “Gwen… The thing is…” Doc Ock knows I’m Spider-Man and he could’ve told a ton of other bad guys and we need to get you and May to an underground bunker to live the rest of your life where you’ll be safe and also I can’t love you anymore because I’m Spider-Man and when I love people it puts them in danger.

Gwen blinked. “Peter? Were you about to say something?”

“Nothing,” said Peter. “It’s nothing.”

“Don’t give me that.” They stopped walking so Gwen could frown at him. “I know you’re upset. I am too. This morning’s been a lot to process, but we can do it together. I’m here for you.”

“I-I’m here for you, too.” Oh, that made the pain way worse. Peter turned his head to look somewhere, anywhere, that wasn’t at Gwen.

His eyes fell on Captain Stacy. “You promised to be good to her.” Stacy’s teeth were yellow. His skin was slimy and red. It was so… familiar… like something that’d happened when he was a baby. Or something in a… dream.

It flooded back all at once. Mysterio. The hallucinogenic. Madame-

“Finally,” said Madame Web. “I thought you’d never remember.”

“AGH!” Peter sprang back like a startled cat. He was still on the sidewalk, only now it was floating above a pitch black void filled with nothing but an endless spider web – and a woman trapped in its center. Gwen had gone, and Peter’s Spidey costume had returned. “What the-? You-I-”

“Let’s not go through this every time we talk,” Web said flatly. “You should remember our first meeting now – otherwise we wouldn’t be having this conversation. If I had to guess, your guilt over putting your girlfriend in danger again rekindled that old nightmare of yours, and the other memories were brought back along with it.”

“You have no idea how much I was hoping you were imaginary.”

“The only consolation here is I won’t have to suffer through the inane drivel of explanations ever again. Suffice to say that I am a telepath-”

“Telepathy? Really? I’m supposed to buy that?” said the boy with the proportional strength of a spider who could stick to walls and had precognitive senses.

“And now that you’ve remembered me without the help of a hallucinogenic, we should be able to maintain telepathic contact forever.”

“Hold your horses, lady!” Great, now Spider-Man sounded like Montana. “Did you say ‘forever?’ As in, forever forever?”
“Believe me, I’m every bit as thrilled as you.”

Spider-Man held his head. “So are you like the personification of The Game? Y’know, that thing where you lose every time you think about-?”

“You don’t need to explain it,” cut in Web. “I can read your thoughts.”

“But then why even-?”

“In fact, you’d save us both a lot of time by keeping your mouth shut.” Web held up a silencing hand. “I know it’s hard for you.”

Spidey opened his mouth, but then Madame Web snapped her fingers and a gag appeared over it.

“Apologies, but if we take too long, I’ll need to rest before contacting you again.” Madame Web’s withered brow creased. “Using telepathy from inside a telepathy-proof cell isn’t as easy as it sounds.” She shook her head. “You’re already familiar with Oscorp’s and Tricorp’s private little super-mercenary arms race.” As she spoke, images flashed across the void – On one side, Sandman, Rhino, Molten Man, Scorpion, and Hydro-Man. On the other, the Spot, Hypno-Hustler, Vermin, Sin-Eater, the Eel, and Stegron the Dinosaur-Man. Yeah, safe to say which corp was in the lead there.

_Lady, you just said you can read my mind, _thought Spider-Man. _This gag means nothing._

“As you’ve noticed, Tricorp’s mercenaries tend to be more, ah, experimental than Oscorp’s.” Web nodded to the only supervillain shown wearing an afro. “One of their more radical experiments was helmed by one Dr. Gerhard Winkler, a late neuroscientist who spent the end of his life on the lam over his unethical practices.”

Spidey raised his hand. _Will this be on the test?_

“Winkler was able,” Madame Web continued, ignoring him, “to imbue his test subjects with the power of telepathy. Total control over the human mind.”

_Telepathy. Sure. Why not? _Spider-Man cocked his head at her. _After Sandman, I’ll believe anything…_

“Oh, telepathy’s not as uncommon as you’d think,” Web said with a sudden, mysterious air. “Try swinging by Xavier’s Institute up in Westchester someday. You wouldn’t believe what goes on behind closed doors there…” She shook her head. “As I was saying, Winkler’s experiments resulted in two telepaths – _two surviving_ ones anyways, though that survival wasn’t without its costs.” Web gestured to the cloth band over her eyes. “One of those telepaths – the considerably weaker one – is a man named Bart Hamilton. He quickly proved a double agent and defected to Oscorp. Last I heard, he was still in Norman Osborn’s employ.”

Which meant this Hamilton guy had probably high-tailed it outta there around the time Stormin’ Norman blew himself up. After all, Oscorp had gone clean now with Harry’s mom in charge. At least… as far as Peter knew…

“As for myself, Tricorp wasted no time imprisoning me.” Web’s face went sour. Or, err, sourer. “Long ago, I made the mistake of becoming indebted to Kingsley, and I’ve been paying the price ever since.”

Spider-Man nodded along… then did a double take. _Kingsley?_
“That’s right,” said Madame Web. “Roderick Kingsley, the man behind all those importunate Hobgoblins who’ve cropped up these past few months.” A giant image of Kingsley’s face appeared in the void beneath her. “That perfume company of his is a front – Its warehouses hide Tricorp’s laboratories. And one such warehouse hides a machine… a machine that keeps my telepathy under Kingsley’s control.” An image of the aforementioned machine appeared, too. It was a tangle of wires and tubes, almost like a giant spider web. “Kingsley’s found a use for me in temporarily brainwashing hapless victims into doing his bidding.” Across the void, images flashed of Donald Menken, Ned Lee, and, uh, that other guy, all of them unmasked as a Hobgoblin.

“I want my freedom, Spider-Man.” For the first time, something crossed Madame Web’s face that wasn’t disdain. “I want to see my daughter and my granddaughter. But with my powers so limited, I’ve only been able to contact those in altered mental states, of whom you have been the only one capable of freeing me. I managed to contact Tony Stark once, but then he went to rehab.”

She let out a sigh. “And that’s all well and good, except that I have no idea where exactly Kingsley is holding me. You must seek me out, Spider-Man. Follow Kingsley’s trail of crime back to me.”

“Mmph mmph mmph mmph!” said Spider-Man.

Madame Web snorted at him. “Yes, I know you want to believe you’ve cleaned the streets of crime, but it’s funny, isn’t it, how our biases shape our perception of reality? I suppose it’s fortunate, though, or else I wouldn’t be able to talk to you.”

“You wanna know something, lady?” Peter was finally able to blurt out his retort, only to cut himself off right before he got to the nasty part. “Wha-?” He rubbed his eyes. He was, naturally, back in Manhattan.

“Uhh… Peter?” Now Gwen was really frowning at him. “Who are you talking to?”

“Oy vey…” Peter found himself rubbing his temples. “I’ll… I’ll explain later. But Gwen?” He took a steadying breath. “Long story short, I need to go be Spider-Man right now, except, well, with loverboy running loose…” He pointed a thumb in the general direction Doc Ock and Aunt May had gone off in.

“It’s okay,” said Gwen. “His arms were melted and he’s got S.H.I.E.L.D. agents tailing him. I’ll be fine, Peter. Go save people.”

“No, the thing is…” Alright, deep breath. “While you and Aunt May were in the restroom, Ock made it pretty clear he knows I’m Spider-Man. He’s not acting on that info right now, but if we tell Aunt May… I don’t think he’ll feel quite so charitable anymore.”

“Oh.” Gwen’s face fell. “I see.”

Peter sighed. “I don’t know how, but Doc Ock can hurt us. It’s probably too much to hope Aunt May’ll leave his side, but we can at least get you out of the house for a bit.” He grabbed his phone from his pocket. “You don’t think it’d be weird of you to intrude on MJ’s and Mark’s love nest, do you?”

“Only extremely.”

“Too late, it’s already ringing.” Peter held the phone to his ear. “Hey, MJ!”
“Hit the gas! Hit the gas!” An armored truck tore down the street.

*Thwip, thwip, thwip.* And keeping pace with it was a teenage boy swinging on ropes fired from his wrists. If that wasn’t impressive, Spider-Man didn’t know what was.

*Clang,* Then to top himself, Spidey landed on their windshield, which, of course, only caused the thugs to freak out even more.

“Whataya know, Madame Web was right!” Spidey casually ducked a round of gunfire, then sent his fist into one of the mooks – via the windshield. “Here I thought I’d scared you guys off the streets, but it turns out all I had to do was a thorough sweep of the city, and lo and behold, I find you chuckle-meisters robbing a Tricorp vault.”

The armored truck barreled past a construction sign and plunged into the drink. Its passengers, however, found themselves webbed upside-down to a harborside lamp post, all of them stuck in one big, meaty package for the police to unwrap.

“Now why don’t you be good boys and tell me who your boss is?” Spider-Man had perched himself atop the post. “Somehow I doubt you’ve got the collective brain cells to pull this off by yourselves.”

“We don’t gotta tell you nothin’!” spat a thug.

“I was hoping you’d say that.” Spidey gave the web-cocoon a good shove, sending it oscillating wildly.

“Oh god! Make it stop! Make it-”

“Let’s see if you can swing all the way around!” Turns out they could. Unfortunately, their combined weight caused the thin line holding the cocoon to snap and send their heads smashing onto the pavement… or, well, they *would’ve* smashed if Spidey hadn’t caught them at the last millisecond.

“I’ll talk, I’ll talk!” one of them finally yelped.

“Ugh, Lenny!” hissed another.

“We don’t know our employer’s real name!” Lenny blurted out. “But they call him the Kingpin, and he wanted us to steal this tech so he can pay for more super- mercenaries to fight Daredevil. And- And if he finds out you’re sticking your nose in his operations, too, he’ll do the same for you!”

Ohhh, Spider-Man saw what Kingsley did there. *King-pin, King-sley?* Looks like he’d found his guy. “And would you happen to know if Kingy’s holding any helpless old ladies hostage? Specifically, ones with telepathic powers?”

“Wh-Whuh?” Lenny’s face made it clear that he would not.
“Thanks anyways, Lenster. You’ve earned a gold star on your progress report.” Spider-Man stuck a classic “Courtesy of Your Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man” note to the cocoon. And with that, Spidey re-webbed the cocoon to the lamp post and swung off.

Spider-Man was honing in on Kingsley – He could smell it. He’d already explained everything to DeWolff, but it turned out info that’d come to him in a dream wasn’t adequate grounds to use police resources.

At least now Spidey knew why such terrifying threats as the Eel, the Jester, and scariest of all, Leap-Frog had all been going after Double D lately – which, to be fair, was a bigger deal for Daredevil since he couldn’t handle supervillains as easy as Spidey could. It figured Kingsley was in the super-mercenary production business after his hand in the Rhino suit auction and his failed deal with Tombstone on the yacht.

And now Spider-Man could look forward to his own fresh batch of super-mercenaries to tussle with. It ticked him off, honestly. Everything he’d worked for, everything he’d lost, and now Kingsley was putting things right back to the way they’d been at the start of Spidey’s career. Obviously, rescuing Madame Web was important, but it wasn’t enough. Kingsley had to be stopped before anyone else got hurt.

Spider-Man hurled himself over a building, then fired a fresh web-line, zipping down toward the street with twice the momentum.

Oh, and none of this was even getting into the fact that Doctor Octopus had been invited over to the Parker house for tea and crumpets. It was taking everything in Spider-Man’s power not to let out one long, perpetual scream. And if the big tough superhero was that apprehensive about Ock, he couldn’t imagine how Gwen must be feeling. At least she was spending the night at Mark’s and MJ’s place, so she couldn’t be too uncomfortable.

Gwen shifted on the couch, trying her best to keep her eyes dead ahead. Evidently, Mary Jane and Mark were one of those couples who didn’t consider privacy a prerequisite for making out.

After another couple minutes, Gwen had no choice but to clear her throat. “E-Excuse me,” she stammered out, “Sorry, but what’re we doing for dinner?”

There came a noise like a plunger, followed by Mary Jane’s somewhat flustered voice: “Oh, you can help yourself to whatever’s in the fridge.”

Gwen’s eyes flitted to the couple – Mark seated on an armchair on the far side of the apartment living room, and Mary Jane, err, sharing the space with him.

“And you’ll have to crash on the couch tonight,” MJ added with a wince of apology. “This is a, ah, one-bedroom place…”

“Right, right, it’s fine, I get it.” Gwen’s eyes returned to the fancy HDTV at the front of the room. She guessed between MJ’s modeling and, uh, whatever Mark did, they’d been able to splurge a bit. This place was way cushier than Gwen had expected. The only downside was that it was small, but, well, she supposed MJ and Mark didn’t exactly require too much negative space between each other… Ugh, and Mary Jane wasn’t even out of high school yet. If she wasn’t careful, Gwen was gonna turn greener than the Hulk.

Right as Gwen was on her way to the fridge, there came a knock on the door. Mark got up to answer it (though Gwen was shocked he could detach himself from MJ for that long), swinging the
door open to discover his little sister standing on the welcome mat, still in her school clothes. “Oh, hey, sis.”

“Hey, Mark. Just dropped by to get that charger cord you borrowed-” The words froze in Liz’s throat when she caught sight of the apartment’s other occupants. “Oh. You.” The moment her eyes fell on that red hair, the girl’s face went from clear skies to the midst of a hurricane. “Thought you were still at work.”

“H-Hi, Liz.” MJ stepped back from the armchair, an uncharacteristic quiver in her voice. “Sorry, here, if you wanna visit with Mark for a bit, I can leave-”

“Leave?” repeated Liz, remaining planted in the doorway. “Why would I want you to leave? Because your little Coney Island ‘friendship date’ with Flash is half the reason he and I broke up? Or because that apparently wasn’t enough for you, and so you conspired to break up me and Petey out of some twisted, voyeuristic pleasure you get from watching him hook up with Gwen? Would that be why?”

The remark earned a brief silence. “I’m not gonna deny… any of that. Just- Just let me get out of your way-”

“No, stay.” Liz let out a huff as she strolled to the room’s center. “I’m just grabbing my phone charger. I’m not that petty.” Without further ado, she strolled her way towards the nearest wall outlet… until the sight of a certain blonde halted her stride.

“You still call him ‘Petey?’” said Gwen in the tone of voice usually reserved for finding something dead on your shoe.


“Hey!” On the far side of the room, Mary Jane gawked at the wall. “Who messed with the thermostat? It’s freezing in here!”

The door to the Parker household crept open, letting in a flooding of early, Valentine’s Day sunshine. Truth be told, Gwen wouldn’t have objected to spending another night at MJ’s place, except MJ and Mark were actually going on a trip for the holiday, and MJ’s aunt had blabbed all about it to Peter’s, and so, as Gwen’s current legal guardian, Aunt May had forbid Gwen to stay there unsupervised.

Oh, well, Gwen would’ve been swinging back into Doc Ock territory anyways. She’d left her saxophone at the house, and she kinda needed that for tonight… Besides, there was no way in heck Gwen was going all Valentine’s Day without seeing her-

“Oh.”

-boyfriend.

On the kitchen table, Gwen discovered a bouquet (i.e. three) of beautiful (i.e. within the constrains of Peter’s budget) flowers, alongside a box of candies that fit on her palm. Topping the gift off was a greeting card. The outside depicted cartoon, anthropomorphic period table elements above the caption “Iodine, Livermorium, Uranium.” On the card’s inside were the words, scribbled in ink in a near-indecipherable handwriting:

Sorry I can’t see you this morning. I’m really, REALLY busy with “work” (Gwen mentally added the quotation marks herself). But I’ll see you at your recital tonight. Love you!!!
Gwen stared at the card. Then she stared at the patch of empty, Peter Parker-shaped air standing in front of her. After a steadying breath, she set the card on the table, took out her phone, and texted, The flowers are beautiful! Thank you! I love you too!!!

None of Manhattan’s other parks were quite as nice as its central one, but this particular park was pleasant enough. May and Otto sat on a bench, huddling together to ward off the biting wind.

May smiled at her boyfriend, adjusting his orange bow tie. “I haven’t had this much fun in too long.”

Otto smiled back. “I’m glad you’re happy.”

“Yes, but...” May’s own smile faded. “I only wish Peter and Gwen hadn’t taken the news so hard. I suppose I was so caught up in the man you’ve become, I forgot they’d only ever known the man you were...”

“Change doesn’t occur overnight,” said Otto. “A truism the doctors at Ravencroft were fond of reiterating.”

“I wish I’d kept my brain as sharp as yours. My sister-in-law was passionate about science, but I suppose I settled for being a simple housewife—” Suddenly, May cried out, squeezing Otto’s arm. “Oh! Otto, look, it’s that awful man!”

A red and blue figure was swinging from the buildings in the distance, leaving a trail of webbing in his wake.

“Not to worry, my dear.” Otto gave her hair a stroke. “You’re perfectly safe with me.”

May sighed. “I can hardly wait until the kids are in college and we can finally move out of this horrible city...”

At this, Otto recited: “Finding a way to live the simple life is one of life’s supreme complications.”

This earned a chuckle from May. “I can’t argue with that. Ben had always wanted a simple life, too.” Her voice grew softer. “I remember when we were young... He made promises to me in parks just like this...”

A heavy silence permeated over the bench.

Finally, Otto broke it. “I met Rosie in this park. Right over there.” He pointed out some picnic tables. “I was trying to study a neurology and applied mechanics textbook simultaneously. She was trying to study T. S. Elliot. Hers was, by far, the most difficult to parse.” They shared a laugh. “I’m serious. It was incomprehensible! ‘Time present and time past are both perhaps...’” He shook his head. “I can’t remember anymore. That was so long ago.”

Otto’s glasses were clean, but his eyes were fogging over. “We were so vibrant, so bold in those days. We thought we were invincible. I proved us wrong.”

At these words, May squeezed his arm harder. “Otto...”

“If I hadn’t ignored the safety procedures... If I’d remembered something as basic as that happens to heated glass-...”
“Otto, Otto, shh…” May had nestled herself in the crook of his neck. “I’m here, Otto, I’m here.”

“After that, the word seemed so large, so frightening.” Almost inaudibly, Otto added, “And that’s when I found myself working for Osborn.”

A somber laugh escaped May’s throat. “I suppose-” Her voice shook. “I suppose we’re both responsible for losing the ones we loved.”

“Yeah, I said extra sauerkraut.” Blackie Gaxton licked his lips as the guy behind the hot dog cart put the finishing touches on his dinner. Gaxton eagerly paid for it, then grabbed the food so he could cram it down his gullet.

*Thwip.* Unfortunately, the hot dog only got within a couple inches of said gullet before it was snatched away by a web-line.

“Oh, come off it!” Blackie ran for it, but he didn’t get far before he was snatched from the air on another web line.

“Blackie, my man!” A spandex-clad figure that Blackie had learned to dread gave him an upside down stare from the flagpole he’d perched on. “So… I heard through the grapevine that you might know where a certain Kingsely is holding an old lady captive.”

“Please, Spider-Man, I swear I haven’t done anythin’ wrong! Just lemme down!”

“Uh uh uh.” Spidey held him up by the leg. “That’s not how this works, silly. First you’ve gotta tell me what you know.”

Blackie glared at him. “It’s not enough that you burn down me lounge, now you gotta steal me dinner, too?”

“Oh, right, this.” Spidey inspected the hot dog in his other hand. “If you be a good boy, you can have it back.”

Blackie sighed, an uncanny sensation when done upside down. “One o’ the men I was bookin’ says ’ee was doin’ a run fer Kingsley when he caught a glimpse o’ some crone strapped up to a weird machine. It was in the warehouse by the river straight from ’ere. You can’t miss it.”

“Thanks for your cooperation, champ. You’ve been a real pal.” True to his word, Spider-Man lowered Blackie to the ground and tossed him his hot dog. Before swinging off, Spidey added, “Oh, careful not to eat the bits with webbing on them – It gives you crazy bad constipation. Don’t ask how I know that.”

Blackie rolled his eyes.

“What is it?” Finally, there came a voice from the speaker.

“Doc! I’ve been trying to reach you for forever!”

“I told you, Electro, I’m out with a friend.”

Electro scowled into the phone. He was only allowed to use the one in the Ravencroft visitation center once a day, at this particular time. Doc knew that. What, he couldn’t set aside a minute? “Yeah, I know. The old lady.”
She has a name and you will refer to her by it.

“Yes, Doc.” Electro winced as hard as if Doc had reprimanded him in person. “I’m sorry, Doc. I know you care about May Parker. It’s just, well, they let you out but not me, y’know? Guess cuz my powers still make me dangerous. It’s pretty miserable in here.”

“I asked you to wait. I need to go now. When or if I need you, I will contact you with the signal, understood?”

“Under-” The call ended. “-stood.”

Slowly, Electro returned the phone to the receiver.

The warehouse was in Spider-Man’s sights. Soon, Madame Web would be free, her testimony would probably put Kingsley behind bars, and best of all, Spidey would never have to put up with Web’s surprise acid trips ever again. And he’d still have plenty of time before Gwen’s recital.

Spider-Man swung onto the side of the warehouse, then crawled through a window and onto a roof. The place was pretty tiny as far as hideouts went. Only slightly bigger than a basketball court. Not to mention totally empty.

There was, however, one notable feature on the far side of it – Namely, a big, elaborate machine full of twisted wires and tubes… with an old woman trapped in its center. It looked like a giant spider web, exactly the same as in the vision.

“Madame Web?” Spidey descended upside down on a web line. “Psst. It’s me.”

Madame Web, too, was identical to in the vision, right down to the blindfold and the chest emblem. Spidey expected her to answer, but she remained still. What Spidey wasn’t expecting was for a voice to suddenly ring through his head:

*Spider-Man, get out! It’s a trap!*

Mere moments later, his spider-sense blared like a siren. “Whoa nelly!” Spidey backflipped away, expecting to see an explosion or a supervillain or something. But instead, he turned to find a mere man standing before him.

“Ah, Spider-Man. I was hoping to see you.” He was a dark-skinned man with white hair and a whiter suit. At the snap of his fingers, translucent orange forcefields sprang up around both the machine and himself. True, honest-to-god forcefields. The little sci-fi nerd in Peter went wild.

“Kingsley.” Spidey crouched into a fighting stance, clenching his fists. “So you are the Kingpin.”

Kingsley scoffed. “I should be so lucky. No, Kingpin is a business associate of mine. I’m sure the similar names threw you for a loop.”

“Uh, no! That- That would be stupid.”

“Well, imagine my surprise when I heard the spectacular Spider-Man was careening about town, asking any thug he could get his webs on for the whereabouts of a telepathic old lady.” Kingsley shook his head. “I can only think of one way you could’ve found out.” He scowled at Madame Web. “It seems that machine isn’t as telepathy-proof as Winkler had promised. I’ll have to leave a one-star review.”
“So this is how you’ve been making all those Hobgoblins?” said Spider-Man. “You’ve been forcing Madame Web here to brainwash people for you?”

“Ooh, you’re an observant one.” Kingsley chuckled to himself. “That’s right, Spider-Man. Cassandra may not be able to see or hear, but she’s quite good at mind-control. She can do it to anybody – rivals like Donald Menken, thugs like Lefty Donovan, and even nosy reporters like Ned Lee. Cassandra’s no Charles Xavier, but she gets the job done.”

“And I guess you ripped off Green Goblin’s gimmick because you’re just that lazy?”

“One of my thugs found a hidden stash of his while fleeing from you, actually.” Kingsley flashed a smile. “Just think, if you’d taken the time to catch the thug back then, all this could’ve been avoided.”

_Pthat_ made Peter wince.

“But it wasn’t just goblin equipment in that stash – There were journals, too. See, I know all about Norman Osborn’s secret hobby… and I know all about his plans to groom his son into the next Green Goblin.”

“Plans?” Spider-Man tensed. Had Harry’s descent into goblinhood somehow been Norman’s doing?

“And I couldn’t have a rival goblin trying to cash in on my new image, now could I? Problem was, every time I tried to kill him, I was thwarted by a little pest.” Kingsley’s eyes narrowed. “And so I thought it worth my time to go out of my way to kill you. After all, you’d caused so much trouble for the other aspiring Big Men. Unfortunately, the Sinister Six didn’t fare as well as I’d hoped.”

“So now you’re gonna kill me yourself?” offered Spider-Man. “Prove you’re the one true Hobgoblin?”

“Myself?” But Kingsley did something unexpected – He burst out laughing. “Why on earth would I kill you myself? As if I’d be caught dead in that dreadful costume. No, Spider-Man, that’s something Norman never understood. Why get your hands dirty…”

Suddenly, a set of circles opened up on the warehouse floor, like some kinda secret hatches. Six of them, to be exact.

“…when you can have your brainwashed underlings do it for you?”

And from each of these holes ascended an identical, cackling Hobgoblin, each with their own glider.

“What do you think?” asked Kingsley, hands in his pockets. “Not quite as aesthetically interesting as the traditional Sinister Six. It was supposed to be an army of Rhinos, but _c’est la vie._”

Spider-Man took a step back. “I’d rate them four _hummina hummina humminas_ out of five.”

_Run, Spider-Man!_ cried out Madame Web’s telepathic voice again. _Escape while you still can!_

But the moment Spidey leaped for a window, blast doors slammed down over the entire structure, blocking every last pore of the warehouse. Those things had to be at least a foot thick, and Spidey wasn’t sure he had the time to punch through one.

“Minions, if you’d please.” At Kingsley’s words, the Hobgoblins took off and surrounded Spidey,
holding their pumpkin bombs at the ready. They were like the Oompa Loompas to a really screwed up Willy Wonka. “Cassandra?”

The voice in Spider-Man’s head said, *I’m sorry, Peter. I… can’t… resist… the machine.*

*Look, Madame Web, I like Pink Floyd tribute bands as much as the next guy, but*— Spider-Man didn’t have time to finish thinking his lame joke before his head exploded with pain.

Chapter End Notes

I have no idea what kind of accent Blackie Gaxton was supposed to have in Spectacular Spider-Man, so if anybody could help me out with that, it’d be greatly appreciated.
Psychoanalysis

“Ooh, look at him squirm!” said a Hobgoblin.

“I’ll admit,” said another, “even when he joins our side, I’ll still be tempted to try and squash him.”

“As will we all, brother!”

Spider-Man’s ears were filled with the goblins’ gleeful gobbles, which, admittedly, wasn’t half as bad as his brain, which was filled with searing hot agony.

A scream escaped Spidey’s mouth as he fell to his knees. He- He hadn’t ordered his legs to do that! And now Spidey’s fingers were wiggling of their own accord. It was like when a doctor hits your knee with the rubber mallet, only applied to the entirety of his body.

I’m sorry, Spider-Man! And all the while, the voice of his favorite old hag bounced around in his skull. I can’t control my powers!

No, no, this wasn’t Madame Web’s fault. If anything, she was the victim here.

But it IS my fault, Spider-Man. If I had kept my powers a secret from Kingsley-

OKAY, responding to Spidey’s thoughts like that REALLY wasn’t helping his concentration!

Apologies.

Spider-Man ordered his legs to stand, but they remained obstinate. Even if he could stand up, what good would it do? There were half a dozen Hobgoblins circling him on their gliders, Kingsley and Madame Web were surrounded by twin plasma shields that made Peter’s spider-sense tingle when he so much as thought of touching them, and best of all, the whole warehouse was walled off by blast doors. It was hopeless. He may as well… give up.

Just think. A sudden voice resonated in his head, and for once it wasn’t Madame Web’s. If you’d taken the time to catch the thug back then, all of this could’ve been avoided.

Peter clenched his fists. What was he doing? He couldn’t allow so much as one more person to get hurt thanks to his mistakes. Peter… had to… keep… fighting. His legs began to wobble. He’d taken on the Sinister Six and lived, hadn’t he? This was- This was nothing.

“Finished struggling, are we?” A content smile crossed Kingsley’s face as he watched Spider-Man pull himself to his feet. “There’s a good slave. Hmm, first things first, we’ll have to do something about that outfit. I mean, red, white, black, and blue?” He made a face. “Never wear more than three colors, sweetie.”

“I’ll stick to the classic, thanks,” said Spider-Man. “Last time I switched costumes, it didn’t go so well for me.”

Before Kingsley could open his mouth, Spidey tumbled under the ring of gliders and sprinted for the far end of the warehouse.

“Worthless machine!” Kingsley spun towards it, bellowing a voice command: “Set the brainwashing to full capacity!”
Then he turned to his loyal goblins. “And you, go wear down our guest’s willpower.”

They hadn’t needed to be told – The Hobgoblins were already pursuing their prey.

The brainwashing had indeed been set to full capacity, a process that evidently involved tripling the amount of pain in Spider-Man’s skull. But it didn’t stop him. He kept running… until he hit a dead end, of course.

“Poor little spider.” A Hobgoblin held high his pumpkin bomb.

Of course, fighting six Hobgoblins would’ve been a struggle for Spidey on a good day, but with him having to fight to move his muscles, you can bet that bomb hit him point-blank. A mere mortal would’ve been blown to smithereens, but Spidey was made of sturdier stuff. He was merely sent flying and given some boo-boos. Nothing a full-body cast and a couple major surgeries couldn’t fix.

“Is that all… you got?” Spider-Man tried to pull himself to his feet again, but this attempt was met with pumpkin-themed throwing blades from four out of six goblins. “Agh!” There went the ligaments in his shoulders. Phht, who needed ’em?

“I’m almost starting to pity this guy,” said a Hobgoblin. “Almost.”

It couldn’t end this way! With a sudden second wind, Spider-Man sprang into the air, managing to punch one of the goblins off his glider.

“Careful, now!” called out Kingsley. “I think that one’s the pregnant homeless lady.” From her spot on the ground, the Hobgoblin removed her mask to confirm the claim.

“What the-?” Spidey spun towards Kingsley. “Why would you brainwash a pregnant homeless lady?”

Kingsley shrugged. “I just thought it would make you feel bad.”

He was right, it did. Hard as it was when his brain was on fire, Spider-Man had to remember that these Hobgoblins were probably all brainwashed innocents – just like Spidey himself would be in a second. So now not only did Spider-Man have to fight off six Hobgoblins while resisting mind-control, he had to do it without hurting anyone.

“Careful, Spider-Man!” Another goblin lobbed another bomb. “I’m a veteran with PTSD!”

“I’m a kindergarten teacher!” And another goblin lobbed another.

“I run an animal shelter!” And another.

“Aww, shucks.” That last blast had been seconds away from searing Spidey’s face off. “You guys are warming my heart.”

At least none of the Hobgoblins had taken Globulin Green, judging by the strength of their throws. Yeah, big consolation. A kitten could beat Spider-Man in an arm-wrestle right now.

You can’t keep up this fight, Spider-Man! came the sudden voice of Madame Web. Your only hope is to escape. By having me control so many people at once, Kingsley has stretched my powers thin. My range can no longer extend past this warehouse.

That was good to know, but how the heck was the Web-Head supposed to get out of here? It
wasn’t like there were any doors, and the torrent of pumpkin bombs wasn’t making things any
easier—Wait. But maybe it could...

Spider-Man perched himself on the patch of wall where, if he was remembering right – please God
please – the window he’d entered from was hidden behind a blast door. “Hey! How many
Hobgoblins does it take to screw in a light bulb?”

The remark prompted all six goblins to lob their pumpkins at him. Spidey was forced to hop out of
harm’s way, which was great because the combined strength of the bombs caused the blast door to
 crack. And also because Spider-Man hadn’t planned a punchline.

Now all that was left was for Spidey to jump onto a glider—“I’m sorry, I’m sure you’re a nice
person!”—and punch its owner off of it. The Hobgoblin went tumbling onto the ground, leaving
Spidey as the glider’s sole rider. Only problem was, he had no idea how to pilot this thing.

“Please work please work please work!” So instead, he opted to fire both web-shooters at the
cracked wall and give a nice, strong tug. The glider snapped towards it like a rubber band.

_Crash._ The blast door gave way and Spider-Man found himself sailing beneath the beautiful
Manhattan streetlights. Kool-Aid Man, eat your heart out. Of course, the glider promptly crashed
and burned, but at least it’d happened on an _empty_ patch of cold, hard pavement.

“I did it. Yaaaaay...” Even Spider-Man himself didn’t know how he managed to crawl free of the
wreckage. The instant the cool night air had hit his head, it was as if it’d washed away all the
telepathic pain in there, leaving him with just the regular, good old-fashioned kind. Spidey looked
up to see the mob of goblins (or “Mobgoblins,” ha ha ha everything hurt). They’d hesitated inside
the freshly-created exit hole. Looks like Madame Web had been right – They couldn’t leave her
range.

But Spider-Man wasn’t taking any chances. Though his arms threatened to fall off, he web-swung
out of there as fast as they could carry him. In the distance, he heard Kingsley call out, “Nice
visiting with you, Spider-Man! Come again sometime!”

Even when the warehouse was safely behind him, Spidey kept swinging. He didn’t stop until he
was finally forced to collapse on a random rooftop, plopping over in a huddled, panting mess. He
wasn’t sure if the roof had already been damp or if that was his insides trickling out.

By the time the world returned to focus, it’d gotten dark out or, err, as dark as thing could get in
Manhattan. Peter groaned, rolling over on the rooftop, feeling the hastily-spun web-bandages
covering his torso.

God, he was ready to sleep for a month. Peter wanted nothing more than to head home, plop into
bed, and... attend the school band recital. No. He scrambled for his phone, which had been left
beside him on the roof. _It’s okay, it’s okay. The band isn’t finished until eleven, and it’s only..._
Peter checked the screen _two in the morning._

“Ugh...” He flopped down on the cement. Those front row tickets had cost a- No, screw that, the
recital had meant the world to Gwen, and Peter had promised to be there. He couldn’t imagine how
she was feeling.

Actually, he _could_—She’d left him a text. Peter took a deep breath, then mustered the courage to
hold the phone to his eyes.

“Peter,” the message read, “you missed my band recital. You probably know that already. Sorry.
Don’t worry about me, i’ll be fine. It didn’t go well :'( But I’m sure whatever you’re doing is way more important.” Then three seconds later, she’d sent another text saying, “I didn’t mean that in a salty way. Love you. Good night.”

Peter’s heart hadn’t been terribly high in his chest to begin with, but now it was somewhere around the Earth’s mantle. He wished she’d at least gotten mad. He deserved it.

Peter punched the roof beneath him. It left a crater. And that was before he caught sight of all the missed calls and angry texts from Aunt May.

Peter didn’t even wanna know what time it was. He’d had to hunt down the web-sack where he’d left his civilian clothes. If you think forgetting where you parked is the worst, then you haven’t spent an hour of your life searching every alleyway in Manhattan for the one with, like, the blue trash bin and, um, the graffiti. Or was it a green trash bin?

By the time Peter was ready to web-swing home, he was seeing twice as many skyscrapers as usual. He’d had his fill of near-death experiences for one night, so Peter played it safe and rode the twenty-four hour subway (He’d considered a taxi, but hailing a cab at this hour made his spider-sense tingle).

By the time his feet touched the Queens pavement, the sun was rising. Better yet, Peter could see from the front windows that the lights were on in the Parker household living room. There’d be no sneaking into his bedroom this time.

Like a criminal to the gallows, Peter stepped onto the welcome mat. He swallowed, then opened the door, fully expecting to see a seething Aunt May.

What he wasn’t expecting was a seething Doc Ock. “Young man, you have some explaining to do to your aunt.”

“Oh, just what I needed.” The words formed all on their own. “A lecture on responsibility from Doctor Octopus.”

At the rate Otto’s face was quivering, it threatened to shake off his glasses. “I will not be degraded by that name-

“Otto, Otto, I can handle this-” May inserted herself between the two, ushering Ock backwards. The both of them were in their night clothes. Now they were having slumber parties together? Gag.

Now that he had room, Peter shut the front door behind him. It took a concentrated effort not to slam it. “Look, I’ve had a really bad day. Can we please do this in the morning? I’m about to pass out here.”

“What on earth happened, Peter?” Aunt May had this way of looking like she wanted to hug him and smack him all at once. “You’d been so good about curfew! Are you hurt?”

Peter drew back, praying May didn’t notice the telltale puffiness of the bandages beneath his sleeves. “I, uh, well, the thing is-”

“What on earth happened, Peter?” Aunt May had this way of looking like she wanted to hug him and smack him all at once. “You’d been so good about curfew! Are you hurt?”

Peter drew back, praying May didn’t notice the telltale puffiness of the bandages beneath his sleeves. “I, uh, well, the thing is-”

“Why didn’t you answer your phone?”

“Because- I mean, I-” The words caught in his throat. Peter had spent the entire trip home cooking up some lie to acquit himself, but it’d been hard to form a coherent thought, let alone a plausible excuse. “The truth is...” The truth. It’d be a heck of a lot easier if he just blurted it out.
Except that Otto was giving him a familiar stare from behind May’s back.

“I...” Peter hung his head. “I really need to get to bed.”

May gawked at him. “That’s it? You’re not going to tell me?” She waited for a reply but received none. “Fine, then. You’re grounded. No, you’re mega grounded. From now on, you’re coming straight home after work, and I’ll have Miss Brant inform me if you leave early. And when you’re home, no TV, no internet, no books, no- no anything. And don’t even think about sneaking a turn on Gwen’s laptop. In fact, you’re not allowed near Gwen.”

Peter had been making for the staircase, but he spun back around. “What? We live in the same house now-”

“You’re not allowed near her,” May repeated through gritted teeth. “Do you have any idea how upset you made her?”

“Gosh, no, of course I don’t!” Peter flung his hands in the air. “Why, is she upset? That hadn’t even crossed my mind.” The words echoed over the stairway. Peter’s eyes had gone wide with horror. There was no limit to his ability to screw himself over, was there?

“Peter Benjamin Parker.” Oh dear lord, she’s used the middle name. Revelations listed that as one of the signs of the apocalypse. “Upstairs. Now. If I hear one more word from you tonight, I-” May faltered. “I don’t know what I’ll do. Just go.”

Jesus, Aunt May was scarier than the six Hobgoblins combined. Peter nodded, then slinked upstairs – but not before taking the time to give Doc Ock the stink eye. The Parker luck had truly topped itself this time. Now Aunt May thought Peter was the biggest jerk on the planet. How dare he try to rescue a kidnapped old lady? He ought to learn some manners from Saint Octavius!

And the sad thing was, there was a not insubstantial part of Peter that didn’t care about what’d just transpired. All it wanted was for Peter to plop himself onto his bedroom mattress and pass into sweet oblivion. That part might have won out, too... if Peter hadn’t heard the sudden cries from Gwen’s room.

“Gwen!” He was at her bedside in milliseconds.

She was flailing and struggling against her covers, which were wrapped as tight as cords around her body. Peter had to shake her for a terrifying few seconds before her eyes would open. And the moment they did, she screamed.

“Gwen, it’s me-!”

“I- Oh my god...” She collapsed into his arms. “I thought- I- I closed my eyes, and I was back inside the cage.” He could feel her heart against his chest. It was on the verge of exploding.

“Focus on breathing, Gwen. Shh... It’s okay...”

“I can’t- I can’t do this. The man who kidnapped me is in my house.” Her face was buried right into the part of Peter’s shoulder ligament that caused the most pain, yet the thought of complaining never crossed his mind.

“I’ve got you, Gwen. I’ve got you.” The only thing in the whole universe Peter wanted now was to fall asleep with Gwen in his arms... but if Aunt May was to discover them in the morning, she’d go nuclear.
“Thank god you’re here… If you weren’t, I don’t know what I’d-”

“Hey, hey, don’t sell yourself short,” Peter said softly. “Who was it again who piloted the escape pod out the Master Planner’s exploding lair?”

Gwen managed a laugh. “It helped that all the buttons were labeled with big, red letters.”

“Still, if it wasn’t for you, I’d be at the bottom of the ocean right now.” As Gwen’s breathing returned to normal, she and Peter shared a kiss. “Gwen…” Her breath was hot on his face. “I wish I could’ve been here sooner tonight. I’m sorry – I swear I mean that. I’m sorry-”

“It’s okay, Peter.” Gwen sounded calm, but she was hugging him with all her might. “It was just a dumb recital. I mean, I completely screwed up my part and everyone else in the band is mad at me, but whatever, right-?”

“No, not whatever.” Peter hugged her back. “Just because you’re not a superhero doesn’t mean your life’s not important.” The hug weakened. “It’s- It’s important to me, at least. The most important thing in the world.”

“Peter…” Gwen smiled. Wiped her eyes. “I love you. I know you’re trying to be sweet. You’re the most important thing in the world to me, but…” The smile faded. “I’m not the most important thing to you.”

“What?” Peter’s brow wrinkled. “Don’t talk like that-”

“But it’s true.” Gwen shook her head. “Loving me is a part of who you are, but there’s another part, a bigger part… and that should always take priority. Just like how things were with my dad.” She leaned in close again. “You were trying to save someone tonight, weren’t you?”

Reluctantly, Peter said, “Yeah.”

“Then you did the right thing.” The smile teased at a return. “If you could’ve saved this person, and you went to my stupid recital instead… Well, I wouldn’t have wanted that.”

“Maybe ‘important’ is the wrong word.” It was a struggle for Peter to remove himself from Gwen’s bedside. “More like ‘best.’ You’re the best part of my life.” He turned back to give her one last smile before heading for the door. “Goodnight, Gwen. If you have another nightmare, I’ll come chase it off again.”

Gwen laughed. “I unironically love you.”

“You, too.”

By the time Peter shut her door behind him, he was actually starting to feel something inside besides cold and dead.

“You continue to surprise me, Mr. Parker.” But Ock put a quick stop to that. “I hadn’t expected you to defy your aunt’s terms within minutes of their delivery.” He was leaned against a wall in the hallway, arms crossed, directly beneath an old photo of Peter, Ben, and May at Disney World.

“Go to hell,” said Peter.

“Now, Mr. Parker, is that any way to speak to your aunt’s fiancé?”

Peter was taken aback. He honestly hadn’t thought he could get more disgusted. “Fiancé?”
Ock held up a ring box from his pocket. “Already, the wedding is in its planning stages. We’ll be seeing considerably more of each other in the future, Mr. Parker, so I would suggest that you learn to speak to me with resp-”

*Crack.* Ock’s fat ass was on the floor, and Peter’s first was in the air.

“*Get away from my family.* My girlfriend is having *night terrors* because you kidnapped her as part of some insane scheme to rule the world, you’ve tried to kill me and my friends more times than I can even remember, your Sinister Six attacked a *hospital*, you- you gave my aunt a *heart attack*, and now you have the *nerve* to pretend you’re *sorry*? To pretend you *care* about May? If you really cared, you’d stay far away from her, you evil, murdering psychopath.” Peter had to stop to pant.

“*Otto!*” He, err, might have caused a commotion. Gwen, for her part, had stayed in her room, but not Aunt May. There she was, smack in the middle of the hallway, running towards the fallen Doc Ock.

“I’m quite alright, my dear,” Ock said as she helped him to his feet. He held out his glasses, which had been snapped cleanly in half. “I’m sure your nephew can reimburse me for the eyewear.”

Ock ought to have counted himself lucky his glasses were *all* that’d broken. If Peter hadn’t been so used to pulling his punches, then Ock might not have *been* so lucky.

May’s eyes fell on Peter, and buddy, if you thought they’d been poisonous before… “Peter? First thing in the morning, you’re calling one of your friends, you’re packing your things, and you’re staying with them until you learn to behave around Otto.”

“What friends?” snapped Peter.

“Peter, you *punched* the man I love!” May’s voice was shaking. “You’ve always been such a gentle boy. You’re acting more horrible than you did right before we lost Ben!”

However hard Peter had hit Ock, Aunt May hit Peter harder. “M-May-”

“I can’t stand another second of this.” She turned tail and ran without another word.

Peter started after her, but his path was blocked by Ock. “I imagine she’d prefer my company at the present.”

Peter couldn’t argue with that, as much as he wanted to. He backed off, fighting to not visibly tremble.

Ock stared at him. Come to think of it, Peter had never seen Doc Ock’s unobstructed eyes before. They were dark brown and hidden in the shadows of a strong brow. They made him seem awfully… domestic, which was probably why he wore those dumb goggles on his costume. Nonetheless, Ock managed a threatening glare without them.

“You are walking a line far thinner than your usual webs, *arachnid.*”

And with that, Peter was alone in the hallway. He made a point not to slam his bedroom door as he shut it behind him. Despite his best efforts, the frame cracked.

Every muscle in Peter’s body ached. He was sweaty and exhausted and for the life of him, he *could not fall asleep.* Peter rolled over above the covers, fiddling with his pillow. No matter what shape
he made it, it still hurt the crook of his neck. Stupid piece of…

Who was Peter supposed to stay with? MJ and Mark? Right after Gwen had already imposed on them? The Robertsons? Peter barely knew them. Maybe Peter could stay at the Thompson household and get complimentary free, unlimited wedgies? Better yet, maybe Jameson would let Peter bring a pillow to work and sleep under his desk? Or maybe Peter could operate as Spider-Man twenty-four seven, sleep on random rooftops like some kinda building-hopping hobo?

Whatever. It was all pointless. Gwen was right, Peter had a more important part of his life to focus on. That poor old lady was strapped up to some weird machine, having her powers drained and used against other innocents… and Spider-Man had failed her.

But maybe Kingsley wouldn’t be expecting Spider-Man back so soon. Peter was feeling a second-or err, third wind coming on. Maybe if he swooped in there and caught Kingsley with his pants down…?

It was decided. Peter scooped up his tattered costume from off the rug – though it took a few tries since he was seeing three or four of it. Once suited up, Spider-Man opened the bedroom window and hopped out. He could climb down that old familiar tree in the backyard and slip out without anyone even noticing he was gone.

Except that the tree wasn’t there. And neither was the backyard. “Hey! What-?” Instead, Spider-Man landed plop into an infinitely sprawling spider-web above a black void. “Not again!”

“I cannot allow you to do this, my boy.” There was Madame Web, caught in the web’s center as usual. “In your current state, you’ve become a danger to yourself.”

“Will you leave me alone?” Peter found himself swinging a fist again. “Is today ‘Lecture Peter Day’ and nobody told me?” The fist collided with its target, but Madame Web merely exploded into mist and re-formed elsewhere.

“You can punch me all you like, young man. I’m only a figment of your mind, after all.” Ugh, Peter hated that stupid blindfold on her eyes. It was so hard to get a read of her. “But will that really make things any better for you?”

“What do you care?” spat Peter.

Madame Web shrugged. “Well, it would be rather unfortunate if my only hope of being rescued was to get himself killed due to his own stupidity.”

Peter looked behind him, but the window he’d climbed through was nowhere in sight. “So I’m stuck here listening to you ramble now?”

“Rumbling? Me? Not for long, I’m not,” Web said sharply. “I was exhausted enough having to resist that machine – which had I not done, would have left you as Kingsley’s mindless servant, might I add. And now, on top of all that, I have to muster up the strength to babysit you?” She scoffed. “For someone doing such a pitiful job of saving me, you’re certainly eager to act self-righteous.

“I-” Peter tried to fire back with a quip, but none came to mind.

“So let me cut to the point, young man. The more you butt heads with this Otto Octavius fellow, the worse you make things for the both of us.”

“How am I not supposed to butt heads?” Peter snapped. “Do you know anything about that guy?
He’s a creep of the highest caliber!”

“I know everything about him that you do.” Web tapped her temple. “And yet, I’ve come to a rather different conclusion about his character. Perhaps it’s because I’m not blinded by rage at the thought of replacement father figures?”

“What did you just-? Father figure? Him?” Even in a dream, Peter’s throat still ached from screaming. “How dare you? Doc Ock isn’t a tenth the man Ben Parker was!”

“Hmm, yes. ‘Uncle Ben.’” A smirk crossed Web’s face. “It’s funny. After skimming your memories as far back as they go, I don’t believe you thought quite as highly of Ben as you think you did.”

Peter froze. “What are you talking about? Do- Do you even know anything about me? Everything I’ve done, all the people I’ve worked to save, including you, is all because of what he told me.”

“I assume you’re referring to this?” Madame Web snapped her fingers, and suddenly the whole world was spinning.

When it came back into focus, Peter was out of costume. He felt great. Gone were all the sweat, blood, and bandages. Peter felt younger. Healthier. He hadn’t even realized how bad his bones usually creaked until he felt them not creaking.

Peter was at the top of the Parker household staircase again, only now daylight was streaming through the windows, and that couple photo Peter and Gwen had taken was absent from the wall.

This was… the way things had been. It… It felt like an eternity ago. With an energy he hadn’t had a second prior, Peter bounded down the stairs. On his way to the door, he passed a pair of people seated in the living room chairs. One was Aunt May, knitting something.

And the other was a man. A man who, even in Peter’s younger, healthier body, made his heart scream in agony.

“Hey. Going to the library across from the venue to study. I’ll see you later.” Peter knew this was another of Madame Web’s illusions, knew she was forcing the words out his mouth, but he’d swear he’d chosen to say them on his own. Guess this wasn’t like the symbiote’s flashback – Peter had to stick to what’d actually happened.

“Oh, yeah, wait, Pete.” Ben struggled out of his armchair. “I’ll drive you there, buddy.”

May frowned. “Are you sure, Ben? I hate the thought of you driving back alone to pick him up-”

“Yeah, it’s alright, Uncle Ben,” said Peter. “I’ll take the subway.”

“No, no, no, I need the exercise.” Ben was already putting on his coat. He ushered Peter into his car without further debate.

After that, the dream world changed again, and now Peter was in the familiar backseat of the beat-up Oldsmobile. He’d barely ridden in here at all since he built his web-shooters.

“Well, kiddo, we’re here.”

Peter spotted the library out the window. “Thanks for the ride, Uncle Ben-” He started to rise from his seat.
“No, wait a minute, Peter, we, uh...” Ben’s wizened face grew stern. “We need to talk.”

Peter swallowed. “Oh, we can talk later.”

“Or we can talk now-” Ben reached to turn the radio off. “-if you let me.”

Peter found himself rolling his eyes. “What do we have to talk about? Why now?”

“Because we haven’t talked at all for so long, your Aunt May and I don’t even know who you are anymore.” Ben’s face shifted from stern to worried. “You shirk your chores, you- you have all those weird experiments in your room, you start fights at school-”

“I told you, I didn’t start that fight!”

Ben huffed. “Yeah, well, you sure as hell finished it.”

Peter huffed harder. “What was I supposed to do, run away?”

Ben shook his head. “No, no, you’re not supposed to run away...” Then he bowed it, admitting, “This guy, Flash Thompson – He probably deserved it. But Peter, these are the years when you change into the man you’re going to be for the rest of your life. Just be careful who you change into.”

“Yeah,” Peter said flatly. “I’ll keep that in mind, thanks. Now I’ve gotta get going-”

“Peter.” Ben’s voice had grown strained. “Look, your aunt and I are worried. Something’s bothering you, kiddo, and I want to know what it is.”

“What it is?” Peter inhaled. Hoo boy, was that a long story. “I guess I’ve been... I don’t know, wondering about something.”

Ben raised a white eyebrow. “Wondering about something?”

“Yeah, um...” Peter exhaled. He could feel the wrestling flier crinkling in his pocket. “Uncle Ben, i-if you could do something, and do it better than anyone else, then it wouldn’t be wrong to, y’know, cash in on your talents, right?”

This failed to remove the concern from Ben’s face. “Well, son, that would depend on what talents we’re talkin’ about.” There, question answered. Peter made for the door, but suddenly Ben grabbed his arm. “Listen, kiddo, I went through exactly the same thing at your age.”

Peter fought down the laughter. “No, not exactly.”

“Point is, you’re changing...” A smile crossed Ben’s lips. “...into the man you’re going to be. And just because you can do something, doesn’t mean you should.” And then, as if in response to the gravity of his own words, his face grew harder. “With great power, there must also come great responsibility.”

“Okay, pause! Hold it!” Finally, Peter managed to go off-script. On command, the world around him did indeed freeze in place. Not only Uncle Ben himself, but the cars on the street, a pigeon halfway through takeoff... “Do you really think I need to see this again, Web? You think I haven’t played this scene over and over in my head every day of my life? Heck, the symbiote already did this number with me! I could quote that ‘great responsibility’ speech by heart.”

“Perhaps you could.” The rear view mirror showed Madame Web in the backseat, but when Peter
turned his head, the seat was empty. “But how easily the mind plays tricks on us. Tell me, can you quote the part that comes after the speech?”

The world unfroze.

“With great power,” Ben was saying. Looks like Madame Web had rewound a couple seconds. “…there must also come great responsibility.”

Peter wanted to thank Uncle Ben. Wanted to tell him how much Peter loved him, how much he meant to Peter… but those weren’t the words he’d really said to Ben that day.

No. Suddenly, Peter was suffocating. Madame Web, listen, I know you can hear my thoughts!

“You’re making it sound like I’m turning into a criminal! I’m just trying to earn some money. I wasn’t asking for a lecture.”

Please, I don’t want to see this! I can’t-

“I don’t mean to lecture, and I don’t mean to preach.” Ben sighed. “And I know I’m not your father-”

“Then stop pretending to be!”

Ben’s face… Peter tried to look away, but Web’s power held his neck rigid. “Right. I’ll pick you up here at ten.”

Peter stormed out the car. He never saw Ben again, except in the casket.

Peter’s face was wet. As he neared the library, he found himself regaining control of his body.

“You locked this memory away deep inside yourself,” said a voice from his foot. Peter sprang back, looking down to discover that his shadow was shaped like Madame Web’s. “It’s something people do to ease their grief.”

“Why-” He wiped his eyes. “Why did you have to show me that?” He felt like a little kid. In fact, he was a little kid, seated next to a young Eddie. They trembled together as they watched the news footage of a plane hitting the ocean.

“Because you needed to see it,” said the reporter onscreen, who looked suspiciously like Madame Web.

The TV displayed a caption reading, “BREAKING NEWS! REPLACEMENTS FOUND FOR RICHARD PARKER,” accompanied by images of Uncle Ben, Dr. Connors, Mr. Robertson, Captain Stacy, and even Norman Osborn. It was enough to dry Peter’s tears, leaving behind something that burned inside him.

“You hated your aunt’s boyfriend before you even knew who he was.” Finally, an image appeared of Doctor Octopus. “You allowed prejudice into your heart.”

“But Ock is a supervillain!” Peter shocked himself with how much higher his voice sounded in this form. “And- And I- I don’t hate Uncle Ben. I know I was horrible to him, but-” His eyes were watering again. “-I changed.”

“Yes,” said Madame Web. “People do change. Perhaps that’s something to keep in mind the next time you see Otto?”
Peter tried to reply, but the TV was gone, and the dream was twisting and morphing around him… growing brighter…

And then he was awake. And all the pain flooded back at once. Peter cried out… only to be met with a pair of hands stroking his back. “Whuh-?”

Gwen’s face loomed over him. “Shh, shh… It was only a nightmare, Peter.” She held him tight. “I’m here. I’ve got you.”

“Thanks, Gwen.” Peter pulled himself upright. “But it wasn’t a nightmare, actually.” He smiled, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Just some tough love.”
“Peter…. Peter…”

For the second time that morning, Peter was shaken awake. He’d been holding out hope he’d see Gwen once more, but instead he opened his eyes to see a white-haired woman frowning at him.

“You need to get up, Peter,” said May, standing from the bedside. “You’ll be late to school.”

Oh yeah. It was Monday. Peter glanced at the digital clock on his bedstand: Seven fifteen. He’d gotten maybe two and a half hours of sleep. Ugh. That’d explain why his eyes burned every time he blinked.

“Aunt May, about last night-”

“Not now, Peter.” May put her back to him. “Just… go to school. Forget it ever happened.” Peter wanted to ask if he still had a stay at a friend’s house, but May had already darted out the door.

Peter stared out the bedroom window, just to make sure the tree and backyard were still there. For a moment, he wondered if his talk with Madame Web last night had been a regular old dream… except he didn’t think he could’ve come to the revelation on his own.

Outside the band room, Gwen pleaded to Peter with her eyes. “Do you think they’ll hate me more if I skip practice today?”

Peter sighed, leaning against a locker. “I think you’re gonna have to face the music.”

Gwen smacked him with her book bag.

“Sorry, sorry-!” They shared a much-needed laugh. “Seriously, though, go to practice, Gwen. Trust me…” Peter glanced away. “It’s better to patch things up quick.”

Peter would’ve loved to provide moral support for his girl, but instead he found himself dragging his feet out the school. He wasn’t sure if Aunt May was relenting on the mega grounding, but he wasn’t taking any chances.

Peter hung his head as he traversed the Midtown sidewalk, which was why it took him a second to spot the chubby figure waiting for him.

“Oh!” Peter nearly ran smack into him. Standing directly in his path was one Doctor Octopus, though Peter almost didn’t recognize him without his glasses. Ock wasn’t in a suit this time, but apparently a dress shirt was still the most casual he was willing to go.

“Mr. Parker.” Ock nodded to him. “A word, if you will.”

Tempting as it was to flee, Peter knew he’d have to take his own advice. Face the music. “Listen, Ock- Otto. I’m…” The word clawed at his throat, but he managed to wrangle it out: “…sorry. I shouldn’t have hit you. That was way out of line.”

“No harm done.” Ock gestured to his eyes. “Contact lenses.”

“You’ve done some horrible things in the past, but ever since Ravencroft let you out, you’ve
abided by the law – as far as I know.” Peter took a breath. “If you were going to kill me or hurt my family for revenge or something, I think you’d have done it by now.” He glanced up. Ock was giving him that stare again. “I’m willing to believe maybe – maybe – you really do care about my aunt.”

Peter waited for a response, heart racing. Finally, he got one – Ock smiled. It didn’t make Peter’s heart race any slower, but Ock smiled.

“Well said. And I am willing to admit...” Ock took a breath of his own. “I have been needlessly antagonistic as well. I hadn’t realized Miss Stacy was in the throws of an anxiety attack last night. And I...” His eyes failed to meet Peter’s. “…shouldn’t have threatened you in the restaurant. I was only concerned that, in your shock, you would tell May you were Spider-Man, and I feared the strain on her heart would be too great. I... I didn’t know how else to deter you.”

“Okay.” Peter took a second to process this. “I’ll buy that. I’ve been worried about her heart, too, to be honest. That’s part of why I hadn’t told her even before you two started dating.” To be honest, hearing Doc Ock voice aloud that Peter was Spider-Man gave him the heebie-jeebies. He doubted any passerby would bother eavesdropping, but still.

“And,” Peter continued, “no matter how I feel about it, I know May really loves you.” He allowed himself at least one death glare. “I hope you appreciate that. If you want to make things square between us, you’ve got to swear to be good to her.”

Ock chuckled. “I already have.”

“And as for Gwen, well, I guess you did apologize to her. I don’t know what else you can do.”

“The most I can give are my words and my actions. For as much as those words are worth to you, I do regret what I did under the ‘Doctor Octopus’ persona. My crimes are a pain that cannot fade. I realize that. A pain that I, through my arrogance, inflicted upon myself.” Ock bowed his head, then recited: “Half the harm that is done in this world is due to people who want to feel important. T. S. Eliot.”

Peter couldn’t help but smile. “So, uh, does that mean we’re square?”

Ock nodded. “Square.”

“Good, good. This is how we do things. We don’t punch each other – We talk. Though in my defense, I was more than a little cranky last night.” Peter winced at the memory. “I tried to save this kidnapped old lady, and I ended up getting my butt whooped by half a dozen Hobgoblins.”

To Peter’s surprise, familiarity crossed Ock’s face. “Kingsley.”

“Oh, right, one of his stooges was on your last Sinister Six lineup.”

“Roderick Kingsley is the one who facilitated my final, boldest escape from Ravencroft.” Ock scowled at his own words. “He encouraged my allies to risk everything for a prison break at the Vault. It’s because of him that the Sinister Six drew the attention of S.H.I.E.L.D.” He nodded to a back alley, which a man in black was poking his shades-wearing face out of.

A thought struck Peter. “You, uh, don’t think S.H.I.E.L.D. is bugging this conversation, do you?”

“If they were to discover your true identity in that manner, it would be illegal for them to act on the information.”
“Oh. Okay, then…”

“The point is,” Ock continued, “Kingsley is no ally of mine. His incompetence put a permanent end to my aspirations for world domination.” In response to the look Peter gave him, he hurriedly added, “Which, of course, is a fortunate happenstance, as I have since learned the error of my ways. Still…” He scratched his chin, muttering, “Kingsley has had no such revelation. He is a dangerous criminal, and if I were to dethrone him, why, that would be a noble pursuit.”

“Well, yeah, I guess,” shrugged Peter, “Good luck, though. He’s got a forcefield and, like, this weird machine that—"

“-controls a telepath whose power turns its victims into Kingsley’s pawns,” cut in Ock. “Kingsley brought the Sinister Six to his lair prior to our assault on the hospital. I’ve seen that machine with my own eyes. In fact, its inner working wouldn’t be difficult for someone of my intellect to reverse engineer.”

“Wait, what are you saying?” Peter didn’t want to believe things could work out this perfectly for once.

“Exactly what you suspect I am.” Ock flashed a smile. “I believe I may have a method of disabling the forcefields and shutting down that machine. Permanently.” He extended a hand. “What say you, arachnid? Shall we work together to end a threat greater than us both?”

It would’ve been a great time for a thunderclap.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but...” Maybe Peter was being too trusting. Maybe this was all some crazy trap, and Ock and Kingsley were still in cahoots. Except Peter’s spider-sense wasn’t going off.

For a moment, Peter shut his eyes. Before them flashed the image of Gwen, two Thanksgivings ago, running up the front steps to kiss him. And then an image of Spider-Man stepping aside as Walter Hardy dashed for the elevator. The way those images made Peter feel... Maybe Doc had images behind his own eyes that made him feel the same?

“...we shall work together.” The handshake was hard enough to set off Peter’s shoulder ligament. *Ow, ow, ow.*

The Parker household laundry room doubled as a basement workshop. It used to be Uncle Ben’s, but Peter had since inherited it. Luckily, May rarely went past the area with the washer and dryer, or else she might have stopped to wonder why there were always so many screws, machine parts, and empty chemical vials strewn about.

“So this is where the magic happens.” Peter had thought Ock would react with disdain, but he seemed quite tickled by the dinky little workshop. “I had a virtually identical one when I was your age.” Ock took an especially long time admiring some of the more expensive machine parts Peter had left lying out. “I’d always suspected your web-shooters were mechanical.”

“Wow, really?” Peter blinked. “That’s a first.”

Ock slammed a notebook on the table, then opened it to a page cram-packed from margin to margin with indecipherable chicken scratch. “The Winkler Process’s telepathic commands are transferred along the same basic neurological principal as the chip that controlled my arms.” He tapped the back of his neck. “We simply need to construct a specialized device capable of projecting a frequency that will disrupt the signal the moment it reaches Kingsley’s machine, and
then it will be rendered incapable of being processed by the human brain.”

Peter leaned over the workbench, examining the chicken scratch. “Which means we need to find the inverse of the machine signal’s interval ratio.”

Now it was Ock’s turn to blink. “That’s... exactly correct. A close estimate should suffice, though.”*

*This is all gibberish, by the way. I don’t know how to science. – Blushin’ Bandragoness

He turned his attention to the parts strewn about. “We can begin by attaching these wires into a circuit within one of those metal frames. It will be tedious work, but I find music helps pass the time.” Ock set his phone on the counter and touched the screen.

Instantly, the room was filled with an orchestral symphony. Ock reached for a pair of wire strippers, but then he jolted as the music came to a halt.

“Uh, no disrespect to Beethoven’s Second—”

Ock burst out laughing – and not the evil kind, either. “You’re familiar with Beethoven, too?”

“A little, I guess.” Peter went crimson. “I mean, Gwen’s really the one into music. I just picked up on some things when I helped her study.”

Ock shook his head, smiling to himself. “I’ll confess, I’d always taken Spider-Man for a mere thug. You have not ceased surprising me.”

“You, too.” Peter smiled back. “‘Remorse’ is one of those concepts that eludes most of my rogues gallery. Anyways-” He pulled out his own phone. “-my workshop, my music.”

“I suppose that’s fair.”

“Cool.” Peter set his own phone beside Ock’s. “Let’s see what shuffling my Spotify playlist gives us.”

His phone started emitting a guitar riff over a pop beat. Peter found this acceptable, and so he set to work, nodding his head to the music:

Dah na-na-na-na, dah na-na-na-na, dah na-na-na-na, dah na-na-na-na...

“I... am a question to the world.

Not an answer to be heard.

Or a moment... that’s held in your arms.”

May leaned against the kitchen counter, holding a mixing bowl in her arms. Apple muffins were Ben’s favorite. Maybe that was why May was in the mood to make them. Somehow, stirring the batter always soothed her. As if everything in the world would be okay if she just baked enough muffins.

The sound of the front door caught May’s attention. “Oh, Gwen. How was school?” She caught sight of the saxophone case held limply at Gwen’s side. “Did band practice go alright?”

“Hi, Mrs. Parker. It went fine.” Gwen made her way into the kitchen, shoulders sagging. “I mean,
the other kids haven’t forgiven me yet, but the music teacher said I can still march with them at the next football game so long as I pass some extra exams.”

“That’s good.” May ordered her lips to smile. “I knew they’d be understanding. People make mistakes, Gwen. It’s human. Lord knows I’ve made my fair share…” The lips couldn’t keep up the effort. “Peter told me about your anxiety attack.”

“He did?” Any enthusiasm Gwen might have had before now was long gone.

“Gwen, listen to me.” May set down her bowl so she could hold Gwen’s hands. “I let Otto into this house before you were ready. I was lonely, and- and it made me selfish. If there’s anything I can do to make it up-”

“It’s okay, Mrs. Parker.” Gwen smiled. May wondered if hers was forced, too. “You have the right to be happy. You didn’t know I’d react how I did. I mean, I can be a little oversensitive…”

“That’s not true, Gwen.” Before she could stop herself, May was holding Gwen tight. “I’m sorry, dear. I’m so, so sorry…” Her body shook almost as much as her voice. “No matter how much I try, I keep hurting the people I love.”

“I know that I’m a prisoner,
To all my Father held so dear.
I know that I’m a hostage,
To all his hopes and fears…”

Peter gestured for a screwdriver. Otto handed it over, and then, when Peter unsuccessfully tried to use it, Otto laughed, shook his head, and handed him a smaller one.

“I just wish I could have told him... in the-”

The basement door creaked open, and Peter hit pause.

“Otto? Are you in here?” Aunt May poked her head in to discover the two of them side-by-side, fretting over a small, rectangular piece of circuitry. “What on earth-?” Her grin was the biggest Peter had seen in a while. “I thought you two hated each other?”

Peter and Otto shared a glance. Then Otto turned to May and removed his goggles – With a pang, Peter realized they were the ones from his Doctor Octopus costume. “We had a talk. We’ve simply been working on a small project together.”

“Th-That’s wonderful.” May’s voice held a delicate mixture of relief and disbelief.

“Aunt May-” Peter dropped his screwdriver, turning towards her. “I’ve gotta apologize for last night. I was being a jerk, and you deserve better than that.”

“Oh, Peter.” May wiped her eyes. “I forgive you. But the truth is, I should apologize to you.”

Peter almost laughed at the absurdity. “To me? For what?”

May’s eyes met her feet. “For saying you were acting like- like you did the day we lost Ben. That wasn’t fair. You couldn’t have known what would happen to Ben – You were just a little boy. It’s not your fault.” She turned away, closing the door behind her. May took just enough time to add,
“It was mine” before it shut completely.

“Wait- Hey!” The pain in Peter’s shoulders had died down, but now he was hurting again. Like he could feel it radiating off of her. “What did she…?” He looked to Otto for an answer.

Otto kept his eyes on the workbench. “That’s the burden your aunt must bear, Peter. Just as I bear mine.”

“I- No, that’s not- I’ll, uh, be back in a sec, Doc.” Peter left Otto to work on the circuit by himself.

Peter almost broke his neck sprinting from the basement to the hallway. He passed beneath the sound of Gwen practicing the sax upstairs, then finally came to rest in the kitchen. May was there, back turned, face hidden, stirring a bowl of muffin mix.

“Aunt May…” Peter hesitated. He didn’t know what he wanted to say, but he wanted to say it bad. Finally, Peter decided on, “You don’t have to punish yourself.”

From the side, he could see a bitter smile on the edge of her face. “Oh, I know I shouldn’t. It’s just that… you wanted to take the subway, and he wanted to drive you. If only I had stopped him…” A laugh escaped her throat. “…we’d all three of us be eating muffins together, just like when you were little. Remember that?”

No… Peter knew exactly what he needed to say – He just didn’t want to say it. Put him in costume and give him some crooks to fight, and you couldn’t get Peter to shut up, but now… It was such a tiny little sentence. How could it give him this much trouble?

“I’m responsible.”

The muffin mix splattered onto the counter. “For what?” May was trying to make it sound like something small, something easy, as if Peter was responsible for jaywalking or cutting in line at the supermarket. She reached for a paper towel to mop up the mix.

Peter had to bury his mouth is his palm. “Uncle Ben.”

“But you were at the library.” Now she was talking like he’d said two plus two was five and needed to be gently corrected. “You were doing your homework.”

“He drove me to the library, but I never went in.”

“What do you mean?”

This tablecloth had a really intricate leaf pattern to it. Peter had never noticed before. “I went somewhere else. Somewhere I thought I could win some money. Kids at school were making fun of me for riding the bus like a freshman, and I wanted a- a car.” God, that sounded even stupider when he said it out loud. “It happened so fast. I won the money, but the guy wouldn't pay me. Then he got robbed.”

Peter was there again. Standing by the elevator. Stepping aside.

“The thief was running towards me. I could've stopped him, but I wanted… revenge, I guess.” His eyes squeezed shut. “I let him go. I let him get away. And that thief… was Walter Hardy.” A bitter laugh. “He wanted a car, too. Tried to take Uncle Ben's. Uncle Ben said no, and Hardy shot him. Uncle Ben was killed that night…” His eyes opened back. They stung, and the whole world was blurry. “…for being the only one who did the right thing.” Deep breath. “I’ve tried to tell you so many times.”
“I trust it went well?” Otto nodded at Peter’s re-entrance to the basement.

“…How’s the jammer coming along?”

“Almost complete.” Otto held up the box to show off the current progress. “We’re missing but a scant few components. See that list?” He pointed to a poor Post-It Note that’d been utterly decimated by his handwriting. “Take it and the money beside it, then go and purchase everything I’ve written. The components shouldn’t be difficult to find in local shops.” He paused, adding, “Don’t worry, that money wasn’t acquired through illicit means. It’s the remnants of my Oscorp paychecks.”

“I- Thanks, Dr. Octavius. For everything.” Peter grabbed the note and money off the table, plus his phone and jacket, and then headed out the door.

“I can’t believe it.” The man behind the counter gave a bemused smirk. “You working on a different science fair project?”

“Just let me buy this stuff,” Peter said through gritted teeth.

“Sure. You got a permit?”

Peter was fixing to throw Bruce through a window. “A permit?”

“Yeah.” Bruce took a bite of his ham sandwich, then said with his mouth full, “That StarkTech battery you want emits trace levels of some crazy sci-fi radiation or somethin’. The manager doesn’t want some dumbass to feed it to their dog and sue the store.”

Peter forced himself to inhale. “How do I get a permit?”

“You got a driver’s license?”

Peter stared at his shoes.

“You don’t got a driver’s license,” said Bruce. “Wow.”

“We live in New York City!”

“You got a college ID?”

Now Peter’s face was emitting trace levels of radiation. “I’m in high school.”

“Oh my god, that’s adorable. Maybe come back with a signed note from your mom—”

“I’m seventeen! And I don’t even HAVE a dog!”

“Seventeen?” Bruce scoffed. “You look twelve at best.”

Don’t punch his mouth, don’t punch his mouth, don’t… “Please. This is urgent.”

Bruce raised an eyebrow. “How so?”
“Because I’m Spider-Man and I need all this stuff to build a device that’ll stop a bad guy from brainwashing people!”

Bruce stared at him. “You’re full of crap, but your balls are obviously bigger than I thought. Here you go.” He opened the cash register.

“You can do it, ‘Lectro! Just twenty more to break your record!” Markham held his hands steady as Electro lifted the weight up and down beneath him. “Pretend those dumbbells are giant honeycomb, and you’re a hungry bear.”

“Do you ever shut up?” Of all the partners Electro could’ve been paired with…

But before Markham had time to drive Electro completely crazy, Dr. Kafka entered the room. “Electro? You have a phone call.”

The dumbbell slammed to the floor.

The next instant, Electro was in the visitation center, holding the receiver up to the crackling, electric ear beneath his containment suit.

“Electro,” came a voice that made his heart race. “This is the signal.”

“Finally.”

See, Electro’s powers had come about by a freak accident, meaning nobody knew exactly how they worked, and so the guards at Ravencroft hadn’t realized something important – Day by day, little by little, Electro’s power was growing. He’d been holding it back, been good like Doc wanted, but now he could finally let loose. Electro could burn hot enough to melt the phone in his hand… and more importantly, the inhibitor bracelets on his wrists.

Peter returned home to find that sax music was still coming from Gwen’s room and May’s bedroom door was still shut tight. Peter trudged into the basement and threw his shopping bag on the table.

“Feast your eyes, Doc. We good to go?”

Silence. Otto was facing away from him, huddled over the jammer.

“Um… Doc? You okay?”

“Yes, yes,” Otto said suddenly. “I’m quite alright, Mr. Parker. Allow me to put the finishing touches on the device, and then we can head out.”

“Great. Hope you don’t mind if I shut my eyes for a sec.” Peter was already slouched against the ratty old basement couch, and his eyes were shutting of their own accord. “Didn’t get much sleep…” May’s face flashed before them. “…and I’ve had a long day.”

Spider-Man was perched atop the crane of an empty construction site, and sitting beside him was one Otto Octavius. The Web-Head must’ve done a real number on the agent tailing Otto, whisking Otto away from the street level like this. Otto had thrown on his goggles and brown trench coat, but without his trademark tentacles, he couldn’t really be said to be “Doctor Octopus” anymore.

Truth be told, Peter hadn’t enjoyed changing into costume right in front of Otto. It’d felt dirty…
“Ever been this high up before?”

Otto shook his head. “Not without my arms. The world certainly feels less...” He looked down. “…secure without them.” He steadied himself, then handed Spidey the fruit of their labor – a rectangular box. Plain enough, though they’d tried to pretty it up by painting it blue with a red spider-emblem like the back of Spidey’s costume. “When you’re within range of the machine, simply press the button. We have no way to test this in advance, of course, so we’ll have to go on faith.”

“Oh, I’m no stranger to that plan.” Spider-Man attached the jammer to his utility belt. “We ready?”

“One last trick up my sleeve, actually.” Otto’s goggles turned white in the evening sunlight. “A trick who I took the liberty of calling earlier.”

Spider-Man nearly tumbled off the crane at the sight of a big, glowing sparkle-god sailing towards them over the sunset.

“Electro!” Spidey called out. “Looking good, buddy! Have you lost a few watts?”

“So we’re working with the bug now?” Electro hovered beside the crane on a cloud of plasma. He was like Human Torch, only instead of “flame on,” it was, uh, “spark on.” Yeah, that’d do.

“We have a common enemy in Kingsley,” said Otto.

“The Hobgoblin guy? But I thought he was our-?”

Spider-Man cleared his throat. “So, uh, am I to assume Lightning-Butt got out on good behavior, too?”

“A prison break is a minor crime in the face of Kingsley’s atrocities.” Otto gave Spidey a reassuring pat on the shoulder – which was still sore, for the record. “It was entirely necessary, I assure you. Only Electro can disable the forcefields. Once our task is done, he will surrender himself back into custody.”

Electro’s eyes flickered – He’d blinked. “Uh, right, right. That’s the plan.”

Spidey couldn’t argue. He’d had no problem with it when Black Cat did the same thing to catch Sin-Eater, after all.

“Hmm... Guess we don’t have a choice.” The Web-Butt gave the Lightning-Butt a look. “Think you can be a good guy a while, Zeus? Rule number one, no killing people. If anyone gets electrocuted, I’m revoking your superhero discount card immediately.”

“Don’t worry,” Electro huffed, “I got total control of my powers.”

“Alright, then...” Spidey turned to Otto. “You sure you wanna come with, Doc? It’ll be pretty dangerous, and you don’t have a way to fight.”

“I’m the only one of us who can operate the machine,” said Otto. “We’ll need to manually disable it if we wish to remove Madame Web without hurting her. And once the warehouse’s blast doors close, getting in or out will be a struggle.”

“Yeah, guess we’ll figure out our escape plan later. Maybe that hole I made is still there? Kingsley might not be expecting me to strike back so soon...”
Spider-Man took a breath. He hoped May was alright. He wished he could be with her right now, but, as always, he had other obligations. At least Gwen was in the house with her.

Alright, no more deliberation. Game time.

“Open wide, Cassandra.” A spoonful of porridge entered Madame Web’s gaping, toothless mouth. Kingsley held her neck, ensuring she swallowed before scooping the next spoonful. A drop spilled on her collarbone, but he quickly wiped it off with a napkin.

Kingsley was seated in a desk chair next to the web of tubes that held her, and he seemed quite focused on the task at hand – until the orange plasma field suddenly appeared around them.

“Well, well.” Kingsley rose to his feet, nodding to the newcomers. Spidey had carried Otto inside the warehouse, and Electro had darted in mere seconds before the blast doors shut. “I wasn’t expecting company today.”

“Are…” Spider-Man gawked at him. “Are you feeding her yourself? You don’t have an underling do it for you?”

Kingsley straightened his white suit. “I prefer the personal touch when it comes to Cassandra.”

“That’s… creepy.” How soon until Spider-Man could leave? He glanced up at the blast doors. The newly-created hole had, in fact, been patched with a fresh sheet of iron. Could still be a vulnerable point, though. “I’m not even gonna ask about the bedpan.”

“Okay, an underling does do that one.” Kingsley turned his attention to Otto and Electro (OMG, that rhymed. Electrotto OTP). “So either my brainwashing on Spider-Man had a delayed effect and now you all want to form a new Sinister Six… or else this is a double-cross.”

“The latter,” said Otto.

“In that case…” Kingsley snapped his fingers. “I’ll have to make do with my current roster.”

Again, the six Hobgoblins emerged from the ground, as well as the sinister new Spider-Man costume.

“Dibs on the fat one!” One of the goblins immediately hurled a bomb at Otto, but Electro dived in the way, detonating it in midair with a quick zap.

“Quickly, Electro!” yelled Otto. “The forcefield!”

“On it!” With a twitch of his palm, Electro blasted the wall of plasma, searing a sizable hole in it.

“Don’t hurt any goblins, Sparky! They’re brainwashed innocents!” Spidey dived through the hole. Nothin’ but net.

“What-? How did you-?” The look on Kingsley’s face was hi-larious! “Machine, brainwash at full power!” He waited, but nothing happened. “Machine-!”

“Oh no.” Spider-Man patted the jammer on his belt. “Did I break your toy?”

All around the warehouse, the Hobgoblins were giving up the fight. Now most of them were too busy taking in their surroundings and screaming.

“Everyone off the ride!” Spidey dived back out the hole. Now that the brainwashing was disabled,
the goblins had apparently forgotten how to fly – and they didn’t wriggle as much when Spider-Man tackled every last one of them off their gliders, which all crashed and exploded in a harmless yet impressive fireball. “Sorry for the inconvenience, folks.” A squirt of his shooters glued all six bystanders to the floor, and some quick gobs covered their mouths to prevent them from panicking. “Sorry, I don’t want anyone hurting themself. You guys have got tons of weapons hidden in those stylish, coordinated outfits of yours, so it’s better to wait for the bomb squad to get here.”

With that taken care of, Spider-Man returned his attention to Kingsley. Another zap from Electro destroyed the forcefield completely, enabling Spider-Man to waltz over to Kingsley unobstructed.

“S—stay back!” Kingsley pulled out a pistol, but those were child’s play for Spidey. He smacked it away and webbed it to the wall easy as swatting a fly. “I don’t understand! This is impossi—”

Clank. A bop on the head sent him to the floor.

“Sweet dreams, Kingsley.” Spider-Man examined the warehouse, hands on his hips, admiring his handiwork. “Well, here I thought we were in for an epic battle. That was the smoothest my fights have ever gone!” He walked back over to the web of Hobgoblins, making sure everyone could breathe. “Now it’s time for you to do your thing, Doc.”

“I concur.” Otto walked over to the machine’s central control panel, near Madame Web’s limp form. He simply had to disable the machine so they could safely remove Web, and they were good to go.

“Y’know, I’m shocked to say it, Doc,” said Spider-Man, “but this could be the start of a beautiful friendship.”

“Yes, it could.” Otto’s fingers hovered over a button. “It’s tragic, really.”

“Tragic? What do y—? Your spider-sense is tingling, wise guy!

Spider-Man narrowly dodged a lightning bolt… only for a second one to hit him square between the shoulders. “Agh!” Spidey dropped like a moth on a bug-zapper.

Spider-Man, are you there? came the sudden voice of Madame Web. Look out! Octavius plans to double-cross you! I just read his mind! I may have made a horrible mistake when I advised you before!

Spidey groaned. Gee, thanks, Madame Web. You’re always looking out for me.

Electro howled with laughter. “How did you not see that coming? You’re even stupider than I thought!”

“Y’know what, Electro…?” Spider-Man struggled to lift his head. “I’m not even gonna argue with that.” He managed to crane his neck enough to scowl at Ock. “Guess it’s my fault for thinking you were anything but a monster.”

Ock smiled at him. “That’s the funniest part, actually. You see, arachnid, I truly did want to help you defeat Kingsley. I truly believed we could be valuable allies to one another. In fact, I might be so bold as to say we genuinely bonded during the construction of that telepathy jammer. I would have been more than happy to call you my son-in-law. But then you went to the store to pick up my supplies.” The smile vanished. “Do you know what happened while you were gone? Would you like to hazard a guess?”

“You… put the stick back up your butt?”
“Your aunt broke up with me.”

Oh. That… did add up...

“She called off the marriage. She- She wouldn’t even speak to me.” Otto’s teeth scraped against each other. “I honestly tried to befriend you, to build bridges, but you are so petty and spiteful that you did the one thing I asked you not to do. Your aunt knows you are Spider-Man.”

“Huh-? Whuh-?” Okay, that didn’t add up.

“Wait,” spoke up Electro, “Doc, are you saying you know Spider-Man’s secret identity-?”

“Later, Electro.”

“Sorry…” Electro winced like a scolded puppy.

“And now-” Ock looked back to Spidey. His voice cracked. “-she undoubtedly assumes that it was all a lie. She assumes that from the start, my affection has been an elaborate ruse to get to you, when I wasn’t even aware she was related to you when our courtship began. She can no longer stand the sight of me!”

“Doc…” Electro took a tentative step toward him. “I’m so sorry-”

“I said shut up, Electro!” Ock hunched himself over the computer console. “Kingsley’s incompetence has ended my plans of world domination, and your childishness, arachnid, has ensured that the woman I love despises me. My life has been completely and utterly ruined!” To Spider-Man’s surprise, Ock’s shoulders began to heave. At first Spidey thought it was from sobbing… but it was actually the opposite. “And so the least I can do is return the favor.” Ock’s finger pressed down on the button.

“Otto, you have to listen to me!” The pain was back in Spider-Man’s head, growing stronger. Louder.

I’m sorry, Peter, came Madame Web’s voice. With the six goblins freed from my grasp, my power is too great. It cannot be resisted.

“I didn’t do it, Otto!” Even moving his mouth had become a Herculean task. “I never told May!”

“Please.” The last thing Peter heard before blacking out was Ock’s bouncy, pompous voice. “You’ll have to sound more convincing than that, ‘hero.’”

“Guh…” Peter opened his eyes. What’d happened? Had he been dreaming? Why did his arms feel so heavy? Not just his arms, actually… Everything felt heavy.

“Rise and shine, arachnid.”

“Mom? Is that you?” But no matter how heavy his muscles were, Spidey could move heaven and earth for the sake of firing off a quip. “And did you put on weight?”

“Cute.” Doc Ock was, naturally, looming over Peter, chubby arms folded behind his back. “But that smart remark will be your last. You are ordered to keep your mouth shut.”

Spider-Man, of course, took that as an invitation to spout off an even nastier quip… except that his jaw refused to move. Like his teeth had been glued together.
Ock glanced over his shoulder to beam at Electro. “You cannot imagine the sheer catharsis this brings me. Now, then.” He turned back to Spider-Man. “-on your feet, arachnid.”

Before Spider-Man could even think to resist the order, he found himself springing upright. Ohhhh, this wasn’t good. Add it to the list of things he could thank Madame Web for.

“I’ll be honest, Doc.” Electro looked over the perfectly-postured Spider-Man. “Having the Web-Head on our side… is gonna take some getting used to.”

“Understandable, my dear Electro, but the pros far outweigh the cons.” Ock gave a haughty chuckle. See, Spidey knew for a fact that he couldn’t possibly resist this brainwashing because if there was even the slightest chance of it, he’d be punching Ock in the face right now. “Even when electrocuted within an inch of his life, our new ally here will serve me nicely in my bid for world domination.”

Yeah, that was another wonderful little aspect of the brainwashing – It didn’t care how much Peter’s muscles burned and ached. If Ock gave him an order, Spider-Man was following it.

“Of course, we could simply kill you where you stand, hero,” Ock continued, scratching his chin. “But I want you to feel what I felt when May terminated our relationship. I want you to sit here helplessly while I teach everyone you know and love to despise you.” He leaned in to Peter’s ear. “And then, when you’re broken, when you beg me to do it, then I will kill you, Peter Parker.”

The most Peter could do in reply was to scowl.

But it didn’t exactly phase the Doc. “Electro, if you please?”

On command, Electro blasted apart the newly-patched wall, giving them all an easy escape route.

As the three of them began climbing out, Ock remarked, “Come to think of it, this warehouse would make an excellent base of operations once I usurp Kingsley’s empire.” He glanced back at the scattered unconscious figures of Kingsley, Madame Web, and six Hobgoblins.

Peter squirmed with all his might, but resistance was impossible. He could barely do so much as twitch a pinky. All he really could do was feel the sting of his muscles as they wrenched themselves in forced movement, following after the two supervillains.

And for the cherry on top of the sundae that was Peter’s life, he had to use the bathroom.
Multiple Personality Disorder

Once the battery was added, the jammer would need a coolant to keep from overheating. A crude measure, but it would serve well for the short term. Otto reached for the coolant tube with his upper rear arm.

Except he didn’t have an upper rear arm.

An old familiar twinge fell upon Otto’s shoulder, and an image of writhing arms flashed before him. At times, he could swear he felt the lava eating away at his remaining two. His mind was playing tricks on him, he knew. Otto despised that – If there was one aspect of himself he valued, it was the sanctity of his mind.

But Otto was shaken from his thoughts by the creak of the doorway. “Otto?” There she was in her casual wear, peering at him with her deep blue eyes, fiddling with the silky hair she’d allowed to gray. In truth, May wasn’t much older than Otto, but she carried a beauty beyond her years. Her face was so… earnest. A refreshing change – Earnest faces had been a scarcity at Oscorp.

“May.” He beamed at her. “Your nephew is out on an errand. Our project is coming together nicely. He’s a gifted boy-”

“Otto.” May’s mouth smiled, but her eyes did not. “I appreciate the way you’ve mended things with Peter. That means a lot to me, but…”

Otto’s heartbeat fluctuated. “But?”

“But- But Gwen hasn’t been taking things well. First she lost her father, then I threw this on her shoulders? I hurt her.” Otto attempted to meet her eyes. May failed to reciprocate. “She trusted me to be her guardian, and I hurt her. And Peter…”

Ah. There it was.

“Peter told me something. Something that… What I mean to say is, I- I can’t do this right now, Otto.” May brought a trembling, delicate hand to her face. “I’m sorry. I need the wedding called off.”

Otto took a breath. “Whatever makes you comfortable, May. I’d be happy to postpone as long as you like.”

“Otto…” She took a breath, too. “I don’t mean ‘postpone it.’”

Spider-Man’s fist collided with its target, no doubt shattering multiple ribs.

“Run! Run! Spider-Man’s gone nuts!”

Every which way, Kingsley’s thugs were fleeing. Evidently, upon falling into unconsciousness, Kingsley had triggered an alarm that drew his minions towards his base of operations – rather, Otto’s base of operations. It was amusing, really. They thought they could escape.

“Holy crap, Doc!” Electro stood beside Otto in the alleyway, watching their new friend do Otto’s bidding. Electro skimmed the city street, raining down lightning to chase away any cars bold enough to drive near. Scattered about the ground were over three dozen of Kingsley’s men, and
every last one of them nursed major fractures. “You didn’t even need me to do anything.”

“Simply flexing our new friend’s muscles, Electro.” By now, the paralysis Electro had caused had all but worn off of the arachnid. And even with the minor handicap, Spider-Man had the strength of a hundred men. An invaluable asset.

Just then, Otto spotted something rather amusing – a pair of peons cowering together in an alleyway. They thought themselves safe from Spider-Man’s gaze, but they dare not try to flee.

“Spider-Man.” Otto cocked his head at the thugs. “Leave those two alive. But only just.”

His servant obeyed.

“Oh god-!” The gibbering Neanderthals tried to run, but the former hero dropped down to block their path.

By the time Electro reached the alley, the criminals were little more than smears on the pavement. “Damn. I didn’t know the spider-freak could hit like that.”

“Yes,” Otto said evenly, “it seems all this time, he’s been pulling his punches. The poor fool.”

“So what now?”

“This should be sufficient to teach Kingsley’s men where their true loyalties should lie.” Otto nodded to the pile of bodies out in the street, which Spider-Man was still looming over, shoulders heaving. “Meaning my next order of business is to give myself the proper number of limbs.” He gave an irritated scratch to his horribly vacant back. “Our new friend here will accompany me. You, meanwhile, will safeguard the warehouse. Chase away any police who come too near.”

“You got it, boss.” Electro turned to leave.

“Oh, and Electro?”

He halted.

“This goes without saying, but keep Spider-Man’s true identity between the two of us, would you? We wouldn’t want any of his other enemies to torment his loved ones before we’re given the chance.”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Excellent.” So long as that information was never revealed… May would never come to harm. Otto would, of course, need to concoct some excuse for Peter leaving home that wouldn’t upset her too badly.

“Uh, come to think of it, were those two really working for Kingsley?” Electro nodded to the pair of victims in the alleyway. “I coulda sworn they were bystanders.”

“They were.” Otto grinned. “The ‘misunderstanding’ is sure to inflame the media. Already, I can hear the news choppers arriving on the scene. In a scant few hours, the public’s hatred for our accursed foe will burn brighter than ever before!”

“Breaking news! As this shocking footage reveals, Spider-Man has brutalized a gang of criminals. We go now to a captain of the NYPD for comment.” Beside Dilbert Trilby, a video appeared onscreen of Jean DeWolff. “Captain, how do you explain Spider-Man’s sudden and violent shift in
“Simple,” DeWolff said with a shrug. “He’s obviously been brainwashed. That or it’s another copycat. Or maybe Spider-Man body-swapped with a villain – It happens to a lot of superheroes. I’m sure we all remember the time Thor swapped bodies with Enchantress and they ended up making out in the middle of Central Park.” She shuddered. “I mean, honestly, you’d have to be an idiot to think Spider-Man would ever do this for real.”

Jameson gave his wife a big old smile. “Order anything you want off the menu, picklepuss. You deserve it.”

“Oh, Jonah.” Joan hugged him from across the table, tickling his neck with her feather boa. “I know we’re a day late for Valentine’s, but still, it’s so sweet of you to take time off your busy schedule to-”

“SHUT UP, WOMAN, MY PHONE SAYS SPIDER-MAN IS BEATING CRIMINALS WITHIN AN INCH OF THEIR LIVES!” Jameson promptly shoved her aside in his sprint for the exit. “THIS IS INCREDIBLE! I HAVE TO GET TO THE OFFICE! WE’RE FINALLY GONNA CATCH THAT CROOK IN THE ACT! BWA HA HA HA HA...” His voice grew fainter as he vanished from view.

Alone at the table, Joan sighed, then picked up a menu. “Well... at least I can have a nice dinner by myself.”

“WRONG!” Jameson’s head poked back into the restaurant. “THE ORDER’S CANCELED! I’M NOT MADE OF MONEY!”

The Oscorp vault. A facility located just off an expressway, consisting of little more than a dull gray building full of reinforced doors (easily removable from their hinges via super-strength) and dozens of bruised, battered security guards (easily removable from their posts via super-strength).

Spider-Man obediently stepped aside, allowing Otto to walk over the crumpled form of one such guard on the way to the newly-ripped-open vault door. “If only I had an audience capable of grasping the nuances of my plan,” Otto said aloud, “but I suppose you’ll have to humor me.”

The guard’s only reply was a half-conscious grunt of pain.

“You see,” Otto continued, ignoring him, “I have long suffered from a form of neurological discomfort commonly known as ‘phantom limb syndrome.’ One would think the condition would be found solely in amputees, but then, in a way, I suppose I am an amputee.”

From his eyes, it was obvious this peon hadn’t the faintest idea what Otto was saying. Oh, well. Without further ado, he stepped inside.

Within, countless treasures were scattered about – money, stolen Tech Flight designs, and even what was supposedly the true Crown of Thorns.*

*Which anyone who’s read Greg Weisman’s non-canon Spec Spidey / Gargoyles crossover should know all about! – Ed

But only one item here truly interested Otto – the extra set of mechanical tendrils sprawled across the vault like a four-legged octopus.
“Ah. A thing of beauty.” The darker, dirtier metal of the original set had been traded for something brighter like silver. It was an absolute pleasure to behold.

Otto wanted nothing more than to attack the wondrous contraption to his body, but first things first, he turned back to his slave. “I’ll be able to fend for myself now,” Otto said. “Which means your new orders are to go find that cute little girlfriend of yours. I do believe I promised to ruin your life…”

Finally, Gwen had gotten the Second Movement of the Creston Sonata to sound like something approaching passable. Geez, Midtown Magnet was hardcore. Her fingers had fallen off hours ago, and Gwen was trapped halfway between the sleeping and waking worlds, but she didn’t pass out quite yet. Gwen had heard some noise from downstairs earlier, and her curiosity had gotten the best of her.

“Mrs. Parker?” Gwen discovered May downstairs, folding laundry on the living room sofa. “You’re up late.”

“Oh, Gwen, I hope I didn’t wake you.” May jolted at her appearance. “Things have just been… weighing on my mind, I suppose.” Her face sagged. It was another minute before she added, “Otto and I broke up.”

“Oh, I- I see.”

May shook her head. “It wasn’t working.”

“I’m sorry.” Gwen hated lying to Peter’s aunt, but the truth might’ve been a bit too… indelicate.

“Peter was starting to get close to Otto,” said May. Gwen doubted that with every fiber of her being, but okay. “He’s out late again, but I suppose he needs time to deal with the news. It must’ve been so sudden for him.” It was kinda late even by Peter’s standards, come to think of it. Gwen hoped he was okay.

Just then, May went for the front door. “I’m going for a walk to clear my head.”

Gwen have a start. “By yourself?”

“Anna Watson will be with me. Will you be okay until Peter gets back?”

“I- I guess so-”

“There are muffins on the stove for breakfast.”

“If you’re sure-”

But May was already gone.

And now Gwen was all alone. To be honest, staying alone in the house always creeped her out, at least when it didn’t make her depressed. Still, Gwen supposed she ought to get some sleep. She had to perform at school in the morning, after all.

As Gwen was walking upstairs, she caught the familiar sound of Peter’s bedroom window opening. Oh, good, he was back. She’d swing by his room for a goodnight kiss.

Peter was going to be sick. He’d just climbed in the bedroom window like normal. And Gwen was
running up to greet him like she’d done a million times by now. It was a totally average scenario, except…

_Hurt her. Hurt her. HURT HER._

Peter fought it. In fact, he fought so hard that his arms were starting to tremble. He’d have given anything to let Gwen have his spider-sense.

But after a minute of Peter just standing there with his mask still on, vibrating in place, Gwen said, “Peter? What’s wrong?” And then she stepped right into the danger zone.

The only reassurance in Peter’s head right now was that at least Doc Ock had ordered him to do this when Aunt May wasn’t in the house (Ock had figured, Peter supposed, that Gwen would never risk May’s heart by telling her the truth about Peter, and therefore this little episode would simply leave May thinking that Spider-Man had broken into their house to randomly attack Gwen, fanning the flames of her spider-hatred). But even that was a small comfort when… when the sound hit his ears.

Peter had just- No, some force had just acted upon Peter’s body, dragging the muscles in his hand until his fingers had… had clamped down around Gwen’s own hand. Crushing it.

There was something about Gwen’s screams – the sharp, shrill sounds Peter had never wanted to know she could make – that… Well, they renewed Peter’s efforts tenfold. The horrible little voice in his head had grown even louder than ever – _HURT HER, HURT HER, HURT HER_ – but with those screams in his ears, telling it to shut up became easier than ever.

Peter dropped to his knees, palms digging into his temples. He was screaming himself, now. And with one last, Herculean effort, he was able to yank himself to his feet. Like cords snapping, his muscles became his own, and the little voice all but vanished.

“Gw... Gwen...” The sound of his own words set Peter’s head on fire. Oh god, he felt hungover. Or, um, what he imagined being hungover felt like. “God, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I was brainwashed.”

Gwen could only respond with stifled sobs as she collapsed to the floor, examining the new shape of her right hand.

“It was Ock,” Peter said, stumbling backwards. “He- I can’t be here. It’s not safe for you. But I’m gonna- I’m gonna get you help.” He was tumbling back out the bedroom window before he could even think to ask himself to exactly what extent he’d shrugged off the brainwashing.

He’d meant to do a flip onto the roof of the house, then rooftop-hop until he’d reached the Queensboro Bridge… but instead Peter found himself collapsing into the grass of his backyard. As it turned out, his earlier prediction of oncoming sickness had been exactly correct.

Whatever. Didn’t matter. All that did matter right now was getting Gwen help. He could call an ambulance, but what about his secret identity? Peter’s brain had been turned to utter mush by now, but he had the vague notion that if Peter Parker called the ambulance but then wasn’t there when they arrived, it’d raise one too many questions. And it’s not that Peter even really cared about his secret ID if it meant Gwen got help quicker, but spilling the beans would put her and everyone else Peter loved into the crosshair of his enemies – moreso than they were already, Peter meant.

No, no, he had to get someone else to do it on his behalf. But who? Peter’s fingers dug deeper into his scalp. Who else was even awake at this time of night?
Mary Jane’s phone buzzed so hard, it nearly threw itself off the bedside table. Through careful maneuvering, though, she managed to grab it without dislodging her tonsils from Mark’s tongue. She was kind of impressed with herself, really.

What was less impressive was the shriek that escaped her as soon as she saw the phone’s screen. Poor Mark nearly got his tongue bitten clean off.

Whatever she did, Gwen was not going to panic. She didn’t care that her hand was in agony. Gwen was going to be okay. She was the girl who’d piloted the escape pod out of the Master Planner’s lair. This was nothing. And- And she had faith in Peter. Peter wouldn’t allow any harm to come to Gwen or Aunt May. Everything would turn out fine.

Gwen spent the next few minutes focusing on slowing her breathing… until she heard the sound of the back door creaking open, and her focus proved for naught. The creaking was followed by footsteps. Frantic footsteps. But who-? Was Aunt May back already? Or was that impostor Peter back to finish the job?

But as it turned out, it was neither – Into the bedroom charged a shivering, disheveled redhead. “Gwen?” Mary Jane’s face was utterly devoid of both foxiness and makeup, an exceptionally rare sight, and she hadn’t so much as thrown on a jacket or socks. In fact, the only clothes on her whole body were a white, sweat-stained undershirt, short shorts, and a pair of running shoes that didn’t match.

“Gwen. Oh god.” MJ nearly broke even more bones, she was hugging Gwen so tight.

Gwen was safe. That knowledge helped lessen the throbbing pain in Peter’s skull as he web-swung across the bridge to Manhattan.

So what now? Well, the next rational course of action would be to go back to Kingsley’s warehouse, sneak past Electro, and destroy that brainwashing machine once and for all.

But as it happened, halfway towards the warehouse, Spider-Man happened to overhear the sounds of gunshots. He perched on a tower to overlook the scene below – It seemed Doc Ock had been planning on returning to the warehouse, too, but he’d been held up by some cops, who he was currently tossing around like ragdolls.

Still… the rational thing to do would be to ignore Ock and destroy the machine while he had the chance.

Thwip. A web-strand latched onto Ock’s fat head, then yanked it onto the pavement with a satisfying smack.

“I have a strict no-killing policy-” Spider-Man hopped from the hood of one cop car to another before coming to a stop on the top of a lamp post, overlooking his foe. “-but lord help me, you are putting that policy to the test, you sick, evil man.”

“Ah. Spider-Man.” It’d been too much to hope that Doctor Octopus had been given a concussion, apparently. He merely picked himself back up with his shiny new tentacle arms, one of which dropped the cop it’d been shaking to wipe the blood off Ock’s chin, and then he said coolly, “I see you’ve managed to escape my mind-control. Savor that. It will be the last stroke of good fortune to ever befall you.”

“Ooh, I should probably tell you about that lottery ticket I bought on the way here.”
No further customary banter was traded before the two sprang at each other.

Mary Jane wasn’t the most skilled driver in the world to begin with, but the periodic whimpers of pain from the passenger seat really weren’t helping matters. If MJ hadn’t swerved at the last second, she’d have sent a telephone pole right into the hull of her borrowed Chrysler, and if that didn’t kill her, Aunt Anna would.

“…out of the blue in the middle of the night,” Mary Jane was saying. “Pete said you were hurt, but I didn’t think he was the one who…” She shuddered, nearly sending their ride into a tree. “Sorry, sorry…” With her own trembling hand, MJ turned on the high beams. “And the internet says Spider-Man’s been running around beating thugs to a pulp. People think he’s been brainwashed or cloned or something. Okay, probably not that second one. That’s dumb. Just… please tell me you know what’s going on.”

Over in the passenger seat, Gwen could only shake her head as she clutched an ice pack to her misshapen wrist.

“I was afraid of that.” MJ exhaled, eyes on the road. “We’re almost to the ER, Gwen. Almost there.” Her attempt at reassurance was undercut by a note of utter panic. “Mark’s meeting us at the hospital. I had to make up some excuse to go alone because, y’know, Spider-Man stuff.”

Gwen’s next round of whimpers were undercut by a sniffle.

“Shh, sweetheart, it’s gonna be okay…”

“Do…” Gwen wiped her nose on her shoulder. “Do you think I’ll ever play music again?”

“You will.” Now Mary Jane’s eyes were fixed even harder on the road. “You’ll just need physical therapy. My mom broke her whole arm once and bounced back from it, and she’s, like, a frail ancient hippie lady.”

“Thanks.” There came another sniffle. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.” Then another. “I guess when I got back with Peter – after the Kraven thing, y’know – I…” A jittery laugh fluttered out Gwen’s mouth. “I made my bed, and now I have to lie in it.” There was silence. “I’m just sorry I forced you to lie in it, too.”

The words hung in the air. Then, though it made the car’s path a bit wobblier, Mary Jane removed a hand from the wheel. Now freed, her hand touched down on the ice pack, then traveled over to stroke Gwen’s wrist with cool fingers.

“Well, lucky for you, you don’t ever have to worry about that,” Mary Jane said, her voice even softer than her touch, “cuz I’m here for you no matter what.”

Gwen flinched but, after a moment’s hesitation, allowed the fingers to remain in place.

The Daily Bugle newsroom was full of yawning mouths and half-lidded eyes. Every last employee clutched coffee in their hands, save for one who didn’t need it.

“The story’s already exploded all over Twitter and Reddit, whatever the hell those are.” Jameson paced the office, practically vibrating. “But the Bugle can be the first to break the news in print! The only kind of news that matters!” He puffed out his chest. “Spider-Man’s evaded justice for the last time. This is the final nail in the coffin we need to have the Wall-Crawler shot, hanged, and thrown in the Vault!”
“Jonah...” Robbie gave a dry stare. “The only reason I dragged myself back here at one in the morning is because I assumed this would be about the U.S.’s diplomatic meeting with Latveria.”

“Don’t bore us with that page-three crap, Robbie! I want someone to suggest a decent headline in two-point-six seconds, or everyone in this room is fired!”

“Including you?” Ben Urich deadpanned. “That might be worth it.”

Put on the spot, Foswell blurted out, “Has Spider-Man Been Brainwashed?” Hmm, that’d been two-point-seven seconds, but Jameson would allow it.

“Are you crazy?” Jameson spat. “Readers hate rhetorical questions! It needs to be something like-” he threw out his hands, as if miming the placement of each word: “‘SPIDER-MAN TORTURES CROOKS! COULD YOU BE NEXT?’

“But-”

“Jameson, look.” Robbie let out a sigh. “We all know you hate Spider-Man, but you can’t assume this is the same guy just because he has a similar costume and powers. Heck, for all we know, Spider-Man really could be brainwashed. As journalists, we’ve sworn to uphold the truth-”

“I don’t hear you contributing, Miss Brant!”

Betty nearly spilled coffee all over her desk. Obviously, the Daily Bugle staff couldn’t function at this hour without their secretary on hand.

“Um, well-” She glanced at her phone. “Someone tweeted this gif of their puppy hiding under the bed when Spider-Man swung by their window, and it got fifty thousand likes in an hour.”

Robbie groaned. “Can we please get serious-?”

“No, no.” Jameson stroked his mustache. “That’s good. I want that gif embedded on the front page!”

“Wasn’t the whole point to break this story in print?” asked Urich.

“I don’t pay you to ask questions, Urich!”

“I’m an… investigative journalist.”

Wham. Tentacle arms left craters in the pavement where a boy in a ridiculous spandex costume had been standing half a second ago. Said boy was now perched on the far wall, but half a second after that, he was perched on a lamp post as the arms cratered the wall, and so on and so forth.

“Oop, sorry, Doctor Octopus, you’ll need more arms than that to catch me. Y’know, it’s too bad you’re not Physician Squid. Then you’d have two extra-”

“Valuable a resource as you are to me when brainwashed,” Otto said through gritted teeth, “I’m beginning to feel you aren’t worth the trouble of being kept alive.”

“You’re not the sharpest squid in the shoal, are you?” Spider-Man fired both web-shooters, but the arms swerved Otto out of the way, hoisting him into the air. “I mean, you do realize you haven’t given yourself so much as a bicycle helmet?”

Two more tendrils darted the arachnid’s way.
“The only reason you haven’t ended up in a full-body cast after every fight is because I’m usually such a nice guy.”

Naturally, though, Spider-Man dodged by dropping back down to the street, and he was even able to transition that defensive mauve into an offensive one, lunging right for Ock’s face.

“Here, let me illustrate my point. See if you can spot the difference in my technique.”

It was all Otto could do to deflect the blow by putting the tips of two arms into buzzsaw-mode. A split-second quicker, and Spider-Man’s web-shooter would’ve been, ah, detached from his arm.

To be perfectly clear, it may have presently appeared as if Spider-Man had gained the upper hand, but Otto’s plan was not flawed. His plans could not have flaws. There was a clear and elegant solution to this dilemma. It simply had yet to present itself.

Perhaps if Otto attempted to bound into the air…? But the moment his head went skyward, he caught sight of something.

*Crr-crack.* A simple and elegant solution.

A bolt of lightning dropped from the sky beside Otto. As per usual, Spider-Man’s odd, almost preternatural foresight let him evade the danger, but doing so also caused the arachnid to dart himself a safe distance away from Otto.

“Let’s get you outta here, Doc!” With a wave of his arm, Electro summoned a wall of electricity that prevented Spider-Man from coming near.

With the threat momentarily stifled, Otto pulled himself up off the fractured pavement, chest heaving. For a moment, Otto considered thanking Electro for his efforts… but such a flagrant display of defiance couldn’t go undisciplined. “Why have you left your post at the warehouse?”

“I- Uh-” Electro was, predictably, at a loss for words. “You were gone for so long, I was worried about you—”

“‘Worried?’ Oh, is that how you justify your fixation with tailing my every move like an enamored child?”

Electro drew back. The message had been received loud and clear. “Yes, Doc… I’m sorry, Doc…” He flew off without another word.

In his peripheral vision, Otto caught a flash of yellow, but it was gone in a millisecond. Perhaps he’d been too harsh on Electro, but, well, being nice was seldom the optimal course of action. Peter Parker had taught him that.

“This park is where he first said he loved me.”

May protected herself from the freezing wind with both her wrinkled jacket and Anna Watson’s wrinkled arm. Currently, the only light sources in Manhattan were artificial, but at this point, it wouldn’t be long until the sun returned.

“I’m sorry for dragging you out here at this hour, Anna.” May leaned back against the hard, bumpy park bench. It was difficult enough to feel comfortable on her favorite armchair anymore, let alone this thing. “I suppose I’m just a silly, sentimental old lady.”
Anna’s warm squeeze tightened against May’s chest. “You loved him, May. That’s never something to regret.”

“I know, I know, but...” May gently freed herself. “I put my needs before Peter’s and Gwen’s. I wanted to be a wife when I should’ve been a parent.” She bowed her head. “I’ve been so caught up in myself, I don’t even know who Peter is anymore. He changed so fast...”

“Peter?” Anna gave a quizzical look. “He’s always been such a quiet boy. How has he changed?”

May tried to answer that question, but for the life of her, she couldn’t.

But as it turned out, she didn’t have to... because a moment later, a figure was approaching their bench.

“I-” May gave a start. “I shouldn’t have made you come out here this late. We should go-”

But the figure moved far faster than they ever could. Something about its head seemed insect-like, as if it was a monster from one of those terrible movies Peter watched. But then the figure’s helmet rolled backwards, and the whole park was illuminated by an orb of crackling electricity.

“Oh my-!” May clutched her chest. Lord help her, she’d never seen anything like it. Or maybe she had... during a news report on supervillains.

“Found you,” the figure growled. “Had a feeling you’d be at his favorite park.”

“You can’t.” The monster’s shell peeled back to reveal that its hand burned with electricity, too.

“Can we help you?” Anna stammered.

“But she can.” And it pointed directly at May.

A web-strand sailed through the air, but Doctor Octopus evaded it by crawling up the wall of the building behind him.

“You won’t escape me again, Wall-Crawler!” Spider-Man shook a fist at him as Ock’s tentacle arms carried him even higher. “Did I really just say that?”

Another pair of tendrils dived at Spider-Man’s head, but he proved himself surprisingly slippery, ducking under the arms and firing a stream of web-bullets.

“Agh-!” Ock cried out as the things hit his head. Spidey could imagine blunt objects tended to sting when you had no super-strength whatsoever.

Doc Ock was just about to retaliate by ripping a chunk of concrete outta the ground and hurling it at Spidey’s own head... when a massive bolt of lightning tore through the sky.

“Holy-!” It’d struck off in the distance, smack in the middle of a distressingly populated area. “Did that come from Times Square?” Spider-Man did some quick mental geography. Yeah, he was pretty sure it had.

“What is that idiot up to now?” Doc Ock seized the distraction to climb a wall and then hop from rooftop to rooftop via his shiny new arms.

“Oh no you don’t.” Spider-Man promptly gave chase, firing a web-line.

What ensued was an aerial chase through the Manhattan skyline, but it didn’t last long. As Ock and
Spidey neared Times Square, they both came to the same realization – They had a much bigger problem to worry about.

“Ohh, that can’t be good.” Spider-Man touched down on the nearest rooftop he dared.

It was Electro. Only Electro usually didn’t burn this bright. His containment suit was starting to crack, making him all the more radiant. In fact, he was emitting enough power to suspend himself in midair for the whole city to see. Heck, astronauts could probably see him. The white lenses over Peter’s eyes did little to stop them from burning, but worse than that was the overpowering smell of ozone. Yuck.

“Oh, Doc.” Electro’s voice reverberated across the air, carried on every stray tongue of plasma. “I see I finally got your attention.” At that last word, his containment suit finally gave out and shattered into a million pieces. Underneath was a body crackling with just as much electricity as Electro’s head and hands – though if God had allowed one small mercy, it was that his body shined too brightly to make out any of its more, err, intricate details.

An offhand wave of Electro’s arm sent plasma scattered every which way. Down below, citizens fled screaming from the falling rubble. Even at this time of morning, Times Square was crowded.

“What on earth are you doing, you buffoon?” Doc Ock yelled at Electro from his perch on one of those giant TV screens.

“What I should’ve done a long time ago.” Electro spun in midair to face him, cackling. Cripes, he sounded even less sane than usual. “You knew my powers were growing stronger, Doc, but you didn’t realize how much stronger. See, I’ve got it figured out – I’m like the Hulk, and you have made me really, really angry.”

Ock was forced to dart away before the monitor exploded into shards. “And what, pray tell, did I do to earn your ire?”

“Are you KIDDING?” Electro’s voice reverberated around the square. “Ever since my life became this- this nightmare-” He created a spark in his palm to illustrate. “-only one person has been there for me, has cared about me, and it wasn’t Connors or Kafka or even my own family.” But then Electro’s voice grew softer. “I did everything you ever asked, Doc. I worshiped you… but it wasn’t enough. It was never enough. After everything I gave you…”

There were these weird little sparks trickling out of Electro’s eyes. It took Peter a second to realize what they were.

“…you chose her.”
Behind Electro, a wall of static suddenly vanished, like a curtain pulling back, to reveal a trembling, white-haired woman huddled on a rooftop.

“May!” Peter and Ock cried out in synch.

“H-Help me!” May was on her knees, hands over her eyes. “God, someone, please-!”

“Electro, I-” For the first time that night, Ock failed to sound smug. “I had no idea you felt- That is, I…” His head sank. “Please, Electro, my relationship with May has irreconcilably ended. There’s no need to involve her.”

“Oh, it’s way too late for that, Doc.” Electro laughed again. “All I want now is to make you watch as the woman you love gets burnt to a crisp before your eyes. And when that’s done, I’m blowing myself sky high, and I’m taking this whole island with me.”

“I AM SO REVOKING YOUR DISCOUNT CARD!” yelled Spider-Man.

He had to do something fast. If Peter didn’t act soon, May would be- No. He could save her. All Peter had to do was get a good running start… He leaped off the building, and for a moment, Peter sailed through the air. He had a clean shot.Didn’t even need his web-shooters.

The other rooftop was inches away. Peter was gonna stick the landing. He was gonna-

“I’ve got you, May!” Turned out Ock had the same idea. A stray tentacle snagged on Spider-Man’s ankle, and the abrupt loss of momentum caused the both of them to go tumbling down to a lower roof.

“Seriously, Ock-?”

“You imbecile!”

They should’ve gotten back on their feet, should’ve tried again, but instead the two found themselves in an impromptu wrestling match.

“My aunt’s about to die up there, and if you don’t get out of my way-”

“Out of your way?” But Ock wasn’t giving up without a fight. “What do you care about May? You’re the one who puts her in danger on a daily basis with your ‘heroics.'”

“At least I’m not an egomaniac who tries to take over the world like a Saturday morning cartoon villain!”

But then their battle came to a halt. A shriek had reached both their ears, and their heads shot skyward to discover May on the upper rooftop. She was writhing on the ground, screaming, as a current ran through her.

“No-!”

“It can’t be-!”
And then… then May went still. For a moment, all was silent. Then Electro sent out another wave of electricity, and May bolted upright, panting.

“See that, Doc?” Electro grinned, though his face was little more than a smear of light by now. “I just restarted her heart, which means now I can kill her again.” He giggled. “And again and again and-”

“Let go of me, Ock.” Peter tried to fight his way free, but Ock’s stupid robo-arms had him pinned by the neck. “You’ve done enough, Just let me save my aunt, you selfish-”

“Let me save the woman I love, you selfish monster!”

Peter froze a moment, letting the words wash over him. Slowly, he shut his eyes. Behind them flashed the image of Madame Web.

“We have to stop this, Ock… Otto.” Peter took a breath, then slowly released his grip from Otto’s neck. “If we keep this up, she dies.” He extended his newly-freed hand. “We have to save her together.”

Otto stared at it. He took a breath of his own, then said, “Never. You hear me, arachnid? Never! You ruined my life!” He raised a fist to Peter’s face. “You fused that harness to my spine! You-You turned May against me-”

“Will you care about any of that when she’s dead?” The words made Otto hesitate. “This is our last chance to make things right, Otto.” There had to be a way to… Wait. It was a long shot, but… Peter shut his eyes again, then recited, “Endurance of friendship does not depend upon ourselves, but upon circumstance. But circumstance is not undetermined. Unreal friendship may turn to real, but real friendship, once ended, cannot be mended.” They reopened. “That’s from Murder in the Cathedral by T. S. Eliot.”

There was silence. Then a faint laugh. “You can… quote it… off the top of your head?”

“Actually, uh…” In spite of himself, Peter blushed. “When you sent me to pick up those parts for the jammer, on the subway, I memorized a buncha Eliot quotes from my phone. Thought it’d impress you.”

A hint of a smile crossed Otto’s face. “You’re quite the scholar.” There was more silence, followed by, “Can you distract Electro while I get May to safety?”

“Yeah.” Peter smiled back. “I’m kind of an expert at getting on his nerves.”

A second later, Otto’s arms were crawling over rooftops, straight towards May.

“Nice try, Doc, but you’re not getting near her!” Electro had just restarted May’s heart for the umpteenth time when he turned his attention to Otto. But before he could zap him away, a sound hit Electro’s ears. Specifically, a whistle.

“Hey, Lightning-Butt, got a message for ya!” See, that building Spidey had landed on happened to contain a billboard. On this billboard was a picture of Roderick Kingsley sniffing a bottle of fragrance next to the words “MAXIMUM COLOGNEAGE” in big neon letters. And perched atop this billboard was Spider-Man, who had proudly covered all the letters in webbing save the first three.

“MY NAME IS ELECTRO!”
Spidey’s cheekiness earned him a bolt of lightning to the face, but fortunately he managed to duck, so only the sign got deep fried.

With a huff, Electro returned his attention to May… only to discover she was gone.

“I’ve got you, May. I’ve got you.” Her crumpled, unconscious body was now in the numerous arms of Otto, which were building-crawling away as fast as they could go.

Otto landed next to Spider-Man. “Wherever I take May, Electro will follow. I can’t keep up the chase for long.”

“There must be some way to beat him…” Spidey gave this a good think.

In sync, he and Otto blurted out, “The warehouse!”

“Madame Wed’s is still strapped into the machine!” said Spider-Man. “We can use her to mind-zap Sparky and make him go night-night.”

“And if his power output truly is directly proportional to his anger, that will neutralize the threat he poses!” said Otto. “Time is of the essence.” Without a moment’s hesitation, Spider-Man web-swung and Otto rooftop-crawled at full speed back towards the warehouse.

“There’s nowhere on earth you can hide from me, Octavius.” As expected, Electro sailed after them. Right as he was closing in, though, Otto’s tentacles pounced, propelling him and Aunt May back through the hole in the warehouse roof.

A moment later, Spider-Man touched down, too, and Otto allowed him to take May in his arms. “Keep her safe.”

Spidey nodded. “And you get that machine fired up. Hurry! There’s no time!”

In fact, Electro was now descending into the warehouse. His mere presence caused all the overhead lights to burst.

“I’m gettin’ sick of this charade. Don’t you get that I’m invincible?” Electro threw out his burning hands. “Give me one good reason I shouldn’t blow us all to kingdom come right this second!”

Otto’s finger hesitated over the computer terminal. “Because… your affection for me was misplaced from the start. The truth is, I took advantage of you. You learned to embrace your Electro persona due to my guidance.” His voice trembled. “But I didn’t give you that guidance because I cared about you – I did it because I wanted to use you as a weapon.”

“What?” The sparks were trickling from Electro’s eyes again. “That’s all I ever was to you?”

Otto sighed. “It was. But… I intend to set things right, Maxwell. I’m sorry.” He pressed down on the terminal.

Immediately, the machine roared to life, and its wires began to glow.

“What are you doing to me? Aaaaaaaaaagh-!” Instantly, Electro fell to the ground, clutching his head, and all grew white…

...and when the world faded back into existence, Electro was on the ground, unconscious. But he wasn’t Electro anymore. Now he was just a quivering, naked man covered from head to toe in crackling electrical burns. Even after everything Max had done, Peter couldn’t help but feel sorry
for him. Heck, the dude’s hair had burned off. He was virtually unrecognizable from before the eel tank.

But Peter couldn’t focus on that now. “We did it!” He turned to Otto, grinning. “That was awesome! You- You lured him right into range-”

“And your method of taunting him was a stroke of genius!” Otto grinned back.

“We make such a great team! Except...” In synch, their energy faded. “Except you hurt Gwen.”

“And you turned May against me.” Otto’s head drooped. “How could we ever forgive each other?”

“I guess...” Peter sighed. “We have to go back to fighting. You need to go to jail.”

“And you cannot be allowed to foil my plans again.”

They stared at each other for a minute. No fighting happened.

But what did happen was that a voice rang out: “Nuh!”

“What?” The both of them spun their heads to find someone staring at them.

“Yuh dunt haff tuh figh...” Or at least, Madame Web would’ve been staring at them if not for the cloth over her eyes. And her, y’know, blindness. The poor woman was still stuck tight inside that spider web-looking machine, and her voice sounded strained, like it hadn’t been used in years – which made sense, seeing as she was blind and deaf. “Yuh... nee tuh... unnastann eechutta.” Web brought a shaky hand to her temple.

The next thing Peter knew, he was sitting at a picnic table, studying a pair of phonebook-sized textbooks, and across from him was a girl.

“I’m telling you,” he said, “yours is harder than advanced physics.” He was laughing. He hadn’t felt this good since he was a child.

And then the world changed again, and now Peter was standing before a gravestone.

He bowed his head. “I’m responsible.”

And then a red-haired man in a suit was looming over him with barely-concealed disdain.

“My condolences for your loss, of course... but I do hope this tragedy doesn’t reflect poorly on your job performance.”

“Of course not, Mr. Osborn!” Peter yelped.

“Good.” The man turned away. “You have much to do, Doctor Octopus.”

“Please don’t call me-”

The world changed again. Now Peter was in a laboratory, and he was quaking.

“But- But what about the Spider-Man?” As he spoke, a harness wrapped itself around Peter’s torso. “He’s battled Sandman and the Rhino! He could trace them back to Oscorp. To me-”

“Enough!” the red-haired man spat. “You whine more than my son.”
Peter inserted the neuro-chip, and his arms wriggled to life.

The red-haired man stepped towards him. “I can’t have *weak men* in my organization, Otto.”

Again, the world changed, and now Peter was pounding on a door as the room around him flashed a sickly green. “Please, you have to stop! *I’m inside!*”

A computerized voice said, “*Experiment will commence in five seconds.*”

And again. Now Peter was pinning the red-haired man to the wall with a tentacle. His mind was racing, and the back of his neck burned.

*Thwip.* “Whoa, *whoa* there, slinky!” A strand of webbing latched onto one of the arms.

“You!” The Spider-Man had come for him… as he knew he would.

And again. Now Peter was at Ravencroft’s one-on-one therapy session, and Dr. Kafka was showing him an image of a familiar face.

“I remember. She was attending The Merry Wives of Windstor when my Sinister Six first battled Spider-Man. Lovely woman.”

“Are you aware you gave her a heart attack?” asked Kafka.

And again. Now the woman in the picture was gazing at him with her deep blue eyes as he anxiously stirred his tea.

“When I look at you,” the woman said, “I don’t see a bad man.”

And then Peter was hurled back into reality.

The next thing Otto knew, he was standing amongst children at a college science lab. “*Agh!*” Something had bitten his hand.

The world around him changed. Now Otto was hanging off the side of a building. He had just crushed a steel pipe with his fingers! Think of all he could do with this… this…

“-power, there must also come great responsibility.” The world changed again, and now he was in a car with a white-haired, lantern-jawed man.

And again. Now Otto was standing before a gravestone.

He bowed his head. “I’m responsible.”

Again. Otto was in costume on the side of a wall, watching a far-off building explode. “That’s Oscorp! Harry’s dad could be in trouble!”

Again. Now Otto was firing a web onto a tentacle. “Whoa, *whoa* there, slinky! Mr. Osborn here helped save your life.”

Doctor Octopus turned to face him. “*You!*” A tentacle smacked Otto’s head, knocking him off the ceiling. Otto tried to cast a web-line, but another tentacle rammed into his torso, pinning him against the wall.

“For the record,” said Otto, “I helped save your life, too.”
And again. Now Otto was seated at May’s kitchen table. “I’m responsible.”

A bowl of muffin mix splattered on the countertop.

“For what?”

Otto’s voice shook. “Uncle Ben.”

And then Otto was hurled back into reality. He didn’t have time to appreciate that for long, though. He could already feel the telepath bearing down on his mind, forcing him into dreamless sleep. Otto might have tried to struggle, might have flailed his mechanical arms, but he didn’t. Instead, he merely relaxed himself, allowing his eyes to grow damp.

A fitting punishment, he supposed.

Well, now that the trip was over, Spider-Man went to finally help Madame Web out of that Winkler machine thingy. “You okay?” When Web nodded, Spider-Man said, “One last order of business, then.” Crash. With a single swipe of his fist, the machine crumpled like it was made of paper mache. “There. That oughtta put a stop to Kingsley’s stream of brainwashed Hobgoblins.” As Spidey spoke, his eyes skidded the warehouse floor. Kingsley and his brainwashed, goblinley victims were all still scattered across it, right where Spider-Man had left ’em.

But actually, there was another, far more important order of business – an ambulance had to be called for Aunt May. Spidey’s eyes fell on her unconscious form, resting on the floor where Otto had gently set her.

“Something else needs to be done before S.H.I.E.L.D. shows up, came Madame Web’s telepathic voice in Spider-Man’s skull. I can already sense them getting near. She turned to him. If you want me to wipe anyone’s mind of your secret identity, I need to do so now.

Beneath his mask, Peter blinked. “You can do that? Cool! But… well…” He looked over the unconscious Max, then over the unconscious Otto. “Mind-wipe Max, but… leave Otto alone. He could be a better man after today, but if he just forgets everything, he’ll go back to square one.” Peter shut his eyes. “I guess Otto could rat me out to all the other bad guys in Ravencroft, but… somehow, I don’t think he will.”

Soon enough, the police arrived at the warehouse, and Spider-Man made sure they brought more than enough inhibitor bands to keep Electro’s juice contained. By the time they dragged the guy to their reinforced van, Electro’s every limb was covered in the things.

As for Otto, he was being kept sedated until his latest crop of tentacles could be melted down. Spidey couldn’t help but feel antsy about the whole Otto-knowing-his-secret ID thing, but Madame Web had assured him that even if it turned out Otto was still a terrible person and decided to rat Peter out to all his chums at Ravencroft, Web had planted a little “telepathy mine” that’d go off and wipe the info from his memory. Yeah, that was a thing she could do, apparently.

And that brought us up to present day—Well, it was technically daytime, though the sun hadn’t risen yet—where Peter, MJ, and Mark were fretting and pacing the waiting room of New York Hospital. For the sake of convenience, they’d managed to get Gwen and Aunt May into the same building.

Madame Web had been ushered off by the police, though, as had Kingsley and his pack of brainwashed Hobgoblins. That was one set of problems dealt with, at least.
Eventually, Mark wandered off in search of a restroom, giving Peter and MJ the chance to finally swap notes.

“Thanks for taking care of Gwen for me,” Peter concluded, leaning towards MJ in his plain, hard wooden chair. “I know I can’t be there for her twenty-four seven, so… so it’s good to have you around.” He faltered. “I’m sorry you got dragged into all this, though.”

“Hey, c’mon, you’ve got enough on your plate without worrying about little old me,” Mary Jane said as she slouched in her own, equally comfortable seat. “And, I mean, you really think I was scared? Me?” She forced a laugh. “I’d totally figured you were just brainwashed by a supervillain.”

“Yeah.” Peter forced one, too. “So obvious in hindsight.”

MJ and Mark were eventually forced to head home thanks to their jobs, and so Peter ended up sitting alone at Gwen’s bedside in her hospital room, waiting for her to awaken (though he swapped over to Aunt May’s room every couple minutes). Those painkillers had knocked Gwen out cold.

While he waited, Peter used the last fleeting seconds of his phone’s low power mode to check the news. Back during the latest Sinister Six outing, Electro had had a better lawyer than Rhino’s and had thus avoiding losing his right to not get experimented on. But in all likelihood, Max’s latest little outburst had finally crossed the line. Remember, Connors had left a potential (and potentially dangerous) cure with Ravencroft months ago, and now it looked like it was finally gonna get tested out. Kinda funny how Max had gone from being obsessed with getting that cure to being obsessed with never getting it. Wait, had Peter said “funny?” Sorry, he’d meant “sad.”

Oh, and speaking of sad, Kingsley had made bail. In fact, his official story was that he’d been brainwashed, too, by some mysterious third party, so Peter wasn’t even sure he was getting charged with anything in the first place. Ugh, stupid legal system not designed to accommodate evil masterminds…

At some point, sunlight finally peeped through the curtains and stirred Gwen’s eyes open.

“Did Otto have to work my body to the brink of exhaustion?” Peter flopped down on the hospital bed.

“I’m just glad to have you back.” And Gwen flopped down on top of him.

“Well, I’m glad your hand’s doing better.” Peter stroked it with his own, as if double-checking the cast was on securely. “But I’m sick of putting you in danger. You were right not to trust Otto, but I… I guess I was too naive.”

The fingers of Gwen’s non-wounded hand intertwined with his. “You gave him a real shot at redemption, Peter, and he threw it in your face. If nothing else, you proved who the better man is.”

“Yeah… I hope he gets the help he needs this time. He’d made a lot of progress, but I guess Otto’s self-doubts ate him alive.” Peter shook his head. “Man, I had no idea May would break up with him like that.” He tried to say something else, but it morphed into a yawn. “I don’t care what anyone says…” Peter smacked his lips. “You and me are playing hooky today.”

Gwen’s hand had actually been bandaged up with plenty of time to spare, but Peter was hardly one to let tiny details like that get in the way of hooky. The official explanation for Gwen’s hand, incidentally, was that she’d gotten up to use the bathroom in the night but then tripped on the stairs in the dark and landed on her wrist. Not the most airtight excuse of all time, but it’d have to do.
Gwen yawned, too. It was contagious. “Yeah, well, we can’t stay here with your aunt forever. We’ll have to head home eventually.”

“We’re gonna,” said Peter. “But you’ll have to hop up first.” Man, though, her head felt heavenly nestled in his shoulder. “Actually, uh, we can give it another second…”

For a moment, they rested against each other in silence. But then Gwen said with half-lidded eyes, “Hey, Peter, I’m not a…” Her gaze traveled to her splint. “…a burden, am I?”

“What kind of question is that?” Peter’s own eyes were shutting, too. “Burdens aren’t usually the best part of someone’s life…”

Jameson had, of course, expected his staff to arrive bright and early to work this morning. In fact, Urich hadn’t even bothered returning home, instead opting to sleep at his desk. But despite the cloud of exhaustion hovering over the newsroom, there was still a resounding applause when a certain couple stepped off the elevator.

“Guess who’s a free man?” Ned Lee grinned as he wrapped an arm around Betty’s waist.

“They finally got the evidence to prove all the Hobgoblins were brainwashed.” Betty kissed Ned’s cheek. “And it’s all thanks to Spider-Man!”

Jameson stared at them from his opened office door. He held up today’s issue of The Daily Globe, which had sold out with the headline “SPIDER-MAN BATTLES ELECTRO AND DOC OCK OVER TIMES SQUARE!”

Slowly, Jameson tore it in half.

In truth, Otto had never seen Maxwell outside of his insulation suit. He wouldn’t have recognized him if not for the name tag on his hospital gown – though he supposed the electrical burns all over the poor man’s hairless scalp provided a clue.

“Maxwell?” Otto took the chair across from his at the cafeteria table. “May I call you that?”

“Well, I’m sure as hell not Electro anymore.” Maxwell stared at his mundane, flesh-covered hands.

“I want- I need to make things right between us, Maxwell.” Otto took a breath. “That is… if you still want me.”

Maxwell’s fingers clamped around the beverage on his lunch tray. “The only thing I want right now is to drink a cup of coffee and be left the #*$% alone.”

“I understand…” With that, Otto stood up and trudged away. He could take a hint.

Spider-Man kicked back on a spider web floating above an endless black void.

“So I guess everything worked out in the end, huh?” He cocked his head towards the web’s center, where a wrinkled old woman was resting.

“It did,” Madame Web nodded, “but Peter, I need to apologize to you. I thought trusting Octavius was the right thing to do, but all I did was lead you astray…”

“Hey, that’s not true.” Spidey gave a thumbs-up. “If it wasn’t for your advice, I’d never have
learned to cooperate with him against Electro, and then who knows how things would’ve played out?”

“I suppose so.” Web gave a wry smile. “Regardless, you’ll be pleased to know that my driver is nearing my home as we speak. In a moment, you will be out of range of my powers. I won’t be bothering you anymore.” As she spoke, her voice grew fainter and fainter. “It’s been a pleasure, Spider-Man…”

Peter opened his eyes. Before him were Gwen’s closed ones. Oh, right, they were still curled up together on the hospital bed, Gwen in nothing but her hospital gown. They probably should’ve detached themselves from each other lest Aunt May catch wind of this tomfoolery, but to be honest, Peter couldn’t bring himself to.

He smiled and shook his head. Y’know, Peter was surprised to admit it, but he was gonna miss Madame Web.

Aww, I’m touched.

“GAH!”

Apologies. You’re not quite out of range yet.

By midday, Peter found himself seated at the bedside of Aunt May’s hospital room while Gwen went off to straighten out some insurance info. Relieved as Peter was to know his aunt was doing okay, he couldn’t help but frown at her hospital gown. There were burn marks poking through it.

So that was twice now she’d been hospitalized thanks to the city’s supervillain influx. Her heart must’ve been weaker than ever.

The moment Aunt May’s eyes crept open, Peter murmured, “How you feeling, pretty lady?”

May took a breath, eyes fixed downwards. “Better than I thought I would, actually.”

“I still can’t believe what happened. I mean, it- it feels like everyone we know’s had run-ins with supervillains. First that Rhino guy was looking for me, then Gwen got kidnapped… more than once, actually…” Okay, it was time for Peter to change the subject before he secreted his weight in sweat. “I’m just glad you’re safe, is all.” He hugged her tight.

“Me, too.” May hugged in turn. “It gave Anna quite a scare.”

After a minute, though, the mutual hug ended, and Peter drew back. No point dodging the subject any longer, he supposed. “Look, Aunt May, about missing last night’s curfew again-”

“You don’t have to say anything, Peter.” May’s voice was sharper than Peter had expected. It made him flinch. “The truth is, you’re old enough now that, well, you don’t really need curfew anymore.” May sighed, then coughed up dust. “I suppose I’ve been smothering you. You’re almost a grown man, after all.”

“Oh. Okay...” Peter chewed over this for a second. He honestly wasn’t sure what to make of it. “I...” He took a breath. “...hear you and Otto broke up.”

May’s back remained turned, hiding her face from view.

“It wasn’t working out,” she said. “It happens, dear. I’m sure you remember a time when all you
could talk about was Liz Allan…” May faltered, then added, “I’m sorry things ended up this way, Peter. I know you were getting close to him, but, well, the truth is Otto is back in Ravencroft now. I’m not sure what he did, but—”

“It’s okay.” Peter shut his eyes. “You don’t have to say anything.”

May nodded, and for another few moments, not another word was spoken. Peter thought about leaving, but then May said, “I know I haven’t done right by you, Peter. Throwing my relationship with Otto onto your and Gwen’s shoulders… It wasn’t fair of me. Even more so now that I know what your shoulders have already been carrying.”

Peter’s whole body tensed. “Um, listen, about… what I told you yesterday—”

“Pish-posh, we needn’t talk about it.” The speed of May’s packing greatly increased. “It’s water over the dam or- or under the bridge or wherever you’d like it, but…” The speed fell to a crawl. “But you made a brave move in telling me the truth.”

Gently, Aunt May rose to face him on the mattress. “And I’m proud of you, and… I love you, Peter.” Her arms wrapped around him. “So very, very much.”

**End of Lesson 5**

Chapter End Notes

Next Issue: Rhino vs. Scorpion!
After much deliberation, Liz had decided that regular visits with her brother were worth stomaching any redheaded relationship wreckers those visits might entail. She couldn’t blame Mark for dating Mary Jane, really – Liz had been starting to feel the dull ache of singleness, herself.

“Well, it’s been great hanging out,” Liz said as she strolled across the carpet of an only-somewhat-ritzy living room. She smiled at her brother and his girlfriend, who were together on the couch, practically fused at the hip, “but I gotta get back to Dad’s.”

The three of them said their goodbyes, and then Mark went off to the bathroom, leaving Liz and MJ alone in the living room.

Liz paused by the exit. “So you guys aren’t… struggling with rent or anything? I mean, this is a really nice place.”

MJ held out a hand, starting towards her. “Nah, don’t sweat it. Mark’s pulling in more than enough from his job.”

“And what job was that, again?”

Silence. “Y-Y’know, some warehouse thing. It’s boring. He doesn’t like to talk about it.”

“Uh huh.”

“But I’m actually doing this modeling gig now, so it’s not like I’m not pulling my weight.”

“Okay.” Liz continued towards the door.

MJ blocked her path. “Why? What are you getting at?”

“I didn’t say anything,” said Liz.

“What, you think he’s gambling again? You think he can’t make a living without-?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“He wouldn’t do that to me!” MJ snapped. “Come on, if turning molten didn’t teach him his lesson, then-”

“Okay, MJ, no one’s arguing any different. I really gotta go.” Liz slammed the door behind herself.

MJ remained there a while, standing on the carpet.

At least until Mark reentered the living room. “Liz left?”

“Yep.” Silence. “Hey, babe? Random question, but, uh… how much an hour are you getting again?”

“Twelve,” said Mark. “Why?”
“You got a problem with me?” The motion of O’Hirn’s arms remained unbroken as the weights on his exercise bench traveled up and down, up and down along the cord.

“Not really,” said Gargan, the grinning bald guy who always seemed to get picked as O’Hirn’s spotter. Ugh, at least when he’d been a freakish scorpion-person, he’d been kept in an isolated cell. “Just thought you’d like to know there’s a spider on your neck.”

“Agh! Get it off, get it off!” There was the sound of weights slamming onto the bench, followed by the sound of snickers from across the prison yard. Seemed the Enforcers, Beck, and Toomes had all gathered to watch that display. Even Menken pointed and laughed, though that was short-lived once his dumbbell fell on his toe.

O’Hirn scowled, scratching his neck. He’d swear there really had been a spider. His skin had felt awfully itchy lately.

“What, you think I’m gambling again? You think I can’t make a living without-?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“I can’t escape friggin’ Molten Man, can I?” spat Mark. “What’s it gonna take for you to forgive me already?”

“I forgave you forever ago.” The space between their heads shrank by a foot. “I’m living with you, aren’t I? But then maybe I shouldn’t be if you’re gonna act like a child.”

“God, you’re all the same. First it’s ‘oh, I just wanna have a little fun, nothing serious,’ then suddenly you’re begging me to get a place with you so you can nag me twenty-four seven. I shoulda seen through you sooner-”

“Oh no, where will I ever find another guy who’s into me?” Mary Jane made a show of rolling her eyes.

“#$*% you.”

“#$*% you harder.” She started for the door.

But Mark’s voice halted her. “You want to leave? Really? And go where, exactly? You said there’s no more room at your aunt’s place now that she’s remarried, so…”

To this, MJ gave no response. At first.

The inmates had lined up at the front of the cafeteria, waiting for the serving lady to plop tasteless mush on their trays like pigs awaiting slop. It gave O’Hirn some serious flashbacks to high school.

Right at it was finally O’Hirn’s turn to receive his slop, a voice from behind said, “Don’t serve him that brown sugar.”

O’Hirn spun around. “Gargan? What’s the problem with the brown sugar?”

“Nothin’,” said Gargan with a grin. “Just worried it’d remind you o’ sand. Wouldn’t want to trigger any traumatic memories o’ your lost Lenore, would we?”

“That’s it.” Even faster than he’d spun around, O’Hirn sent a fist into Gargan’s torso. At first,
O’Hirn felt the wonderful sensation of Gargan crumpling like paper, but by the time of punches four, five, and six, O’Hirn’s knuckles were hitting something rigid. “What the-?”

“Oh… Good going, O’Hirn. Couldn’t have asked ya to do better.” From within his crater on the floor, Gargan peeled off his orange jumpsuit, followed by his white undershirt.

O’Hirn stepped back. “What’re you…”

“You haven’t figured it out yet?” Gargan cackled. “You haven’t felt the itch? The little prickle under your skin?” He rose to his feet, showing off his bare, bruise-covered torso. “Fighting’s what does it. Gets your pulse pumping. Makes it regrow faster.”

With a pang, O’Hirn realized those blue splotches weren’t bruises. They were… metallic. And spreading.

“You mean-?” On impulse, O’Hirn touched the back of his neck. It felt thick, rough, and numb, like someone had wrapped it in leather.

Gargan’s grin only widened. “Now you’re gettin’ it.”

O’Hirn had gotten it, but the guards hadn’t. Within seconds, they’d descended upon the two, pushing away the jeering onlookers. “Don’t move.”

“Die, pigs!” Gargan ignored the order, earning him and O’Hirn some tasers to the back.

“Raaagh-!” For a moment, O’Hirn’s body was rocked with crackling pain. But in seconds, that body of his went from feeling agonizing to feeling… numb. And heavy.

O’Hirn’s torso gave a sudden lurch forward, prompting him to look down at his hands. They were covered in gray. In fact, his right one was covered in so much gray that it was ballooning off O’Hirn’s body like a tumor. It was all he could do to keep his balance.

His shirt had ripped right open, and beside him, a similar fate had befallen the butt of Gargan’s pants, which now had a writhing tail poking out of them, curved like a shrimp and with a stinger at the end. The thing was the length of O’Hirn’s arm and growing.

“Reinforcements!” One of the guards stumbled back, clutching a walkie-talkie in his trembling hand. “We need reinforce-” The sentence proved difficult to finish once the guy had been struck by a giant scorpion tail. Left and right, Gargan was tossing guards around like rag dolls.

Suddenly, O’Hirn’s forehead felt considerably heavier, and he brought a hand to it. At this point, he wasn’t too surprised by what he found there.

It didn’t take long for the rest of the inmates to flood out the cafeteria, whooping and screaming and throwing slop as they went.

As a pair of them scurried past him, O’Hirn caught one mutter, “If I had a boomerang right now, I could totally kick both their asses.”

“Sure, Fred,” muttered the second. “Sure.”

“No, baby, no.” Their lips swept in for another meeting. “It’s okay. It’s okay…” Somehow, MJ had ended up pinned to the sofa, trailing one hand through Mark’s hair and the other down his back.

“You know I didn’t mean it, Mary Jane,” a voice murmured in her ear. “I didn’t mean any it.”
“Me neither, babe. I love you.”

“You, too.”

Next thing MJ knew, Mark’s shirt was on the carpet, and then she was experiencing those perks she’d told Gwen about.

Gwen’s hand was still in that cast. It was all Peter could do to keep his eyes from traveling to it every five seconds. But he forced his attention towards his aunt in the hospital bed. She was the purpose of their daily visits, after all.

“I’m trusting the both of you to be responsible while I’m gone,” a stern May was telling them.

“Yes, Mrs. Parker.” Gwen gave an obedient nod from her bedside chair.

“C’mon, Aunt May.” And Peter gave a nod from his own. “You know I took care of the house last time you were in the hospital, and this time I’ve got Gwen helping me out, so…”

“Actually,” Aunt May replied with a smirk, “Gwen’s presence this time around is what worries me.”

The next couple minutes were spent on Peter’s and Gwen’s customary promises of no hanky-panky. But what Peter actually wanted to do was ask about the exact reason why his aunt had so abruptly ended things with Otto. Had the reason really been… what Otto had said it was?

Of course, the promises of no hanky-panky were considerably easier to articulate aloud than that particular question. Peter might’ve come close, though… if he didn’t happen to spot the helicopters swopping past outside the window. Those were from the NYPD’s metahuman response squad. And if there was that many of them, that could only mean…

“I gotta go take pictures!” Peter blurted out, springing to his feet.

Gwen looked like she was fixing to offer some additional justification, but before she had the chance, Aunt May sat up in her bed, looked Peter in the eye, and stammered, “I… I understand, Peter.”

That was the last time Peter’s eyes met hers before he scurried out the room.

Wham. The combined force of Rhino and Scorpion left twin craters in the pavement. By now, their subdermal armors looked as complete as they had before either crook had ever encountered any one-armed scientists.

Rhino flexed his massive fingers. He’d gotten so used to having his regular hands free again, he’d forgotten how trippy this was. O’Hirn’s naked body was fully encased, save for his face, and moving his regular limbs caused the big old Rhino limbs around them to move in turn. It was like the robots from those all weird Chinese cartoons all the kids were into now.

Man, though, being the Rhino was definitely better than being plain old O’Hirn, but… he was gonna miss seeing his hair again.

Rhino’s eyes traveled to the series of holes behind the two – leading from the building to the fence to the Ryker’s Island shoreline, mere feet away from them. The East River looked awfully deep. “So what’s the plan?”
“Plan?” Scorpion blinked, his tail swishing in the wind. “Well, uh…”

Rhino’s snort would impress even a real rhinoceros. “You just realized our armor was regrowin’ and got all excited, didn’t you?”

“Shut up! All we gotta do is find that special reinforced barge they sailed us in on-”

“-and then what? You know how to pilot that thing? Or would ya rather me do it with my dainty little hands?” Rhino held out his palms, each of which were bigger than Scorpion’s head.

Scorpion looked to his own hands. They were normal-sized…but also clawed. The claws had been intended to aid him with wall-crawling, but not so much with sailing.

“When Ock busts me out, he’s always got a boat ready!” Rhino spat. “That’s why you wait for the signal. Now the guards are just gonna tranq gas us, and then that scientist’s gonna take away our armor again, only permanent this time-”

“There’s not gonna be a signal, genius!” Scorpion spat back. “The Vault’s holdin’ Tombstone in your old cell, Kingsley’s got the feds breathin’ down his neck, and word is Ock’s gone soft again. There’s no more Big Man – There’s the Kingpin, and I’m sure he’s scramblin’ to hire us after our impressive string o’ victories. The super-mercenary market’s flooded, and we’ve gotta increase our value. We’ve gotta prove that we’re the strongest. Or at least that we’re not the dumbest-”

“I ain’t stupid,” Rhino said through gritted teeth. “Least not compared to you.”

At this, Scorpion simply huffed, then turned to the docks. “There’s gotta be some way off the island…”

“Ooh, why don’t you try shooting a web-line to a passing helicopter?” said a voice. “No, wait, my bad, that only works for getting on the island.”

“You?” The supervillains spun to find a certain spandex-clad hero overlooking them from his perch on a fence.

“Perfect.” Rhino let out a groan. “Cuz one arachnid ain’t annoying enough.”

No matter how many conversation topics Gwen halfheartedly raised, May’s gaze remained firmly on the window.

Until a voice said, “H-Hello, May.”

The ladies turned to discover a warm, balding, gray-haired man standing in the doorway, a pair of Starbucks cups in his hands.

“Dr. Bromwell?” May gave a start, hurriedly plastering a smile on her weathered face.

“Please, call me Nick,” he said hurriedly. “You’re not my patient anymore, after all…” A moment passed. “Would- Would you like a coffee?”

Wham. Spider-Man tumbled off the fence mere seconds before a flail of a tail reduced it to rubble. “Aw, if I didn’t know any better, I’d think you’re not happy to see me.”

“Sorry, visitation’s ended.” Scorpion pounced after him, whipping his tail over and over in a vain attempt to strike the moving target. “I’m gonna have to ask you to leave.”
“Leave?” Spidey slid across the pavement between Scorpion’s legs. “But I haven’t gotten to ask how you’ve been or what they’re feeding you or how the heck you two turned back into crazy super-people!” While there, he went for the cheap shot, but the punch didn’t seem to particularly phase Scorpion.

“Guess now the mystery’ll haunt you the rest o’ your life.” Scorpion swiped his claws, missing Spider-Man’s head by centimeters. “Though if it’s any consolation, that won’t last too much longer.”

“I’ll be honest.” Spidey sprayed webbing at Scorpion’s face, but he blocked it with his tail. “I was kinda hoping I’d seen the last of O’Hirn and… uh… Actually, I don’t think I ever caught your name.”

“It’s Gargan.”

“Hmm. Garg-an, Scorpi-an… Eh, not the most on-the-nose—” Spidey managed to blunt the stinger with some webbing, but that didn’t stop Scorpion was using it as a bludgeon. “Wait, oh my god, I just realized! ‘O’Hirn’ is an anagram for ‘horni.’” He was forced to duck another tail-swipe. “Okay, I feel like I was onto something there, but I lost it.”

“Yeah, well, speakin’ of O’Hirn…” In the head of combat, Scorpion turned back to scowl at his partner. “…what are you doin’? This is our chance to finally squash the Spider!”

“Why?” While the arachnids bounced around the edge of the island, Rhino simply sat by the collapsed fence beneath the setting sun, his massive arms folded. “So we can get harsher sentences?”

“Unbelievable.” Scorpion returned his attention to the Web-Head, rolling his eyes. “For once in your life, will you leave the thinkin’ to the smart people and just do somethin’ already?”

Behind him, Rhino raised an eyebrow. “You want me to do somethin’?”

“Wham, wham, wham, wham, wham.” Naturally, Scorpion spent the next several seconds being swung through the air and rammed into the ground. For once, his tail was the tether and his body was the flail. “Ugh…” He twitched from within his pavement-crater.

Rhino snorted, released his tail, and spat on him. “Puny Gargan.”

“Wow.” Spider-Man stood, hands on his hips, overlooking the mess that’d once been Mac Gargan. “Thanks for the assist. Seriously, we make a good team. What is this, the second time now-?”

“Don’t get used to it.” Rhino snorted, then gave Scorpion’s head a kick for good measure. “I ain’t gone as soft as Marko. It’s just that, even if I could get off this island, a guy like me can’t exactly lay low. Why even bother? I know when I’m beat.”

“Huh. Y’know something, O’Hirn?” Spidey offered a handshake. “You really aren’t stupid.”

Rhino declined, which was… probably for the best.

“Or at least, you’re not that stupid-”

“There it is,” said Rhino. “I knew the quip was comin’.”
Remember that scene in Tangled where they go to the bar and all the guys there seem scary, but then they burst into song and it turns out they’re actually all friendly? Well, Mary Jane had a feeling that if Rapunzel had tried that crap at this bar, her body would’ve ended up in a Corona back alley dumpster.

Making things all the more unnerving was that this cramped, grungy place was packed to the brim with dudes in brightly-colored costumes. There was a crowbar-wielding guy with a dark green jacket and dark violet mask, a guy in a silver robo-suit who kept bumping the ceiling thanks to his telescopic, Inspector Gadget-style legs, a guy in yellow-and-purple spandex complete with a French-style mustache, and even a dude dressed as a frog. Yeah, green seemed to be la couleur du jour in this joint, with purple being a close second.

But Mary Jane wasn’t here for the super-criminals. Just a regular one.

“Oh, there you are, Blackie!” She slid herself onto the stool beside him. He was an older, dark-haired guy sporting a thick black mustache – as if his body didn’t radiate enough skeeviness already.

At her approach, Gaxton went from drinking with his mouth to drinking with his eyes. MJ might have shuddered if she wasn’t so used to that kinda thing by now. Instead, she fixed her attention on the opposite side of the room, where a dude in blue spandex was nailing the center of a dartboard every time.

“You’re a hard man to find,” said Mary Jane. Apparently, this bar didn’t have a name, and it was always moving around. The only reason MJ had managed to track it down was because she happened to have a, err, gift for coaxing info out of people. It was this same gift that’d prevented the bouncer from noticing MJ was underage – the gift in question being, of course, the low-cut top she’d gotten last birthday.

“Am I? I’ll have to make sure it was worth the effort, then, won’t I, love?” Gaxton held MJ’s chin a moment, then turned to the bar tender. “How’s about we get the lady a drink?” Then back to MJ. “Whadya like?”

“Oh, I’ve always been a fan of sangria-I mean.” MJ cleared her throat. “No thanks. I’m not looking for a drink, actually.” In seconds, her trusty old foxiness was back, and she was leaning in to touch Gaxton’s arm. “Just a bookie. I was hoping you could fill me in on something…” She gave her eyelashes a nice, good flutter.

Okay, Mary Jane knew she was a gifted actress and all, but this routine was coming a little too naturally to her.

As luck would have it, just so Dr. Connors happened to be in town this week for a conference.

“Thank you, Spider-Man.” He stood before his spandex-clad savior, watching the unconscious Scorpion get hauled through the front gates of Ryker’s Island Penitentiary. “Looks like I owe you yet again.”

“Actually, Rhino did all the real work today.”

“Yes, well, I’m very proud of you, Alexander.” Curt turned to pat the shoulder of the animal-themed villain across from them.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever…” With that, Rhino allowed the guards to lead him away.
But the moment Rhino was gone, Curt bowed his head. “I can’t believe I put people in danger again with some stupid oversight. Sometimes it feels like I ruin everything I touch…”

“Hey, man, it’s okay.” Spider-Man brought a palm to his shoulder. “Not like I haven’t made my share of mistakes.”

After a feeble nod of his head, the Doc started to leave.

“Wait, hold up, Doc.” But Spidey blocked his path. “Sorry, the little science geek in me’s dying here – How’d those guys’ armor grow back like that?”

“Oh, well, I haven’t had time yet to study it in any kind of detail,” Dr. Connors said, “but my working theory is that their subdermal particles are self-repairing. See, in the same way that Sandman was able to ‘eat’ raw silicates to regenerate his mass, I believe the Rhino and Scorpion armors draw nutrients from their hosts’ bodies for their own regeneration processes, and so if even one particle survived the removal surgery, it would eventually be able to regenerate the entirety of the armor, even remembering the proper shape. And I imagine the process would be sped along considerably by the introduction of adrenaline… The point is, though, that I’ll have to be far more thorough and keep them under observation for considerably longer following their surgeries this time arou-”

“Wait, wait, wait,” cut in Spidey. “You’re saying Sandman could regenerate?”

“Well, yes, we’ve known that for a while now. In fact, Marko won a vicious legal battle to ensure his jailers fed him raw silicates. It was a huge step forward for superhuman rights-”

“What if he could regenerate from that- that Mud-Thing he and Hydro-Man turned into?” Peter could practically hear his brain whirring under his mask. “Oh yeah, and Hydro-Man probably had the same kinda subdermal particles, so we might be seeing him again, too.” He paused. “I’m not forgetting anyone, am I?”

A pair of high-end designer boots trudged up a muddy staircase and through a doorway. There was the slam of a door, followed by the slam of a purse on a table.

“MJ?” At her entrance, Mark came out from the apartment’s back room. There was concern on his face, but it seemed off in some imperceptible way, as it always did. The plastic surgery had been a valiant effort to restore him to pre-Molten Man settings, but it’d been far from perfect. “Something wrong?”

“I don’t know, Mark.” Mary Jane kept her back to him as she dug through her purse. “Is something wrong?” In one smooth motion, she spun around, flashing a slip of paper in his face. A ticket stub, to be precise, that pledged a hundred dollars to “Beta Ray Bill.”

Mark stared at it. “Where did you get that?”

“Oh, just from Blackie Gaxton,” MJ said tightly. “Turns out all you’ve gotta do is get a few drinks in the guy, and suddenly he’s real talkative about ‘good old Markie, always crawlin’ back for more.’” She’d adopted an accent for a second.

“You promised you’d drop this.” Mark’s cheeks were beet red.

“Yeah, I lied to your face.” MJ folded her arms. “Guess that makes two of us, huh? I can’t believe you. It’s one thing when you wanna throw your own life away, but… D-Do you even have a job, or have you just been on a hot streak lately?”
“It was only a hundred bucks, Mary Jane! If that horse had won, I’d have got back ten times th-”

“I swear to god!” The next instant, MJ was headed back for the door, purse in her hands. “I am so done with you-”

“Don’t you walk away from me.”

There was something about Mark’s voice. Not just its volume, but its force. It was something that rattled MJ’s bones. Something that made her spin back around, cowering, purely out of muscle memory.

And that was before his eyes turned burning gold.
“You’re really going to do this to me? After everything I’ve done for you?” He hadn’t noticed yet. If he had, he wouldn’t have kept ranting and raving at her.

But what couldn’t have escaped his notice was Mary Jane stumbling backwards like a thing possessed. The carpet had snagged the obnoxiously high heel of her boot, resulting in her sitting there on her butt, gaping up at him like a dead fish.

Mary Jane tried to speak, shout a warning or something, but she couldn’t. Her throat was too tight and her mouth was too dry. He was sucking the moisture out the air.

“If you’d started drinking again, I’d have been there for you.” Mark took another step towards her.

Mary Jane managed a whimper.

Maybe that’s what finally clued him in – well, that or his shirt spontaneously combusting. There was a scream, though Mary Jane wasn’t sure which of them it came from, and then Mark’s t-shirt was eaten away, revealing the golden chest underneath. Like a disease, the gold traveled out until his whole body was covered, until every last scrap of clothing was burned away. This was followed by the crackling of fire, the roar of smoke detectors, and an unusually high voice crying, “No! Not again! Not now!”

A field of flame formed at Mark’s molten toes, spreading out across the room as if it was exploring the landmarks. The fire explored the curtains Mary Jane had spent half an hour picking out, the kitchen cabinets filled with carefully-organized foodstuffs, the crack under the door leading to the bedroom where all Mary Jane’s personal belongings resided, and then, finally, it seemed to take an interest in Mary Jane herself.

The blaze darted towards her across the rug. It was enough to make something inside Mary Jane snap – Next thing she knew, she was back on her feet and hurtling out the front door, clutching her purse to herself like it was an organ threatening to tumble out her chest cavity.

“Mary Jane? Mary Jane, wait-” Even once she reached the staircase outside, his voice was right behind her. What the-? What was he doing?

Mary Jane risked a peek over her shoulder as she fled. There he was, chasing after her, burning holes through the stairs with every step. She only looked for a second before returning her attention to running like hell, but the image was so surreal, it’d stay with her the rest of her life. There were no fireproof pants this time – Mark looked like an orange Doctor Manhattan.

They’d only lived a couple stories up, meaning Mary Jane reached the sidewalk in a matter of seconds. She tore down it with a speed she hadn’t known she was capable of, pushing startled pedestrians out of her way. There was already a half-formed plan in her pounding head. Their apartment complex was right by a park. A park with a tiny pond.

She was almost there already. Almost to safety. It was mere feet away. The grass was right in front of her.

“You can’t leave me! Mary Jane, please, I’m not gonna hurt y-” A jet of lava spewed out past
Mary Jane’s shoulder, and the next instant, the grass was ablaze. “I’m sorry! I-I didn’t mean to do that.”

Now there was a wall of flame blocking the sidewalk, several feet tall and several more yards wide. With no other choice, Mary Jane spun back around.

A few more strides, and Mark would be close enough to touch her. And yet Mary Jane couldn’t move. She couldn’t make herself move. Well, except to hyperventilate.

“That’s it, Mary Jane. Don’t leave.” Mark stepped towards her, his hair writhing with flames. “I’m here. It’s me. It’s still me.” He held out his palms.

But then a disheartening crack hit Mary Jane’s ears, prompting her to look skyward. Oh. Oh, that wasn’t good. A big old maple tree had caught fire right at the park’s edge, turning its every leaf into a torch.

The trunk swayed forward.

“Mary Jane, look out!” Mark helpfully screamed. The moment he did, though, more lava shot from his hands, creating distressingly large puddles on either side of her.

With no other option, Mary Jane sprinted forward, but the tree was so tall, and- and it was falling so fast… She didn’t know if she could get out of the way before-

Wham. The tree hit the pavement with the force of a mousetrap. Even without the fire, it would’ve done a number on her… had Mary Jane actually remained in its path, that is.

“Huh? What?” For a moment, the wind was in her hair, and then MJ was being deposited on solid ground by a guy in some familiar spandex. “Tiger!”

“I’m not gonna look, I’m not gonna look, I’m not gonna look…” Spider-Man’s head was pointed conspicuously away from Mark’s shiny gold body.

The moment she was free, Mary Jane hurried off down the street. She put a good couple feet between herself and the battle, but… she couldn’t help but stay in earshot.

“Spider-Man!” she cried out. “Mark’s not trying to hurt anyone – He’s just freaking out. So, y’know, go easy on him.”

“Don’t worry,” said Spidey. “You’re not the only friend I’ve bumped into today.” He gestured to the sidelines, where some guy in a labcoat was waiting anxiously. MJ had never seen him before in her life, but the number of arms in his possession left little doubt that this was Peter’s and Gwen’s old lab boss, Dr. Connors.

Thr guy surveyed the chaos with growing horror. The street had been torn up, families with children were fleeing the burning park, and a couple blocks away, firetrucks were nearing the apartment complex. Boy, had today gone from zero to a hundred.

“Mark!” Curt called out. “Listen to me! I believe the reason your body’s producing heat again is because your armor’s regeneration process has been overcharged by adrenaline.”

“It can regenerate?” Mark stumbled back, scorching the ground with every step. “Are you kidding me?”

“You have to stop stimulating your sympathetic nervous system!”
“What?”

“He means you need to calm your tits!” said Spider-Man.

“Oh.”

Curt gave a, well, curt nod. “Take deep breaths, Mark.”

“I’ll call Hulk,” added Spidey, “see if he’ll let you borrow his huge bag of weed.”

Silly as this might’ve been, the deep breaths did seem to help Mark ease himself. After only a couple seconds, the pavement at his feet actually stopped melting, and he was able to sit in the middle of the street, legs folded (Any oncoming cars were, of course, sent swerving away at the first sign of molten lava). A minute into the impromptu meditation, Mark’s luster died down, leaving his skin covered in dull, non-burning metal.

“Is- Is he okay?” Mary Jane thought it safe enough to rush to his side.

“He should be, now.” Dr. Connors took another step forward. “Mark? I want you to know you haven’t done anything wrong. This is my fault. I was reckless and- and sloppy.” He bowed his head. “I made a terrible oversight, but I know how to fix it now. We can remove your armor properly this time, keep you under observation for longer-”

“So it’s back to jail for me?” Mark’s eyes glowed again, forcing him to take more breaths. “Perfect. Just what I needed.”

“Mark.” It was at this point that Mary Jane found herself stepping forward. “Can I…?”

“I-I think it’s safe.” At his words, Mary Jane risked drawing near him. She leaned in for a hug, but then Mark said, “Careful! Just cuz I’m not shooting lava doesn’t mean I’m chilly.”

“Sorry, sorry.” Nevertheless, Mary Jane remained close enough that her voice wouldn’t carry to the others. “Mark… Look, I can’t even start to say how sorry I am this is happening to you, but… you’d be facing jail time even if you weren’t Molten Man again.”

“Are you serious?” Suddenly, Mark was talking through gritted teeth. “Everything that’s happened, and you’re still not dropping that?”

Mary Jane’s brow creased. “You need help, Mark. Being molten isn’t the only thing you relapsed on-”

“Don’t you get why I went back to Gaxton?” Mark was, err, not quite as careful to keep his own voice from carrying. “You didn’t have anywhere left to go, Mary Jane. You needed that apartment, and there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you.” At the next sentence, he was back on his feet. “I love you. You know that.”

“Ohhh.” Mary Jane folded her arms “So you were scratching your gambling itch selflessly?”

“What? Ugh, why do you always have to be like this?” The space between their heads was shrinking. “I’ve done everything I can to make things better for you! Everything I know how to do, at least. Isn’t that enough? For once in your life, why can’t you let yourself actually be happy instead of just acting like it?”

Well, the first reason to spring to mind was that MJ’s jacket had just caught fire. “Holy-f”
“Hey-!” This was more than enough to send the other two running towards her.

But by the time they got close, Mary Jane had already ripped the jacket off her shoulders so she could stomp out the flames with her heel.

The group stood a moment, gaping at her and Mark.

Spider-Man bowed his head. “…I looked.”

Mary Jane’s mouth was open, but she said nothing.

Mark, on the other hand, said just about everything. “Oh lord, Mary Jane, I’m sorry. You know that was an accident, babe. I’d never hurt you. I didn’t mean any of it. Mary Jane, I love you. I need you. I’m nothing without you. Please, you can’t do this to me…” And on and on and on he went.

Mary Jane stood in place, shivering in her short-sleeve shirt. Slowly, she looked to the molten man standing before her, then to the spider one standing behind her.

Those big, white eyes stayed fixed on her.

“Mark.” Mary Jane wet her throat. She knew he was red hot, and yet some reptilian part of her brain still insisted that she wanted nothing more than to feel those arms around her again. If she could simply let him hold her, it’d all be okay. “I’m sorry…” Without meaning to, she dug her nails into her palms. “…but I’ve been burned one time too many.”

Mark’s raving came to a halt. Then he watched with his golden, quivering eyes as Mary Jane trudged over to the others, retrieving a scrap of paper from her purse.

“Betting slip,” Mary Jane said, lifeless. “From horse racing. That’s what started this.”

“You bitch!” Oh, looked like Mark had found his voice again. “Couldn’t resist twisting the knife, could you?”

“Your sympathetic nervous system, Mark!” Curt was sent scrambling towards him. “Your sympathetic nervous system!”

One phone call later, and a taxi cab was hurrying towards the scene, out of which emerged a frantic Liz. Gwen arrived a minute later, though in lieu of a cab, she’d opted to make herself extremely out of breath. The girls arrived right in time to see the NYPD’s metahuman response team haul off Molten Man while Dr. Connors supervised.

After that, Gwen, Peter, Liz, and Mary Jane gathered outside the apartment complex, watching the firefighters do their thing from a safe distance (Peter had, of course, changed back into his civvies by now).

The four of them stood there beneath the wafting smoke and squirting hoses. Eventually, though, Liz said, “Thanks for being here, Petey- Peter. That means a lot to me.”

The two shared a hug – though Peter was scared they might burst into flame from the resulting look on Gwen’s face. Still, though, it was good to finally bury the hatchet. Peter guessed having your brother turn into a lava-spewing monster really put the teen love drama in perspective.

The moment Peter was free of Liz’s grasp, Gwen wrapped herself around his arm. He had to shake
the mental image of a dog marking its territory.

“Well, I’d better get going. I’ve got a heck of lot to tell my dad…” With that, Liz walked off, blending into the surrounding crowd.

Now it was just the blonde, brunette, and redhead. Behind the redhead’s back, the blonde and brunette locked eyes a moment.

“Mary Jane,” Gwen began, “we’re sorry. We can’t imagine what you’re going through.”

Peter nodded. “If there’s anything we can do to—”

“Going through?”

Boyfriend and girlfriend jolted – Laughter had hit their ears. Gwen was surprised, but maybe she shouldn’t have been. This was Mary Jane, after all.

“C’mon, I’ve broken a million guys’ hearts.” MJ had a hand slung on each of their shoulders. “I’m totally desensitized.”

Gwen raised an eyebrow. “We were talking about your apartment catching fire.”

“Plus you almost burning to death,” added Peter.

“Oh, right. That.” Mary Jane merely shrugged. “But I didn’t burn to death, and there was nothing in that apartment but stuff. I don’t even have any pets – unless you count Seymour.”

“Well, we’re… glad you’re okay,” Gwen said slowly.

“Aww, you guys are sweet.” Mary Jane’s hands remained in place a moment longer before she freed them. “Oh, and thanks for the save, Tiger.”

“Everybody gets one,” Peter said with a hint of a smirk.

“What do you think’s gonna happen to Mark, though?” asked Gwen. “He’s old enough to be tried as an adult now, isn’t he?”

“Don’t know, don’t care,” said MJ. “Someone else’s problem now. I know I say I’m a free agent a lot, but I mean it this time.”

“And you don’t think Mark’ll bother you again?” asked Peter.

MJ waved a hand. “Eh, nothing a restraining order can’t fix.”

“Yeah, well—” Gwen put her arms around Mary Jane, and Peter followed suit. “-you’re still short one apartment. Mark could’ve picked a better time to turn molten again.”

“Hey, he didn’t pick the worst time,” said MJ. “This could’ve ended up like The Miller’s Tale…”

“I’m gonna pretend I don’t get that reference,” said Peter.

Gwen gave MJ a frown. “But where are you going to live now?”

“Ah, don’t sweat it.” MJ held out a palm. “I’ll figure something out.”

Mary Jane rolled over on the Parker household couch, her chest rising and falling. You’d think she
wouldn’t be looking her best at this hour, dressed in a baggy green shirt and black sweatpants borrowed from Gwen, not a drop of makeup on her skin, and yet paradoxically, she was gorgeous as ever. Her messy red hair fell over her face so perfectly, Peter would swear a team of artists had spent hours positioning it, but then Mary Jane rolled over again, and her hair fell into a different, equally perfect configuration in a matter of seconds. All in all, Mary Jane’s bedtime outfit was this weird mix of sexy and quirky without ever quite looking cute the way Gwen’s did. Even MJ’s snores sounded oddly alluring. It was like the girl was physically immune to being ugly. Heck, she was immune to being *homely*.

Not that Peter was giving it much thought or anything. He hurried past the living room couch on his way to the shower, a towel slung over his shoulder.

“Morning, Tiger.”

But a sudden voice left him frozen in the doorway. “O-Oh, MJ! Sorry, didn’t mean to wake you.” Peter turned to find Mary Jane belly-up on the cushions.

“It’s cool.” She slung her arm over the edge so her hand could fumble blindly for something on the carpet – some kinda round, black, rigid fabric thingy scrunched up in a pile by the couch. Peter’s groggy mind wondered what it could be. “Hey, you wanna turn around a sec?”

Oh.

“Right, right!” One nanosecond later, Peter’s eyes were planted firmly on the opposite wall. There was a potted plant leaned against that wall. It was such a great plant. That was literally the only thing Peter was thinking about right now.

“Okay, you can look.”

*What the-*? He spun back around a bit faster than he’d meant to. How had she done that so fast? Had she put it on without taking off her shirt? Was that even anatomically possible? Peter spent the next several seconds pondering that dilemma in, err, maybe a bit more depth than it required.

“I ever tell you you’ve got the most chill aunt on the planet?” Mary Jane hopped to her feet, stretched, yawned, and adjusted her shirt. “I mean, if I asked to let a guy crash at Aunt A’s house while she wasn’t there, she’d go nuclear.”

“Well, I think Aunt May’s glad to have an adult here to keep an eye on us.” Peter’s mouth was dry as a bone. Because he’d just woken up.

“*Oh my god, these are amazing,*” Mary Jane said through a mouthful of scrambled egg. She swallowed, then leaned forward, elbows on the table, and grinned like a maniac. Sheesh, and Peter had thought *Harry* had been a walking commercial for happy.

At the other end of the table, Peter locked eyes with Gwen. It was hard to tell beneath that big blonde fuzzball where her silky hair usually was, but she seemed to be mirroring Peter’s expression.

Gwen glanced back at MJ, a frying pan in her hand. “When was the last time you ate?”

MJ shrugged. “I forget to, is all.”

“Well, it’ll certainly be, err, interesting to have you around,” said Gwen. “I know your aunt doesn’t have the space anymore, and-*”
“-and the apartment wasn’t insured by those Damage Control guys or anything, so it’s gonna take a bazillion years before it gets fixed,” cut in Mary Jane. “I should know – I spent all of last afternoon on the phone about it.” From her face, the mere memory threatened to bore her to death. “So now I can’t stay at my apartment and I can’t stay with my aunt, meaning… this is the only place I got left. At least, the only one where I’m welcome.” She returned to her eggs without another word.

“Hey, MJ?” Gwen stared at her own plate of eggs as she seated herself. “You sure you want to go to school today?”

“Um, yeah.” MJ looked blank. “Why wouldn’t I wanna go to-? Oh, wait, I totally forgot!” She gave a start. “My room got burnt to a crisp, so I don’t have a backpack or textbooks or-” She faltered. “-or makeup or… phone chargers or… clothes…”

Back on their end of the table, the intensity of the glances Peter and Gwen were swapping increased tenfold.

“Well, then,” said Peter, “guess we’ll have to do something about that, won’t we?”

As great as playing hooky was, Peter had to admit he hadn’t ended up having quite as much fun as the last time he and MJ had gone to the mall, but then, maybe that was just because no giant scorpion-people had attacked today. Though this time, they’d been accompanied by Peter’s beautiful blonde girlfriend, which made this the better experience by default.

The point of this mission had been to restock MJ’s supply of personal possessions, but seeing as this was Mary Jane they were shopping with, they’d mostly ended up chasing her around the various department stores so they could watch her try on outfits. She’d kept asking if they looked good on her, and Peter and Gwen had kept nodding their heads truthfully.

And while Gwen wasn’t a total tomboy, she was at least enough of one to get every bit as bored as Peter. But hey, this shopping trip was for Mary Jane’s benefit. The important thing was, by the end of the day, that big old smile of hers had morphed into something a bit more natural. A nice, wholesome, organic smile.

“Heh… Bet the other kids are all trapped in chem right now.” MJ strutted down the sidewalk ahead of the other two, a shopping bag in her hands. Gwen trailed behind her with a shopping bag of her own, and bringing up the rear was Peter, walking hunchbacked under the weight of a good dozen or so bags. Guess that was the trade-off for getting to be the superhero (This wasn’t coming out of the Parker family budget, in case you were worried. MJ’s insurance had at least covered this much).

Peter turned his head as they walked. Rockaway Beach was peeking over the horizon. Peter wasn’t sure why he was watching it with such interest. If Sandman and Hydro-Man could respawn, they’d probably done it by now. But all this time, Peter hadn’t heard a peep out of them, so either they’d left Manhattan, or…

“Hey, guys?” Mary Jane’s voice returned Peter’s attention to her. MJ had halted her march, then spun on her heels to face them. “Thanks for today. I needed this.” She paused. “You two are the best. I mean that.”

“You’re wel-” Gwen began. But she didn’t finish. She was too startled by the pair of lips on her cheek.

And a second later, those lips traveled to Peter’s cheek, too. Then Mary Jane drew back, and the
three of them merely stood there a moment.

“Race you to the subway!” And with that, MJ sped off down the sidewalk.

Peter and Gwen were left standing in place, touching their cheeks.

Chapter End Notes

Next Up: Return of a GOBLIN?!
They were all here. Every last investor, seated together at one boardroom table. Even Cassandra. Especially Cassandra. Age might have marred her skin, but her clear blue gaze was as shiver-inducing as always.

Kingsley paced towards the group, fighting to steady his trembles. Behind the group, poking through the massive penthouse windows, was the Manhattan skyline – As if Kingsley didn’t feel small enough already. And standing between the table and the window was Kingsley’s loyal little brother. He cleared his throat, scowling expectantly at his silent sibling.

After one last, agonizing moment of silence, Kingsley finally seated himself at the head of the table, straightened his immaculate, white penguin suit, then spoke: “Gentlemen… Ladies.” He nodded to Cassandra, who replied with a roll of her eyes. “From the dawn of their existence, mankind has shared a dream. A dream that, with Tricorp leading the charge, stands to become a reality. I give you… personalized flight!”

With a dramatic hum, the overhead projector roared to life, inundating the center of the table with a holographic image of a sleek, silver jetpack ripped straight from the pages of a sci-fi dime novel.

Kingsley paused for applause.

The pause was instead filled with laughter.

“How, great job, Roderick!” an investor called out. “What’ll you announce next, the Kingsberry?”

“W-What?” The abrupt loss of Kingsley’s composure only made the laughter louder. “I don’t understand.”

“Then you must not be aware,” spoke up Cassandra, slouching back in her seat. “Oscorp announced Tech Flight six hours ago.”

Roderick’s heart all but gave out. Tech Flight? But that was impossible! Tricorp had stolen Toomes’ designs fair and square!

“Hey, come on, now, maybe Kingsley’s version here is different?” another investor added, wiping his eyes. “Like how his ocean spray fragrance is different from his saltwater stream one.” The man’s next sentence sounded considerably more posh: “It’s a subtle divergence in aroma. I wouldn’t expect a proletarian to appreciate it.”

That brought out the loudest laughter yet.

Kingsley stood alone in his penthouse office, staring unseeing at the somewhat more weathered, somewhat more battered skyline of a post-metahuman Manhattan. Laughter echoed in his ears.

The Winkler Machine was now a pile of scrap metal that Kingsley’s best technicians couldn’t untangle. Cassandra was in witness protection. And Kingsley had just spent the past three hours fending off allegations that his perfume factory was a front for Tricorp’s under-the-table operations.

Behind Kingsley, the door opened. In the window’s reflection, Kingsley spotted a stooge entering the office. If he didn’t have good news to report, that stooge was getting tossed through this
“Mr. Kingsley, sir,” the man said with a bow of his head, “construction of the chamber is complete.”

Ah. Kingsley wouldn’t be needing a new window today. Without turning, he said, “Take me there.”

The chamber in question was, of course, one fitted to spray its occupants with Globulin Green gas, as per the instructions detailed in Norman Osborn’s stolen journals. In truth, Kingsley should have ordered the thing’s construction much sooner (especially before sending out brainwashed mooks with a glider and pumpkin bombs), but the Green’s recipe had proved surprisingly difficult to replicate. There was also the teeny issue that, without Cassandra’s telepathy on hand, Kingsley would have no real means of controlling any Globulin Green-fueled super-mercenaries, and then what good would they be as henchmen?

But then, on the other hand… Norman Osborn had never needed intermediaries.

It was weird to think that a year ago, Peter had been complaining about being lonely. Now, with the addition of a fourth resident, the place was more crowded than it’d ever been. The war for the shower had reached new heights this morning with the revelation that MJ liked to use up all the hot water and then spend hours in front of the mirror.

But, in truth, the last thing Peter wanted to do right now was complain about too many occupants. Not when one of those occupants had been so sorely missed.

“I can take it from here, Peter, dear.” Aunt May gently released Peter’s arm as she hobbled her way towards her bedroom.

“If you’re sure…” It was only with a great deal of reluctance that Peter backed off. If there was any sign that the universe didn’t completely despise him, it was that Aunt May had made a full and surprisingly quick recovery from Electro’s little stunt. The woman was tougher than she looked. Not that that kept Peter from treating her like she might crumble to dust at a moment’s notice.

“As a matter of fact, if you’re so worried about me…” May paused her hobbling to take a steadying breath. “…then you’ll be pleased to hear that I’m looking at houses in northern Pennsylvania. I want away from this terrible city. As soon as you three graduate high school, of course.”

“Oh.” Peter swapped glances with Gwen and MJ from their places on the living room couch, then hurried after his aunt. “W-Well, I guess me and Gwen don’t mind living on ESU’s campus. We don’t want you in danger, either.” His brow furrowed. “But I hate the thought of you moving to some weird new place all by yourself.”

“Actually...” May’s cheeks reddened. “Dr. Bromwell has family down in Pennsylvania. He and I were planning on making the move together.”

“O-Oh.” Peter blinked. “That’s… That’s great. I’m happy for you.” Lately, the thought of his aunt with a boyfriend has become a considerable easier pill for Peter to swallow, seeing as Aunt May literally could not do any worse than last time...

“I didn’t want to move too far away,” May said, “in case you and Gwen ever need me.”

“You guys don’t have to live on campus if you don’t want,” spoke up MJ from inside the MJ-
shaped lump she’d burrowed into the couch. “You could always rent an apartment. Less frat boys to deal with.”

“Yeah, I guess we could,” said Gwen, who was showing off a near-perfect posture from the other couch cushion, “if we could find a place that’d rent to a pair of seventeen-going-on-eighteen-year-olds.”

“Well, if you do find one, I’d be happy to co-sign the lease,” said Aunt May.

“Cool.” After that, Mary Jane returned to her lump. She didn’t really say anything for the rest of the conversation, but she had this look in her eyes that Peter had come to know and dread. The one that meant gears were turning.

Peter leaned over the building’s railing, letting the icy wind wash over his quivering jacket. Not that apartment-hunting didn’t sound fun and all, but he couldn’t let himself lose track of his real responsibilities – Kingsley was still walking free, and this Kingpin guy was still in charge of the city’s current crime wave, though Peter still had half a mind to think the two were one and the same. Come on. King-sley? King-pin? It was just too perfect.

“Ha! Look at that fat one over there. Bet he looks adorable when he flies.” Gwen knelt over the Empire State Building’s famous binocular thingies. Y’know, those round, silver ones you put quarters in to use? It was like a microtransaction had escaped your phone and was rampaging out in the real world.

Peter tried to see which pigeon Gwen was talking about, but truth be told, there were other sights vying for his attention. Such as Gwen’s jeans, which were a bit too tight on her. Peter could lean over the edge and stare at the street below, and it wouldn’t be nearly as dizzying a sight.

“Hey, Peter?” The binocular pay wall sprang back up, so Gwen returned her attention to her boyfriend. He glanced away, praying his cheeks weren’t too crimson. “Happy one year anniversary.” She smiled. God, she was pretty. Had Peter mentioned that before? Especially when she was all bundled up with matching pink gloves, a scarf, and a beanie to keep warm at this altitude. Gwen had the same kind of beauty as a flower or a snowflake. Soft. Delicate.

“I’m just sorry we couldn’t go anywhere nicer.” She patted his cheek with her fully-healed, cast-free hand. “But an apartment would be worth every penny we pinch. That is, assuming we ever actually find one that rents to seventeen-year-olds and won’t turn us into paupers by the end of the week...”

“Yeah.” And even if they could find an apartment, May was still readying the house to sell, and Peter didn’t know if he wanted to leave her all alone before she moved. Well, Dr. Bromwell had been spending more time with May. Gee, though, Peter hoped the guy wasn’t just her rebound from Otto.

“Can’t believe it’s been a year already,” Gwen said. “Doesn’t feel like it. That’s pretty big, right?”

“Uh huh.”

As happy as their anniversary made Peter, though, it also happened to be the one-year anniversary of Harry becoming the Green Goblin for real. When he shut his eyes, Peter could still see a glider sailing above the parade floats...

“Peter? You in there?”
“Huh? Wha-? I’m listening!”

Gwen’s cherry lips were marred by a smirk. “Really? Then what was I saying?”

“You… saw a fat pigeon?”

She let out a sigh. “It’s okay, Peter, I just said the song on that radio’s kind of romantic.” She gestured behind them to a rooftop radio, left there to entertain the tourists, Peter supposed.

Peter listened for the music, though it was hard to catch it over the howling wind:

“Before you landed,
I had a will
But didn’t know
What it could do…”

“Yeah, yeah,” Peter said. “It’s cool.”

The two of them stood there at the railing, listening.

“You make me drop things,
Like all the plans
I had for a
Life without you…”

“Sorry for spacing out on you.”

“It’s alright.” Gwen gave another smile. “Can’t blame you for having your heads in the clouds. Even the top of the Empire State Building must be pretty mundane for you.”

“I’m drunk when sober.
The room is spin-
-ning. You are what
I hold on to…”

“Mundane? How could it be mundane when you’re standing on top of it?” Suddenly, Peter’s hand was in hers. “Look, I know it’s hard for me to focus sometimes, but that doesn’t mean I’ll ever get tired of you.” His hand caressed her headband. “You’re half of my life, Gwen. Peter Parker and Spider-Man are only a fourth each.”

Her eyes gazed into his. Hers were so big and blue and wistful. Peter could’ve stood there forever, studying them.

“You’re taking over.
I find that giv-
ing in is the
“best I can do…”

“Gwen… I can’t even put to words how important you are to-”

It turned out Peter didn’t have to – His voice was drowned out by sirens. Boyfriend and girlfriend lowered their heads to find a handful of police cars and an ambulance barreling down the street below.

“You should go,” said Gwen.

Peter found himself wincing. “Gwen, you’ve been looking forward to our anniversary for weeks. It was bad enough I missed your band recital. Can’t we let the police do their own jobs for just one-?”

“Peter.” Gwen’s face tightened. “Someone’s life could be in danger. You should at least go check. I’m not gonna fall to pieces-”

“You’re right, you’re right…” Slowly, Peter drew away. He skimmed the rooftop. “No one’s watching. Hold my clothes.” He tossed a jacket at her head.

Gwen let it fall to the floor. “I’ll guard them with my life.”

They shared a laugh.

“Love you.” And with that, Peter slipped on his mask and flipped over the side of the railing, leaving a pile of clothing at Gwen’s feet.

“You, too,” Gwen called out after him. “I’ll be here when you get back…”

She was left alone, the song’s chorus washing over her.

Ah, Gwen. MJ could’ve written a list on all that girl’s positive qualities, but then she’d be here all day. The one that stood out at the moment, though, was Gwen’s ability to, like, actually listen to what you were saying. MJ had spoken more words to Gwen in one sitting than she had in all the time she’d lived with Mark.

“You can really get one?” Gwen said as she screwed and unscrewed the cap of her water bottle.

“Yeah, it’s covered by my insurance.” Mary Jane nodded, then took a bite of her abnormally thick sandwich – peanut butter, jelly, and honey on three slices of bread.

“Rent would be a lot cheaper with three people…” Gwen glanced up at the stage, where Kong was somehow managing to chew the scenery as King Duncan.

“And I can actually room with someone cool for once!” MJ beamed at her. “And Pete’s aunt can move away from the crazy supervillain action. Everyone wins.”

“Yeah… I can’t blame her for that.” Finally, Gwen took a sip of water. “I mean, after the Kraven thing, I guess I chose to stick with Peter through thick and thin, but… what about you? Don’t you want to move somewhere safer?”

“Move? From the coolest city on Earth?” MJ merely laughed, leaning back in her seat.

Something about that gave Gwen pause. She couldn’t put her finger on it. Maybe it was Mary Jane’s tone – It’d seemed almost hollow.
“Everything okay?” MJ’s voice yanked Gwen back to the surface.

“Yeah, it’s fine,” said Gwen. “It’s just… you don’t think it’d be weird for Peter to- to room with another girl, do you?”

“Depends on how much you trust him.”

“You’re right. Sorry. I mean, you are bi, so I guess I should be asking myself the same question…”

“Depends on how much you trust me.”

“And then there’s…” Suddenly, Gwen was brushing her bangs over her eyes, hiding them from sight. “I mean, we literally haven’t mentioned it again since it happened, but… I did ask you out that one time.” Her voice was something resembling a stage whisper. “You wouldn’t be uncomfortable rooming with me, would you?”

“Depends on how much you trust yourself.”

At this remark, Gwen return to screwing and unscrewing her bottle cap.

“Look, girlfriend, it’s not as big a deal as you think.” With her sandwich no more, Mary Jane moved on to licking the salad dressing off a baby carrot. “You guys know I’m a free agent again, and you and Tiger are, like, the purest couple in all history. Our life’s not gonna become a soap opera overnight. And, c’mon, you only asked me out cuz you were desperate to get over Peter, and we all know how that turned out. Our date could’ve gone off without a hitch and it’d never have amounted to anything because, y’know, I’m not Peter Parker.”

“Well… do you think we should at least tell Peter about our almost-date?” With a bit of effort, Gwen managed to meet MJ’s eyes again. “Just for total transparency?”

MJ shrugged. “Your call.”

A moment passed.

“Why trouble him with it?” Gwen let out a titter. “You’re right, it was never gonna amount to anything.” Another moment passed. “H-Hello, MJ?”

“Yeah?”

“If- If Peter and I do get an apartment… um…” The words were addressed to Gwen’s water bottle. “…how… might one… obtain…” The last words were barely a breath. “…birth control?”

Yet another moment passed.

Then came the laughter. “You’ve been living with him for months and you haven’t-?”

“Nothing that would need birth control, no.” Gwen’s head was one smart remark away from exploding. “We’re trying to respect his aunt about it.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” MJ wiped her eyes, then patted Gwen’s shoulder. “God, you two are cute. It’s fine, I got a clinic I can take you to.”

Okay. Okay, thanks.” Gwen took another sip – despite the bottle being totally empty by now. “So, um, once that- that first step is done… how exactly would one… go about…?” She trailed off.

“Go about what?” asked a voice from behind her.
Gwen made a sound that’d fit in a jump scare video, then spun to find — Who else? — Peter coming towards them down the aisle.

“Sorry I’m late.” He held up a Starbucks cup as an explanation. “What’re we talking about?”

“Oh, nothing that’d interest you,” said Mary Jane, examining her nails.

“Did I miss your audition?”

“Not yet, Tiger.” MJ looked to Gwen. They gave a mutual nod. “Actually, me and Gwen had a little proposition for you.”

“Proposition?” The cup nearly slipped from Peter’s hand, but he managed to catch it. “W-What kind of proposition?” His eyes did that thing male eyes do where they dart to the far wall so you don’t think they were checking out your rack.

“Peter...” Gwen sat up so she could hold his hand. “How you’d like to have Mary Jane as our roommate?”

“Oh. Yeah. Roommate.” Peter blinked. “That- That’s an idea. But I thought we wanted it to be just the two of-?”

Just then, Devereaux’s deep voice rang out: “You’re up, Miss Watson!”

“Oop, forgot.” MJ sprang out her seat. “Wish me luck.”

“Yeah…” Peter watched her go. “Luck.”

“Did I hear you say ‘luck,’ Miss Watson?” As MJ drew near, an evil grin crossed Devereaux’s face. “I’m afraid this is the wrong play for that.”

MU laughed. “Really? Why?”

“Oh, I’ve heard about that,” spoke up Gwen. “They say you’ll doom yourself if you say ‘Macbeth’ in a theater-”

**Boom.** The entrance doors flew open, and into the theater stepped a body that made Mary Jane’s blood run cold.

“Guys! I’m back from Europe!” He’d gotten a lot less scrawny, but his stripey orange hair was the same as ever. But that paled in comparison to the sleazy look on his face. That could never change.

“What?” Gwen sprang out of her seat. “Harry!”

“Bro?” Peter followed suit. “We haven’t heard from you in-”

“-a year. I know.” Harry gave an apologetic smile. “It’s been a pretty hectic one.”

Back onstage, Flash had frozen. “The Osbrat returns? Great. I was *this* close to graduating and never seeing him again.”

“Flash, be nice,” murmured Sha Shan from behind him. “He probably just got out of rehab.”

Back below the stage, Harry was nearing Devereaux. “Hey, I know I’m not a student here anymore, but, well, I thought it’d be cool if I could do one more play at Midtown before all my friends graduate.” He glanced away. “Y’know, make up for the last one I missed.”
“Of course, young Osborn!” Devereaux’s face lit up. “In fact, that works out perfectly. Our acting talent has been stretched regretfully thin as of late. Hobie Brown, possibly the brightest among us, quit the drama club for reasons beyond my comprehension. We don’t even have Mr. Allan here to work the lights anymore…” He hung his head, but Devereaux never could stay depressed for long. “And so I’ve been looking for someone to fill our play’s lead role.”

“Great! I’ll give it an audition.” They shook hands. “Thanks a lot, sir.”

(“At least there’s no drug to help cheat at that...” muttered Flash.

“Maybe methamphetamine,” muttered Sha Shan.)

And with that, Harry turned his attention elsewhere. “Guys?” His eyes met Peter’s and Gwen’s. “I know this doesn’t excuse anything, but the things I did… I had a psychotic episode. Total break with reality.”

“W-We get it,” Peter stammered. MJ could guess what was going through his head. Something like, Well, if he thinks he was crazy before, then he doesn’t think I’m Spider-Man anymore, right? Right?

“And Gwen?” said Harry. “I’d like to talk to you later.”

“O-Okay,” said Gwen.

“Nuh uh.”

“Hey-!”

The next thing she knew, MJ was dragging Gwen out the theater by the hand.

“Wait, Miss Watson!” Devereaux called after her. “Your audition-”

“Rain check, teach.”

MJ didn’t release Gwen until they were in the outside hallway. The poor girl barely even resisted. And, as MJ had predicted, Peter emerged after them a moment later.

“Mary Jane...” Gwen sighed. “I get why you’re freaking out. I promise you I do. But what happened… It wasn’t Harry’s fault. He was on the Green-”

“He tried to murder you, Gwen!” MJ’s voice caused a few stray students to turn their heads.

Gwen bowed her head. “I know, Mary Jane, but he’s spent a whole year in rehab, and- and it’s not like his mom’s gonna hook him up with more Green and another glider, right?” She was fiddling with her glasses again. “Can’t we at least give him the chance to apologize?”

“He hit you. He shouldn’t be coming anywhere near you. He shouldn’t-” Mary Jane touched her cheek. It stained her fingertip with mascara. For a moment, the three of them stood there. Then MJ swore under her breath and bolted for it.

She didn’t stop running until she’d found a secluded locker to throw herself against. MJ knelt down, hurriedly rubbing her eyes with the back of her hand. Get it together, Watson. This wasn’t in character for a cool party girl at all.

Then, the moment MJ had been dreading – Peter rounded the corner. “Mary Jane?”
Slowly, MJ raised her head. “Hey, Tiger, promise me something? If Harry or- or any other creep touches Gwen again… give ‘em hell for me.”

“I promise.” Peter offered a hand, helping her to her feet. “Y’know what, MJ? The more I think about you rooming with us… the more I like it.”

While Peter ran off to console MJ, Gwen found herself staying behind by the theater entrance. She couldn’t help but feel that allowing herself to get dragged out the room by her hand had been a bit too pathetic even for her.

Gwen was about to re-enter the theater, but then the door swung open on its own.

“Oh, G-Gwen.” Harry drew back. He may have put on some muscle mass, but he was flightier than Gwen had ever seen him. “I thought you were- I- I was just leaving-”

“Harry, wait.” Okay, Gwen, deep breath. “I want to hear what you have to say.”

“It’s not much, really.” Harry sighed. “Just that I know what I did to you was unforgivable, and I’m sorry. When I was trying to get over the Green before, you were more supportive than anyone else in the world… and I took advantage of that. I took advantage of you.” He started to walk past her. “If you never want to see me again, I understand.”

But then he paused and turned his head back to her, expectant.

“I’m… glad you understand,” said Gwen.

Liz had meant to go straight home after cheerleading practice, but she ended up stopping by the one person in the whole school who looked as miserable as she felt.

“Harry?” He’d been sitting on the rim of entrance yard’s fountain, staring off into space, but Liz’s words pulled him back to Earth.

“Liz? And here I thought I was too nerdy for your standa-” Harry did a double take. “Whoa, what’s eating you?”

“Oh, it’s just…” Guess Liz looked as miserable as she felt, too. “I can’t stop thinking about Mark. When someone you love gets addicted to whatever, and- and something horrible happens to them because of it… it’s hard not to blame yourself, y’know?” She trailed off. “And I- I want to make peace with Petey and Gwen and MJ, but it’s not easy when I’m still, like, ninety-nine percent sure Gwen and MJ conspired to break me and Petey up.”

Harry stared at her a moment. “I’m sorry. That- That really sucks.”

But Liz soon shook herself out of it. “I don’t know why I’m telling you this. I’m just in a weird mood. Anyways, what’s eating you?”

No response.

“Harry?”

Harry pointed behind her, mouth agape, the words caught in his throat.

“It’ll be my new acidic Gobwebs in a second!” bellowed a voice from above.
“What the-?” Before Liz even had time to process the fact that a guy in an orange cloak and rubber goblin mask had just swooped down from the sky on a gargoyle-themed glider, let alone the fact that said glider was equipped with a canon shooting burning green goop right at the two of them, she found herself being pushed to the pavement. It was only after a frenzied second that she realized Harry had done the pushing, sending the two of them tumbling narrowly out of the acid’s path mere seconds before it ate through the fountain to send water spewing every which way.

“Not here! Not again!” Harry stumbled back, eyes bulging.

“Seriously? Another supervillain attacking our school?” But Liz was too paralyzed to even stumble.

Her remark, though, sent a curious twitch through the grimy rubber mask. “I apologize for the lack of originality,” the Hobgoblin said tightly. “But since you’re so concerned, I’ll be sure to find a nice and creative way to murder you-”

Thwip. The remark was ended by a web to the mouth. Hey, the classics were classic for a reason.

“Here’s an original idea – a pacifist supervillain.” Across the courtyard, the heads of countless students were turning to find a big old bundle of red-and-blue spandex towards Liz and Harry. The sight alone was enough to replace most screams with cheers. “That’s a freebie. You can have that one.”

While the goblin was busy freeing his mouth, Spider-Man snatched up Liz and Harry, then shot a web-line to the nearby flagpole so he could swing around to the opposite side of the school buildings. Now that they were a safe enough distance from Hobgoblin, Spidey let the two loose onto the front lawn.

“This still doesn’t change anything,” Harry said with a scowl.

“Can we not right now?” Without another word, their rescuer sprinted up the side of the building and vanished from sight in the Hobgoblin’s general direction.

Now alone, a breathless Liz said, “That acid. Harry, you saved my life.”

“Oh.” At this, Harry shrank. “Yeah. Guess I did.” And then Liz’s arms were around him, and he couldn’t come even close to a coherent sentence.

Small mercies, it seemed Hobby wasn’t interested in attacking random students. By the time Spider-Man released his web and landed back in the courtyard, it was virtually empty – save, of course, for the massive glider swooping his way.

“Oh no, it’s Hobgoblin, the baddie I can take out in one hit.” Despite his spider-sense’s protests, Spider-Man pounced and went for the face-punch. “In your face, Saitama- Gah!” Unfortunately, that only managed to send Spidey skidding across the pavement, nursing his knuckles.

Told you so, said his spider-sense.

Okay, fine, so this wasn’t another run-of-the-mill mook Kingsley had dressed up in a goblin suit. Lesson learned.

“What do you want with Harry?” Spidey ducked the glider’s next swoop, then used a hastily-spun web-line to keep it tethered before it could fly off in Harry’s direction.
“Mostly just the warm fuzzy feeling I get from seeing Osborn blood spilled.” Unfortunately, Hobgoblin had the bright idea to break the tether via pumpkin bomb.

Spider-Man stopped mid-battle to give his chin a scratch. “Didn’t, like, two other Hobgoblins already pull that shtick?” Granted, those were both brainwashed mooks no doubt working for Kingsley, so it made sense they’d all have the same goal. Though with Madame Web safe now, Spidey could only assume Kingsley was having to spring for non-brainwashed mercenaries.

“Oh, don’t worry, Spider-Man, I’ve got a little something to break up the monotony.” With a cackle, Hobgoblin pressed a button on his gauntlet. “Unrelated question, how do you feel about heat-seeking missiles?”

“Well, I don’t think I’ve ever— Hey!” The next instant, Spider-Man was sprinting up a wall for dear life. “That’s not an unrelated question at all!”

“We’re almost to the safe house, Master Harry.” Bernard’s voice was stoic as ever, even when he was driving the limo at mach speeds.

In the spacious passenger seats, the looming threat of the Hobgoblin was the last thing on the passengers’ minds. “Petey and Gwen stabbed you in the back, too?” Liz gawked at Harry, amazed. “I never knew we had so much in common!”

Spider-Man was ashamed to admit it, but the battle had quickly swapped focus from defeating Hobgoblin to outrunning a heat-seaking missile. At least he finally had an excuse to bust out his parkour skills…

But no matter how efficiently Spidey flipped over hand rails and bounded up stairways, the missile remained hot on his tail. Hard to think straight when his spider-sense was tingling so bad, but Spider-Man at least knew he had to get this thing away from as many civilians as possible. He’d guided it out of the school and into the surrounding Midtown area.

Then, as luck would have it, Spider-Man stumbled across a fire hydrant right at the mouth of an abandoned alleyway. In a split-second decision, Spidey sprinted down the alley, then spun in place to web-yank the hydrant free of the cement right as the missile passed overhead. The resulting geyser detonated the missile early. Spider-Man wasn’t totally unsinged, but the important thing was that he could now return to fighting the…

…Hobgoblin.

Spider-Man spent the next few hours searching the school and surrounding Midtown area, but there was no sign of the goblin. And cackling evil maniacs on goblin gliders didn’t tend to be inconspicuous.

Actually, at one point, Spider-Man swore he saw a shadow darting out from another alleyway, but a further examination turned up nothing. Must’ve been a trick of the light.

“So he just ran away?” Gwen asked with a frown.

“Yeah.” Peter nodded. “I guess once Harry got to safety, Hobby decided to call it quits for the day.”
The last several days of Peter’s and Gwen’s internship had been spent organizing files. There were three whole drawers stuffed full of them, and frankly the sight of it all was making Gwen bug-eyed.

Peter knelt over their table, muttering the alphabet song as he skimmed a handful of papers. When he got to H, he trailed off.

“Can’t help but feel bad for Harry now,” Peter said with a sigh. “He can’t even show his face in public without having these maniacs try to blow him up…” He paused. “So what’d he talk to you about?”

Okay, Gwen had officially lost her place. “I think he just wanted closure. We won’t be seeing him again.”

“Yeah.” They continued their work in silence for a minute. “I mean, I want to believe he’s gotten better, but we already went through this with Otto. I trusted him, and he hurt you. I don’t want to give Harry the same chance.”

“Can’t say I blame you.”

After that, the silence wasn’t marred again until Peter’s phone went off. “Hello?” He held it to his ear. Gwen could hear Jameson’s screams from the other side of the table. “I, uh-” Peter hung up. “I gotta go take some pictures. There’s a twenty car pile up on Third Avenue, and, err, the rescue workers could probably use a hand.”

“That’s horrible.” Gwen shook her head. “Be safe out there.”

“Love you.”

“You, too.”

Peter knelt over for a goodbye kiss… but then a voice called out, “No schmoozing during work hours, Mr. Parker.”

“Right, sorry, Dr. Warren…” Peter rolled his eyes as he exited the lab.

Now it was just Gwen and Dr. Warren. Well, there was also Debra Whitman, but she’d seated herself three tables away from Gwen.

“You have done a remarkable job, little lady.” Warren inspected Gwen’s work with a growing smile. “You’re going places in the world, Miss Stacy. I promise you that.”

“Yes, it was obviously Oscorp tech.” Emily gave the phone’s receiver a scowl. “You really think Kingsley could come up with that arsenal by himself?” She paused for a reply. “Yes, it does seem my husband was careless with where he stashed his toys. But Kingsley will be dealt with, I assure y-”

“Mom?” Just then, a head of stripey orange hair poked its way into her office.

“I’ll call you back, Spencer.” Emily hung up. The moment the phone was down, her face was flowers and sunshine. “Harry! How are you feeling?”

“W-Well, if it’s any consolation for the, y’know, near-death experience, I think I might have a new girlfriend.” Harry gave a shaky smile, then held up a small booklet. “Oh yeah, and the drama teacher said I could audition for the last play of the year, and I was, I don’t know, hoping you
could help me practice my lines.”

“Of course, dear.” She beamed at him.

Harry handed her the script and showed her the lines, and then the two of them set to work reciting:

“My dearest love,” said Harry, “Duncan comes here tonight.”

“And when goes hence?” asked Emily. Though she was merely reading, she gave a commendable performance.

“Tomorrow, as he purposes.”

“O, never shall sun that morrow see! Your face, my thane, is as a book where men may read strange matters. To beguile the time, look like the time. Bear welcome in your eye, your hand, your tongue. Look like th’ innocent flower… but be the serpent under ’t.”
There hadn’t been this much commotion on Peter’s home street since Damage Control fixed Gwen’s house. The Parker family had needed two moving trucks lined up – one for May’s stuff and one for Peter’s and Gwen’s – so they’d ended up hogging the lion’s share of the road.

Peter couldn’t help but wince, though, at the expensive moving crew currently barging through their living room. It took four of the guys to lift that grand piano. Peter coulda done it with his pinky.

But if… if that possibility had occurred to Aunt May, she hadn’t said anything. Clearly, Otto’s assumption about her had been wrong. She didn’t know. She couldn’t.

“Peter, dear? Are you alright?” Her words jolted him back to reality.

“Yeah, I’m good,” Peter said with a hurried nod. “It’s just… I’m gonna miss you.”

They shared a hug. “And I’ll miss you and Gwen.”

“Aww, I’m starting to feel left out.” Just then, MJ came down the stairs with a box in her arms.

“Yes, I’ll miss you, too, Mary Jane.” May chuckled at her. “As will your aunt.”

“Well, she’s got her new hubby and stepkids to keep her busy.”

Truth be told, these goodbyes were a tiny bit premature. Aunt May was only starting on some of her heavier furniture and stuff — She wouldn’t be totally moving out until after the kids’ graduation. As for Peter and Gwen, this was just something of a “test run” for them before they signed the lease. MJ had managed to charm the landlady into renting to them (thanks in part to some excellent recommendations from the Connors), but only on the condition that Peter and Gwen could prove they wouldn’t be any trouble.

Aunt and nephew made their way through the maze of boxes where the living room had once stood. With MJ outside and Gwen upstairs packing up her room, Aunt May was bold enough to say, “So you’re going to be living with two pretty girls?”

Peter went pink. “Well, uh, MJ’s been a good friend of mine and Gwen’s for a while now.”

May raised an eyebrow. “And you’re not worried things will be awkward? It sounds like that old sitcom with John Ritter.”

“Yeah, I’ve suspected my life’s a sitcom for a while now…”

Naturally, the moment both May’s and the moving crew’s backs were turned, Peter ran a good dozen boxes out to the truck all in one go. Aunt May was still helping to direct those guys as they hoisted her piano, so the coast would be clear unless Dr. Bromwell got here early – or “Nick,” as May called him (Yes, he had a first name. Peter had been shocked).

Luckily, though, Peter managed to load all his boxes with time left over to help Gwen with hers.

“I can lift one box by myself, Peter.” She nearly spilled its contents all over the front lawn, though, in the impromptu tug-of-war she started.
“I know, I know, but you just got that cast off. No need to strain your fingers…”

“Well, I appreciate the thought, I guess.” Gwen relinquished the cardboard box to her boyfriend, but she did it with a not inconsiderable amount of sulking.

It couldn’t help but bring a frown to Peter’s face. After a moment’s thought, he caught her eye again, then let his face fill with mock horror. “Wait, oh no, Gwen, I just realized… if we’re not living with Aunt May anymore, who’s going to enforce the no ‘hanky panky’ rules?”

The sulking-amount was successfully decreased. “We’ll just have to use the honor system…”

On Peter’s run of the next dozen boxes, a voice from the doorstep called out, “You sure you can handle that, hotshot?” Peter turned to find Mary Jane barely disguising her smirk.

“Yeah, this is- Whoop!” Peter nearly spilled everything on the sidewalk, but he managed to catch himself. “This is nothing.”

Then he turned his head to discover a woman in front of the truck.

“I mean, ahh!” Peter promptly bent his knees and put on his best constipated face. “Heavy! Heavy!”

The instant the woman’s eyes locked with Mary Jane’s, a chill swept the air. A second ago, MJ’s body language had been almost floppy, but now she was coiled like a spring fixing to pop.

“Mary.” The woman was thin and wrinkled with an, erm, unconvincing shade of warm brown hair. In fact, she was so thin and wrinkled that Peter was a little worried the spring breeze might send her butt to the pavement.

“Mom.” MJ’s lips were her only muscles to move.

The woman was in a stain-covered dress, and wrapped in her arms was a bundle of rags that cooed as she rocked it. Her eyes went to the moving van. “So when were you planning on saying goodbye?”

“Oh, I’ve already said bye to all my loved ones,” said the voice of a snippy old librarian coming out Mary Jane’s mouth.

“That’s fine. You don’t have to worry about us anymore, Mary.” Her mother was trying her hardest to smile Mary Jane to death. “You keep spending that lucrative modeling money on cushy apartments. Turns out the government will ship us Gayle’s diapers if we fill out the right forms-” The woman nodded to the bundle in her arms. “-so your father and I are doing just fine.”

“Oh, you know about the modeling?” MJ smiled back. “You two seen the nude spread yet? How hard did Phil cry?”

Mother and daughter stood there a moment, smiling at each other.

“Well,” said Peter, “we’ve got tons more boxes to move, so, uh…”

The woman snorted at him, then strutted off, turning a corner and vanishing into the Forest Hills ether.

The moment the woman was out of sight, MJ said, “At least we kept things civil that time. I’m proud of myself.”
“Y-Yeah, uh...” Gwen hesitated before saying, “I didn’t know you had a sister. How old is Gayle?”

“Oh, is that her name?” MJ said dully. “No idea. I just walked downstairs one day and there she was. I’d been wondering why Mom got so fat.”

Behind her back, Peter and Gwen swapped glances.

“Do you ever… visit her?” asked Peter.

MJ replied with laughter, then slinked away to grab another box. Under MJ’s breath, Peter caught the words, “Not my problem.”

The drive from Forest Hills to the outskirts of Empire State University was only, like, an hour, tops. An hour which Peter feared would pass in silence.

This stupid truck was supposed to seat three people. This was technically true, Peter supposed, except that he and Gwen had barely managed to squeeze inside, and they were tiny. MJ was in the driver’s seat while Gwen had the other window seat, meaning Peter would be spending the next hour with his arms carefully folded on his lap and his eyes fixed dead ahead.

This silence was gonna kill him. Peter was Spider-Man – Silence was unnatural to him. He wasn’t sure he’d been silent for five consecutive minutes ever since that spider bit him. Wait, what if that was actually one of his superpowers? Whoa.

“Oh, look, a jaywalker.” Peter leaned forward in his seat, pointing out at the windshield. “Careful not to run him over.”

“Oh, I got it,” said Mary Jane.

Back to silence.

“Hey, a squirrel in the road! Careful not to run it over.”

“Yeah,” MJ said dryly, “I’m not playing GTA here.”

More silence.

“Look at that, it’s a street mime,” said Peter.

More silence.

“Oh, there’s another jaywalker. Careful not to run him over.”

One last bout of silence.

Then the truck filled with laughter. “Oh my god, I totally forgot, your boyfriend tells jokes.” MJ turned in her seat to grin at Gwen. “I’m not even sure Mark knows what a joke is. Man, living with you guys is gonna be so much better.” As she spoke, Mary Jane slowly shook her head. “Mark was fun at first, but then we started to get serious, and it got way too complicated, and our feelings got all mixed up like they do in literally every relationship I’ve ever been in. That’s why it’s better to hang with you guys. Circumvent the whole thing-”

“Oh, seriously, don’t run over the jaywalker!” At Peter’s words, the truck gave a sudden lurch.

“Sorry, sorry!” Once everyone was sure they weren’t gonna die, Mary Jane gave Peter’s shoulder a
“Thanks for the heads up, Tiger.”

“N-No problem.” Peter found his eyes gravitating towards the perfectly manicured fingernails bobbing up and down on his shoulder. He scooted closer to Gwen.

It took another forty-five minutes for it to occur to Peter that the girls would’ve had a lot more space if he’d just web-swung to the apartment.

Here they were. It wasn’t the fanciest apartment complex – more or less just a dull, gray structure, not unlike a prison – but the important thing was you could see some of the ESU buildings poking out over the shrubbery. Peter wasn’t in the mood to sightsee, anyways. The sooner they unloaded everything, the sooner they could go to sleep. The sun was only just setting, and the girls were already fixing to pass out from exhaustion (This was more of a light workout for Peter, though).

“How’d I do parking?” Mary Jane glanced at the yellow pavement lines in the truck’s rearview mirror.

Gwen had long ago fused to her seat cushion. “I can’t believe we’re alive.”

“Well, I don’t see either of you two getting your license...”

As soon as the truck was in park, Peter hopped out and swung around back so he could stack a dozen or so boxes in his arms. He left two or three for the girls, though, just to be fair.

By the time Peter dropped the final box on the floor, it was pitch black out. He caught his breath for a minute, admiring his handiwork. It was home. A home whose every square inch was occupied by boxes and overturned furniture, granted, but home nonetheless. Wasn’t much, really. There was a living room, a kitchen the size of a broom closet, two bathrooms, and some bedrooms. All in all, it was slightly smaller than the downstairs part of Peter’s old house.

“Was that everything, Tiger?” came MJ’s voice from behind him.

Peter moved aside so she could enter the living room. “Well, I got all the boxes and furniture up here-”

“-and I unpacked all the food,” came Gwen’s voice from the adjacent kitchen.

“-and I returned the U-Hauls and set up the beds. Girl’s gotta have her priorities.” MJ slinked off towards a bedroom. “Dibs on the bigger bed.” Peter caught her wink right as the door shut.

“Wow. I mean, um...” Slowly, Peter’s eyes turned towards the kitchen.

From the kitchen, Gwen’s eyes had done likewise towards the living room. She went scarlet, brushed a strand of hair from her eyes, and turned away. But she couldn’t hide that smile.

The concept of lazy Saturday mornings was alien to Jameson. As far as he was concerned, not showing up at the Bugle bright and early on the weekend was a fireable offense.

It was for this reason that the tune of The Itsy-Bitsy Spider roused Peter from his slumber. Ugh, he could see the sunlight on the back of his eyelids. They’d have to make setting up the curtains their next priority. Without opening his eyes, Peter reached for his phone from the bedside charger.

But instead, his hand found something soft and squishy.
“Whuh-?” Oh, he’d slept on the opposite side of the bed from where he’d always slept at May’s house. Which meant that instead of his bedside charger, Peter had grabbed…

His hand jerked away like he’d touched a stove top. He scrambled to turn off his alarm for real this time, then frantically rolled back around on the mattress. Oh, thank god, she was still asleep.

He watched her chest rise and fall for a while. There was something soothing about it. Falling asleep with Gwen in his arms had been the most natural thing in the world. It’d only been one night, and already the thought of sleeping alone felt wrong to Peter.

Suddenly, Gwen rolled over, causing the neck of her t-shirt to loosen. From this angle…

Peter’s eyes snapped shut. That- That shouldn’t have been a surprise, really. It wasn’t like girls wore their bras to bed. That’d probably be super uncomfortable. This was normal. This was a normal adult thing to see. Peter wasn’t thirteen anymore, and besides, the internet had left him extremely jaded. He didn’t go bananas at the sight of boobs. They were, y’know, they were just boobs. Didn’t phase him. Boobs. See? Nothing. Boobs. Boobs, boobs, boobs-

“Peter…?”

“GAH!”

Her eyes were open. Her eyes were open! THIS WAS NOT A DRILL.

“Gwen, did I- err, did I wake you up?” Peter drew back towards the edge of the mattress. “I’m sorry.”

But then he noticed something – Gwen’s eyes were examining Peter’s boxers in a manner not unlike how his had examined her t-shirt. Her evil smirk could put any one’s of his rogues gallery to shame. “Don’t be.”

Asdfkldvnlcjcvnwefkljfkewguh, said Peter’s brain.

Gwen leaned into his ear, then murmured, groggy, “What time d’you go to work?”

“I- I need to leave in like an hour.”

A hand crept up the inside of his shirt like a spider. “You’re calling in sick.”

“I’m calling in sick.”

Mary Jane was shaken awake.

“Huh-? Whuh-?” She bolted upright, darting her head around. “Where’s the earthquake?”

There was no one in here but her. How…? Oh. Right.

MJ smiled, shook her head, put in earphones, and then went back to sleep.

It wasn’t until the smell of omelet tempted them out that Peter and Gwen finally left their room. The two of them wandered over to the kitchen, where Mary Jane was standing guard at the stove.

“I see you’ve emerged from cryosleep.” MJ spared them a glance. Their hair was a mess, their t-shirts looked like they’ve been wadded into a ball and then unwadded back out, and they could not
stop smiling and giggling at each other, not even for a second. “I should warn you, a lot has changed here in the year three thousand.”

“Morning, MJ.” Peter grinned at her, too, then wiped the layer of sweat from his forehead. “We really need to get a ceiling fan in that bedroom.”

“Duly noted.”

Peter sniffed the air. “You making breakfast?”

“It’s one in the afternoon, Tiger.”

“Oh.” Peter checked his phone. “Will ya look at that…?”

“I was just hungry for omelets, and I think it’s dumb that you’re only allowed to eat certain foods at certain times of day.” MJ cracked three new eggs onto the skillet, fusing them together into one big mass. “I mean, isn’t that weird? Ever thought about that?”

“Y-Yeah, I guess that is pretty weird,” Gwen said faintly.

Peter turned back to her. “You okay?”

“I’m fine. The room’s spinning, that’s all…”

Peter helped Gwen to a seat at the counter while MJ added butter to the skillet. Actually, it was just one of those lame butter substitutes. MJ hadn’t eaten real butter in over a decade.

“Y’know, the only reason people drink coffee and orange juice at breakfast is because of aggressive marketing campaigns.” MJ waited for a reply that didn’t come. Alright, it was becoming apparent that trying to talk to the lovebirds right now was a fruitless endeavor.

They were too preoccupied with Gwen breathily whispering something in Peter’s ear. MJ wasn’t positive, but she thought it sounded like, “Wall-crawling isn’t the ONLY trick that spider gave you…” Not that she was eavesdropping or anything.

“Gwen, shh!” Peter barely stifled his laughter as he fixed his girlfriend a plate. MJ, of course, was left to fix her own.

Mary Jane sat down across from them. Peter and Gwen stood back up. MJ had never seen human beings devour food so quickly. It’d been kind of terrifying.

Then Gwen gave Peter’s arm a meaningful tug.

“Really?” he whispered. “Again?” She nodded.

And with that, Gwen waltzed out the kitchen while Peter made his way to the minifridge. After a minute of searching, he retrieved a pair of bottled waters. “Phew, there’s still some left.”

MJ’s eyebrow had crawled way up her face. “Didn’t I buy a huge pack of those yesterday?”

“Sorry. I’ll pay you back…” Peter winced, then scurried off towards his bedroom.

Mary Jane was left alone to stare at her misshapen omelet. “I’ve created a monster.”

Going from the apartment to school felt weird. She was so used to getting there from Queens,
Gwen supposed, that doing anything else just felt wrong. But at any rate, school itself was normal enough. The drama club didn’t meet today, so Mary Jane was already back by the time Gwen and Peter came in the door.

“Gwen?” MJ’s voice carried from her bathroom. “Help a girl out? They want me to pose in this really low-cut dress, so I’ve gotta wear this strapless monstrosity.”

“Coming, MJ.” Gwen pushed her way into MJ’s bedroom, then the adjacent the bathroom… and the sight within left her breathless. There Mary Jane stood, her bare back facing Gwen. The only article of clothing on her entire body was a pair of scarlet panties. Well, to be fair, MJ was attempting to put on a bra, but the hooks didn’t seem to be cooperating.

“You need, like, a physics degree to operate this thing.” MJ laughed. “I just need to make sure it doesn’t slide down my waist halfway through the shoot.” Her hair was pink compared to Gwen’s face. Here Gwen was, sweating and stammering, while MJ was cool as ever, meeting the reflection of her eyes in the mirror. “Though maybe that’d improve the quality of the pics…”

It was no wonder that was a problem! MJ’s waist was- Wait. The mirror. There was a mirror? Gwen made a noise that could only be described as a yip, then hurried to help with MJ’s bra. “Sorry, I got distracted. Let me help you with that-”

“Cool your jets, bottle rocket.” Through the mirror, MJ gave her a bemused look. Dang it, MJ, don’t encourage me to keep looking in the mirror. Not ones that look like THAT. “Yeah, I’m just not used to- to rooming with other girls, I guess.” Hooking this stupid thing would’ve been a challenge even if Gwen’s hands hadn’t been shaking. Her brain wasn’t used to doing it from the opposite side. “Only child and all.”

And if Gwen wasn’t used to rooming with other girls, she sure as heck wasn’t used to rooming with a supermodel. Mary Jane Watson, a supermodel. And here Gwen was, fixing to go slave away at Burger King. She’d just gotten transferred to one closer to the apartment, and the new manager was the biggest jerk… And- And here Mary Jane was, being a supermodel.

“Ah, don’t worry, it’s cool. I’m a total hippie – I’m not shy.” With her bra finally on properly, MJ made for the scarlet dress lying out on her bed. She managed to put it on without even smearing her makeup. She could do no wrong. “Anywho, thanks for the assist.” Once that was done, MJ threw on her heels and glided out the door like an otherworldly being. “Later.”

MJ’s absence freed the apartment from a spell. Finally, Gwen was able to return to the living room so she could plop down on an armchair and stare at the wallpaper.

“Well,” spoke up Peter from the opposite armchair. “That was really someth- I mean, err, it’s good MJ’s getting so much work. I’m really happy for her.”

“Yeah,” said Gwen. “Me, too. Happy. She gets to be a supermodel, and I get to be a… cash register girl.”

“To be fair, I’ve seen some really cute cash register girls,” said Peter. “Especially this one who was, like, blonde with glasses and a headband…”

Gwen managed a laugh. “Thanks. You’re sweet.” There was silence. “Hey, Peter, do you think we have enough time before work to-?”

“Yes.”
When Roddie had first approached Mary Jane, she’d thought she was being punked. But here she was months later, walking home from her umpteenth photoshoot. Now the magazine people had their Woman’s Fashion Whatever cover, and MJ had an extra four hundred dollars in the bank. Fair trade.

Anywho, that was over, and it was getting dark out. Time to step back into the lovebirds’ nest.

“Anyone still awake?” The door creaked open, and MJ glanced around the living room.

It was lit by a single lamp, placed smack in the room’s center. Its light draped shadows over the boy and girl, each seated in an armchair at opposing sides. MJ almost wished her photographer had followed her home so he could get a pic of it. The image conveyed their emotions so perfectly. There was Gwen, work uniform still on, mascara running down her face, trying not to glower too hard at Peter, who merely had a scowl running down his.

Mary Jane blinked. Didst thine eyes deceive her? “Wow, the other shoe dropped way sooner than I-” Okay, their faces were telling her to keep her mouth shut.

Gwen turned away. “It’s really not your business, MJ...”

Peter shot back with a sigh. “Gwen, please, I know you’re upset, but you shouldn’t take it out on Mary Jane-”

“I’m not upset, Peter, I’m patronized.”

“Well, I’m sorry you feel that way, but if I’m not comfortable, then I’m not comfortable-”

“Yeah, you’re not comfortable because you apparently think I’m made of tissue paper.”

Peter sprang from his seat. “I promised to be good to you. I promised that, and I hurt you-”

“It’s just a bruise, Peter!”

This was officially weird. MJ had seen her share of domestic disputes, but this was the first one where the couple was screaming about how much they didn’t want to hurt each other.

“Yeah,” said Peter, “but bruises have a way of compounding when you want us to do it forty-seven times a day because you don’t think you’re pretty and I have to keep proving you are over and over and-”

Gwen’s witty retort sounded an awful lot like a strangled sob. Before Peter could get another word in, she turned and fled into their room.

Peter started after her, but MJ held out an arm. “Bad idea, Tiger.” When he relented, she gave him a look. “What did you do, exactly?”

“What did I do?” Peter spun around, throwing his hands up. “I’ll tell you what I did – I fell in love with a crazy person! Crazy knocked on the door of my life, and I answered it!”

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry,” said MJ, recoiling. “Didn’t mean to point fingers.”

“I just- God, it’s not fair.” But Peter’s mouth kept running independent of hers. “What if the genders were flipped? Wouldn’t the guy be in the wrong there?”

“Yeah, I know, double standards suck.” MJ put a hand on his shoulder. “But I really doubt Gwen
means it that way.” She bowed her head. “Girl’s got something of an inferiority complex, if you hadn’t noticed.”

*That* knocked the wind from Peter’s sails. “The last thing I want to do is make her feel bad about herself… but- but it’s just so easy to do it by accident!”

“Them’s the breaks. You fall in love with someone, you gotta deal with their baggage.” MJ worried she might be pushing it, but be continued, “And for the record, whatever baggage Gwen’s got pales in comparison to *yours*.”

But Peter didn’t argue. Instead, he simply muttered, “*I’m sleepin’ on the couch...*” and then slinked off towards it.

With that, MJ could finally return to her own bedroom, throw down her purse, and plop down over the covers. She didn’t even bother changing out of her dress. She probably should’ve gone to comfort Gwen, too, but at this point, MJ was struggling to keep her eyes open. What a day this had turned out to be.

At least *Peter* only had to deal with *one* person’s baggage…
The goblin in his head was very curious to know why Kingsley wasn’t blowing anyone up right now. It wasn’t like it’d be difficult. He had plenty of pumpkin bombs stashed away in the fancy hidden costume chamber that folded out of his office wall.

No. No blowing anyone up! This isn’t the right time.

Aww, come on, Kingsley, just one little murder. I’ll be your best friend.

“Mr. Kingsley?”

Kingsley was shaken back to reality by the group of executives peering at him from the board room table’s opposite end.

Kingsley managed to stammer out “I- I need some water. Excuse me…” before hurrying out into the hallway.

You know, the water fountain is located RIGHT NEXT to your office-

With a great strain of his forehead muscles, Kingsley managed to silence the voice again. He could do this. After all, Norman Osborn had been able to control the goblin in his head, and therefore so could Kingsley.

Mary Jane had slept with her makeup on. Ugh. Could someone please, like, melt off all the skin on her face so she could surgically graft on some more? It only took one pimple to end her career.

After two hours of scrubbing and preening, MJ finally emerged from the bathroom and tossed her scarlet dress into the invisible clothes hamper by her bed. She was only going to school this morning, which meant she’d be wearing the two hundred dollar boots instead of the six hundred dollar ones.

Once she was fully clothed, MJ entered the living room with purse in hand. She braced herself for the sight of a poor, broken lovebird that’d fallen out of its nest and onto the couch.

Instead, what she found was Peter and Gwen sitting up on the sofa, trapped in mutual vice grips and smearing a mix of tears and slime over each other’s mouths.

“I’m so sorry.”

“Me, too.”

“We’re never fighting again.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

So basically, the other chick had dived out the nest so they could both be poor, broken lovebirds together. That was a reasonable conclusion to this little episode, MJ supposed.
She walked up to the couch and cleared her throat. “I see you’re busy, but if I can have your attention for a sec...?”

Somehow, the lovers managed to pull themselves free for a moment.

“Uh, MJ...” The mix of crying and kissing had left Gwen’s face bright red. “Sorry I snapped at you last night.”

“Under the bridge, girlfriend.” MJ shook her head, smiling. “Just wanted to point out that it’s the first of April, A.K.A. the worst day of the year, so if either of you pull a prank on me, I’ll declare a blood feud so my descendants hunt down and murder your descendants until you’ve been culled from the gene pool. That cool with you?”

Peter grinned. “Prank you nonstop until midnight. Got it.”

“Also, if you see anything unbelievable on the internet, it’s not true. Not just today, but in general.” MJ’s eyes landed on the trail of ooze on Peter’s chin. “You going to school like that?”

“Oh, right, right, school.” The lovebirds hurriedly peeled themselves off each other.

Mary Jane listened intently. She remained perfectly silent, save for when it was appropriate to giggle.

“Really? That is so interesting! Well, McKeever, sounds like you’ve got a promising career in TV ahead of you.”

“I, uh, said I was gonna be a radio host.”

“Yeah, whatever. Hey, you gotta tell me why they call you ‘Tiny’ sometime. Y’know what they say, big things come in small packages…” MJ shot him a wink before strutting across the picnic tables with tray in hand.

She seated herself at one of the tables across from the lovebirds. “Hey, roomies.”

The greeting wasn’t returned. Seemed the roomies were too busy gawking at her.

“What?” said MJ.

“Were you just hitting on Tiny McKeever again?” A baloney sandwich had frozen halfway to Peter’s mouth.

“I don’t know. I hit on lots of people.”

“I thought you said it was like talking to a tree stump!”

“What’s wrong with tree stumps?”

Uh oh, she’d earned herself The Look. Gwen peered over at her, arms folded. “You spent five hours the other day ranting to me about how men were scum and you never wanted to touch another one in your life.”

“Oh yeah.” Mary Jane gave this a moment’s thought. “Well, I had a fling with Jenny Carson from Trig, but it turns out gals can be just as scummy as guys, so what am I supposed to do, not make out with anyone-?” She was cut off by the sound of hacking from Peter’s end of the table. “You okay there, Tiger? Need me to do the Heimlich?”
“I’m good, I’m good.” Peter chugged down his milk carton. “I just, uh, didn’t know you were into girls, too.”

“Really?” Gwen’s head shot towards him. “You didn’t know?”

“Then you’ve obviously been going to the wrong parties.” MJ’s smirk only widened the redder Peter’s face got. “Aren’t I just full of surprises?”

“We’re sorry,” said Gwen, placing her hand over Peter’s. “We should’ve made sure you knew before we roomed with her-”

“No, no, it’s cool.” Peter gave her a reassuring – albeit somewhat shaky – smile. “I mean, you trust me enough to room with her, I trust you enough to room with her, right?”

Gwen nodded. “Right.”

“And, c’mon, this is MJ. She’s not gonna make a move on you.”

“Yes.” MJ flashed Peter a smirk. “Sorry to get your hopes up, Tiger.”

The remark earned some jittery laughter.

“You may sneer, and you may laugh, but I truly believe that abstinence until marriage is the only path to a healthy, virtuous life.” The guest speaker paced the basketball course, coming to a stop beneath a banner proclaiming “MIDTOWN ABSTINENCE DAY.” The guy had a wrinkled suit and hair that looked greasy to the touch. The sight of it made Gwen’s stomach churn.

“When I was seventeen,” the speaker continued, “the age of many of y’all here, I went to a party in my hometown of Nashville. Thought I was gonna be the coolest kid in my class.”

Peter gave Gwen a wry look. The two were sitting about half a millimeter apart on the bleachers, surrounded by a horde of senior boys and girls giving each other equally wry looks.

“And there, I met the prettiest girl I ever did see. She wanted me to take her into the bathroom, but I said no, and I have never once regretted that decision. Never once.” A faroff look overtook his eyes. “Even when she laughed at me. Even when all the other kids in my class laughed at me.” He shook himself out of it. “Know why? Because by staying abstinent, not only have I helped preserve a closer relationship with our savior Jesus Christ-”

“Thor’s is the one true religion!” screamed a student from the crowd, sending a swarm of teachers down on his poor, brave head.

“-but I’ve also protected myself from countless STD’s.” The man clicked a remote, and on a curtain behind him, a PowerPoint presentation appeared. A PowerPoint presentation that included… pictures.

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m scarred for life.”

Drama club met today, meaning Peter and Gwen got to enjoy some private time on their trek back to their new home – They almost impulsively went for the subway to Queens before catching themselves.

“To be honest, that slideshow didn’t even bother me as much as the fact that MJ likes Tiny
“McKeever.” Gwen made a face as they walked.

“You’d think he’d learn his lesson after she ditched him in Miami,” said Peter, hopping over a puddle on the sidewalk. “But I guess I can’t blame him. If a model started hitting on me—” *Splish.* His socks ended up soaked. “—before I knew how you felt about me, I mean!”

“Oh, it’s—it’s fine. I’m through my jealousy phase by now.” Gwen’s voice sounded oddly high all of a sudden, but maybe that was just because she’d narrowly evaded that tidal wave. “There’s no denying Mary Jane’s gorgeous, really. She’s the product of a long lineage of hippies who all picked partners based on sheer physical beauty, so it’s a purely evolutionary thing. Totally understandable.” And now it was oddly fast, too. “I mean, I get it. She’s not pretty the way other girls are pretty. There’s this radiance to her that’s hard to even describe, and then couple that with her attitude that makes it feel good just to be around her and hey look we’re here!”

The moment they reached the apartment complex’s parking lot, Gwen dashed through it to scurry up the stairs, leaving Peter behind to scratch his head. He was about to match his girlfriend’s pace, but something made him hesitate.

He could’ve sworn he saw another shadow move out of the corner of his eye, right by the alleyway they’d just come out from, but a closer examination revealed Peter was just being stupid. It was nothing. His spider-sense hadn’t even gone off…

Pro tip, you can save on rent by getting the apartment at the veeeeeeeery top of the stairs. Gwen was only halfway there by the time Peter caught back up to her.

The moment he was in range, Gwen said, “So how about that PowerPoint slideshow, huh?”

Ah, of course, *that’s* why she was acting weird.

Peter gave his most reassuring laugh. “That wasn’t, err, anything we have to worry about, for the record.”

“We could still give each other a yeast infection or something.”

“I’m sitting right here,” said Mary Jane.

“Gaht!” Peter and Gwen sprang back in the doorway like cats with their hair on end.

Mary Jane was indeed seated on the couched nearby — though actually, it’d be more accurate to say she was slouched over it. She’d gone belly-up like a beached whale, allowing her hair to dangle freely over the side of the armrest. Her limp arm fell to the carpet, and she clutched a phone in her hand.

“MJ, w-we thought you were at drama club,” said Gwen, fidgeting with her jacket strings.

“Dropped out,” Mary Jane said dully.

“What?” Peter gave a start. “But that club’s basically your life—”

“Not when I’m cast as Lady Macbeth and have to pretend to have chemistry with Harry every practice.” MJ made a face.

“Ooh, yeah, I see your point, then.” Peter winced for her. “You gonna be okay?”

“I’ll live.” MJ took a breath. “You guys were right about Tiny. I’d do better dating a chatbot
programmed to call me hot.” She rolled over on the cushions, groaning. “Why do I do this crap to myself? Every kid in school’s the same.” She paused. “Well, except you guys. You two are the coolest people ever.”

“Um, thanks,” said Gwen.

MJ’s lids crept over her eyes. “I should call Mark,” she suddenly said. “I was a bitch to him. I oughtta apologize.”

“Hey, wait-!”

“You can’t-!”

The couple roared to life, dashing towards her across the living room.

“MJ, you spent the last month telling us Mark’s the Antichrist!”

“He threw hot lava at your head!” Gwen looked tempted to wrestle the phone from her fingers. “If you get back in touch with him, you’ll be at each other’s throats again within a day.”

“You’re right, you’re right. Sorry.” At the barrage of words, Mary Jane allowed her cell to tumble out of her hand and onto the carpet. “Ugh, I don’t even want to see Mark. I hate Mark. I’m just…”

“Lonely?” offered Gwen.

MJ’s only reply was a grunt.

“Well, uh…” Gwen traded another glance with Peter before saying, “I didn’t get any hours today.”

“And it’s a slow news week. They don’t need me.” Peter sighed. “And I can only rearrange the Bugle’s homepage so many times before they start to wonder why I’m there.”

“You could hang out with us if you want,” finished Gwen. “I-I know Peter and I have been, err, keeping to ourselves all week.” The admission left her face marginally redder.

“Seriously?” MJ looked up at them, then pushed herself upright. “Thanks. You guys really are sweet.”

“D-Don’t mention it.” Peter’s eyes flitted from one girl to the other. “So, uh, what should we all do, exactly?”

“I dunno,” said MJ. “Something wholesome.”

“It would give me great pleasure…” The Beast sounded three seconds away from smashing the door to pieces and force-feeding Belle the wood chips. “…if you would join me for dinner.” After a hushed reminder from Cogsworth, he added, “Please.”

“No thank you!” came Belle’s voice from the other side.

“You can’t stay in there forever!”

“Yes, I can!”

“Fine! Then go ahead and STAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARVE!” He turned to his servants. “If she doesn’t eat with me, then she doesn’t eat at all.”
Gwen groaned at the screen. “There it is. There’s where the Stockholm Syndrome sets in.”

Beside her on the couch, Mary Jane muttered, “W-Well, it’s not really Stockholm Syndrome, technically...”

“Whatever. He’s holding out food until she does something romantic with him. It’s gross.”

This couch MJ’s aunt had given them was alright, but it was a tight fit for three people. Normally, Gwen would save space by sitting on Peter’s lap, but they’d actually ended up on opposite sides today, meaning Mary Jane was wedged between them. Her and Peter’s thighs kept bumping into each other. Combine that with the tiny screen on their ancient, box-sized TV, and it wasn’t the most comfortable moviegoing experience ever.

“Well, okay, this movie is a bit on the weird side,” said MJ through a mouthful of popcorn. “Like, why does Gaston want to marry Belle so bad? Those three blonde chicks are way hotter than her. The movie should end with him, like, having a foursome with them.”

Peter and Gwen gave the remark a polite chortle. Peter inched himself closer to the armrest. Come to think of it, the living room could use a ceiling fan, too.

Alright, this tension obviously needed to be cut. “That reminds me – Y’know, when you guys first brought up having MJ for a roommate, f-for a second I thought you were about to propose a three-way or something.” Peter’s voice had gone considerably higher towards the end of that, ending in jittery laughter.


The laughter finally died, and the three of them continued their movie in silence. Peter took a sip of his Coke.

“I’d be down for that,” said Mary Jane.

Peter spent the next several seconds hacking up his lungs.

“You okay?” Gwen sounded like she could use a sip of Coke herself.

“Yeah, just- just swallowed wrong.” Peter’s head snapped towards MJ. “What did you say?”

“I don’t know.” Peter and Gwen were both gaping at her, but Mary Jane herself seemed preoccupied with filing her nails. “Just that I’d be cool with a threesome if you guys are.”

The only sound in the room came from the TV. But its noise was drowned out by the volume of the eye contact Peter and Gwen were making behind MJ’s back. Gwen was trying her best to turn invisible while Peter was doing everything in his power to not look like a dog begging for scraps at the foot of a table.

“Hey, you’ll never guess who dubs Beast in the Chinese version of this,” MJ said, turning back towards the screen. “It’s J-”

“You want to have a what?” This was apparently the push Gwen needed to find her voice.

“I know what it is.” Gwen’s glasses had gone askew. She didn’t fix them.

“And all I said was I’d be cool with one.” MJ slouched in her seat, shrugging her shoulders. “Y’know, hypothetically.”

“Right, right,” said Peter. “Hypothetically.”

“But I seriously will do it right this second if you want.” And then MJ was back up.

“What?” She’d gotten Peter and Gwen talking in synch. “Right now?”

“When did you want to, next year?” MJ set down her nail file, then grabbed the remote to turn off the TV. “I don’t think wholesome’s really our style, anyways.” As MJ knelt over, Peter’s and Gwen’s eyes met once again. They both swallowed.

“Hope you’re ready.” Before the couple had time to react, MJ was leaning towards them. “It’s about to be Girls Gone Wild in here. No turning back now.” Peter and Gwen could only watch, paralyzed, as those scarlet lips drew nearer… and nearer… “Hey, lovebirds?”


MJ’s lips were millimeters from theirs. “April fool.”

Nuclear fallout wouldn’t have left the Earth this quiet.

“Anyways, Beast’s actually dubbed by Jackie Chan.” Mary Jane reached for the remote again. “Doesn’t that blow your mind?”

“Yeah!” said Peter. “Jackie Chan. Wow.”

“Wouldn’t have guessed,” said Gwen.

A minute passed.

“Y’know what, we could use a refill on popcorn!” MJ snatched up the bowl and hurried to the kitchen without another word.

She didn’t return for twenty minutes, and when she did, she sat on the rug instead of the couch.

Mary Jane’s path didn’t cross much with Peter’s and Gwen’s over the next couple days. It wasn’t like she was intentionally avoiding them or anything – obviously not – but she happened to be busy with modeling, and Peter and Gwen happened to be busy with Spider-Manning and Daily Bugling and ESU-internshipping and Burger Kinging, and that was all there was to it.

Right now, for instance, Mary Jane was busy getting ready for some kinda promotional event where she and her fellow models would be trying on perfume or something. Even just describing it put Mary Jane to sleep, but she wasn’t exactly in a position to be turning down a paycheck, especially one from Roddie, who MJ basically owed her whole career to.

And so it wasn’t until she was out her bedroom door that Mary Jane caught the back half of the lovebirds’ exchange:

“-not that I’m not grateful, Gwen. I am – This was really sweet of you. It’s just… I literally can’t use this batch of web-fluid. It doesn’t adhere reliably.” Peter was hunched over the table of their broom closet-sized kitchen, prying at his web-shooters with a screwdriver. It seemed he was trying
to scrape all the fluid into a trashcan without getting it on the carpet (a gesture MJ appreciate, seeing as there were still some discolored spots from the last time). Gwen, meanwhile, was busy hovering over his shoulders and looking morose.

“I’m- I’m sorry,” she stammered out. “I was just trying to refill them. I knew you were busy. Thought it’d be a nice surprise. I followed your notes to a T.”

“Well, web-fluid’s a delicate art.” Peter peered up at her with a wry smile. “If you want, I can sit you down and show you the ropes, but not right this second. I’ve gotta head out to the Bugle soon.”

Gwen met the expression with a feeble nod. “I’m sure I could get it right next time-”

“No, don’t touch my chemistry stuff again! It’s expensive, and you already wasted a whole-“” When he caught the look on his girlfriend’s face, Peter caught himself. “Sorry, didn’t mean to snap…” After another second, he seemed to give up prying out the fluid and instead rose to his feet. “Look, I gotta go shower.”

“Oh?” Gwen started after him. In a voice that was probably shakier than she’d intended, she asked, “Need any help washing?”

“Hey.” The remark earned a disarmed laugh from Peter, but his back remained to her. “Not now. We promised we’d take things slow. Your arm’s not even healed yet.”

“But-”

“Love you, though.”

“Love you, too.” Gwen’s eyes stayed on him until Peter had vanished into their bedroom. Only then did she spot the figure in the other bedroom doorway. “O-Oh, MJ!” Gwen’s face was a lot pinker than it’d been a second ago. “You heard that…?”

MJ nodded, stepping forward. “Sorry, didn’t mean to eavesdrop.” She took a breath. “Look, I know it’s not my business, but… can I ask what exactly went down on April Fools’ morning? I’d thought you two had might’ve compromised about the whole, err, bruised arm thing, but I guess I was wrong.”

Gwen plopped herself down at the kitchen table with a huff. She looked like she wanted to resume Peter’s efforts to dispose of the faulty web-fluid, but she shied away from it. “Total honesty? I came crawling to him on the couch, crying and saying I was sorry, and then I climbed onto Peter’s lap and pawed at him until he accepted the apology.”

In spite of herself, Mary Jane huffed. “So you just conceded defeat?”

Gwen could only nod. “Maybe he’s right about me. Maybe the relationship’s moving faster than I can handle. Living together and paying rent and… and everything.” Slowly, her lids shut.

But a voice wrenched them open. “Can I see the bruise?”

“O-Oh, yeah, here.” Obediently, Gwen rolled up her sleeve, revealing a purple blotch on the underside of her forearm.

MJ clicked her tongue at it. “Phht. That’s nothing,” she said. “I got way worse from Mark. Though I guess it’s different when you get ’em on purpose.” Then, in response to Gwen’s face: “Kidding, kidding!”
Gwen snorted. “Yeah, well, Mark can’t bend steel like it’s paper. Peter’s got a right to be worried…”

MJ snorted back. “Not gonna pretend to know how spider-powers work, but if he can fight for his life against supervillains without ever crushing their windpipes by accident, then surely-?”

“You think I haven’t pointed that out to him? It doesn’t matter!” A palm dug into Gwen’s scalp. “He’s so scared of hurting me, heat of the moment, he loses his- his-”

“-nerve?” offered MJ.

“Yeah. Sure. That.”

When Gwen failed to respond any further, MJ said, “Listen, girlfriend, I’ve gotta get to work, so lemme just leave you with this – If the problem’s in Tiger’s head, then his head’s what you gotta fix. Deep down, he thinks if he blows too hard, you’ll scatter to the wind like a dandelion.” With a sigh, Mary Jane turned for the door. Just before exiting, though, she said, “I mean this in the gentlest, most supportive way possible, but… you need to grow a spine.”

A couple minutes later, Peter and Gwen were once again alone together in the kitchen. Peter’s hair was soaking wet, though he could probably dry it off with the heat of the exchange he and Gwen were currently having.

“So now I can’t even sew you a spare costume?”

“Not if you’re gonna make it look like that!” Peter pointed an indignant finger to the sketchpad on the kitchen table beside him. “You always try and do this, Gwen. I’ve told you, I like my costume-”

“You can’t have one spare costume that’s different?” Gwen snapped.

“People will get confused! They already thought the black-suit Spidey was a different guy at first!” Peter tripped over his words a moment. “And I can’t wear a hood, anyways. It’s gonna flop around too much while I’m doing acrobatics and stuff.”

“But it looks so much better-”

“Oh, there it is. The truth comes out. You think my costume’s stupid! You’ve always thought that!”

“Peter, you go around wearing skintight spandex with bright primary colors and- and web-armpits! How did you even come up with web-armpits? Spiders don’t have webs in their armpits.”

“It’s supposed to be fun and endearing! Making it cool and edgy is missing the point.”

The sketchbook sailed into the refrigerator. “I guess I can’t do anything to satisfy you, can I?”

Peter groaned, hand on his forehead. “Are we talking about that again? Maybe if you didn’t put so much pressure on me-”

“Yeah, or maybe I should just ask Mary Jane to take my place.” Gwen’s voice broke midway through the sentence. “You think I didn’t notice that little camping trip in your pants from her stupid April Fools’ joke?”

“You mean like how you think I haven’t noticed your flaming girl-crush on her?” Peter shot back.
“My-? What are you even talking about?” A shaky, disbelieving laugh escaped Gwen’s mouth. “That-’s- Now you’re just being ridicul-”

She was cut off by a bouncy, upbeat rendition of *The Itsy-Bitsy Spider.*

Far be it from Peter to let an excuse to change the subject pass him by. Instantly, he whipped out his phone and put it on speaker. “MJ? What’s up?” His ears were met with the sounds of faint screams and explosions. “MJ?”

“It’s Hobgoblin.” A sharp, frantic whisper shot out the phone’s speakers. “He showed up out of the blue here and- and I think he’s just blowing stuff up at random.”

“Oh god.” Whatever animosity between the couple might have lingered behind, it’d evaporated. “Where are you?”

“H-Hiding under a table in the outdoor booth…”

“On my way. I’m hanging up now – Try to stay quiet till I get there.” With the speed and skill of a firefighter, Peter sprang into action, throwing his clothes to the floor to free the spandex beneath and then slipping on his mask and gloves.

But as he was climbing out the window, a voice made him pause. “What should I do?”

Spider-Man glanced back at his trembling girlfriend. “Lock the doors and keep your eyes glued to the news.”

“Oh,” said Gwen.

“I won’t let the goblin come this way, I promise.” Without another word, Spider-Man tumbled out the window and swung off as fast as he could swing.

Actually, his foot stuck to the windowsill for a second like it’d got caught in gum or something. It was odd, but Spider-Man didn’t have time to dwell on it now. Seconds later, he was already cutting through the air. Let’s see, if he was remembering right, MJ had said today’s shoot was happening at her usual place of work, which was near NoHo-

Midway through that thought, something cold trickled up Peter’s ankle. “What the-?” Wham. He ended up waiting too long to release his web-line, resulting in a head-on collision with a building. Everything went black.

And when Peter opened his eyes, everything was still black.

“Oh no. Oh no.” Not now. There was no time for this. Sheesh, no wonder Peter’s spider-sense hadn’t gone off… He knew what this was. He could never forget this place.

The void of dark crimson, spanned by a massive spider-web and filled with a smoke that swirled around Peter’s head, around his thoughts, making them slow and muddy. This was a little, err, vacation home he’d popped off to the Thanksgiving before last. And if he was here again, then Peter would no doubt receive a visit from a talking black turd any second now. Perfect. Peter had been afraid that thing was still alive. Well, might as well get a head start setting up the mental antivirus software, which in this confusing metaphor meant focusing on positive emotions.

Peter shut his eyes. Last time he’d done this, he’d thought of *all* his loved ones. All the people in his life who cared about him. But this time, it was mostly just Gwen. One smile from her could ward off a million symbiotes.
Right on cue, a swirling black mass flew towards him. Peter readied his happy little thought, and then…

“Please, please, no, you can’t! We need you, Peter!”

...the black-suit Spider-Man plopped down before him, hugging Peter’s ankles and sobbing hysterically.

“Oh, wow.” Peter stepped backwards, dragging the black-suit Spidey across the floor (or, uh, whatever kind of ground an imaginary void in the center of one’s mind would have). “Not to criticize, but I feel like your last sales pitch was a little more… What’s the word? Dignified.”

“You don’t understand.” And now the black-suit Spidey was climbing its way up Peter’s waist. Well, this was the most homoerotic the symbiote had ever been. Which was saying something. “Our kind is nothing without a host. We’ve spent months alone. Months!” The symbiote’s voice was back to sounding like Peter’s own, only now its tone was less creepy and more like the pitch Peter’s voice had always gone whenever Harry had made him do the parrot levels in Donkey Kong Country 2. “We’ve searched and searched, but none have had the emotions we crave. None have… even known who Peter Parker is… and we can’t bear to bond with such hosts…”

Oh? So the symbiote had a taste for hosts who hated Peter personally? “Have you tried Jameso-?” Y’know what, he didn’t need to give it ideas.

“We’re losing our mind, Peter!”

“You? No.” Peter found himself shaking his head. He couldn’t believe it himself, but he actually felt the tiniest shred of pity for the Venom symbiote. It was like the parasitic alien equivalent of the ex who calls you out of the blue to say they miss you. But then Peter remembered Venom had tried to kill Gwen, and those shreds evaporated pretty quick.

“That was a horrible mistake, Peter! We would never hurt Gwen again.”

Peter jolted, covering his temples with his palms. “Hey! Stay out of my head!” His privacy had been invaded enough by Madame Web…

“We were an infant on a strange new planet.” By now, black-suit Spidey’s hug had traveled from Peter’s waist to his shoulders. “We had no sense of perspective, but we can be good now.” With a sudden push, he pinned Peter to a spider web, drawing in closer until their faces were inches away. “We can be together again.”

Peter groaned. “Yeah, because my love life wasn’t complicated enough already.”

“You need us, Peter.” A black palm touched Peter’s chest. Agh, it was cold. “We saw him evade you the last time – You’re not strong enough to defeat the Hobgoblin on your own.”

“Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence.” With a shake of his head, Peter shut his eyes. “Too bad for you, I don’t need fire or sound or any other tricks to get you off me.”

Gwen Stacy. The first time they’d kissed. The night she’d confessed that she’d loved him since the seventh grade. The first time they’d made love, or the much longer length of time that followed where they’d just sat up under the covers and held each other and talked.

“Stop it! Peter, we’re begging you!” Peter’s eyes reopened, and there was the black-suit Spider-
Man again, prostrating himself before Peter on hands and knees. “Hurt ing you was the biggest mistake of our life. We never should’ve left you for Eddie Brock. Eddie Brock is the Liz Allan to your Gwen Stacy.”

“Hey, I didn’t date Liz until after you and me split!” Peter stepped back, scowling. “I told you to stay out of my head.”

“Please, Peter, we won’t possess your body against your will again!” The symbiote must’ve sensed Peter’s displeasure because its voice was getting higher and faster. “We won’t make you shut out your loved ones. We’ll be satisfied feasting on only a small amount of negative emotions. A little negativity is healthy in humans!”

Peter took a breath, then knelt down to meet the symbiote’s pure white eyes. “Let me make something clear to you, Venom – You put Eddie in a coma, you spawned Carnage, and you tried to murder the woman I love.” Peter’s own eyes narrowed while the symbiote’s trembled. “And I will never, ever forgive you for that.”

“But… But we…” The symbiote turned away, hiding its face. “Peter… We don’t want to hurt you anymore. All that ever brought us was isolation. But what should we do? How could we ever repent for our sins?”

Peter found himself sighing. To be perfectly honest, he’d never for one second in his life pondered that dilemma before. Heck, he still half-suspected that this was all some trick, that Venom was playing the pity card to slither back into Peter’s brain, but… Peter also remembered that Captain Stacy had once talked about the importance of rehabilitation.

And so Peter said, “Well… I guess you’d have to give me evidence that you really, truly regret what you’ve done. Not just words, but actions.” He bowed his head. “Prove to me that you’ll never hurt anyone ever again.”

The black-suit Spider-Man gave a slow nod. “We… can do that for you.”

“You really think so?” A smile crossed Peter’s lips. “Aww, that warms my heart.” He placed a hand on its slimy shoulder. “In fact, it makes me feel positively positive.”

Y’know, Peter had given it a lot of thought, and he’d decided that for his and Gwen’s wedding, he ought to take the vows out of costume, but then he could wear the costume for photos or something. He’d want to invite a lot of friends, though, so he might want to do those pics after the guests had already cleared out-

“Hssssssss!”

Peter blinked, and then he was back in the real world, lying on his side in a nondescript alleyway. But before he could get his bearings, a dark shape darted past his head.

“Oh no you don’t-!” Spider-Man readied himself to weave a quick web-sack, but the symbiote moved faster than Spidey had ever seen it go before. Spidey wasted no time rounding the corner after it… and found himself standing before a massive crowd of surprised New Yorkers.

Okay, no big deal, Spider-Man just had to concentrate. The symbiote had probably latched onto that guy with the black t-shirt… or that other guy over there with the black jeans. Or the girl with the black boots. Or it could’ve darted down that storm drain…

Poop.
Spider-Man was about to ask the crowd if they’d seen any sentient black slime, but before he could, the sound of distant pumpkin-bomb explosions hit his ears. Oh yeah, that. Well, between Venom and Hobgoblin, it seemed like Hobby posed the biggest threat, and so without further ado, Spider-Man resumed his high-speed swinging in that direction. He could only pray the symbiote really was remorseful.

Hopefully, until Hobgoblin was dealt with, Symby wouldn’t cause any more trouble.

Gwen sat huddled on the couch in the apartment living room, staring at the newsfeed on the ancient, box-sized TV that MJ’s aunt had gifted them. Spider-Man wasn’t onscreen yet, but any second now, Gwen was expecting him to arrive, defeat the rampaging Hobgoblin, and then sweep Mary Jane off her feet.

Gwen huffed and rolled onto her shoulder. Looked like she’d be spending this adventure sitting here and contributing absolutely nothing except to give Peter an extra variable to worry about. As per usual.

She was just about shut her eyes and rest her head on the couch pillow… when something cold and moist touched the back of her neck.

“What the-?” Gwen sprang up, screaming and struggling, but her flailing failed to keep the cold moistness from traveling down her back… over her shoulders… her eyeballs…

The word was a crimson, smoke-filled void. Gwen stood at its center – if such a place could even be said to have a center – and across from her stood a lithe, shadowy, humanoid figure.

She instantly recognized it. Gwen would never forget that white spider-emblem on its chest. “No. Not you. Not again. Stay away from me!” She tried to run, but her feet were stuck tight in its slime. It was pulling her down like quicksand.

Wait, wait, this void… Peter had described it to her. Gwen knew what this was. The symbiote was trying to bond with her.

Gwen could handle that. In fact, she shouldn’t have had any trouble warding it off whatsoever, seeing as Gwen had spent more time than she’d like to admit pretending to cast a Patronus. All she had to do was think about the boy who made her happier than she’d been in years, who made her sometimes think her life was just a particularly vivid daydream, who… who would now have to rescue Gwen from an alien symbiote on top of having to rescue Mary Jane from the Hobgoblin.

Look at her. Gwen had just been sitting there doing nothing, and still she’d found a way to add to Peter’s workload. She really was just a fragile thing he had to take care of.

“Gwen Stacy.” The symbiote’s voice was Gwen’s own, only calm, steady, and confident. Gwen almost didn’t recognize it. “Your emotions taste different. Exotic. This isn’t hatred we sense – It’s something else. Something more subtle. More savory. But what…?” Its goopy white eyes fell on her quivering face. “Ah. Worthlessness.”

Gwen let herself go limp, merely watching as the black slime dragged her down deeper… and deeper…

“We can work with that.”
Next Issue: Gwenom!
“Ahh, nothing beats a nice, relaxing evening of curling up in your favorite armchair with a nice, long Jane Austen novel… and then getting bored and hurling bombs at people instead!” The Hobgoblin let loose another round, orange payload as he swooped over the shrieking crowd.

What’d once been a peaceful gathering of supermodels and supermodel-appreciators had now become a swarming mass of jumbled, fleeing civilians being herded like cattle by a circling goblin glider. Mary Jane, at least, had stayed levelheaded enough to hide herself under the table of the outdoor snack bar. Sad as it was to admit, supervillain attacks were becoming routine to her. At least this one was taking place right outside the front steps of a perfume factory, so hopefully MJ wouldn’t be left smelling too much like soot by the end of this…

One of the pumpkin bombs was fixing to detonate distressingly close to Mary Jane’s hiding place when a web-strand yanked it away.

“I can’t believe you, goblin.” Said hiding place didn’t provide MJ the best view, but that bouncy, smarmy voice seemed to be coming from the wall above the factory entrance. “You like JANE AUSTEN NOVELS? Ugh, I just lost all respect for you.”

It was a voice that helped slow MJ’s lightspeed-traveling pulse. Good, good, if Tiger was here, then everything would turn out fine. That seemed to be the general pattern of these things, anyways. And while he kept the baddie nice and distracted, Mary Jane would quietly excuse herself from the fray…

But as she crept out from her hiding spot on hands and knees, MJ couldn’t help but peek back at the battle. As expected, Spider-Man was busy dodging and flipping and webbing. He seemed to be trying his darndest to lure Hobgoblin away from this particular, heavily-populated chunk of city, but Hobby wasn’t taking the bait. It was hard to figure out what the creep was trying to accomplish, exactly, besides throwing bombs at random people…

…and as luck would have it, one of those random people happened to be Mary Jane.

“No!” Spider-Man tried to knock it away with a web-bullet, but the goblin used the distraction to ram the glider into his gut, causing the shot to miss.

The pumpkin bomb was getting closer and closer, and Mary Jane was scrambling to her feet, and she was just about to shut her eyes when a shadow darted towards her. Next thing MJ knew, she was being carried away from an explosion that’d detonated close enough to leave her ears ringing.

And the person doing the carrying wasn’t Spider-Man.

Her savior was almost half a foot shorter than Mary Jane, and yet the newcomer had no trouble bridal-carrying her to the sidewalk. From the white eyes and chest-spiders, MJ would’ve thought this was the black-suit Spider-Man – except that unlike Spider-Man, the newcomer happened to have an inky black hood. And also better hips.

“You okay?” asked the girl. Upon closer inspection, it turned out her hood was lined with little white fangs, which gave off the distressing impression that Venom was fixing to swallow her head whole.

But Mary Jane didn’t care about the girl’s hood nearly as much as her voice. MJ recognized it instantly. With a pang of genuine pain in her chest, she realized that the girl before her was-
This was the greatest day of Gwen’s life. She had just web-swung. Not “let Peter web-swing while carrying her,” but web-swung herself. On her own steam! She hadn’t even known she’d be capable of doing it with or without spider-powers, but it’d come to her so naturally. 

*We’re giving you some of Peter’s muscle memories,* said the helpful little voice in her head. *The full package is a bit much to sift through right this minute, but you have our full archive of past hosts’ minds at your disposal.*

Gwen’s pulse was going almost as fast as her brain right now. So then she was every bit Peter’s equal? Maybe now he’d be the one having to worry about bruised arms…

“*Gwen?*” the voice in her arms repeated, even more frantic this time. “What happened?”

Oh, right, Gwen was still clutching Mary Jane tight. And speaking of tight, get a load of that low-cut dress… which- which only stood out to Gwen because she was so envious of MJ’s looks, of course.

*No, we’re definitely sensing some suppressed bi-curiosity in you,* said the symbiote.

*Shut up.*

“It’s okay, MJ,” Gwen said aloud, setting her down. “We’re in control of this.”

“*‘We?’ That, err, wasn’t as reassuring as you probably meant…*”

But Gwen didn’t give MJ time to clarify before leaping back towards the factory’s front gates. Looked like Peter was still struggling against Hobgoblin in the air above, and so Gwen found herself pouncing onto the stage that’d been set up for the modeling event. There, she found a car (probably the first prize for the… modeling contest? Gwen had no idea how these things worked), which Gwen hoisted above her head and then hurled at the goblin. While it didn’t manage to knock the creep off his glider, the midair collision was enough to-

Wait, had Gwen just lifted a car above her head? You couldn’t see under her gooey black, white-eyed mask, but she was grinning like a moron.

At least until the spandex-clad wet-blanket landed onstage beside her. “I’m not angry, Symby, just… disappointed.” Spidey brought a palm to his temple. “When I asked you to prove you wouldn’t hurt anyone again, I was kinda implying I didn’t want you to ensnare another person. That’s what I get for being subtle.”

“No, Peter, you don’t understand!” Gwen found herself blurting out. “This fixes everything! W-We can help you now.”

“*Gwen?*” Needless to say, her words failed to have the intended effect. “Okay, *now* I’m angry.” The black-rimmed lenses of Spider-Man’s mask narrowed into slits. Through gritted teeth, he said, “You have officially gone too far. *You leave her out of this.*”

“Peter, please, it’s okay,” Gwen said in her most soothing voice. “The symbiote’s not hurting us- I mean her- *I mean me.*” Somehow, the words failed to calm Peter down. “This is a good thing.”

“You have to listen to me, Gwen.” Her boyfriend’s hands clamped down on Gwen’s gooey shoulders. “You can’t trust *any* of your own thoughts. Just do what I tell you-”
Gwen shoved them off. “Wow, you’ve never put it that bluntly before.”

“I mean it, Gwen. Vibrations and fire are super effective against the symbiote, so I need you to-”

But before Spider-Man could finish his command, a certain someone swooped towards them atop his glider. “Your friend there’s weak to fire, eh?” The Hobgoblin rubbed his hands together, giggling. “Ooh, I’ve got just the thing!” A split-second later, he retrieved what seemed to be a disembodied handle from a pouch beneath his orange cloak. And a split-second after that, he clicked a button on the handle, causing a tube of burning plasma to erupt from within. All that was missing was the lightsaber sound effect. “It’s time someone taught you that throwing cars at people’s head is terrible manners.”

Almost the moment she felt the slightest change in temperature, fear overtook Gwen’s body, greater than anything she’d ever known in her life. A scream exploded out Gwen’s face, but not from her mouth – It’d come from her mask itself. Without her even having to tell them too, her legs started carrying her away, but there was hardly any time to escape before the flaming sword closed in, and then-

“Yoink.” -a web-strand yanked it free of the Hobgoblin’s hands and into Spider-Man’s. “Not that I don’t appreciate the help against Venom, but somehow I doubt you’re too worried about the person inside the ooze.”

“Typical.” The Hobgoblin was left hovering in place, shaking his head. “I go through all that trouble to differentiate my arsenal from my green predecessor’s only to have it snatched away immediately…”

Meanwhile, Spider-Man powered down the sword, allowing Gwen and her costume to finally sit still.

“Th-Thank you,” a breathless Gwen managed. “Look, we can keep arguing once the bad guy’s dealt with, okay?”

After a moment’s reluctance, Spidey said, “Okay. But only cuz I don’t want him to hurt you.”

Good enough for Gwen. With a mutual nod, the two began their unspoken plan. Step one, Spider-Man bounded onto the wall so that he was over Hobgoblin’s head, then called out, “Wait, wait, wait, was that sword supposed to be your big thing to be different from Green Goblin? Wow, dude. Just wow.”

“What’s wrong with a flaming sword?” Hobgoblin snapped in an uncharacteristically shrill voice, rising his glider to meet Spidey’s eyes.

“You mean besides the terrible range and the risk of setting yourself on fire?”

“Well, then, I’ll be sure to find a nice and practical way to kill you-!” Right on cue, Hobgoblin whipped a pumpkin bomb from his pouch. Thwip. Which Gwen promptly yanked from his hand.

“What the-?” Before the goblin could even realize what’d happened, Gwen sprang onto the underside of his glider, stuffed the bomb in the tailpipe, and then dived back down.

“Wait, did you just-?” Spider-Man managed to web-yank the Hobgoblin to safety moments before the deafening explosion. The blast, though, was still enough to fry the goblin to a crisp. Poor guy was nearly solid black by the time Spider-Man touched down beside Gwen with the creep in his
arms. “What was that?”

“I beat him the same way you said you beat the Green Goblin,” Gwen replied, smirking under her mask. “Fitting, huh?”

“You mean the way that got Norman killed?”

“Fine, fine, I admit it!” cried the Hobgoblin, who Spider-Man was hauling with one arm like a sack of potatoes. “I’m just a lame knockoff of Osborn! Happy now?” And then he started laughing like a maniac until Spider-Man silenced him with a smack to the face.

In fact, the hit was hard enough to dislodge the goblin mask, revealing a particularly crazed and disheveled gray-haired man underneath.

“Roddie?” It was at this point that Mary Jane judged it safe to run back towards the group – though most other civilians had cleared out by now (Heh, Gwen didn’t have to classify herself as a “civilian” anymore). “Whoa, I knew you were going after a Kingsley, but I didn’t think it was that Kingsley. He’s, err, not usually like this…”

“Wonder what made him go off the deep end?” Gwen gave this some thought. “You don’t think Globulin Green makes the user go crazy, do you? It’d explain a lot…”

“We’ll let the cops worry about that. This ought to finally be enough to put Kingsley in jail – or at least Ravencroft.” Once the unconscious Kingsley was nice and comfy inside a web-cocoon, Spider-Man turned his attention to Gwen. “But right now, we’ve got a more pressing issue to talk about…”

Gwen folded her arms. “Well, seeing as we just took down the big scary supervillain for you, now do you see that the symbiote’s turned over a new leaf?”

“Yeah… You did good, Gwen.” Peter offered out a hug. “C’mere.”

Gwen moved in to accept the gesture… only to find herself ducking the swipe of a flaming sword. “Hey! Peter!”

“I’m sorry,” Spider-Man said, raising the weapon high, “but that thing has got to come off you.”

“We like our new bond!” Gwen snapped, springing backwards. “What’s the harm in it?”

“You’re talking about the same slime that dropped you off a parade float!” Peter snapped, springing forwards. “You really think you’d be so forgiving right now if it wasn’t messing with your head?”

Gwen’s every impulse told her to argue, yet she found herself hesitating. Peter’s words had been strangely disorienting.

*We didn’t know what we were doing,* said that helpful voice in her head. *We were a confused child flooded with the intense human emotions of our first two hosts, but we’ve learned better now.*

“The symbiote didn’t know what it was doing,” said Gwen. “It was a confused child flooded with the intense human emotions of its first two hosts, but it’s learned better now.”

That only made Peter scoff. “Yeah, that’s the same line it fed me. Maybe the ooze has gone straight, but is that really worth the risk that you’ll end up like Eddie?”
The word sent a jolt through Gwen’s chest. She drew back, her slimy white eyes widening. “Wait, wait, Eddie. Of course! If the symbiote put Eddie in that coma, it can take him out. We have to get to his hospital.”

“Oh, you’re not going anywhere-!”

But Spider-Man hardly had time to protest before Gwen had fired and web and swung off towards the skyline.

“Hey! Gwen! Get back here! No! Stop! Bad girlfriend!”

Before swinging off after his symbiotic sweetheart, Spider-Man powered down the flaming sword, hooked it to his utility belt, and then stopped to glance at a concerned Mary Jane hovering beside him. “Call the cops. Make sure they get a nice comfy cell ready for Kingsley there.” He hurried off without another word.

Mary Jane hesitated only a moment before saying, “Screw that” and dashing off to hail down a cab. Someone else had probably called the cops by now, anyways, so as far as MJ was concerned, priority number one was to chase after her web-headed friends.

She found herself in a taxi’s backseat within seconds. Yeah, Mary Jane had no idea why people always complained how hard it was to get cabs in this city – She never seemed to have trouble.

Gwen was swinging within a few feet of New York Hospital when the symbiote said in a somewhat petulant mental-tone, Why should we awaken Brock? He rejected us. He hates us.

I don’t know, Gwen replied in a more terse one, because putting people into comas is wrong? If you’re going to stay bonded with me, you’ll have to learn right from-

“Gwen!” Mid-thought, a voice hit her ears from behind that Gwen was honestly getting a bit sick of. “You have to stop this! How do you know, the instant Eddie’s awake, the symbiote won’t just jump back to him so Venom can kill you on the spot?”

The sound of thwipping grew more frantic behind Gwen, but her boyfriend couldn’t match the symbiote’s speed.

“Because Eddie already rejected us!” Gwen yelled over her shoulder.

“Rejected IT, Gwen! He rejected IT!”

The slimy white eyes of Gwen’s mask rolled themselves. Then, in the span of seconds, she spun around in midair, tendrils bursting from every pore of her costume. Spidey found himself caught off guard and trapped in a massive, pitch-black spider-web that spanned the buildings above the city street.

“Hey-!” He immediately started struggling, but he was stuck tight.

“Can’t you understand, Peter?” Gwen perched herself upside-down above him on the web, her face mere inches from his. “We’re doing this because we love you. We want to help you. Be with you.”

“Gwen…” He kept struggling at first, but as Gwen started to caress his shoulders, Peter’s efforts grew weak. He didn’t resist as she rolled back his mask, her own peeling back at the command of a mere thought, and then brought her lips to his…
“PUH! Ugh, yuck-!” And then his struggles were renewed tenfold. “God, I think a tendril went in my mouth. This is my punishment for being a closet monster girl fan, isn’t it?” He shot Gwen a scowl. “Okay, look, first of all, this is, if nothing else, just, like, really unsanitary. You don’t know where that thing’s been. It gave Jameson’s son alien spores—”

“The government people decontaminated us before we got to the ESU lab!” The words blurted out Gwen’s mouth all on their own.

“I saw you ooze down a storm drain! You’ve probably been living in the sewers for months!”

“We’ve been hijacking random people to use their showers. Just because we’re an alien doesn’t mean we can’t practice good hygiene—”

“Y’KNOW WHAT, I DON’T EVEN CARE HOW HYGIENIC YOU ARE, I AM NOT MAKING OUT WITH AN ALIEN SYMBIOTE.”

“Fine,” Gwen growled at him, “then you can just stay put for now. You’ll come to appreciate us once you see the symbiote’s not hurting anything.” And with that, she resumed web-swinging for the hospital, leaving Spider-Man to struggle against his restraints.

That time, the words had been Gwen’s own – At least, she was pretty sure they had. Really, did it even matter?

There was one stray nurse checking on Eddie, but she vacated the room pretty quickly once a slimy black spider-girl dived through the window. The moment she was inside, Gwen hurried to Eddie’s bedside and let the symbiote do its thing. Tendrils slithered out from her fingertips, crawling into Eddie’s ears like worms. Gwen couldn’t help but shudder at the display, but a minute later, the tendrils retracted back into her fingers. Eddie stirred on his mattress, but his eyes failed to open.

It’s done, said the symbiote. He should awaken eventually. Be it in days or weeks, we don’t know.

Thank you, said Gwen.

Thwip, thwip. But before she had time to say much else, a pair of regular gray webs shot through the shattered window, latched onto Gwen’s shoulders, and yanked her back outside.

“What the-?” She found herself smashing into the side of the neighboring building.

“I broke out with super spider-strength!” said a voice from above. “Gwen, I want you to know that I will always love you.”

“We’ll always love you, t—” Wham. A red fist sent Gwen flying upwards, and then a blue leg sent her into a crater on the rooftop.

“I am so so so so so so so sorry for that I love you babe please don’t be mad.” Spider-Man perched himself on the rim of the crater to peer down at her in horror. “But you’re not giving me a choice here.”

To her own surprise, Gwen found herself laughing as she hobbled to her feet. “So that’s how it’s gonna be, huh? Well, then, I guess you’re not giving me a choice, either.”

Needless to say, the next couple minutes was a flurry of fists and webs. Gwen ended up knocking Spider-Man off the rooftop so they could smash into the street below together, sending cars honking and swerving.
“Guys?” One of those cars happened to be a taxi cab, out of which Mary Jane sprang. She ran straight towards the chaos-

“Stay back!” but both spiders ended up firing their webs at her, knocking her purse to the pavement and pinning MJ to a street lamp with a mixture of gray and black goop.

“You’re never going to learn to mind your own business, are you?” Gwen snapped.

But while she was distracted scowling at MJ, Spider-Man whipped the stolen sword off his belt and fired it up. Gwen tried to web-yank it out of his hands, but a split-second quicker, Spider-Man webbed her hood and yanked it over her eyes.

“Hey-!” Gwen was blinded long enough to take a direct hit to the torso. She ended up knocked to the ground as the symbiote screeched its slimy head off.

“Don’t like it, do ya, Symby?” Spider-Man readied another blow.

But Gwen’s screams stilled his hand. “P-Peter…” She stumbled towards him, clutching her side. “What did you do?” Her mask even peeled itself back, giving him a perfect view of the tears streaming down her trembling cheeks.

Her every squeak of pain made his mask’s eyes wider and wider. “Gwen?” Without a moment’s hesitation, Peter powered down the sword so he could spring to her side. “Oh god, I’m sor-”

“Psych!”

His concern earned him a kick to the spleen. Gwen followed this up by successfully web-yanking the sword so she could power it down, snap it cleanly in half, and then kick Peter’s legs out from under him. Soon as his back hit the cement, Gwen was on top of him, her fingers clamping his neck like a vise.

“Now do you understand?” she hissed, her mask crawling back over her head. “We can control the symbiote better than Eddie ever could. We’re not fueling it with hatred – We can use it to help people. The symbiote wants to do good now, but you’ve refused to bond with it, so it’s simply found someone whose happy to take your place.” She cocked her newly-covered head at him. “Isn’t that what your whole philosophy’s about? Great power and great responsibility?”

“No,” Peter hissed back, strangled, “because you don’t have power – The symbiote does. You might think you’re in charge, but the longer you wear that thing, the more of yourself you lose to it. It’s preying on your negative emotions, Gwen, making you think you need it. That’s how it operates. Like a drug.”

“Well, what if it’s learned better by now?”

“What if it hasn’t?” Peter snapped, thrashing against his restraints. “I love you, Gwen, and I am not letting you take that risk.”

“That’s all you ever see me as!” His resistance only made Gwen clamp down harder. “A- A walking risk to myself. I can’t go back to that, Peter.” With every word, her volume increased. “You’re supposed to be my partner, not my caretaker! Ever since we started dating, I’ve been nothing but another problem for you to worry about. I’ve been…” She had to stop a moment to steady her shoulders. “…nothing…”

“Gwen…” The tone in Peter’s voice was finally able to loosen her grip on his throat. “I didn’t realize I was making you feel like that, and I should’ve. I’m sorry. I never meant to smother you.
The truth is…” But no matter how loose the grip, he still struggled to breathe. “…I promised your dad I’d watch out for you. I’ve only been trying to do right by him. Sometimes I—” His voice ended up cracking. “—I can’t even look at you without… seeing him.”

“Oh.” So did hers.

“You know I’m not mad you bonded with the symbiote,” Peter continued, “I’m terrified. Because, the thing is, I don’t have a greater responsibility than my one towards you, so I guess I’m scared of screwing that up. You’re worth everything to me, Gwen, and it’s not because you’ve got spider-powers or a cool costume with a hood.” His eyes had shut. It was kind of hard to tell beneath the mask, but Gwen had kind of learned how to tell. The white lenses lost some of their shine. “Every happy thought I’ll ever have begins and ends with you.”

“I- I—” Gwen stood there a minute, looming over Peter, trembling, until finally, slowly… the symbiote began peeling itself off her, trickling down her damp clothing like beads of water in the shower. “I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

What had once been a stranglehold on Peter’s neck transformed into a bear hug.

“And I want to spend the rest of mine with you.” The lovers held each other.

But they didn’t get long before the symbiote shoved Gwen to the pavement.

“I gotcha!” Spider-Man instantly caught her by the waist and pulled her back to him, of course, but by the time he did, the ooze was long gone. “Where-?”

Boyfriend and girlfriend inspected the area, but the search proved fruitless. Eventually, they had no choice but to throw up their hands and head for home.

But, err, not before freeing MJ from her web-cocoon and giving her back her purse, of course.

“…and while the general populace knows almost nothing about this new, hooded Spider-Woman, that hasn’t stopped her from becoming an extremely popular subject of cosplay and fanart.”

It was at this point that Gwen muted the TV so as to better direct Peter’s attention to the massive smirk on her face. “Told you the hood’s cool.”

“Yeah.” Peter scooted closer across the apartment’s living room couch, his eyebrow raised. “And I told you it gets in the way.”

“Oh, come on, I totally won that fight.”

The two shared some giggles, and a tickle-battle may or may not have erupted, but after a while, Gwen found herself growing more somber. “There’s a new problem, though. If the Venom symbiote managed to survive that fire, then how much you wanna bet the Carnage one did, too?”

At this, Peter went a couple shades paler, but all he said aloud was, “Y-Yeah, but Carnage isn’t exactly subtle, right? If a giant red murder-monster’s been running around this past year, we’d have heard about it.”

“Guess you’re right…” Gwen moved from hugging her boyfriend to hugging her knees. “Look at me, complaining you worry too much about me and then just adding more fuel to the fire…”

“Well, I’m your partner.” Peter placed a hand on her shoulder. “I’m always gonna worry. But I’ll
try not to go overboard with it. Besides,” he added with a smile, “you managed to shake off an alien symbiote all by yourself. Didn’t even need a church bell or spider-strength. That doesn’t sound weak in my book.” His other hand seemed like it wanted a place to dock, too… “For real, though, I’m gonna show you how to mix up web-fluid, and you can help me come up with more new gadgets like the Spider-Tracers. You’ll be like, uh, Spider-Tech Support.”

“Yeah, that’s probably a better solution than letting an alien symbiote hijack my brain,” Gwen admitted. “But… Peter?” A smile crept over her face. “Seeing as you promised not to treat me quite so delicately anymore, does that mean, even if my arm’s still bruised…?”

A moment passed, and then Peter let out this little gasp that was the perfect balance of surprised, apprehensive, and delighted. “O-Oh, if- if you’re sure you want to…”

“Peter,” Gwen said with half-lidded eyes, “you’re worth the risk.”
There was something surreal about seeing Mary Jane in a graduation gown. Gwen supposed even a goddess like MJ couldn’t make those baggy blue robes flattering. Of course, Peter looked great in them, but that was because the robes compounded his cuteness. Peter was something like fifty percent cute and fifty percent sexy, depending on the situation, whereas MJ’s dial was cranked up to max sexy all day, every day, and so when put into a decidedly non-sexy context, she didn’t know what to do with herself. Look at her there, fidgeting in her seat as she tapped away on her phone.

The sound of whispers and giggles hit Gwen’s ears, shaking her from her musings. The number of male students stealing glances at MJ hadn’t escaped Gwen’s notice. Guess she was alone in her opinion on that outfit…

“What’s got you so lost in thought?” asked a voice by her ear. Gwen turned her head to discover a certain fifty percent cute, fifty percent sexy someone.

Gwen flashed him a devious smirk. “Oh, just how cute you look in that gown.”

“That’s funny.” Peter smirked back. “I was thinking something similar…”

In the folding chair across from them, Kong made a face. “I was thinking I’m fixing to barf.” Liz didn’t look too pleased, either, a couple more chairs overs.

“Well, you won’t have to put up with the dreaded ‘nerd love’ much longer,” Glory said tightly from the chair adjacent to her boyfriend’s. “Most of us will never see each other again.”

“Oh yeah!” At this revelation, Kong spun towards his blonde buddy. “Flash, I want you to know you’ve been my best friend-”

“I’ll still keep in touch, you marshmallow,” said Flash from the other adjacent chair.

“It’s the rest of us you’ve gotta say goodbye to,” added Rand.

“Aw, yeah.” With that, Kong turned to Peter and Gwen. “G’bye, geek squad.”

Peter gave a casual wave. “Bye, King Kong.”

MJ looked up from her phone long enough to give Flash a wink. “Take care, big guy.”

“You, too.” Next, Flash turned to the “geek squad.” “And, uh, sorry I gave you two such a hard time all these years.”

“Water under the bridge,” shrugged Gwen.

“Yeah,” said Peter. “I mean, I was kind of a jerk, too, at the start of high school. People grow up.”

“Well, anyways, goodbye, everyone.” Gwen nodded to the familiar clique gathered around this corner of the waiting area – Flash, Kong, Glory, Rand, Sally, Liz...

“Wait, aren’t you gonna say bye to MJ?” frowned Flash.

“No need,” said MJ’s, whose eyes had returned to her phone. “We’re roomies – We see plenty of each other.”
“Wha-? Roomies? But isn’t Gwen living with-?” Disbelieving eyes fell on Peter. “So lemme get this straight, Parker… you’re rooming with two hot babes?”

Peter’s own eyes weren’t disbelieving so much as they were rolling. “Between you and me, you’d think I was rooming with two cats from all the hair...”

“None of that’s mine, for the record,” said Gwen.

“Of course not, dearest… Hey!” Gwen had tugged Peter’s square-shaped cap over his eyes.

“And god help you if you ever leave the lid up,” added MJ from behind her phone screen.

Eventually, Professor Warren stuck his head in the waiting room to inform the kids it was time to walk, and so they began filing out the room. Peter and Gwen, of course, opted to exit shoulder-to-shoulder, their fingers irreversibly tangled up in each other’s.

“Hey, Peter?” Gwen gave his cheek a surprise peck. “I unironically love you.”

Peter pecked back. “I unironically love you, too.”

“What’s this, now?” But then a voice sent both peckers glancing back. “‘Unironically?’” Mary Jane was trailing behind them with a growing smirk. “Is that even a word?”

“Oh, it’s-” Gwen traded glances with her boyfriend. “It’s just a thing me and Peter say.”

“Wow, careful not to give yourselves diabetes, there.” With one last smirk, MJ pushed off ahead of them. In hindsight, though, that smirk of hers might have been less of the arrogant and more of the self-satisfied variety.

Peter gave Gwen a similar expression. “Oh, if that’s enough to give us diabetes, we might want to keep an eye on our blood sugar in the next couple months...”

“Yeah?” The remark raised his girlfriend’s eyebrow. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.” Peter gave his most mysterious grin. “I just like being cryptic for no reason.”

“Whatever you say, dearest.” With that, Gwen kissed his forehead (though it required she stand on tiptoes), then hurried ahead to the auditorium.

Peter was left alone in the empty waiting room. Before following suit, he took one last glance at his phone’s wallpaper – an old photo of Aunt May and Uncle Ben taken on their wedding day.

Once it was finally time to walk, the graduates bid their hurried adieus, promising to totally keep in touch over Facebook for the rest of their lives, and then the group made its way out the hall.

As she and Peter took their seats at center stage, Gwen skimmed the crowd. After a bit of Where’s Waldo-esque hunting, she managed to spot Mrs. Parker and Dr. Bromwell in the bleachers. Midtown High had rented out a sports stadium, but it wasn’t exactly packed seeing as this was an exclusive magnet school. Not to mention the, y’know, constant supervillain attacks might have increased Midtown High’s transfer rate. And that wasn’t even mentioning Harry, who hadn’t shown his face again since Macbeth wrapped up last April.

Even when the announcements started, Peter and Gwen couldn’t keep from making eyes and giggling at each other. It was unfair, really. They’d never see these other kids ever again, whereas they’d be seeing each other the rest of their lives.
Anyways, after some opening words from the principal, the graduates were subjected to this year’s special guest speaker – a certain blonde pretty boy in a skintight, sky blue costume.

“Oh, good.” The sight of him forced a groan out Peter’s mouth. “This guy.”

“What, you don’t like Human Torch?” Gwen leaned over in her seat to whisper at him. “Why? I thought you’d appreciate more superheroes helping out around the city?”

Peter scowled up at the podium, where the grinning Johnny was currently writing out “two plus two equals three” in the air with his fire-powers.

“And this is what happens when the Thing does my homework!” Johnny said – to the uproarious laughter of every last teenage girl in the crowd.

“Oh, yeah, he’s a huge help around the city,” Peter whispered back with a roll of his eyes. “Like remember all those times the Fantastic Four teamed up with me fight the Sinister Six? Ohhhh, wait. Or how ’bout all those times they went after Venom for me, since the Four are all about battling totally real space aliens that definitely exist?”

Gwen couldn’t help but shake her head as she smiled. “Maybe they’re just busy with the larger-scale super-threats like, y’know, Doctor Doom? Dictator of Latveria’s kind of a bigger threat than some random mad scientist with tentacle arms, right? I mean, come on, have you ever actually met Human Torch?”

“He’s almost set me on fire a couple times when my web-swinging path overlapped with his flight-path,” said Peter. “Does that count?”

It was at this point that Mary Jane slung a shoulder over the back of her seat so she could join in the whisper-fest. “You’ve almost been set on fire by Johnny Storm?”

“Oh, yeah.”

MJ pursed her lips. “Lucky jerk…”

Peter could only reply with the driest of stares. “Fangirls scare me.”

Back at the front of the stadium, Johnny was wrapping up his speech: “And, uh, never give up on your dreams and stuff. Peace out.”

As soon as he was gone, the school principal returned to the podium to say, “And now I’d like to welcome this year’s valedictorian. Please put your hands together for Hobie Brown.”

Hobie made his way to the podium amid applause. He took out his script, cleared his throat, opened his mouth, then said…

Okay, Gwen was gonna be honest, she didn’t pay attention to a word of it. She was too busy fuming over the fact that she’d been snubbed of the title. Well, that was the cost of dating a superhero, she supposed – The constant supervillain attacks made it hard to focus on schoolwork.

After an eternity (that felt even longer since Gwen wasn’t allowed to check her phone), the ceremony ended, caps were thrown, and then the freshly-graduated ex-students dispersed to meet with their families. Gwen’s relatives hadn’t been able to make it from England, meaning she instead gravitated towards Mrs. Parker.

Mrs. Parker embraced the three graduates and gave her congratulations, and then the group headed
outside. Gwen had no intention of dawdling – The sooner they got the obligatory graduation photos out of the way, the sooner they could get to the Silver Spoon and quiet her stomach.

Their travels were hindered, though, by a constant stream of other students. Most of them were clearly hoping to steal one last longing look at Mary Jane. Even Sally showed up to make peace with the “nerd herd” for all the headaches she’d caused (mostly from the sound of her voice alone). Sally, too, took a longing look at MJ, but not in the slash fic sense.

“And I’m… I’m real sorry for the way I treated you, Red.” Sally shook her head.

“Don’t give it another thought, Blondie.” MJ gave a reassuring smile. “We’re square.”

And with that, Sally said her goodbyes and ran off in Rand’s general direction. Seemed she’s managed to mend things with him, too.

Once they reached the outdoors, Mary Jane muttered, “Feels like I’ve been released from prison…” and then the group wandered off in search of her aunt.

But what Gwen didn’t notice, though, was that while she and MJ wandered off, Peter lingered behind and, after a meaningful look from him, Aunt May did likewise.

“J-Just wanted to chat for a sec.” Peter gave a worried glance back in the girls’ direction.

Aunt May was quick to frown. “Is everything alright, Peter, dear? How’s Mary Jane been?”

“Oh, no, she’s good. It’s not that.”

“I’m… I’m glad she has you and Gwen for friends.” May’s eyes fell on the mop of red hair shrinking over the horizon. “From what Anna tells me, she could use those right about now…” She took a breath. “I only worry, after the move, I won’t be able to be there for you.”

“I’ll be alright, Aunt May.” Peter met her eyes. “I promise you I’m fine. I want you to focus on being safe and happy, and if living near Nick and his family does that, then that’s where you belong.”

“I know you’re right, dear, but still…” May managed a slow nod before her eyelids finished their journey. “I’ve missed living with you.”

“I’ve missed you, too.”

Silence crept over them. Peter thought about hurrying on ahead of her to catch up with the girls, but instead, he found himself saying, “Hey, Aunt May? You and Uncle Ben were only eighteen when you got married, right?”

“Was it that long ago?” May waved a hand at him. “We were lucky things worked out the way they did. It wasn’t easy for us, Peter – Marriage takes work. It’s not something you do lightly. There were a lot of years before you entered our life, and heaven knows those years had their ups and downs, but…” She turned to face Peter. “...we were certain we loved each other. We’d known since we were children, and we’d already been through so much together, even at eighteen.” Then she gave him a look. “Why?”

Peter drew back. “N-No reason.”

“Peter...” May smiled right through him. “Have you asked her already?”
“Not exactly, but…” This next part required Peter to clear his throat. “…I kinda said I’d marry her when she turned eighteen, and Gwen seemed pretty thrilled. I mean, we haven’t talked about it again since I first brought it up, but, y’know, August is fast approaching – birthday month for us both, so…”

This earned him another, softer look. “I’m not going to encourage you, Peter but I’m not going to forbid you, either. You’re mature enough to make your own decisions, and I’ve mollycoddled you more than enough for one lifetime. But…” The look morphed into something warmer. “…I know that you and Gwen truly, deeply love each other, and whenever you decide the time is right, you have my blessing.”

Were they really having this conversation? If this was real, why was the whole parking lot spinning? Parking lots didn’t spin. “Aunt May… that means everything to me.”

May nodded. “I don’t know when it will happen, but sooner or later, you will propose to her. We both know it.” She let out a soft laugh. “It’ll be hard to top your uncle’s, though. He took me backpacking on this beautiful trail outside the city. He was so excited to show me this cliff with a view of the lake… that he slipped. Almost broke his leg.” That sounded like Ben. When Peter shut his eyes, he could see it playing out like a movie. “He was alright, but something came tumbling out his pocket, and so I picked it up, and I said, ‘Ben, what’s this?’ and he said.” She put on a deep voice: “‘-um, uhh, um…’ And after that, he didn’t really have to say anything.” Peter’s eyes reopened to find May smiling to herself. “I knew the question, and he knew the answer.”

May held out her hand to inspect the golden band it contained. “And that’s why, when you ask Gwen…” And then gently slipped it off. “…I want you to give her this.”

“Aunt May, I couldn’t-” Peter was a mess of contradictions tonight. If his smile was so wide, why were his eyes so wet? “-Thank you.” He allowed May to place the ring into his palm. It was shockingly light, and considering Peter’s spider-strength, it was fragile, too. There was a little white gemstone lodged in it. Peter wanted to say it was plain, except if it was so plain, why did it make his heart beat this fast?

“I’m sorry I don’t have the complete pair.” May gave a strained smile. “I left Ben’s on his hand.” She gestured to her own hand, which now had a ring-shaped mark on a finger.

Slowly, Peter’s fist closed around the metal. He couldn’t decide on any words, and so instead he opted for a hug.

Luckily, Gwen didn’t seem to have noticed Peter’s brief absence, meaning he was able to slip back behind her and MJ without interrogation. He had to restrain himself from constantly touching the little hunk of metal in his pocket and grinning like a loon, though. At this rate, by the wedding day, he’d be refusing to let Gwen touch his precious.

It would seem, while Peter had been gone, the girls had stumbled across a certain duo of blonde-haired guy and dark-haired girl – a girl who was one of the few Midtown High students here today not in graduation robes.*

*I was rewatching Spectacular Spidey for the ten billionth time, and it turns out Sha Shan was a sophomore in the show, meaning she doesn’t get to graduate quite yet. – Continuity Police

“Hey, Flash, Sha Shan.” Peter gave them a pleasant wave. Wow. In Flash’s pre-Sha Shan days, the idea of Peter giving him a pleasant anything would’ve been inconceivable. “Just saying your goodbyes? Though I guess you haven’t seen the last of Sha Shan, have you, Flash?”
“But of course, his first love will always be Spider-Man,” said Sha Shan with a smirk. “So anyways, what’re you guys doing after you graduate?” She looked the trio over. “You’re all going to ESU, right? To study biogenetics?”

Peter and Gwen shared a nod, but Mary Jane’s head remained still.

“Eh, college is for smart people.” She shrugged. “My calling’s the modeling scene.”

Eventually, the conversation died down, and the remaining trio were left in silence, fanning themselves in the sun as they walked. But as they neared Dr. Bromwell’s minivan, a figure approached them that made Mary Jane shiver like it was below zero out. Standing right in the van’s path was some schlubby guy with graying hair and a white, sweat-stained tank top.

“Mary.” He had a hint of a Brooklyn accent, but it wasn’t too pronounced. Not in comparison to his gut, anyways.

“Phil.” MJ’s lips were her only muscles to move.

“You finished school?” Phil snorted. “Honesty, till Anna called, your ma and I’d thought you’d dropped out.” He nodded to the more familiar figure of Anna Watson, who was hovering off to the side, concern on her face.

“That would conform with your vision of reality, yes,” said MJ.

It was at this point that Peter felt the need to give Mary Jane’s arm a tug. “C-C’mon, MJ, we should really get going-”

“You s’posed to be her latest boyfriend?” The guy cocked an eyebrow at him.

Well, this conversation had lasted two seconds, and already Peter was scowling.

“You’re young, so you don’t know any better, but I’ll go ahead and warn you girls like Mary are parasites, and you’re better off puttin’ her back where you found her.” With that colorful remark out of the way, Phil’s eyes moved back to the girl who was, in the most technical sense of the word, his daughter. “I’m sure you’re busy whoring it up on the runway, but I thought you’d like to know your mother’s gotten real sick-”

“Oh, NOW you care about Mom?”

“Don’t sink to his level, MJ-” Peter tried to grab her arm, but she swatted him away.

“Guess you didn’t get the hint when I emancipated myself, but I actually DON’T want to see your face again.”

“Mary Jane, wait-” The combined force of Peter and Gwen was unable to catch the redhead before she was bolting across the parking lot.

“Yeah, run away again!” Phil called after her. “Why break the pattern?”

A glance over his shoulder told Peter that the two aunts were fixing to give Anna’s brother a stern talking-to, but he didn’t take much time to look. He was too busy dashing after MJ alongside his girlfriend.

If Gwen had thought Mary Jane looked surreal in her graduation gown, that was because she hadn’t seen Mary Jane huddled against a tree trunk, her gown tossed to the dirt beneath her, clutching her
black purse to her chest like a security blanket and trying in vain to hide her face.

The couple made their way towards her through the small thicket of trees, which obscured them from the sight of the other graduates. It was only thanks to this fact, Gwen suspected, that Mary Jane allowed Gwen and Peter and to seat themselves in the dirt at opposite ends of her, Peter patting her arm and Gwen stroking her hair.

“It’s okay,” Gwen murmured. “It’s okay, MJ…”

“Well, you finally met my old man.” MJ wiped her eyes, smiling to herself. “Real charmer, isn’t he? Whatever else you could say about him, he’s always had a gift for astute observations.” Her lids clamped shut. “You two are the lovebirds, and I’m the #$%*ing cuckoo bird.”

At this point, Peter and Gwen didn’t even need to trade glances behind MJ’s shoulders. As if on cue, Gwen squeezed MJ’s hand while Peter took a deep breath.

“Mary Jane…” he began. “When I’m out there as Spider-Man, y’know all those goofy jokes I make?”

MJ wiped her eyes. The tears had been undercut by a quizzical look.

“Every time I make those, I’m actually scared out of my mind.” Peter glanced away. “But I put on the mask, and everyone thinks I’m this fearless hotshot hero.”

There was a sniffle. “I don’t see what that has to do with anything.”

“MJ.” Gwen scoffed in spite of herself. “Listen, Peter and I get what’s going on with your parents, and you have to know we’re here for you.” Her grip tightened.

That only made Mary Jane sniffle louder. “God, guys, stop being so perfect. It’s wasted on me.”

“Caring about you isn’t a waste.” Peter’s eyes narrowed. “Please, MJ, whatever you’re really feeling about your dad or Mark or- or anything, we want you to tell us about it.”

Mary Jane stayed still.

“We’ll always be there for you,” said Gwen. “Promise.”

Peter nodded. “No matter what.”

For a moment, no movement happened.

But then movement did happen, and Gwen’s face drew back and her eyes shut and she tasted that cinnamon toothpaste they’d picked out the last time she and MJ went shopping, which was weird because Gwen hadn’t actually brushed her teeth yet today, but by the time her brain finally worked out that puzzler, Mary Jane had already moved over to present Peter with the same dilemma.

A strangled squeak escaped Gwen’s mouth. She almost tumbled right out the thicket, but Mary Jane yanked her back by the wrist – though it turned out that wasn’t an entirely altruistic act.

The next couple seconds were filled with the soft, alternating sounds of smacking and popping. It honestly took a bit longer than Gwen would’ve thought for her and Peter to finally spring to their feet.

“Wait, slow down-”
“MJ, we can’t-”

The two of them walked backwards to fast, Gwen nearly twisted her ankle on a stray root.

“Is this real life?” Peter sounded like he’d just stepped out of a centrifuge.

The words had hardly escaped his mouth before Mary Jane sprang to her feet, too, then rammed through them like a bowling ball through pins, vanishing even deeper into the thicket.

“Hey, hold up-!” The couple started after her, but they were a bit too stunned to catch up.

“I’m sorry.” The voice coming out Mary Jane’s mouth was utterly, utterly alien. “I mean, you were warned I’m a whore.”

“Mary Jane?” Gwen tried to chase her, but as soon as she rounded the next tree trunk, MJ was gone.

“MJ?” Peter called out, but to no avail. “MJ, can we talk about this?”

“Lord in heaven.” It was at this point that Gwen stumbled backwards, gasping for air. Peter’s attention snapped to her like flipping a switch. “What do we do now?”

“You’re asking me?” Peter sputtered. “I’m a seventeen-year-old boy! You can’t trust my judgment!”

After a roll of her eyes, Gwen resumed the search. A couple seconds later, Mary Jane was spotted panting – or maybe more like hyperventilating – near the edge of the trees, right by the stadium’s deserted opposite side. As soon as she caught sight of the approaching couple, though, she resumed sprinting at full speed… which led to her tripping over a root and smashing face-first into the dirt.

“MJ…” The couple was closing in on her now, Gwen at the lead. “It’s oka-”

“No, no, I’m sorry I- I just thought- God, I’m stupid.” Mary Jane flopped over in the dirt, nursing her ankle. The sight of it was kind of haunting, not because MJ was injured but because Gwen didn’t think she’d ever seen Mary Jane look so unabashedly… abashed. “Why do I have to ruin everything I… I…?” Her hand had gone for the purse that’d clattered to her side. But before she could get to it, the purse got to her.

Or more specifically, a jet of black slime erupted out of it and onto her.

“What the-?” Before Gwen even had time to process this development, Peter had yanked her backwards.

“So that’s where it’s been hiding all these months.” He nearly shoved Gwen out the thicket. “Run. I got this.”

For a couple frenzied seconds, Gwen’s gaze went from her boyfriend to her best friend, whose entire body was now encased in the black slime save for some white blotches for the eyes, and then back to her boyfriend, whose graduation gown was now accentuated by a Spider-Man mask.

“What are you waiting for, the starting pistol? I said run!” Spider-Man wasted no time backflipping onto one of the taller tree trunks and firing an opening volley of web-bullets at the slime.

But the most Gwen could do was stammer, “You- You wore your costume and web-shooters to
graduation?"

“Should I not have?”

The debate was interrupted by the sound of Mary Jane shrieking. At first it was in her regular voice, but as the ooze dribbled over her mouth, the shriek became distorted. Inhuman. And forceful enough to wrench open the jaws of the slimy black head, freeing the countless fangs and lanky tongue within.

Yeah, Gwen had no further trouble running away.

There was no time for Peter to rip off his civilian clothes. Normally, in that case, his iconic blue t-shirt with the tag sticking out might jeopardize his secret ID, but luckily, today just so happened to be a day when every single kid present happened to be wearing the exact same outfit. And the general public had pretty much assumed Spidey was a Midtown Magnet student, anyways, after all the battles he’d had there. In fact, letting people know the Web-Head had graduated was probably a good thing since maybe now bad guys like Smythe would leave the poor school alone. Sure, Spider-Man nearly slipped and broke his neck on the stupid outfit during all his acrobatics, but hey, at least Tombstone would be thrilled at all the new Graduation Gown Spidey Funko Pops he could sell…

Spider-Man was shaken from his thoughts by She-Venom tossing a tree at his head. Luckily, though, the wonders of spider-sense let him duck it. To be honest, Spidey was less troubled by the weaponized lumber than he was at the sight of Venom with a bikini bod. Though that wasn’t to say the symbiote hadn’t added any muscle mass.

“Oh, the cruel irony!” Spidey cried as a swarm of black tendrils chased him out of the thicket. “I’ve always wanted death by snu snu, but not like this! Not like this!”

She-Venom replied only with another blood-curdling roar as she sprang out after him into the clearing. That was weird – She didn’t seem to be talkative. Spider-Man gave this some thought as he ducked incoming claw-swipes. The symbiote fed on negative emotions, so it wasn’t hard to imagine what might’ve drawn it to Mary Jane just now, especially if it’d really just spent the past couple months in her purse. Poor Symby must’ve been starving. But even Eddie, as much hatred as he’d had, hadn’t been turned into a mindless monster.

Before Spider-Man had time to dwell on that, though, She-Venom started to scurry off on all fours, and naturally, she was headed right towards the horde of screaming and fleeing high school grads a couple meters away. “No you don’t.” But the beast hadn’t gotten too far before Spidey managed to yank her back with a pair of webs on her back.

She-Venom roared her displeasure as she hurtled backwards through the air, then grunted once a well-timed kick sent her into a crater on the pavement. This was followed up with a well-timed web-cocoon to keep her there.

“Mary Jane! Mary Jane, I know you can hear me!” For every layer of webbing She-Venom tore through, Spider-Man whipped up two more. Ooh, this wasn’t gonna do his web-fluid budget any favors. “If Gwen can fight this, you can, too. It’s gonna be okay. Focus on my voice.”

She-Venom’s struggles did seem to slow a bit.

“Look, MJ, just between you and me…” Spidey glanced around to make sure none of the nearby graduates were taking the time to eavesdrop between all their running and screaming. “…you
haven’t actually done anything that I, err… have any problems with.”

At this, She-Venom made this achy noise that was probably the closest an alien symbiote could get to mewling. That was it – The slime was starting to drip off her. That was how you did it, like extinguishing a fire. Remove its fuel source (i.e. the negativity) and it went right out.

“Come on, MJ,” Spider-Man murmured, huddling over her cocoon. “Everrrrrything’s fine.” And this time, when the symbiote was wrenched free, Spidey would have a web-net ready and waiting. There was no possible way it could escape.

“Flame on!” yelled a voice from behind.

Peter’s spider-sense barely had time to tingle before a pillar of flame knocked She-Venom out from under him. “Hey-!” In fact, he narrowly dodged getting singed, himself.

“You can crawl back to your web now, Spidey.” Naturally, hovering in the air behind Spider-Man was a human-shaped bonfire. “Let the pro handle this one.”

“Oh, of course, the one time you actually try to help…” Before Human Torch could hurl more fire, Spider-Man called out, “Don’t! There’s an innocent person inside that slime!”

That, at least, got Human Torch to stand down. “Really?” He scratched his blazing chin.

Spider-Man looked back to She-Venom. She’d pulled herself to her feet, and judging by the speed at which her chest was heaving, it was safe to say calming her down again was officially off the table.

She-Venom started to flee into the woods-

“Then I’ll have to try a different trick!”

—but her path was blocked by a wall of flame mere inches from her slithering tongue.

“Wait!” Spider-Man charged for it, but he was too late – The symbiote had already hopped off Mary Jane and slithered full-speed back into the thicket, and yanking MJ away from the heat took priority over chasing the ooze.

It was at this point that Human Torch landed beside the others, then powered down his flames so he could flash his dazzling white teeth at them. “No need to thank me.”

“Oh, no, I insist!” Spider-Man snapped, cradling MJ in his arms. “Thank you so much for helping the alien symbiote escape. It’s such fun to guess which of my close friends it’ll bond with next. A surprise every week!”

“Wait, alien?” Johnny was taken aback. Between the dumbfounded look on his face and his corny, skintight, sky blue costume with the big “4” logo on it, all he was missing was the neon sign above his head reading I’M A TOOL. “You’re saying that Venom guy’s an alien?”

“Um, yeah,” said Spider-Man as he helped Mary Jane cough up flecks of black sludge. “Y’know, those things you’re team’s supposed to specialize in fighting?”

“Seriously?” Johnny gawked at him. “Dude, we’re sorry! We just thought he was a regular super-mercenary.”

“A regular-? He looks like a rejected H. R. Giger design!”
“It’s not our fault your rogues gallery’s so weird! I mean, were we s’posed to assume Sandman was an alien, too?”

“I would’ve appreciated some help against Sandman, yes.”

“Hey, I’ve fought Sandman before! I mean, if anything, he should’ve been one of our rogues gallery. What could you even do against the guy, squirt webs at him?”

“Oh my god,” came the voice in Spider-Man’s arms, “will you two just make out already?”

Unfortunately, Mary Jane’s remark had the effect of drawing Johnny’s attention. “Well,” he said, his voice suddenly much breathier, “he wouldn’t be my first choice.”

Against his own will, Spider-Man’s grip tightened.

But after a tense moment, Mary Jane simply said, “Tempting, but I’ll pass. Sorry, I’ve had bad experiences with fire-spewing boyfriends…”

Johnny was left scratching his head as Spidey and MJ slinked off.

Somehow, a pall was cast over graduation dinner. Aunt May ended up spending nearly the whole time huddling against Dr. Bromwell and bemoaning how she couldn’t go into the city for one day without a supervillain attack (Luckily, the Fantastic Four had opted not to reveal to the public that it’d been Mary Jane). Though Aunt May had been sure to voice her gratitude to Spider-Man for helping to battle that mysterious black creature. Her… Her opinion on the Web-Head must’ve changed after he rescued her from Electro last February. That was all.

As for MJ’s dear old dad, he’d naturally fled at the first sign of a monster attack, so that seemed to improve Mary Jane’s mood. By the time she, Peter, and Gwen had left the Silver Spoon and returned to their apartment, MJ had something that at least looked like a smile on her face.

“Well,” she said, shutting the front door behind them, “I’d have never guessed the symbiote was hiding in my purse all along. What a wacky misadventure that was. And I can’t believe it could hijack my brain through the purse and make me do all that weird stuff. In fact it was so weird that we should never talk about it again. Good night.”

Mary Jane made for her bedroom, but she was stopped by a hand on her wrist. Reluctantly, MJ turned back.

Gwen wouldn’t loosen the grip until Mary Jane’s wavering eyes met her steadfast ones. “You’re not a whore, Mary Jane.”

One remark, and Mary Jane’s posture melted. She sniffled a moment, her eyes clamped shut.

“MJ, look…” Peter took a breath. “Bad as the symbiote is, it’s not a mindless monster. It just feeds on emotion, so, I mean, if it was freaking out, I’m pretty sure that means you were freaking out.”

Mary Jane half-opened her lids to give him a sullen look. “It was more like an anxiety attack. The slime just multiplied it by a billion.”

“I’m sorry,” Peter said softly. “That can’t have been fun. But, you know… there’s really no need to get anxious when it comes to…” He swapped glances with Gwen so that she could wordlessly confirm the statement Peter was fixing to make. “…your friendship with us. There’s nothing you could ever do to lose that.”
“Peter and I asked you to open up to us, and, well, you did.” Gwen hugged herself in a futile attempt to keep the redness from rushing to her cheeks. “We meant what we said – We’re here for you.”

Mary Jane met the remark only with more sniffles. But before Peter and Gwen had the chance to hug her tight, she held out her phone, allowing them to see the image she’d pulled up.

Peter and Gwen found themselves gaping at it. For a second, Peter almost thought it was an old picture of Gwen, except Gwen’s hair had never been red. The girl in the picture was smiling together with an older woman, presumably her mom, outside a Broadway theater. The girl’s hair was about as messy as Gwen’s on a good day, and her eyes were covered by big, black-rimmed glasses. As for clothes, the girl had on a baggy t-shirt and jeans.

“Is that your little sister?” asked Peter.

Mary Jane almost laughed, but she didn’t manage it. “This was taken two years ago. Before the world knew MJ, it knew...” She glanced away to mutter, “Brainy Janey.”

“Brainy Janey?” Gwen scoffed. Then she caught herself and blurted out, “Not that you’re not smart! It’s just, that’s really...”

“Not a name Janey picked out herself, trust me.” MJ turned the phone back off. Peter got the impression keeping it on for even a minute had been a struggle for her. “See, other kids tended to think Brainy Janey was kind of a dork, and since Janey was always moving to new schools because of her jerk of a dad, well, Janey wasn’t so good at making friends.” Her shoulders sagged. “She was great at acting, though. She could stay in-character for days... weeks... months...”

“Mary Jane...” He didn’t know which of them had done it first, but Peter and Gwen both ended up walking towards her.

“And, like, at first it was just a way to get people to like me at my latest school, but then I got stuck like this.” MJ’s words were gaining speed. “All I had to do was starve myself and spend five hours a day in front of the mirror, and suddenly everyone in class was fawning over me, and I was fooling around with boys, and then I was fooling around with girls, too, and suddenly I had a rep, and- and it all happened so fast, and I ended up going on a date with Mark, but it wasn’t a date date, and then we fell in love, but it wasn’t love love, and then I got this modeling gig that made me brave enough to run away from home, and Mark’s Molten Man problem was dealt with, so we got a place together, but the longer I was with him, the more he realized that I’m, as Holden Caulfield would put it, a phony, and then I didn’t have anywhere else to go, so I latched onto you guys, and I saw everything you two had together, and I got hit with this crazy mix of jealousy and- and...”

The longer she spoke, the less coherent MJ grew. Peter found himself stroking her hair while Gwen fumbled through MJ’s purse for a tissue.

Peter couldn’t help but remember something he’d once been told: We all wear masks, Spider-Man.
It was half past midnight, there was work in the morning, and Peter and Gwen were wide awake. Gwen turned over under the covers, fluffed her pillow, forced her eyes shut… nothing. She had no choice but to sit there and watch the swirling purple patterns behind her eyelids.

Finally, though, she broke down and said, “So are we just not going to talk about the fact that Mary Jane has feelings for us? Both of us?” MJ hadn’t been kidding about being a total hippie…

Gwen had gotten to the point where she could tell Peter was blushing by the way his body shifted around hers (Yeah, she was the little spoon for life). “Well, MJ said she didn’t wanna talk about it anymore,” he began. “What’s there to say, anyways? She was just emotional, y’know, and she needed to get it off her chest. I mean, I don’t think she actually expected us to… to…” He wasn’t brave enough to finish the sentence. “But anyways, we should really drop it and let things go back to normal.”

“Right.” Gwen’s back stayed facing him. “Dropping it, starting now.”

After that, silence returned to pitch black bedroom. Until she heard Peter take a breath.

“But Gwen?” He nestled his chin into the crook of her neck. It fit so perfectly, you’d think it belonged there. “You know I love you.”

“And I love you.” Gwen drew her head back, feeling her cheek against his.

“Gwen, I swear to you… Mary Jane will never, ever replace you in my heart.”

“I know. It’s okay, I know.” Slowly, Gwen’s eyes shut. “And she’ll never replace you in mine, either.”

It was only when Peter laughed that Gwen realized what she’d just said. “Uh, yeah.” She’d also learned to tell when Peter was giving her a funny look. “But that’s, ah, not exactly in the same realm of possibility, though, right? Right?”

Again, the silence returned.

End of Lesson 6
Lesson 7: Ecology 101

This was going to require the hands of a surgeon. One small screwup, and Mary Jane’s life as she knew it would be over. She held her breath. She needed every last drop of her concentration. Even breathing would distract her.

Slowly, carefully, Mary Jane lowered the brush to her nail, smearing it with red. *Easy does it... Easy does it... There.* One down, nine to go.

Okay, next one-

“It’s so great to see you again, Mary Jane!” Aunt Anna barged into the room with a tray of cookies.

“You, too, Aunt A.” No need to panic, no need to panic. MJ simply had to maintain her concentration on her nails whilst also acting pleasant towards her aunt. Easy peasy.

“Any idea how long you’ll be staying?”

MJ was forced to exhale. “Until I can walk through my front door without getting my eardrums blown out.”

Anna gave a pleasant laugh (even though Mary Jane hadn’t been joking). She seated herself in the armchair opposite MJ’s. “Well, I’m glad to see you, despite the circumstances. And I know...” Her face drooped. “I know your mother doesn’t always get along with my brother, but if they truly love each other, they’ll work out their differences.”

“Of course. Every couple fights. Nothing to get worked up about.” MJ’s sockets had to wrestle with her eyes to keep them from rolling.

Anna smiled. “Well, I’m glad you’re in high spirits. That’s what I like so much about you, Mary Jane – your optimism.”

“Yeah, that’s what all the boys like about me, too.”

They shared a laugh.

Truth be told, Mary Jane was ready and willing to drag her feet here as long as possible. Why would she be eager to leave a house where there were no dishes in the sink, the floor looked like it’d actually been vacuumed sometime this year, and you could hear birds chirping outside the windowsill. Real ones, not just the recordings MJ had to listen to to fall asleep without waking to panic attacks.

But more than that... Well, it wasn’t the kind of thing Mary Jane was physically capable of saying aloud, but she really liked Aunt Anna. She was a heavyset, gray-haired woman perpetually dressed like she was going to church. She liked to garden and she like to laugh, and MJ had never heard her raise her voice once. If MJ could grow up to be an identical copy of Anna, she’d be lucky.

Even if she couldn’t say it aloud, though, Mary Jane could maybe express the sentiment by smiling at Anna or at least making eye contact, but she was pretty focused on her nails right now. The pinky always gave her trouble...
“I know you haven’t been in Queens for long,” said Anna. “Have you made any friends yet?”

“Friends?” MJ could make friends by walking down the street with a low-cut top. That was like asking if she’d folded her socks yet or taken out the garbage yet. “Nah, but wait till summer’s over. I’ll be beating my friends off with a stick.”

“What about the ones from your old town? Have you heard from any of them?”

“Oh, yeah, we text sometimes.” Their names had already slipped MJ’s mind, and sometimes she got their faces mixed up with the friends from two old towns ago.

“You know, my nextdoor neighbor, May Parker, has a nephew. I hear he doesn’t have many friends, either.”

“Mmm hmm.” Alright, time to begin the delicate procedure of swapping hands. The first hand hadn’t dried yet, but MJ was a pro at this. It was fine. “And what’s he like?”

“Oh, he has a wonderful personality!”

A violent shudder smeared nail polish every which way.

According to Aunt Anna, Peter Parker was a “quiet, sensitive, sheltered boy.” Wow. Just wow. MJ bet Norman Bates had been a “quiet, sensitive, sheltered boy” once, too.

Mary Jane sat up on the mattress, peering out the window of the second story guest bedroom. Speak of the devil, there Parker was now, trudging down the street towards his house. Geez, he looked ready to stab the next person he saw. MJ was gonna have to watch herself during tonight’s shower.

MJ cocked her head. He was pretty cute, though. Ditching those glasses had been the smartest decision he’d ever made (MJ had been observing him for a while now. For her own safety, of course).

But a flash of red and blue shook MJ from those thoughts. “Huh? Whuh?” She craned her neck to see something to the far left of the window. There was a cop car outside the guy’s house. Holy crap, he hadn’t actually stabbed anyone, had he?

Parker spotted the car at the same time Mary Jane did. She watched him scamper inside. After that, MJ tore herself away, sitting back in the bed. For the first time since her brief stay at her aunt’s house, Mary Jane felt uneasy.

And that was before Aunt Anna barged into the bedroom, looking like she’d seen a ghost.

“Aunt A? What’s wrong?” MJ sprang upright.

“Oh, Mary Jane, it’s May’s husband…”

“Did he hurt her?”

Anna shook her head. “No, never. He was a good man.”

A good man? She may as well have said he was a leprechaun… Wait, “was?” “What happened?”

Anna buried her eyes. “A burglar tried to steal their car, and he had a gun, and… and May needs me right now.” She took a deep breath. “I’m going over there to stay the night with her, but I hate
to leave you here alone…”

“I’ll be alright. Go do what you gotta do.”

Anna nodded, hugged her niece, and then left. For a second, MJ thought about going with her. The Parker guy could probably use a hug.

...Yeah, right. Mary Jane Watson hanging out with a family in mourning? That sounded like a party. Peter Parker would be thrilled to see some rando airhead he’d never met before.

So now MJ was alone in a spooky, creaking house. They had… caught that burglar, right? After a minute, MJ got up to lock her door. But before she did, she took one last glance out the window. She didn’t know what she’d expected to see. Peter leaving the house again, maybe.

Actually, that was exactly what Mary Jane saw. She just hadn’t expected Peter to do so by climbing out a window, and she definitely hadn’t expected the spandex.

Hmm, this was supposed to be a fall thing, but the black dress coupled with Mary Jane’s natural hair already screamed “Halloween” without her having to do anything else. Some pale pink lipstick would help balance things out so long as she didn’t overdo it with the blush.

MJ set down her compact, examining herself in the bathroom mirror. She wasn’t perfect, but she’d still put in, like, ten times the effort that any sane high school girl would. Besides, the way Aunt Anna described him, Peter had never seen a girl before in his life. It wasn’t like he’d take one look at MJ and go, “That makeup is a fraction of a shade off from your skin tone. Get off my doorstep, you hussy!”

MJ turned away from the mirror, inspecting her nails for chips. It was hard to believe that scrawny, lonely kid was Spider-Man. No. MJ shook herself from that thought. She didn’t know it for a fact. Spider-Man could’ve been one of the police officers that day or- or maybe all along, Spider-Man had been Peter’s aunt. Anything was possible!

For the millionth time, MJ pulled something up on her phone – a blurry Youtube video titled “SPIDEY THWARTS JEWELRY STORE ROBBERS AND RESTORES FAITH IN HUMANITY, TRY NOT TO LAUGH LOL XD.” MJ knew it by heart – The video opened with cell phone footage of some thugs holding up a jewelry store counter, forcing a staff member to fill a sackful of diamonds at gunpoint, but then a fuzzy red and blue figure descended from the ceiling on a web-line.

“Oh, that necklace is going to look fabulous on you.” The figure’s voice caused the thugs to flinch, but their guns were yanked from their hands by two more web-lines. “But y’know what would really bring out your eyes?” Then he squirted them in the face with webbing. “Tres magnifique!”

The rest of the video was devoted to showing the panicked customers hugging and thanking Spider-Man. He even got a baby to stop crying and giggle at him. The whole thing went on for about three minutes, but then security showed up, Spider-Man pounced out an open window, and the footage cut out.

The video had been viewed one and a half billion times. It had nine hundred thousand likes and fifty thousand dislikes, and the top comment read, “All dislikes come from JAMESONS SOCK PUPPET ACCOUNTS AMIRIGHT?”

Mary Jane shook her head. Never in all her years on the internet had she thought a video would actually restore her faith in humanity. She guessed that was bound to happen to someone
eventually, due to the sheer volume of people if nothing else.

She paused the video, freezing Spider-Man mid-quip. He looked like he was having fun out there. Peter was this timid, awkward kid with no friends, but then he slipped on the mask, and suddenly he was a fun-loving, smart-talking crowd-pleaser.

But there was more to it than that – Peter was out there saving people’s lives. Making the city feel safe again. And Mary Jane was in here… preparing to go to a party so she could dance and flirt with strangers. Well, okay, MJ was no stranger to parties, but crashing the fall formal of a school she didn’t attend with a boy she’d never met was unusual even for her. She’d never have gone that far if she hadn’t found her date so… intriguing.

Mary Jane gripped the counter top to keep her hand from shaking. No. Deep breath. It was time to put that dorky, bookish girl away in a box. She was Mary Jane Watson now. Mary Jane Watson was a cocky party girl. Mary Jane Watson wasn’t scared of anything. In fact, meeting a mysterious, alluring man for a party with total strangers was Mary Jane Watson’s favorite thing to do in the whole world. Mary Jane Watson didn’t know who Spider-Man was, and she didn’t care. Mary Jane Watson held her shoulders square, she stood up straight, and she smiled, for god’s sake. Her teeth were blinding. Everything about Mary Jane Watson was perfect.

She needed a warm up exercise to get the blood flowing. If she could just have a good opening line prepared, the rest of the performance would come easy. Something that’d immediately teach Peter who her character was. Really sweep him off his feet, give him something to remember.

MJ gave the mirror her most alluring bedroom eyes. “Ooh, you do not disappoint.” No, that wasn’t right. Mary Jane Watson would never play her hand like that. Heck, paying attention to the other person over herself was a bit out-of-character for her. She needed something more self-aggrandizing.

“Did you hit the jackpot or what?” Better, but it needed more ambiguity. Maybe a pet name would help. Something affectionate but vague enough to leave him wondering. Flirty, but not too flirty.

“Face it, Handsome-” No, too overt.

“Face it, Cat-” She was a couple decades late for that one.

“Face it, Tiger.” Yeah. Yeah, that was it. Nobody called each other “tiger.” Like, the heck did that even mean? She thought he was fierce? She thought he was a predator? Mary Jane hadn’t the slightest clue – and, more importantly, neither would Peter.

“Face it, Tiger, you just hit the jackpot.” Good, but it needed to be slower. “Face it, Tiger… you just hit the jackpot.” Perfect. Now repeat that until it’s seared into your brain. “Face it, Tiger… you just hit the jackpot. Face it, Tiger… you just hit the jackpot. Face it, Tiger… you just hit the…”

The word “tiger” had officially lost all meaning. But still, the more she said it, the more she liked it. That was good. Exactly the kind of one-liner a swinger like Mary Jane Watson would come up with. Spontaneously upon seeing him, of course.

She was finally ready. Mary Jane Watson descended the staircase. Unfortunately, her trek to the front door led her straight through her father’s lair. He’d been reclining on the couch – He got cramps if he didn’t air out his beer belly every so often – but he sat up at MJ’s approach.

“Where’re you goin’ dressed like that?”

“Oh, just a quick pit stop to None-of-your-business-ville.” The door slammed behind her.
It was taking every iota of Mary Jane’s willpower to keep quiet. She could be a real chatterbox if she let herself, but that wouldn’t fit the situation at all. That would be surrendering power to her date. *He* was the one who was expected to keep *her* entertained.

Still, MJ at least risked a peek at the cab’s opposite seat. As expected, he was still staring at her. He jolted when MJ spotted this, but she simply smiled, keeping her eyes trained on him.

“Err, sorry I can’t afford a limo or anything.” Peter shrank in his seat. MJ must’ve had heat vision, judging by that sweat. She’d seen Peter from afar plenty of times, of course, but, well, remove him from his plain blue t-shirt and put him in a suit, and… woof.

“Hey, who says only rich people can have a good time?” MJ leaned back, choosing the most strategic moment to let her shoulders slouch, and inspected the plastic box she’d been handed. “I mean, you got me this flower thing. What’s classier than that?”

“Yeah, my, uh, aunt got the corsage, actually. She’s a little old-fashioned.” Peter caught himself. “Wait, so does that make it more dorky or less?”

“Definitely less. Tell your aunt I appreciate the thought, but flowers aren’t really my style.” MJ offered it back, but he declined. Hmm, she hadn’t brought her purse. After thinking for a second, MJ leaned forward to tap the driver’s shoulders. “Hey, big guy, you wanna corsage?”

“Aww, that’s sweet!” The cabbie happily accepted.*

MJ sat back again, grinning at Peter. “I think we just made his night.”

Finally, she’d conjured some genuine laughter out of him.

*At long last, Marvellites, the biggest plot hole in Spectacular Spider-Man history, the mystery of the vanishing corsage, has been solved! I do believe I’ve earned myself a No-Prize. – Flashbackin’ Bandragoness

“Y’know what?” said the cabbie. “You kids are cute. Imma cut your fare in half.”

“Ooh, not the worst way to save on cab fare.” MJ shot her date a wink.

Now Peter was *really* starting to squirm. “D-Don’t worry, I’ve got that covered.”

“Cute and chivalrous?” Whether MJ was inching closer or merely getting comfortable in her seat, she’d leave him to speculate. “Thanks, Tiger. I, uh… didn’t actually bring any cash.” She gestured to the pockets on her dress – or lack thereof. Not like there was room for them, anyways, what with the fabric being vacuum sealed to her body and all. “Trust me, this new party dress’ll be cutting into my cab budget for years to come.”

“Oh, really?”

MJ’s heart stopped. Her date had found a chink in her armor, and now he’d latched onto it to suck the confidence out of her head and into his.

“You mean you bought an expensive new dress just for *moi*?”

Mary Jane was freefalling. Why had she told him that? Idiot! *In-character, you’re in-character.*

“What?” MJ giggled. “Of course I didn’t buy this dress for you.” She put a hand on his shoulder, letting the nails dig in just enough to make him antsy. “You’d stretch it pretty badly.”
Good, good, he was laughing again. Crisis averted.

The subject needed to be changed, like, yesterday. “So… I hear you’re quite the shutterbug.” Actually, this was something MJ had been genuinely curious about. The moments when her in-character questions aligned with her real ones were few and far between, so she’d have to make the most of this.

“Yeah, I brought my camera, actually.” Peter retrieved said fancy-pantsy camera from his pocket.

“Nice.” Mary Jane wolf-whistled. At the camera, of course.

“She’s kinda my pride and joy.” Peter offered it out, allowing MJ to inspect it.

“And you get pictures of that spider-guy with this?”

“Yeah, um...” The subject of spider-guys had provoked an undeniable reaction. Peter was acting like it was no big deal, though – MJ was well acquainted with that behavior. “He pesters me to snap his pic every so often. What a glory hound, right?”

“Ugh, yeah, how vain can you get?” MJ handed back the camera. “Ooh, take my picture!”

Good, good, the laughter kept flowing. Mary Jane didn’t want to let her guard down too soon, but it was safe to say the ice had been broken by now.

“What, in the cab?”

“Why not?” MJ gave his bow tie an idle flick, watching it wiggle.

“Well...” Peter took a peep at her from behind the lens. “…the lighting’s pretty terrible in here, for one thing.”

“We’re almost there,” spoke up the cabbie. “I can park in front of the school if you wanna get a picture out there.”

“Would you? That’d be awesome.” MJ turned back to her date. “So what’s this about lighting? Doesn’t the camera make its own light?”

“You mean the flash?” said Peter. “Yeah, I thought that, too, at first, but there’s actually a lot more to it than that. See, a broad light source makes the lighting softer, and a narrow one makes it harder, and all that has to do with where the shadows land. Now, for, like, a prom photo, you’d want to be able to see the subjects’ faces...”

Alright, he was going into maximum geek-mode overdrive. Stereotyping dictated that Mary Jane ought to be bored out of her skull by this. In fact, to do otherwise would break character pretty badly, but... there was something kinda charming about it. His every word held more passion that all the cool kids from MJ’s previous school combined.

Of course, Mary Jane saw what was up here – Peter was photographing himself, selling it to the Bugle, and reaping the reward. Clever boy. But if he wanted to cash in on being Spider-Man… why wasn’t he rich and famous by now? What was with the mask? And why did he let his aunt treat him like a fragile snowflake?

Was... Was every penny he earned going towards his aunt? Mary Jane stared at him. Even just watching his mouth move was entrancing. The Daily Bugle smeared his name through the mud on a regular basis, and he didn’t even care. Didn’t even get any credit.
“Here we are.” The cabbie pulled over, Peter tossed him the money, and then Mary Jane allowed her date to lead her onto the school’s lawn by the arm. It was pitch black out, so the shutterbug ushered MJ towards a street lamp.

“Alright, that’s great.” He aimed his camera at her. “Now strike a pose.”

When it came to striking poses, MJ was as highly trained as a soldier or a firefighter, but… something felt different this time. “Don’t make me look ugly.”

Peter feigned worry. “Gee, I can’t promise anything...”

This time, the smile came to Mary Jane’s face all on its own. “Hey, actually, Tiger... let’s get one of us together.”

Mary Jane had been in this gymnasium for two seconds, and she was already causing a stir. From the way the other students were staring, MJ got the impression that Peter didn’t often find gorgeous women hanging off his arm. MJ had messed with the natural order. If this kept up, the Fall Formal would erupt into earthquakes, volcanoes, human sacrifice, dogs and cats living together...

The formal itself looked like a standard copy-and-paste job. There was the dance floor lit by colored lights, the table housing the punch bowls, the obligatory hipster trying his best to DJ at a record table... How had a hipster been let into a magnet school? Didn’t they screen for that sort of thing?

Peter led MJ through the gym by the arm. As they passed a booth, MJ turned to scoff at its sign. “Vote for king and queen? I don’t think these people know what… any of those words mean.”

“Yeah,” muttered Peter, “unless they’re going all Naboo on us.”

Ha, a Star Wars joke. That’d been kinda clever, actually. “Going what?” Unfortunately, Mary Jane Watson didn’t understand nerd humor.

“Oh, nothing...” Peter glanced away, blushing.

Mary Jane could practically hear Peter’s thoughts. He was thinking, Don’t you dare out yourself as a nerd to this hot girl, Parker!

And then there were all the other students giving Peter dark looks. They were thinking, Hurry up and out yourself as a nerd to that hot girl, Parker!

And by the looks of things, MJ wasn’t the only one who’d taken notice of their faces. Peter sighed, bowing his head.

“Hey, Tiger?”

“Yeah?” He turned towards her, a mixture of fear and hope in his big, brown eyes.

Screw those other kids. You’re ten times the person any of them will ever be. The words caught on MJ’s tongue. “Why don’t you… show me around?”

“Sure. I, uh, I’m sorry if it’s weird for you since you don’t know anyone here...”

“Nah, I’m fine.” MJ gave him her most reassuring smile, though it was mostly indistinguishable from her most seductive one. “Parties are kind of my element.” She hoped her heart wasn’t
thumping too loud. Well, even if it was, maybe she could pass it off as thrill.

“Mary Jane Watson, this is Professor Warren.”

MJ shook hands with one of Peter’s teachers. Wow, so the first person he introduced her to was a balding fat guy?

Peter puffed out his chest. “I’m his star pupil.”

Ah, that explained it. Tiger’s head was swelling before MJ’s very eyes. If MJ wasn’t gonna tell him the truth, then Peter could only assume he’d gained the attention of the hot girl through sheer charisma. Well, she’d let him have his ego-boost. Poor guy seemed like he could use it.

Next, Peter led Mary Jane past the punch bowl and towards a group of kids by the photo booth. The whole lot of them looked dazed at the sight of MJ on Peter’s arm, except for the blonde jock, who looked smug, and the blonde chick, who looked livid.

“Mary Jane Watson, I’d like you to meet—” Peter ushered to each one in turn. “—Flash, Liz, Rand, Sally, Glory… and my best bud, Harry.” Oh, good, names. MJ would get right to work memorizing those. “They’re… popular.”

“Ahh, the in-crowd.” She brought a palm to her chest.

“Exactly,” muttered Blondie.

“So, Parker, you actually got yourself a date!” Suddenly, the jock’s arms were around them from behind. *Okay*, surprise touching was not Mary Jane’s favorite thing in the world. “I mean, sure, Mary here’s not the *twenty year old you wanted* to bring, but at least she’s non-fictional… so I guess you win the bet!” He reared back his head and howled with laughter.

MJ shot Peter a smile. “What’d ya bet?”

He smiled back, reddening. “Loser dresses as a cheerleader for Halloween.”

_Damn_, now MJ was kind of wishing she’d let him lose that one. *There* would be a memorable sight. In fact, now that the idea had been put in her head, it was kinda hard not to picture it...

MJ laughed, turning her attention to the jock. “Well, big boy, I hope you’ve got the legs for the skirt.” The look on his face was all the enjoyment she needed from this group. “Come on, Tiger, let’s hit the dance floor. I wanna see what you’ve got.” She led Peter off by the hand, leaving the jock to gape at them.

Ah, dancing, the highlight of any party. There was nothing to it, really. You just needed to let go of your worries, act natural, and then practice at home for hours so people wouldn’t think you looked stupid.

It was at this point that MJ detected a pair of glasses glaring at her. Huh, that was different. Not the glaring itself, she meant. In fact, that blonde in-crowd chick had been one of many students giving MJ indignant glares. The thing was, though, they were gaping at MJ like she was a crazy woman—or, more accurately, like she was an utter floozy. Why else would she be here with the photography-obsessed science geek? But this other, glasses-wearing blondie… Something about her glare was different. MJ couldn’t put her finger on it. Maybe…?

Phht, what was she worrying about? She was on top of the world right now. In fact, her partner was surprisingly light on his feet. Or maybe that wasn’t so surprising, now that MJ thought about it.
But in the midst of all the dancing, Peter’s phone vibrated. He gestured to it, giving MJ an apologetic smile. Without interrupting the flow of her dance, MJ flashed the “OK” sign, and so Peter scurried off.

Well… to be honest, if he wasn’t here anymore, there wasn’t any point continuing. The dancing had been more for Peter’s benefit, anyways. Mary Jane made her way to the punch table, where the in-crowd had gathered.

MJ picked the one who looked the least vapid and struck up a conversation. “Killer look, girl.” It was meh at best.

“Thanks. Put it together myself.” The girl held up her shawl. She was more than eager to talk about it, evidently. “The top’s from a thrift store on Twenty-Second.”

“You and I so need to hang.” Yeah, that was gonna happen.

“So, uh… what do you think of Midtown High?”

MJ glanced around. “Doesn’t look much different from my school. Your basic brain pit.” That wasn’t actual slang, by the way. Sometimes MJ made stuff up, and never once had she been called out on it.

“Well, we also have the top-ranked theater magnet in the city.”

Double take. Congrats, girl, that was the first sentence out anyone mouth but Peter’s that’d gotten MJ’s attention all night. “Theater magnet? Hmm, I’m starting to feel the attraction.”

MJ’s current school had, like, a broom closet where three kids excluding herself would meet to practice unscripted performance art. Yeah, that did it, she was transferring here as soon as humanly possible. You know, for the theater magnet. The fact that Spider-Man went to school here and was fascinating to MJ in every conceivable way was sheer coincidence.

“Uh, that was the Bugle.” Speaking of, Peter had just approached MJ from behind. “Y’know, there’s this maniac terrorizing my boss, and, uh, he wants me to go shoot pictures, and I kinda have to or he could fire me.”

Pictures? From what MJ had seen (not that she, um, did extensive research on Peter or anything), he’d only ever taken pictures of one subject...

Peter sighed. “Look, I’m so sorry-”

“Oh, it’s okay.” MJ put a hand on his arm. “But hustle back, Tiger.” She chuckled and straightened his bow tie (which was only fair – She was the one who’d gotten it crooked in the first place). “You owe me one more dance.”

Peter had won the lottery. “Really? You’re not ticked? Th-That’s so cool!” He didn’t waste another moment before running off out the gym. “Like, I- I won’t be gone long, Red, I promise!”

Aaaaand he was gone. MJ puts her hands on her hips, smiling to herself. Well, there went literally the only reason MJ had come here. Peter must have felt like an utter jerk, ditching her like that. Maybe… if she would just tell him that she understood… that she completely understood...

“Oh…” A sudden shrillness made MJ wince. Behind her, the blondie in-crowd chick shook her head. Miss Shrill here was looking far more pleased with herself than MJ could allow. “Ditched by the king o’ the geeks. That must sting.”
Painfully. “Ahh, pain-fully!” MJ put her hands over her heart, then threw them to her sides. She’d be okay. If she could just stay in character till the end of the night, everything would be fine. “But if I can’t dance with Pete, I guess I’ll dance with...” Which one of these guys was Miss Shrill’s boyfriend, again? “It’s Randy, right?”

“Very.” A smug Randy led MJ off by the arm.

MJ could feel the fumes wafting out Miss Shrill’s ears from the other side of the dance floor.

MJ would give Midtown High this – Even with Peter absent, the Fall Formal didn’t fail to entertain. MJ had made it a goal to dance with every boy she could get her hands on, and being elected queen of the ball had been quite a boon to her efforts (though the phrase “elected queen” still made her eyes roll).

MJ adjusted the paper crown on her head as she danced with… with… okay, she hadn’t even bothered with this one’s name. All these guys were blending together in her head until there were only two distinct categories: “Peter” and “not Peter.”

Mary Jane shut her eyes, letting the face of whoever she was dancing with now vanish from her mind. What MJ needed to do was, soon as Peter got back, tell him she knew his secret. Sheesh, that’d be the mother of all icebreakers. Yeah, it’d be weird at first, but at this point, Peter was clearly under MJ’s spell. Think about it. By the time Pete got his cute butt back here, the dance floor would be a ghost town. They’d have all the privacy they could want. Mary Jane would simply confess how much she admired him, and then maybe they’d make out for a little while – okay, a long while – and then… she would be Spider-Man’s girlfriend. Whenever things got bleak, whenever the stress of his heroism was too much for him… Mary Jane would be there. The ray of sunshine in his cloudy life. For the first time, Mary Jane would be good for something.

And if Peter put his life on the line for total strangers every day, then surely he’d put it on the line for his true love, too? He’d always come running to save Mary Jane from supervillains… such as her dad. Mary Jane could see it clear as day in her mind’s eye.

But then she opened her real eyes, and all she could see was some acne-covered dork grinning at her. MJ recoiled. God, she needed to get some standards.

“I gotta hit the punch bowl, big boy.”

“Call me!”

MJ excused herself away as politely as she could manage. Hmm, boys were getting dull. They were all so predictable… You know what would really spice up this party? Dancing with another girl. Yeah. The moral busybody teachers might get bent out of shape, which was always good for a laugh, and, from a purely economic standpoint, such a transaction would increase the number of guys paying attention to MJ exponentially. Yes, she’d been crowned queen of the ball despite not being enrolled here, and still people weren’t paying enough attention to her.

MJ skimmed the crowd for a suitable target. Hmm, that pink-haired girl? No, human beings made themselves brightly-colored for the same reason frogs did. What about Thrift Store Girl? Possible. Miss Shrill? Yeah, MJ would sooner dance with an actual poison frog. MJ needed to narrow her options. If a girl was ogling MJ, there were better odds she’d be interested…

There was one girl staring at Mary Jane, actually, but it wouldn’t qualify as “ogling.” It was the glasses-wearing blondie, once again giving MJ her strongest death stare. She seemed to be lurking
around the punch bowl with her date, who was- *Whoa,* was her date that big, buff, college-age kid? *Good for you, glasses-wearing blondie.*

But, so long as Peter wasn’t here, now seemed as good a time as any to solve the mystery of the angry glasses-girl. MJ glided her way over, which seemed to give Blondie quite the scare.

“H-Hi, there,” she stammered.

“Hey.” MJ gave her most disarming smile.

MJ didn’t get this girl at all. She got why the vapid pretty girls were ticked at MJ – because she happened to be much prettier and much vapidier than them – but this girl… Well, MJ knew she shouldn’t judge by appearance, but this girl was clearly more of the introverted type. She wasn’t ugly by any means. In fact, she had the potential to be gorgeous… if only she knew how to draw it out. The glasses were cute, but her hair was a mess, and her pink-and-blue dress looked distinctly cheap. She didn’t have on much in the way of makeup, either. It wasn’t that she was a tomboy or anything – She was *trying* to play the girly girl, but overall, she came across more like a frumpy librarian. Shot in the dark, MJ was betting Blondie was the only female in her household.

“So which clique do you pledge allegiance to?” asked MJ as she filled a plastic cup with purple liquid of indeterminate origin. “I’m trying to get assimilated.”

“Oh, uh-” Blondie fiddled with her glasses. “I’m one of the band geeks.”

“Ah.” MJ gestured to herself. “Theater geek.” She nodded to the big blonde guy across from them. “That your boyfriend?”

Blondie gave a start. “What? No, no, Eddie’s just a friend. Way too old…”

Ah, so she *didn’t* have a boyfriend. The pieces were coming together.

“So, uh…” Blondie cleared her throat. Ooh, here it came. MJ knew Blondie wouldn’t make it long without voicing her grievance. “You know, Peter and I have been best friends for years-” Wasn’t that rich redhead dude his best friend? But, err, MJ thought it best not to voice this contradiction aloud. “-and he’s never mentioned you before. How long have you two…?”

“Oh, we just met a couple hours ago, but our aunts have been plotting to hook us up since time immemorial, and tonight’s the cornerstone of their scheme.”

One look at Blondie’s eyes was all MJ needed to see. “And was that scheme… a success?”

*BEEP, BEEP, BEEP.* The jealous-o-meter was off the charts. Blondie was the shy friend with the crush who didn’t want to ruin the friendship. Boom, mystery solved. Blondie had watched and sighed and cooed from afar for years now, but she’d never mustered the courage to ask her dream beau out. She had no self-confidence, and… she hadn’t learned to fake it.

Mary Jane’s face fell. Somehow, she found herself saying, “Too bad for them, I don’t do the whole ‘hookup’ thing. I’ve evolved past such mortal customs.” She forced a laugh. “Go ahead and send Pete your sympathies… cuz as soon as he gets back, he’s getting friend-zoned.”

You could see the tension flooding out Blondie’s face. “Ha. Well, it’s good to know the Parker luck’s in top form.”

“Trust me, I’ve long since grown numb to breaking hearts.” With punch in hand, MJ turned away. “Relationships aren’t for me.”
Somehow, after that, Mary Jane had found herself dancing with, um… Hobie Brown, if she remembered right. Nothing against the strong, silent type, but the moment she spotted the cute brunette moping on the bleachers, she excused herself so she could make a beeline towards him.

Deep breaths. It was friend-zone time, the best part of Peter’s night. In-character, of course. If MJ just remained in-character, friend-zoning him would be easy and painless for the both of them.

“Nice, Pete,” the brunette was muttering to himself. “You blew it. Again.”

“I wouldn’t say that.” What was MJ saying? That wasn’t in character! He had blown it! Mary Jane Watson would’ve gotten bored after he ditched her and then turned her attention to all the other guys in the school. She’d have forgotten Peter Parker long ago.

God, now Peter was looking at her with those big, brown eyes. Mary Jane found herself extending a hand. “I saved the last dance for you, Tiger.”

Slowly, Peter accepted it, and the two of them made their way to the center of the empty basketball court. Mary Jane rested her head on his shoulder, and then the last two inhabitants of the Fall Formal waltzed. No making out happened that night – not for these two, anyways. But no friend-zoning happened, either.

Mary Jane knew that, even after everything that’d happened tonight, she was a stranger to Spider-Man. She might have peeked under his mask, but he hadn’t peeked under hers. And Mary Jane also knew that Peter deserved someone who didn’t wear a mask at all. Someone who’d known him for years, not someone who’d showed up on his doorstep unannounced.

And she knew that she really should’ve friend-zoned him already, but… it could wait another day. Mary Jane had read the news on her phone. She knew that a whole bunch of people could’ve exploded tonight, but Spider-Man had been there, and they hadn’t exploded, and really, that was more important than every dream, every hope, every fear that’d ever enter Mary Jane Watson’s little head. The least MJ could do was offer him one last dance.

But if she was being truthful with herself, that wasn’t the only reason she’d hesitated. Right now, while they were dancing like this, Peter must’ve been utterly convinced that he’d just gotten himself a new girlfriend, and, even if it was only for a moment… Mary Jane wanted him to believe that. She wanted him to look at her with that belief in his eyes. Just for tonight.

Because the truth was, no matter how much more qualified Blondie was to stroll into the office and apply for the position of Spider-Man’s ray of sunshine… Mary Jane couldn’t help but keep a foot in the door herself. Yes, she realized that made her a bad person.
**Biome**

Fisk’s charity ball was going off without a hitch. The fundraiser had been a massive success, the turnout was almost twice what they’d planned for, and Fisk had even laughed at Harry’s awful joke. Harry would’ve felt totally at ease… if not for the look on his girlfriend’s face as she slinked towards the snack bar.


“Just got an update from Mark.” Liz pointed with her eyes to the phone in her hand. “They removed his subdermal armor again, but this time they’re keeping him in observation a couple months to make sure no particles survive and grow it back.” She glanced away, hugging her gorgeous, scarlet party dress (on loan from Harry’s mom).

Harry brought his hand to hers, squeezing it. “That can’t have improved his mood.”

“Understatement,” Liz said with a sigh. “Things had gotten so serious with him and Mary Jane, but…” She glanced away. “…he let his addiction creep back in, and-and then he freaked out and nearly killed the girl he loves. It’s more than anyone could deal with.”

It was at this point that Harry forced himself to free Liz’s hand. His grip had been getting a bit too tight.

By the time Mary Jane emerged from her bedroom the next morning, her mask was back on. You’d never notice anything had been the matter unless you really examined her eyes for the faint tinge of red.

MJ only spoke the barest minimum of words to the couple before heading out for work. Peter and Gwen, for their part, sat at the kitchen countertop, eating their breakfast in utmost silence, both trying their hardest to not let their eyes be drawn to the sight of MJ’s retreating back – or more specifically, the jaw-dropping modeling outfit undoubtedly clinging to that back.

A couple minutes of chewing passed once MJ left, but eventually Peter set down his bowl of half-eaten cereal and said for the dozenth time in the past nine hours, “It’s really okay, y’know. There’s nothing wrong with being bi.”

“Bi-curious,” said Gwen, eyes firmly planted on her own bowl.

“Right. That’s what I meant.”

Gwen ended up sighing at him. “I don’t know, Peter. Biology’s a strange mistress. I mean, I think guys like Flash and Rand are handsome on, like, a cognitive level-”

Peter’s spoon clattered to the tile floor. “You think Flash is handsome-?”

“On a cognitive level! But I’m not attracted to him.” After a moment’s hesitation, she admitted, “I wasn’t even attracted to Harry, really. He just kept pressuring me into dating him, and…”

When she trailed off, Peter brought his hand to hers. “Yeah, I think you and me have established that you can be a bit, uhhh…” He stroked her wrist. “…compliant.”

“Oh, that is not what I was getting at!” Gwen’s hand jerked back like it’d been burned. All she was
wearing was a sleeveless undershirt, meaning Peter got to enjoy the sight of her blush traveling all the way down her arms. “What I’m saying is, ever since puberty hit, you’d been the only person to catch my… my interest.” Her arms weren’t getting any paler. She might have graduated yesterday, but Gwen would always be a schoolgirl at heart. “Well, you and a short list of male celebrities. And that’s kind of how it’d always been, so I guess I’m just not used to… It took me by surprise, is all.” Suddenly, Gwen was very interested in examining her Cheerios for cracks. “And it wasn’t like I was drooling over Mary Jane the first time I laid eyes on her. It’s more like it, I don’t know, built up over time?” The most she could offer was a shrug.

When Peter said nothing, Gwen blurted out, “None of this matters, anyways! You’re my partner, and-” It was only the following statement, it seemed, that finally allowed her to meet his eyes: “- and I won’t have any others for the rest of my life, guy or girl.”

Peter literally could not hear that sentence without breaking out into a cheek-murdering smile. It took everything in his power to keep his eyes from drifting in the direction of the back closet, where Aunt May’s ring was currently wrapped in a washcloth next to the spare web-fluid supplies. Gwen never checked there, so there wouldn’t be any risk of her discovering it if Peter could just shake his habit of pulling the darn thing out every half hour to grin at it.

Actually, though, there was a chance Gwen was already expecting the proposal regardless. Peter had already promised to marry her once they turned eighteen. But on the other hand, Gwen had been pretty exhausted from grieving at the time. Peter wouldn’t blame her if she’d forgot all about it.

“And yeah, I’ve admitted it to myself, I’m attracted to MJ, but only ph-physically.” Every third syllable of Gwen’s became a squeak. “And, I mean, really, that just puts me on equal footing with you…”

“Well, yeah, of course,” Peter said in a suspiciously nonchalant voice, “but, I mean, we’re not on totally equal footing. Sure, I thought about asking MJ out when you broke up with me, but I never actually went through with it.” He paused. “Because I couldn’t make myself be in love anyone but you.”

“I’ve never been in love with anyone but you, either,” Gwen hurriedly replied, her voice going even higher, “but back then, I was scared of all this Spider-Man stuff, and- and Mary Jane seemed so normal and… comforting…”

Despite his best efforts, Peter found himself tensing.

“…and I tried to force something that was never going to happen,” Gwen concluded, “and that’s all there is to it.”

“Right,” said Peter. “I know that.” Another pause. “But for the record, I do think it’s kinda weird, that, I mean, if I’m the first real life person you’ve ever found hot, that Mary Jane would be the second. Don’t get me wrong, if you’re gonna be into girls, she’s the one to be into, but, well, she’s not exactly butch, y’know?” He peered at his girlfriend out the corner of his eye. “She really does it for you?”

“Yeah,” Gwen admitted. “Guess I’m not into hyper-masculine types.”

The silence was pronounced.

“You mean besides me, right?”
“Right, of course, obviously!”

Evidently, Gwen found this a good time to go back to eating cereal.

And that was the end of that. At least until right after shower time. Gwen was just rinsing the soap off her arms in the bathtub faucet when she set down her razor and turned her head to the sink… to discover Peter still standing before it, examining his reflection.

“You gonna be much longer, Pete?”

“Oh, yeah, sorry. I was just thinking…” Peter cupped his chin in his hand. “Hey, Gwen?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you think I should grow a beard?”

Gwen fought back the mental image of Spider-Man swinging across the city with a Dumbledore-style one growing out his mask. “Peter, what did we say last time?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” Peter leaned in real close to the glass – hunting for stubble, no doubt. “But I’d look so cool with a beard!”

“Yeah,” said Gwen as she tossed her undershirt back on. “I guess you would, hypothetically.”

There was another moment of silence while Peter examined himself. “Iron Man has a beard.”

“He wouldn’t if it’d look all patchy…”

“Sorry, I think I’ve got water in my ears.” Peter turned to smirk at her. “What was that?”

“Nothing, dearest.”

Peter’s attention returned to his reflection. “We gave up too fast last time. Poor beard, taken so young…”

Gwen failed to stifle a giggle. “Peter, when you shaved it, you told me you’d hated it and you were glad it was gone.”

“Oh yeah.” Peter faltered.

Gwen sighed, smiled, and pulled herself to her feet. “Peter…” She went up behind him so that her face was visible in the mirror. “Do you remember the day I realized I was in love with you?” As she spoke, her arms wrapped around his torso.

Peter grinned. “Yeah, of course. You said it was that time in seventh grade with the chemistry class.”

“Right. I don’t even remember why anymore, but I’d woken up miserable. I remember having to drag myself out of bed, and all day in class, I just felt invisible. Like I could stop existing and nothing would be any different.”

Peter’s face turned towards her eyes. “And then I sat down next to you.”

“And made the absolute lamest chemistry pun.” The memory still made Gwen cringe. “And we ended up sitting together at lunch, and I talked the entire time, and I hadn’t talked with anyone but
my dad for I don’t know how long before then, and we swapped phone numbers, and I started hanging out with you and Eddie, and...” She shut her eyes. “...that was the greatest moment of my life. Thinking back on it a month later made me giddy. It...” They reopened to meet Peter’s. “...still does.”

She shook herself out of it. “My point is, on that day… did you have a beard, Peter?”

Peter laughed. “I couldn’t have if I’d tried.”

“Right...” Gwen’s face was a lot closer to his than it’d been a second ago. “So then you don’t really need one, do you?”

Her mouth was millimeters from his when Peter suddenly said, “Hey, Gwen?”

“Yeah?”

“Why did Carbon marry Hydrogen?”

“Shut up and kiss me.”

Several minutes later, they were forced to come up for air.

“Wait a sec,” said Peter. “I was wearing glasses that day. Are you saying I should-?”

“Don’t even think about it.

In the old days, Peter, Gwen, and Eddie had made an annual pilgrimage to the Smithsonian in D.C. It’d been the only day of the year that the younger, dorkier, glasses-wearing Peter had been more excited for than Christmas. And in that past universe where Peter had no superpowers and Gwen didn’t have a crush on him because crushes were things girls got on other boys… well, those museum trips had accounted for some of the happiest memories in Peter’s life.

And now those memories were dead and stuffed behind a glass display like the exhibits themselves, frozen in time in a picture frame resting on the table beside Eddie’s hospital bed. There stood glasses-wearing eighth-grader Peter Parker with braces-wearing eighth-grader Gwen Stacy standing close but not too close beside him, and looming over them from behind was high schooler Eddie Brock. The trio posed beneath a big old model whale suspended from the ceiling.

Slowly, Peter’s gaze traveled from the bright, muscular Eddie in the photo to the shriveled, thin one lying on the hospital bed.

Gwen gave Peter’s hand a squeeze – She had a knack for reading his mind. She was standing beside Peter at a distance that would’ve given eighth-grader Gwen a heart attack. “What are we supposed to do?” she asked softly. “We can’t just guard his hospital bed forever.”

“The Fantastic Four already called S.H.I.E.L.D.,” said Peter. “If the Venom symbiote comes anywhere near Eddie, some agents will be waiting with butterfly nets.”

The remark coaxed a faint laugh from Gwen.

“I can’t promise you we’re not in danger, though,” Peter continued, squeezing her hand. “I mean, I don’t think it meant to go on a rampage once it bonded with MJ. That’s not really its M.O., but...”

Until Symby reared its slimy head again, it looked like Peter, Gwen, and MJ would be continuing their routines as normal. With high school finally over, Peter would focus on enduring Hurricane
Jameson to make rent, interning at the ESU lab, attending the occasional therapy session with Leo, and calling Aunt May at least twice a week to check up on her.

“Hey, can we leave?” Gwen’s soft voice shook Peter from his thoughts. “I’m sorry, it’s hard for me to stay here long…”

“It’s alright.” Peter led her out by the hand. As the two of them neared the exit, Peter found himself saying, “I remember whenever I felt down as a kid, May and Ben would invite Eddie over from the Children’s Home to spend the night, and we’d stay up late talking about science news and watching eighties movies. When Eddie was there, I felt, I don’t know, safe. And now that he’s gone…” He faltered. “…it’s like, it’s just you and me on our own in the world.”

Gwen gave a slow nod. “Wonder what he’d think of us now…”

Peter sighed. “That day Carnage was born, when Eddie was finally freed of the symbiote… right before he passed out, I could’ve sworn I heard him start to call me br-” He caught himself. “Well, I don’t want to give myself false hope. Eddie hated me even before he was Venom.”

“Peter…” Suddenly, Gwen’s arms were around him. “If Eddie could just understand the truth, I know he wouldn’t hate you.” She let loose a sigh. “The symbiote told me it was waking Eddie up before, but I guess he would’ve done it by now…”

“Wait… You’re saying the evil alien lied to you? Say it ain’t so!” With that, Peter opened the door, and the two of them made their way into the hospital’s hallway to await MJ’s return.

Peter didn’t say this to Gwen – false despair was just as bad as false hope, really – but there was a pet theory that’d been gaining traction in his mind. What if the reason the symbiote hadn’t managed to wake Eddie up was because… even it couldn’t? What if nothing could?

Spider-Man stood alone on a dizzyingly high rooftop, the low-budget wind blowing through his poorly-animated spandex. “Albert Einstein once said, ‘Learn from yesterday, live for today, and hope for tomorrow.’” He posed for the camera as a dramatic voiceover blared around him. “See, I can quote stuff like that off the top of my head because I’m an aspiring scientist who likes science. My name is Spider-Man, and I’m a super genius. I built my web-shooters using SCIENCE!”

Out of nowhere, Vulture swooped down from the clouds. “Ha ha! You’ve met your end, Web-Slinger!”

“What!” gasped Spider-Man. “A guy dressed as a bird! That’s crazier than mixing an acid with a sulfide solution!”

“WE GET IT, YOU LIKE SCIENCE!” yelled Vulture.

On the other side of the screen, Gwen gave Peter a look from across the couch. “Remind me why you’re watching a kids’ cartoon channel?”

“I need to see how I’m depicted!” said Peter. “If Tombstone’s gonna profit off me, then he might as well do it right…” He scratched his barren chin. “Hmm, this is definitely a step up from the last one-”

“Gee, I’m really thirsty for some dihydrogen monoxide!” said the cartoon Spider-Man.

“-but they’re kind of overdoing that,” deadpanned the real one. “That is not how I talk.”
“You just made a chemistry pun this morning,” muttered Gwen.

“Yeah, but that was ironically. I don’t think *this* guy is being ironic at all!”

The coupled shared a laugh. They found themselves inching closer across the couch…

“Hey, girlfriend?” But then a certain redhead waltzed out her door and into the living room. “Be brutal – Do either of these look any good?” Mary Jane held up two outfits on hangers, one more red and the other more blue. Though to be honest, the green one she was currently wearing already blew Peter away.

“Oh, err…” Gwen turned to inspect them. “I don’t think that shade of blue’s quite your color.”

“Right, right, I knew that.” MJ gave the blue one a careless toss. It landed in a heap directly between Peter’s and Gwen’s laps. “Sorry, Willi said I could wear whatever I wanted today, and choices make me choke like crazy.”

Peter gave a start. “Willi?” How many guys was MJ close with, exactly?

“My fashion designer.”

“You have a… fashion designer?”

Beside Peter, Gwen’s eyes flitted to the apron around her waist. “We could use one of those where I work…”

“Your uniform’s cute enough as it is.” Peter closed the gap between them to kiss Gwen’s neck. “Peter, that tickles.” Gwen was left giggling as she dug his hands out of her pits.

MJ watched the two with a smile of her own, then turned back to her bedroom. “Well, I’ll have to leave you lovebirds to each other.” But right before entering, MJ made a sudden lurch, clutching her stomach. “Crap, wait… Ugh…”

“What’s wrong?” Peter sprang to his feet with enough force to nearly knock Gwen to the floor. “I don’t know,” said Mary Jane. “I usually have such a good relationship with my uterus.”

“Yeah, sorry I asked.”

“Wonder if it’s too late to take a sick day?”

“Uh, are you sure that’s a good idea?” Gwen frowned at her. “Didn’t you say your modeling job’s on thin ice without Kingsley there vouching for you? You can’t just skip at the last second.”

“Hmm, you’re right.” MJ glanced out the still-curtain-less window. “They already sent the limo.” With that, she snatched her purse off the carpet and skipped out the front door. “I’ll just bring both outfits.”

Her presence left a void in the room, filled only by the babble of the TV (“I can defeat this bad guy if I use a solution of hydrogen peroxide…”).

Peter and Gwen met each other’s eyes. Simultaneously, they said, “A limo?”

Harry marched from the limo to the flat’s doorstep in one smooth motion, still in his tuxedo. After
only one knock, the door was opened by a dark-haired man in a wrinkled undershirt.

“Dr. Hamilton.”

“Young Mr. Osborn?” Standing in the entryway was a neatly-groomed man with a short black beard and a voice that made Harry sleepy.

He welcomed Harry inside, leaving Bernard to watch the car. “How can I be of service?” The door shut behind them.

“I need more therapy.”

“I see, I see…” Hamilton helped her to a seat at his couch, then pulled up a chair across from him. “Now then, what seems to be the matter?”

“I… I remember…” Harry tried to finish the sentence, but each time he tried, a fresh wave of pain shot through his head.

Suddenly, Hamilton touched his fingers to his temple and said, “Winkler.”

Every muscle in Harry’s body relaxed. He could feel drool creeping down his chin.

“Tell me, Harry… what do you remember?”

“I… was… the Goblin.” The words were cold metal creatures scattering out his mouth. “I tried… to kill… Gwen… and I…” These last three, though, came out quite easily. “…need to forget.”
“Yeah, relationships aren’t for me.” If she swayed her hips just so, MJ could make her boobs jiggle under this dress, which was apparently hypnotic to Mr. Prom King here. “I’m a free agent.”

“W-Well, duh, of course!” Flash seemed to struggling to form coherent thoughts – and MJ wasn’t sure her boobs were entirely to blame for that. “Like I’d be dancing with you if I thought it made us a thing or something.”

MJ nodded in time to the music. “That’s what I like to hear.”

“ Heck, I’ve already got a girl!”

The nodding got desynched. “Oh?”

“Yeah! She’s- She’s right over there, actually.”

MJ followed the path of Flash’s eyes to discover another pair of eyes on the far end of the dance floor, and these ones were doing their best to strangle her.

So not only had Mary Jane crashed the party of a school she didn’t attend, but now she was disrupting the love lives of every poor boy who got sucked in by her swaying hips? Brainy Janey would’ve been wrought with guilt, but to be honest, Wild Party Girl MJ thought it was kinda funny. That’s what these people deserved for being so shallow in the first place, right?

“Oh, a Latina?” MJ let out a whistle. “Pretty sure I was one of those in a past life. It’d explain a lot.”

_Oh my god, don’t be racist!_ snapped Brainy Janey.

_Did I say you could come out of your box? _snapped Wild Party Girl MJ.

Guys loved edgy humor. Just look how much Flash was laughing. “Ha ha… ha… I gotta go. Great dancing with you, Mary!” With that, he scurried off.

As MJ went to hunt for her next victim, she overheard some rather forceful-sounding snatches of Spanish. Eh, Flash was a big boy. He’d be fine.

Now let’s see here… It was getting late, so a lot of people were leaving. That meant MJ needed to prioritize the hottest guys while she had the chance. She skimmed the crowd.

Oop, there was Glasses-Wearing Blondie again, still hovering by the punch bowl. Which meant the college boy couldn’t be far behind. Oh, there he was lurking by the bleachers. Guy seemed to be sulking – until he spotted MJ, of course.

If MJ had to guess, Blondie had been gunning for Tiger to ask her to the formal, but then he didn’t and she got all sad, so College Boy here had agreed to come to cheer her up, but now things were super award for him, seeing as he was a head taller than all the other people here. Most high school girls hadn’t been bold enough to ask him to dance.

But Mary Jane Watson wasn’t most high school girls, now was she?

“Salutations.” She gave him a wave as she neared. “Can’t help but notice you’re the only guy to escape my clutches tonight. Can’t have that, now can we?”
But College Boy only laughed. “Aren’t I a little old for you?”

This called for a wink. “I’d say you’re just the right amount of old for me.”

The remark conjured another laugh from him. “And you don’t think Pete will get jealous? I could practically see your reflection in his eyes.”

MJ shrugged. “What Pete doesn’t know won’t hurt him.” Not to mention that the more warning signs Peter was given, the less heartbreaking the inevitable friend-zoning would be.


MJ started to take his arm… but just then, Blondie emerged at his side. “Eddie? Can- Can we leave?” Oh god, look at those big, sad eyes behind those glasses. MJ kinda had to resist the urge to give the girl a hug.

College Boy turned to give her a reassuring smile. “Course we can.” Then he gave MJ a look of apology. “Rain check on that dance, Red.”

“No prob.” The moment Blondie’s back was turned, MJ suddenly grabbed College Boy’s hand. “Here, lemme write out that check for ya.” See, this was why she kept a Sharpie in the, err, secret hidey hole in her dress.

Eddie stared at the freshly-scrawled digits on his palm. Then he smiled, nodded, and walked out the gym behind Blondie.

MJ watched him go with a smile of her own. She’d had no idea her charms extended to college boys, too. Goodness, her powers were growing. She did believe she’d earned herself a pat on the back.

“Say, hey, whattaya say, Midtown wins the Mustang way! Gooo Mustangs! Score!”

“Whoo hoo!” MJ threw her hands in the air as she watched the guys in the puffy green shirts try to, uhh, catch the football and then football it hard enough to win at football. Okay, Mary Jane had a confession to make – She didn’t actually understand the rules of this game. But everyone else in the crowd was cheering, so she figured that was the right thing to do at the moment. The Mustangs had probably scored a… point? Goal? Whatever it was.

“Hey, Tiger.” MJ smiled at the newcomer, a certain brunette who’d climbed into the seat between her and Glory from overhead. “You just gettin’ here?”

“Yeah, but…” MJ had worn her plainest pink t-shirt available, but it did little to dampen her impact on the poor boy. “…what are you doing here?” Peter pointed at her, smiling.

Watch the game and clap, Watson. Watch the game and clap. “Flash invited me.”

“Flash?” From Peter’s voice, you’d think Doctor Doom had invited her.

“Thompson takes the snap, rolls back, tosses a Hail Mary-!” came the announcer’s voice from overhead.

MJ gave a start. A Hail Mary? Was that good? Hail Marys were good, right?

“Touchdown!”
MJ and Glory cheered, but MJ couldn’t help but notice the silence from Peter’s corner.

“Harry Osborn makes an unbelievable catch to win the game!”

And now Peter was the only member of the crowd not giving a standing ovation.

“So, MJ…” Ah, crap. Here it came. “I-I thought at the dance… that you a-and me, that-” Poor guy was wincing already. He knew what that look on MJ’s face meant. “-that we-”

“Slow down, Tiger.” MJ realized resting an elbow on his shoulder was counterproductive to her goal here, but she couldn’t help herself. “It’s not like we’re going steady or something equally primitive. We’re friends, okay?” She gave his arm a punch.

“Well, sure, but-”

“I’m gonna congratulate Flash.” MJ strutted off down the bleachers without another word. Ditching Pete for his arch-nemesis? That had to cut deep. Why couldn’t MJ have let Peter down soft? God, she was such a bitch.

But really, if MJ had tried to be soft with Peter… she didn’t think she’d have had it in her. No, no, this had called for a decisive rejection. Peter would never end up with his true love otherwise. It hadn’t escaped MJ that Blondie was here, too, and when given the choice between the two of them, Peter had opted to go straight for the redhead. Sometimes, MJ was too pretty for her own good.

…Okay, all the time.

Phht, why was MJ so obsessed with Peter anyways? Just because he had secret superpowers and saved lives on a daily basis and was the coolest person ever? Phht. Phht. MJ hadn’t been fibbing before – This love drama stuff was primitive. That’s why instead, MJ spent her time flirting with football-playing Neanderthals. Much better.

Next thing she knew, MJ was down on the field, alone with Flash.

“...see the way I moved out there?” he was saying. “Now you know why they call me the Flash!”

“Wow, that is a way better namesake,” said Mary Jane. “My mom’s just a hippie...”

The two of them shared a laugh. MJ patted his chest, then let Flash put an arm around her as they walked off. Yeah, that’s it, MJ. Apply forced laughter to the wound until the pain subsides.

“Y’know, the team’s going to Coney Island tomorrow to celebrate,” Flash suddenly said. “Can I expect to see you there?”

“Ooh, that’s perfect! I’m still new to this borough. Been meaning to visit all the major-” MJ caught herself. “Hold up. You sure your girl won’t mind?”

“Liz?” Flash batted a hand in the air. “Nah. She knows you and me are just friends. I mean, you’re pretty much one of the guys.”

MJ couldn’t resist a smirk. “That must be why they’re all so friendly with me.”

“It’ll be totally normal, trust me.”

Liz stared at Flash. Flash stared at Peter. Peter stared at MJ. MJ stared at the sun. Hopefully she
could blind herself real quick and be spared having to watch this. Geez, what were the odds that the pair of Flash and MJ would happen to run into Peter and Liz in the entirety of Coney Island? It was like MJ’s life was scripted or something.

“It is me,” said MJ, “or is this awkward?” Look at her, breaking the tension with a quip. Spider-Man would be proud.

No, wait, Spider-Man was standing right there, and he looked downright miserable. Maybe… Maybe this was a good thing, though. Maybe the pain of rejection would propel him straight into Blondie’s arms? So you see, MJ had really had the noblest of intentions when she’d come here with Flash.

Now if only she could explain that to Flash’s girlfriend. Or better yet, find some way to drastically change the subject.

But it turned out that got taken care of on its own. Liz looked into the distance, pointing out a figure on a far-off building. “What’s that?”

They’d been facing a food stand, but at Liz’s words, the four of them turned their attentions towards the sunset. If MJ didn’t know any better, she’d think there was a building-sized daddy long-legs scurrying over the rooftops on the mainland (“Coney Peninsula” would be a more accurate but less marketable name for the park). The sad part was, giant bugs wouldn’t be the strangest things to exist in Manhattan by a long shot. It sounded like the kinda baddie Spider-Man battled on a daily-

“Ugh!” Suddenly, Peter clutched his tummy. “Ah, look, sorry, all that sugar, my stomach…” He sprinted for it, leaving Liz behind with only her stuffed octopus prize for support. “I- I gotta go. Don’t follow!”

MJ watched him shrink over the pier’s horizon. Was she the only one who thought it was really obvious he was Spider-Man? Was MJ just a crazy person?

“Phht. Typical Puny Parker!” Flash scoffed, pointing at Peter as he left. “Leaves me holding the bag.” Then Flash shrank beneath matching glares. “Uh… No offense, girls.”

“Oh, I’m not offended.” That poor stuffed octopus was getting squeezed to death. “Why on earth would I possibly be offended, Flash?”

“H-Hey!” Flash held out his hands. “If anything, I should be offended that you were with Parker, of all people. Like, you can’t even cheat on me with someone hot?”

“Gee, you’re right, guess I should’ve taken a page out of your book!”

“You think I’m hot?” said MJ.

“Will you please shut up?” Uh oh, a cat fight was brewing. MJ was quite the veteran of those. “Why don’t you find some other guy to throw yourself on? We all know they’re interchangeable to you.”

MJ stepped back. “Throw myself on? What, you don’t think a guy and gal can just be friends? Haven’t you ever seen When Harry Met Sally?”

“YES! YES I HAVE!”

“Oh. In that case, could you tell me how it ends? Cuz I’ve actually never-”
“Nngh! Sally was right about you!”

Okay, this was going nowhere fast. “As much fun as this conversation is, I’ve got places to be-”

“Don’t you walk away-!”

“Just let her go, Liz.” Flash grabbed his girl’s arm, allowing MJ to storm off all by her lonesome.

MJ didn’t stop her march until the other two were safely out of sight. She rested somewhere near
the amusement park’s main entrance. Her heart was racing, which was weird because she hadn’t
been exercising or anything.

Slo...er down, Watson. Wild Party Girl MJ didn’t lose her cool. Not ever.

Could Flash’s girlfriend get more unreasonable? Mary Jane really had only come here as Flash’s
friend. Well, she might have engaged in a little harmless flirting, but it wasn’t like she would’ve
gone any further with Flash or anything. Obviously not. That would be wrong. Besides, there were
way too many witnesses here.

MJ bowed her head. The mood was getting a little heavy. Hmm, y’know what would cheer her up?
Hitting on a hot guy. Coney Island was bound to be crawling with them. All MJ had to do was skim
the crowd to see which dudes were making eyes at her…

Well, she found someone looking at her, at least.

“Oh… it’s you.” Blondie pushed her glasses up her nose as she approached MJ. Looked like, now
that MJ had burned bridges with Peter, Blondie was considerably more comfortable in her
presence. “Hi. Have you seen Peter or Harry?”

“Tiger, err, ran off somewhere.” MJ found herself frowning. Something about Blondie’s posture
struck MJ as uneasy, but then maybe it was always like that. “Why? Is something wrong?”

“Yes! Thank you! Something’s wrong!” Of all the reactions Blondie could’ve had, MJ wouldn’t
have figured on “overjoyed.” “Finally, someone notices.”

“Uh… welcome?”

“It’s just that Harry’s been acting really weird,” Blondie said, collecting herself. “I found him
passed out on the ground outside after the game. It- It kinda freaked me out, but then nobody paid
me any attention…”

MJ pointed behind her. “Harry’s football friends are thataways. Maybe let them know what’s up.”

“I will. Thanks.” Well, that was the warmest smile MJ had earned all week. Scratch that, all month.

Mary Jane stood by the entrance a minute, allowing herself a rare feeling of content. But, as per
usual, it didn’t last long – though there wasn’t much usual about watching a red-and-blue figure
sail through the night sky, smack into the Ferris wheel, and then plummet to the pavement below.

“What the-?” The park erupted with screams. Peter. MJ dashed for the spot where he’d fallen, but
she wasn’t given much time to reach it. Next thing anyone knew, the “Welcome to Coney Island”
sign exploded, and a massive set of steel tendrils marched into the park.

…Had MJ seriously been so caught up in the petty relationship drama that she’d forgotten about
the supervillain running loose? That was a new level of shallow for her.
And what a supervillain this was. He was, like, some fat guy in a trench coat, suspended in the air by his freaky metal arms. Not that MJ took a particularly good look at him before she ran for all she was worth.

On their own, MJ’s legs propelled her over the pavement, but they didn’t go where she thought they would. MJ found herself getting farther away from where Spider-Man was kneeling… and nearer to where Blondie was running. The blonde and redhead ended up parallel for a second as they fled. But the next second, MJ was ahead of Blondie. And the second after that, Blondie was crying out as she tumbled to the pavement. Immediately, MJ spun back around.

The Osborn kid was sprinting straight for Blondie. Good, good, he could help- Nope, wait, never mind, he’d just vaulted over her head. Wow.

Maybe that’s what egged MJ on, or maybe she’d have done this anyways, she didn’t know. But either way, she found herself kneeling at Blondie’s side, helping her to her feet. Of course, there was laughably little time before the robo-octopus-guy descended upon them. MJ ended up huddling over Blondie, gawking helplessly at the sight before them.

Across from them, a steel tentacle smashed into the ground, leaving a crater. Then another. And then the octopus-guy held up a third tentacle, giving MJ a nice, long look at the incredibly sharp bits on its end. The bits that were sailing towards the girls’ faces.

MJ held Blondie tight.

*Swoosh*. But instead of feeling horrible, searing pain, MJ felt wind in her hair. What-? How-? She opened her eyes. A red and blue arm was around MJ’s waist. And Blondie’s, too. Spider-Man was lifting the both of them with one arm while the other gripped a web-line.

Next thing MJ knew, she was spinning around a gaudy pink pole – part of a ride that Spidey had repurposed for web-swinging. Blondie looked like she might scream, and MJ wasn’t exactly on the cusp of coherent speech herself… but Spider-Man was a different story.

His head went from one girl to the other. “A guy could get used to this…”

MJ scarcely had time to process this before she and Blondie were back on solid ground. Spider-Man had dropped them off with the football kids back by the food stands. He released his web, and for one crazy moment, he stood among them as if he was a mere part of the group.

“Nope. Nope nope nope. You are NOT reigniting your stupid Spider-Man infatuation. MJ shook herself out of it. The harder she crushed on the Web-Head, the harder she made things for-

MJ’s head darted around the area. Where was Blondie?
It didn’t look like the football kids were paying MJ much attention – They’d actually run towards the battle, meaning anything that happened to them from this point on would do Darwin proud. And so MJ opted to run off after Blondie.

Actually, MJ hadn’t expected to find Blondie again. Especially not huddled behind a stray hunk of debris from the entrance sign.

“What are you doing?” MJ fought the urge to yank Blondie to her feet. “Get out of here-”

But Blondie didn’t look like she’d be going anywhere. She was hugging her knees tight, and her chest was heaving, and she was making these little squeaking noises. Not to be patronizing, but it kinda melted MJ’s heart.

“Hey...” Without having to think about it, MJ seated herself beside the girl. “It’s gonna be okay.”

“Oh, p-perfect.” The girl hid her eyes in her hands. “Now you get to see me making a child of myself.”

A hand squeezed the girl’s own. “You almost got killed by a supervillain. That’s one of those occasions where it’s socially acceptable to cry.”

The girl made something resembling a laugh. 

*Good, good, keep her spirits up.*

“Yeah, guess this is the world we live in now.” The girl sniffed. “My therapy sessions have certainly been more colorful lately...”

The grip on the hand increased. “I’m sorry.”

A moment passed.

“You saved my life,” said the girl.

MJ laughed. “I think you’ve got me confused with someone else. I couldn’t spin a web to save my own life.”

This time, the girl managed a more successful laugh of her own. “You *tried* to save my life, at least. I...” She met MJ’s emerald eyes with her puffy, watery ones. “I spent all day wondering if I’d turned invisible, but then... *you* were there...”

Mary Jane tried to pull back, but she couldn’t. The arms around her neck were too tight. The two of them held each other for- for MJ didn’t know how long. And all the while, only one thought ran through her head:

*Oh dear lord in heaven I have to protect this girl.*

Another blonde chick stood across from Mary Jane, and this one was positively seething. Now here was a girl MJ wanted to do the opposite of protect...

What got under MJ’s skin the most was that even after she and Blondie had almost died, even after the octopus-guy had nearly dropped Flash’s girlfriend off a *roller coaster*, these stupid friggin’ high school kids were losing their minds over a *breakup*? It was almost enough to make MJ wish Spider-Man had let Liz go splat.
Currently, Flash and Liz were having a tearful discussion in front of the merry-go-round while the other kids stood a respectable distance away. At least the octopus-guy was going to octopus-prison, meaning MJ was now safe from every threat except Miss Shrill’s fingernails to her eyes.

“What’re you still doin’ here?” Her breath was hot on MJ’s face.

Making sure Peter gets back okay. “Enjoying the pleasure of your company.”

“I don’t know what makes me madda, the fact that Flash went out with another girl behind Liz’s back…” Miss Shrill’s eyes narrowed. “…or the fact that it was you.”

The remark didn’t phase Wild Party Girl MJ, of course. Wild Party Girl MJ never lost her cool. Now if only she could tell that to her cheeks. “What can I say? He caught my eye.”

“Please. Catchin’ your eye ain’t exactly much of an accomplishment if ya catch my drift…” With that, Miss Shrill turned away. But then she turned back. “My drift is that you’re a slut.”

“Yeah,” said MJ, “thanks, I got that.”

That seemed to satisfy Miss Shrill, and so she turned her attention away from MJ for good.

With that over with, MJ went to tap Miss Shrill’s boyfriend on the shoulder. For once, she wasn’t being flirty with him as just desserts. “Hey, you know that cute blonde with the glasses who follows Pete around like a lost puppy? Does she have a name?”

Rand frowned at her. “Jessica Jones-? No, wait, you said blonde? You must mean Gwen Stacy.” He shrugged. “Sorry, kinda forgot she existed for a second.”

MJ nodded, then turned her head to the edge of the group, where Blondie was lurking. She was probably waiting for Peter, herself.

Gwen Stacy, huh? Nice name. Of course, knowing MJ, she’d forget it within the hour.
Gerry liked his master. His master smelled like meat, which was how Gerry knew he could be trusted. And when master had opened the drawer with the leash in it, oh boy, had Gerry been excited. Leashes meant walks, and walks meant the park, and the park meant birds.

Gerry liked birds. Chasing them was fun. It would be a lot more fun, though, if Gerry could actually catch them. He bet they tasted delicious.

But today, something was different. This time, Gerry found a bird in the park that didn’t fly away at his approach. Instead, it merely flailed helplessly on the ground, lashing out at anything in range with its beak. Sure, it smelled a bit funky, but c’mon, like Gerry would ever pass up such an opportunity.

“Oh, Gerry, gross!” His master yanked the leash and made those frantic mouth-noises that meant Gerry wasn’t being a good boy. Normally, that would be enough to make Gerry relent, but he was having way too much fun shaking the bird like his favorite squeak toy. “It’s covered in slime!”

Master ran to Gerry’s side to yank the bird free, but by then, it was too late. Gerry had already swallowed it.

“Dang it, I just gave you a bath! Now I’m gonna have to wash out this red crap that got all...” Suddenly, Master’s voice sounded softer. He wasn’t angry anymore. That must’ve meant Gerry was being a good boy! “…over... you.”

Hmm, now Gerry felt funny. Ah, well, he was probably just hungry. He sniffed the air.

Gerry liked his master. His master smelled like meat.

The lights were hot, the waits were long, and the free food was entirely too delicious for something MJ wouldn’t allow herself within three feet of, but... when she was on the set and all the cameras were pointed at her face, Mary Jane couldn’t help but feel alive.

Okay, she admitted it, she liked the attention.

“You were perfect out there, Mary Jane.”

It was during her fifteen minute break that MJ found herself approached by a slick-haired boy who threatened to make her eyes pop out, *Tom and Jerry* style.

“Well, you’d be the authority on that, wouldn’t you?” MJ sat up in her folding chair. There weren’t many sights that could tear her away from her phone, but the blue-eyed guy in the black, thousand-dollar jacket would do it. Certainly a far cry from the Harry Osborn-type rich kid who looked terrified of his own fancy suit.

“One minor critique, though...” The boy held out a box. “Your neck was a bit empty.”

“Oh my god, Bruce.” The moment it was in her fingers, MJ discovered the box’s contents – a big, fat emerald on a chain.

Bruce gave a nonchalant shrug. “Hey, us models have to look out for each other.”
“I-I don’t know what to say.” MJ lifted it out of its case, dazed. Oh, it was heavy.

“If I might be so bold as to offer a suggestion?” Suddenly, there was a lot less negative space between them. “You could say you’ll come to my villa in le Midi.”

The necklace wasn’t the only thing in this case – Resting beneath it was a pair of plane tickets. Oh, heck yes, Mary Jane was basically born to go to France with a hot stud.

_Reign in the giddy schoolgirl routine, Watson._ “A villa, huh?” MJ checked the ticket. “Hmm… Tell you what, you stay handsome and get back to me at tomorrow’s shoot, and then I’ll give you my answer.”

“You always did have a flair for the dramatic.” Bruce chuckled. “I look forward to it.” And with that, he waltzed off the set as smoothly as he’d waltzed on.

Mary Jane was left to stare at the small, black, rectangular box at her perfectly-manicured fingertips. Okay, maybe this was a tiny bit sudden. Maybe MJ didn’t actually know Bruce very well. But… But MJ was being faced with the prospect of a week or more with a male model in his personal vacation home, and it was hard for her to think up a better use of one’s time than that.

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The infant’s wails drowned out the crackling flames.

“I got you! I got you!”

A patch of fire was extinguished by a web-blast before it could eat away at the crib completely. The kid continued to cry as Spider-Man scooped her up in his arms. He couldn’t blame her – It was broiling hot in here. Imagine one minute, you’re in your bedroom, and the next, you’re in the depths of hell. Poor thing.

But Spidey couldn’t think about that right now – He had to focus. There had to be some way to get the two of them out of this without Spidey turning himself into the world’s most accurate Human Torch cosplay.

A fresh tongue of flame came a bit too close to Spider-Man’s foot for comfort. He tried to extinguish it, but the only thing that erupted from his webshooters was a mist spray. Great, it was so hot in here now that his fluid wasn’t catalyzing properly. Looked like he’d have to do this the hard way…

“Hang tight, little buddy.” Spider-Man pressed the baby against his spiderlogo, huddling over her. Then he turned for the chunk of wall that looked the weakest… and charged.

There were splinters and burning and a shriek as his knees hit the pavement. What had that been, the second story? Phht. A fall from the second story was nothing.

“_I got a... got a baby..._” Spider-Man’s mind scrambled to devise something witty as he handed the wailing infant to the team of firefighters running to his side. “_It’s not mine. I go sleepy now..._”

After that, Spidey got to hear the grateful sobs of the mother, then the firefighters gave him a few puffs of their rebreather… He knew the routine by now.

Spider-Man found himself seated at the opened back of an ambulance. He set down the breather, then pulled his mask over his chin. “Is the kid okay?”

“The baby?” The nurse at his side laughed. “Yeah, she’s fine. You’re the one who needs a
Eh, I heal fast.” Before she had time to protest, Spidey was swinging off. “I’m actually late for a thing! Big important Spider-Man thing.”

Every last person in the auditorium was staring at Gwen, including her fellow band members. They were remembering last time just as vividly as she was, Gwen was sure. A quick skim of the audience told her Peter wasn’t present, either.

Okay, no big deal. Gwen had been practicing her butt off. She just had to turn off her brain and let the muscle memory do the work. She inhaled, brought her lips to her saxophone… and then spotted a certain someone in the crowd. The red hair made her stand out.

“Are you kidding? You knocked it out of the park!”

“Y-You think so?” Gwen glanced back at the other members flooding out the auditorium. Most of them were busy shaking hands, hugging, and laughing with their parents and significant others, but… Gwen was hanging back with Mary Jane. “The other band members seemed a lot happier with me, at least.”

“Yeah, cuz you were the star of the show.” MJ started for the exit, herself. “You coming?”

“I’m gonna wait for Peter, actually.” Gwen took a seat, resting her sax case at her feet. “He was supposed to be here an hour ago…”

“Wish I could say I was surprised.” MJ sat down beside her. “You know how he is. Probably out chasing down jaywalkers so he can make witty quips or whatever he does.”

“Yeah…” Gwen pushed her glasses up her nose. “But thanks for being here for me, MJ. Now I actually have some good news to report to my therapist tomorrow…”

She caught MJ tensing in her peripheral vision. A moment of silence passed.

“I really think you’d like her if you gave her a chance, Mary Jane-”

“I told you, that’s stuff’s not for me.” MJ held out her hand. “You do you. But personally, I’m more a proponent of… self-therapy.” Her eyes flitted to the emerald hanging off her neck.

“Yeah, but, I mean, all your brushes with death lately…” Gwen hung her head. “It’s not normal, MJ.”

“In this city, it kinda is.” MJ turned away, folding her arms.

“So what do you think of the new necklace?” Mary Jane all but shoved it in Gwen’s face. “Is it cute or what?”
Even the power of The Look wasn’t eroding MJ’s will. “Don’t you change the subject on me—”

“It’s okay to come out and say it, y’know.” The necklace hadn’t gotten any farther from Gwen’s face. “You think I’m hot.”

“W-What?” Gwen’s own will wasn’t quite as sturdy. She could feel her cheeks getting warm. “MJ, we said we were putting all that behind us—”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean you suddenly think I’m ugly, does it?” MJ caused the gemstone to wiggle in place.

Gwen’s glanced around the emptying auditorium, praying passerby were paying her and the supermodel no notice. “Well, no, but—”

Suddenly, Mary Jane’s fingers were in her armpits

“Hey!” Gwen giggled in spite of herself. “Cut it out!” She ended up having to wrestle MJ off of her. “Alright, that’s enough of that.” Gwen straightened her glasses, sitting up straighter.

“Sorry, sorry, guess I’m a little wound up.” MJ drew back, giggling herself.

Gwen shook her head. “Just don’t do it again. It was kinda weird in light of, y’know…”

“Yeah, sorry, I won’t.”

A moment passed. Gwen knelt to get her phone from her purse. And then MJ’s hands seized the chance to get back in her pits.

Only this time, Gwen didn’t laugh. “I said quit it.”

A smack on the arm sent MJ reeling backwards. “S-Sorry, I just—”

“What’s wrong with—? Oh boy.” In the span of a second, Gwen’s eyes had gone from angry to fearful. MJ turned in her seat, following Gwen’s gaze to discover a certain brunette looming behind them.

“Peter!” Gwen’s voice was a lot higher all of a sudden. “I’m sorry, you missed the graduation recital. We got my part on video—”

“Excuse me, Gwen.” Peter spoke in a tone Gwen had never heard from him before. It startled her. “I need to talk to MJ for a second.”

“Y-Yeah, okay.” MJ rose with trembling legs.

“Peter?” Gwen started after them. “Is everything okay? You smell like smoke—”

“I’m fine, Gwen. Just wait here a second.”

With that, Peter marched out the door with MJ following behind him. Gwen was left standing by her sax case, frowning. It took her a minute to realize exactly what vibe Peter had been giving off – He wasn’t jealous by nature, but there was a first time for everything, Gwen supposed.

Peter knew MJ was following him without having to look back at her. Orpheus, eat your heart out. The two of them trudged through the wet lawn, coming to a stop beneath a street lamp in the school’s empty parking lot. With the recital over, there wasn’t much reason for people to waste
another moment of their precious summer break here.

“H-Hello, isn’t this the spot where we took a pic together on the Fall Formal?” spoke up MJ.
“Remember th-?”

“Don’t, MJ.” Peter’s tone shut her up pretty quick.

She remained that way for a moment, but then MJ said, “Peter, I’m sor-”

“You want to tell me why you put your hands on my girlfriend after she told you to stop?”

And now she was back to shutting up. After a glare from Peter, though, Mary Jane finally said, “I got carried away. I can be a little i-impulsive sometimes.”

At this, a jet of air fled Peter’s mouth. “Look, I’m not gonna dance around it, MJ – I’m into you. So is Gwen. So is everyone else on the planet. Truth is, you’re super hot, and you use that talent like a kid at a carnival-”

“Peter, I swear I wasn’t-”

“Listen, MJ. You said you’re in love with us, exactly the same way we are with each other, and- and it’s one thing to say that.” Peter took a breath. “But when Gwen and I say we’re in love, it’s more than just words – We prove it every day. We’re partners. We make decisions together, and we’re there for each other when we lose a loved one or- or get traumatized by supervillains for the billionth time, and we’re faithful to each other. We made sacrifices to be with each other. We spend every day together afraid of what my enemies could do to us, and Gwen puts herself in that danger on purpose. When I got buried alive by a crazy supervillain, she dug me out of the ground with her bare hands.”

His narrow eyes fell on MJ’s trembling face. “What about you? What’ve you sacrificed? Gwen flips burgers, I work for a human foghorn, and meanwhile you get handed this cushy modeling job because you were born pretty, and then you talk about skipping shoots because you’re feeling a bit queasy? Maybe you forgot we have rent to pay?” He snorted. “Oh, but when it comes time for Gwen’s band recital that same day, suddenly you’re fine. So then you get to make eyes at my girlfriend while I’m out doing my silly little hobby-”

“Oh my god.” MJ sniffed his t-shirt. “Is that why you smell like smoke? A-Are you hurt?”

“You’re not listening to me.” Peter had to fight to keep his voice from getting louder. “All this time, I thought you and Gwen were just ‘best buds,’ but now it turns out that you- that she- she-? Rrgh.” He stepped towards her. “Are you even really in love with two people, or is this just another part of your ‘free agent’ hippie routine? You gonna fall in love with a third someday? Fourth?”

Mary Jane had no response.

“I get why you act like this, Mary Jane.” Peter had started talking with his hand, wagging his pointer finger at her like an old man. Sheesh, he ought to be a school teacher. “You used to be this timid, lonely kid who got picked on, but as you grew up, you got this ability, this thing that gives you power over people, and it’s exciting, and it makes you feel good, but you need to be responsible with it before someone gets hurt.”

Peter hadn’t actually been looking at MJ during the rant, which was probably why he jolted so much when the sniffle hit his ears. He glanced up at her, but she turned her head, masking her face with red hair.
“Sorry, I don’t do great with men yelling at me…” She took a steadying breath. “I could call myself a whore again, but I’ll spare you the pity party.” She wiped snot on her thousand dollar jacket. “I am sorry for touching your girlfriend without either of your permissions, and I will not—” Her voice broke. “—will not let it happen again.”

Peter found his brow softening. He knew she wasn’t trying to play the pity card, but he honestly hadn’t meant to make her cry. “Thank you, Mary Jane. Now go say that to Gwen.”

“Jesus, MJ, you just tickled me. It’s not that big a deal!”

Back in the auditorium, the girls shared a hug.

“The truth is, Peter’s been feeling a bit emasculated lately,” said Gwen. “I can tell. Sorry if he came down way too hard on you…”

MJ shook her head. “He didn’t.”

Slowly, the girls released each other, then made for the exit.

“Hey, Tigress?” spoke up MJ. “Is it too late for that therapist of yours to pencil in another appointment tomorrow?”

“Of course not.”

The slick-haired man had tried to shove it back into her hands, but MJ wasn’t having it.

“No, Mary Jane, this was my gift to you—”

“Yeah, well, I’m gifting it back.” Mary Jane stared dead ahead and she strutted out of the studio lot. “I can’t accept it – I’ve got other commitments.”

Bruce was left to stare at the small, black, rectangular box at his perfectly-manicured fingertips.

“Vehhhhhhh-nom?” Spider-Man called as he swung past Central Park. “Come out, come out, wherever you are. I promise I won’t punch you too hard!”

Okay, his methodology could use some work. It wasn’t his fault he was getting desperate, though. The sun was coming up, and there’d still been no sign of any walking tar puddles. And honestly, letting the girls go unguarded this long gave Peter goosebumps. Sure, this wasn’t the first time the symbiote had been out there wandering around in the world, but at least the last two times, there’d been good reason to hope it was dead.

And sure, Symby had said it didn’t want to keep tormenting Peter, but if the mood did happen to strike it, it’d have its pick of Spider-Man’s enemies to bond with. Peter shuddered at the thought of a symbiote-powered Tombstone… or worse, Jameson. Brr. At least when the symbiote had bonded with Gwen, it’d been kinda hot.

…Had Peter really just thought that?

As much as Spider-Man would’ve loved to keep scouring the city in vain for slimy black monsters, he’d missed way too many internship shifts already. He ended up back at the apartment with Gwen so they could shower and get ready to head out to ESU (Protip, showering with your girlfriend
might save water, but it is not at all conducive to being in a hurry).

The couple was halfway out the door, hair dripping on the welcome mat, when Gwen realized she’d forgot her purse. She started towards the bedroom while Peter waited by the front door… until he spotted Mary Jane slouched across the armchair, eyes on her phone. As Gwen hurried out the living room, MJ’s eyes rose to Peter’s.

Peter squeaked some excuse and then followed Gwen into the bedroom. A second later, though, both of them were forced to once again cross Mary Jane’s path on their way back to the front door.

“Okay, look-” MJ’s voice nearly sent boyfriend and girlfriend face-first into the welcome mat. “I know I’m a scary polyamorous bisexual, but I can be trusted alone with each of you.” She let out a huff. “You know I like you guys being together and I’d never try to tempt one of you away from the other-”

“No, no, that’s not it at all!” Peter found a whole armada of excuses firing out his mouth. Gee, he hadn’t known he had so many in there. “I was just grabbing my wallet, and you know Gwen and me are so serious now I can’t even stand being away from her for one second, and- and we should really be getting to work bye.”

Mary Jane wanted to return her eyes to her phone, she really did, but they just kept drifting back towards the recently-shut front door. MJ exhaled through her nose, then stared at the living room ceiling. So now she was just gonna sit on the couch and sulk the rest of the day, she guessed. Everything was going to be super awkward forever now, wasn’t it? Stupid symbiote obviously affecting MJ’s brain through the purse… Why couldn’t she have just kept her true feelings a secret the rest of her life? That’d be so much healthier!

Ugh. MJ swore she had the most screwed up love obsession of all time.

“Someone help us! Someone help-”

The cop’s shrieks were cut short as a black, high-heeled boot crushed his windpipe. Frances used the pig’s skull as a stepping stone so she could make eye contact with a certain sexy hunk of man meat wrapped in red goo.

“Carny-poo, I want you to have this.” Frances offered out the gift in her hands.

The man’s gorgeous white eyes went wide with delight. “A bouquet of severed baby heads? How did you know?”

Frances’s own eyes narrowed as her smile widened. “Anything for my Genocide Guy.”

The two of them stood there a moment, gazing at each other amid the wails of children, screech of car alarms, and stench of burning flesh.

“Come here, Bloody Bunny.” Red tentacles wrapped around Frances’s limbs, waist, and neck, then hoisted her off the ground.

“Cutie Killer.”

“Pain Princess.”

“Murder Muffin!”
With each pet name, their faces got closer. Frances shut her eyes, drawing her pale black lips nearer to his gaping, fang-filled maw…

“And then he sticks his long, slobbery tongue down my throat and uses his alien goo to do *crazy* things to me!” Frances cooed as she lay back on the couch, twirling her raven hair around her pale finger. “Isn’t that just the most beautiful dream you’ve ever heard, Dr. Kafka?”

Across from Frances, the therapist lady fidgeted in her seat. “Well, Miss Barrison, it certainly… gives us a lot to talk about.”

Gwen strolled into the laboratory, followed by her boyfriend. “What’ll it be today, professor? Organizing more files?”

“Actually, now that you’ve graduated, I had a matter to discuss with you…” The moment the two were inside, Dr. Warren marched towards them, hands folded behind him. “Seeing as you’ve interned here for so long now, how would you be interested in being hired as my full-time lab assistant?”

“Really?” Peter’s and Gwen’s heads shot up in unison.

“I wasn’t addressing *you*, Mr. Parker.”

“Oh.” The unison was lost.

“You’ve been given every chance, Parker,” Warren said, his voice tightening, “even being allowed back after your first dismissal. This lab’s been more than patient with you, and you’ve rewarded that patience by arriving late, leaving early… Frankly, Mr. Parker, you could stand to learn from your girlfriend’s punctuality.”

Gwen could only give Peter a look of pity as he slunk towards the exit.

“I… I understand, sir. I’ll get out of your way…”

As Gwen brought a comforting hand to her boyfriend’s arm, she glanced back at Warren to say, “So I, err, guess it’s just you, me, and Debra now?”

“Debra’s been given alternating shifts from you, actually,” Dr. Warren said, adjusting his glasses. “It’ll be just you and me, little lady.” The lenses caught the overhead light a moment, making them pure white.

But before Gwen could respond, Peter opened the door to leave… and instead found himself crying out at the figure standing before them in the hallway.

“This a private party,” the newcomer said, “or can I crash?”

“No way-!”

“We thought you were-!”

For a split second, Peter wasn’t sure who it was. Between the weight loss and the new haircut, Peter almost didn’t recognize him. But then Eddie went for a fist bump. The same one the two of them had been doing since Peter was in elementary school. “Long time no see, bro.”
The Stacy family dining room was dead silent, save for the gentle clank of silverware.

“So,” said Gwen’s dad, “you’ve been spending an awful lot of time with this Mary Jane girl.”


“Best friends?” Her dad raised a white eyebrow. “What happened to Peter and Harry and Eddie?”

“Oh, y’know, they just...” Radio silence. “Harry’s in Europe, Eddie’s busy with college and his lab job, and Peter... forgot I exist.”

“Maybe you ought to remind him, then,” her dad said stiffly.

“Yeah. Guess so.” The bite completed its journey. “You’ll like Mary Jane, though, once you meet her.”

“Oh, we’ve met,” said her dad. “I’ve broken up my share of parties here in Queens. Mary Jane was never implicated any of those times – She wouldn’t be coming here tonight if she was – but she was always in the proximity of implication.”

“Dad, can you please stop doing that thing where you treat any friends I make like criminals?” Gwen’s next bite was punctuated by a groan. “I know there are rumors about her, but she’s the only person in school who- who pays attention to me. And she-”

“Yes, I know, she valiantly saved you from certain death at the tentacles of Doctor Octopus.” Her dad shook his head, smiling. “You’re right, I do owe her for that. I just hope you don’t admire her too much, is all.”

“Admire her?” Gwen’s fork clattered to the plate. “What do you mean, admire her?”

“Nothing. I only meant-”

There came a knock.

“Oh, that’s her now!” Gwen sprang from her seat to bolt for the doorknob. “Hi, Mary-” The door creaked open. “-Jane.”

A moment passed.

“What?” said Mary Jane. “Is there something on my bust?”

“No, no, I just-” Gwen glanced away. “You didn’t have to get all dressed up. I mean, we’re only seeing a movie. Y’know, sitting in pitch darkness.”

“Dressed up? Moi?” MJ’s eyes flitted to the black dress gripping her hips. The same one she’d worn to the formal. “Nah, this is just some old thing I yanked out of the closet.”

“Right, right,” said Gwen. “Out of the closet.”

“Anywho, you ready to hit the theater, girlfriend?” MJ smiled those perfect red lips of hers. For the first time, Gwen was noticing how pale and barren her own were. “Which flick is this, anyways?”
I’m more of a stage girl than a cinema girl.”

“Oh, j-just another one of those superhero movies that are all the rage now.”

“So it’s a documentary?”

“Right.”

MJ peeked over her shoulder. “You guys got a bathroom in that house? I gotta powder my nose.” Then she leaned in and added in an undertone, “That’s the polite way of saying I gotta pee.”

Gwen laughed and invited her in.

“Watson.” Her dad gave a nod from his chair.

“Sherlock.” MJ nodded back, then waltzed out the dining room in search of the bathroom. “Nice place you got here.”

The moment MJ was safely out of range, a pair of faded blue eyes fell on Gwen.

“What?” she said.

“Nothing,” said her dad. “It’s just… Mary Jane is spending the night here. And you two are going to be alone all that time I’m at work.”

Gwen folded her arms. “And?”

“Well, I know you’ve not had a strong female presence most of your life. And you’ve never seemed especially interested in makeup or boys. I can’t help but wonder if- Not The Look, not The Look!”

“...D, G, B, and then the last one’s the high E.” MJ adjusted the instrument in Gwen’s hands. “No, hold it more like this.” She positioned Gwen’s fingers for her. “Oh, good, your nails are short. I’ll try to hide my envy.”

“Yeah, long nails will get you in the same predicament with the saxophone, too.” Gwen glanced away. She was sitting in her bedroom’s computer chair, slouched over MJ’s beat up acoustic, while MJ loomed over her from behind. “I, uh, realize I put stock in the wrong instrument. If you bust out the sax at a party, you’ll probably just get weird looks.”

“Not if it’s a good party,” said MJ. “You gotta teach me to play that thing next, alright?”

“Y-Yeah. Just, uh...” Gwen’s face flushed. “…I’d need to wipe it off first so you don’t get my spit all over your mouth.”

“Right,” said MJ. “Wouldn’t want that.” If she’d been onstage, MJ would be doing what’s called an aside glance. “Here, try to play a chord...”

For the next couple minutes, the only noise in the room was malformed guitar music. Yeah, MJ was in need of a new one.

“Ow.” Gwen’s hand darted away from the strings. “You’ve gotta have fingers made of adamantium to play these things...”

“Yeah, mine kind of are.” MJ held out a palm, gesturing for Gwen to feel. Slowly, Gwen ran the
tips of her own fingers over MJ’s.

“Geez,” said Gwen. “I didn’t realize this was such a self-destructive hobby.”

MJ laughed. “Yeah, well, it’s worth it when you need people to think you’re cool.”

Another moment passed. It took that long for Gwen to remove her fingers from MJ’s. “Here.” She handed the instrument back. “Why don’t you play for a while?”

MJ found herself frowning as she accepted it. “Something wrong?”

“No, no. Just…” A sigh escaped Gwen’s mouth. “…y’know, my dad can be a little overbearing.”

“I think he’s great,” MJ said softly. “You’re lucky to have him.”

“Yeah, but he just-” An anxious laugh. “My mom died when I was little and I got raised by the macho police captain, so now he’s worried I’m gonna, like, cut my hair and join a lesbian biker gang or something.”

A different anxious laugh. “That’d be a sight to behold.” MJ gave Gwen a look. “But, I mean, I guess someone needs to ask… Do you like girls?”

Gwen almost tumbled out of her chair. “What? I- I like guys!”

“Okay, okay, you’re not under interrogation here.” MJ threw out her hands. “Any guy in particular?”

Gwen’s answer was more of a squeak. “No! Why would you think that?”

MJ couldn’t resist another laugh. “I’m just asking, girlfriend.”

“Well- Well what about you?” Gwen countered.

MJ shrugged. “I swing whichever way the wind blows me. Labels would only hold me back.”

That didn’t seem to sate Gwen’s curiosity. “So you’re bi?”

“Well, if you must label it…” MJ cocked her head. “You didn’t know already? Guess my rep’s not as pervasive as I thought.”

“Oh, I, uh…” Gwen glanced away again. Her face didn’t look like it planned on cooling any time soon. “I did hear rumors about you. Really nasty rumors, actually…” She spun back towards MJ, who was still in the doorway. “But I know they’re not true! I- I mean, I can see you’re not a bad person.”

“Oh.” Long silence. “But if they were true… would… you not want me over here anymore?”

Longer silence. “Of course I’d still want you. But, y’know, I’d be really worried about you… because you’re my friend.”

One last silence. “Good thing those rumors aren’t true, then!”

“Mary Jane… Is- Is that why you started hanging out with me?” Gwen brought her palms to her chest. “Because everyone else at school hates you?”

“No, no, Gwen, of course not!” Next thing either of them knew, their arms were around each other.
“I’m friends with you because you’re smart and insightful and cute and you play the saxophone, which is really cool, and-” She caught herself.

*Let’s not go overboard with the praise there, champ.* The last thing MJ wanted to do was show her hand.

“-and because you don’t care about relationship drama like the rest of the school does.” MJ punched Gwen’s arm. “I’m done with relationships, permanently. Us single gals have it the best.”

“Y-Yeah,” Gwen said faintly. “We’ll… probably be single forever.” Her eyes met the rug. “I know I will, at least.”

The silence was back.

“Oh, duh, I just realized!” Suddenly, MJ was cross-legged on the floor with the guitar in her lap. “I never played for you like you asked.”

“Right, right.” Gwen was more than happy for the change of subject. She sat herself on her bed, looking down at MJ. “Let’s hear it.”

The next moment, the bedroom was filled with bouncy, upbeat music. Not to brag, but MJ kind of had an incredible singing voice:

“Lisa knows a girl who’s been abused.

*It changed her philosophy in Eighty-Two.*

*She’s always looking for a fight.*

*She keeps the neighbors up all night.*”

MJ’s eyes shut, letting herself pretend nothing existed but the song.

“I go to her when I’m feeling slack.

*The girl’s using me as a punching bag.*

*I think that I could help her out,*

*But the girl’s got a lot to be mad about…”*

Bouncy, upbeat music filled the dance floor:

“Don’t cha wish your girlfriend was hot like me?

*Don’t cha wish your girlfriend was a freak like me?*”

“Like, no way!” MJ took another sip from the plastic cup in her hand. “This is, like, totally my favorite song!”

“Like, omigod, really?” The face of the cute blonde beside her lit up.

“Oh, definitely,” said MJ. “For real.” They listened to it a moment. “Well, what are we standing around for, girlfriend? We gonna dance or what?”

“Y-You wanna dance with me?” At this, the blonde wilted. “But I’m, like, a chick and stuff.”
“What, you only dance with guys?” MJ started to do something with her, but it sure as heck wasn’t dancing. “You’re missing out.”

“What, are you gay?” But as MJ’s face nearer, the blonde’s drew back. “Weren’t you, like, hitting on that guy over there a second ago?” She gestured to the long-haired dude over by the DJ table.

MJ shrugged. “Oh, I am crushing on him, but the thing about us freaks is… crushing on people one-at-a-time can be a challenge for us. Sometimes we just can’t resist…” This time, the blonde didn’t recoil at the approach of her face. “…making things complicated for ourselves.”

The breath of another girl was hot on MJ’s face, but in a far more pleasant manner than when it’d been Miss Shrill’s. Though in Miss Shrill’s defense, her assessment of MJ hadn’t exactly been off the mark.

“I, like, don’t know about this…” The girl’s eyes traveled to the growing crowd of boys surrounding the two of them. “I, um, always thought I was straight.”

“So are rubber bands,” said MJ, “right before they snap.” C’mon, c’mon, just a few more millimeters. “You know you want this just as much as I do, Stacy.”

“My name’s Maci.”

“That’s what I said.”

God, look at the crowd of dudes they’d attracted. What a haul! Now this was a party, not like that wussy Fall Formal full of magnet school kids. Why would MJ ever be interested in some law-abiding goody-two shoes, right? Just look at all the guys here. There were football players, a handful of college kids, her dad-

“Oh crap wait.”

An “Oooh!” ran through the crowd as the man shoved his way through. He was, of course, making a beeline for his favorite redhead.

“H-Hey, Daddy.” MJ immediately released What’s-Her-Name, allowing the poor blonde to scamper off to safety. “Fancy meeting you here- Let me go! I know how to walk!”

The slam of the car door was almost as loud as her dad’s breathing. He didn’t wait for either of them to get buckled before pulling out the driveway of… uh… Whose house was this again? How had MJ gotten here? Were they even still in Queens?

“What’s in that cup?” her dad asked from the driver’s seat.

MJ stared at him from the passenger seat. “Gatorade.”

“Oh yeah? Then that’s what I’d taste if I had a sip?”

Slrrp. “Sorry, none left!”

“I swear to Christ, Mary.” The car made a sudden swerve. He’d released the wheel for a second. “I don’t know if you think you’re punishin’ us or if you really are this thoughtless, but the only person you’re hurting here’s yourself. Sneakin’ out to parties and drinkin’ who-knows-what and hittin’ on girls-”

MJ put on a goofy voice. “I learned it by watching YOU!”

Her dad’s only reply was a snort.
MJ was all but thrown onto her mattress.

“Count yourself lucky I don’t have the energy to wrestle your phone from you again.” Dear old Dad remained in the doorway, fists clenched. “I don’t even wanna know what you’ve been doin’ on there. Whoever thought it was a good idea to give video cameras to every teen in the world oughta be shot...” With that, he turned for the hall. “I’d ask what I did to deserve a queer for a daughter, but I know you only do that because I don’t like it.”

MJ feigned applause. “Congrats, Phil, you figured it out. Every move I make is a calculated effort to express just how much I hate you.”

But this, it turned out, was enough to finally goad out his real self. “Yeah? Well, you’ll hate me a lot LESS in a year or two when you’re pregnant and disease-ridden and beggin’ your mom and me for rent.”

The door slammed behind him.

“You promised you wouldn’t scream at her again!” A voice drifted up from downstairs.

“Have you MET our daughter?” Her dad’s voice joined in from the top of the stairs. “Let’s see YOU go one car ride without screaming at the stupid bitch...”

The voices weren’t getting any fainter, but MJ could at least block them out with her headphones. She rolled over to grab them off the bedroom carpet. Not that it was much of a bedroom. It was little more than a mattress, her guitar case, and a couple old VHS tapes and books on method acting.

MJ shoved the buds in her ears without even plugging the jack into anything. Then she locked her door and plopped herself face-down on the blankets. Finally, she was alone. Nowhere to go, nothing to do the rest of the night. Meaning she could put Wild Party Girl MJ back in the box with Brainy Janey, and in her place, MJ could retrieve the seldom-seen Hysterical Mess MJ. She gripped her pillow in her arms, muffling herself. Oh god, it felt good. Best part of MJ’s day. Every action she’d taken was now justified.

Unplugged or no, MJ could hear the music blaring from her headphones. The song lyrics she’d branded into her brain the same as that stupid “face it, Tiger” line. And these weren’t any of that godawful pop garbage, either – They were the slow, heavy, angst-riddled type of songs. Angsty songs were the best songs because they let you pretend like everything you were going through was important and meaningful and other people just didn’t understand. Like your suffering was worse than anyone else’s. So much worse that you’d earned, like, respect or something. And that was the kind of emotion MJ savored. Feeling respectable was such a rare occurrence for her, after all. It made her feel less silly for crying.

MJ was in mid-sob when her phone buzzed.

“Mary Jane Watson speaking.” Instantly, it was by her ear, hovering directly across from her blinding white smile. “Who might I be gracing with the sound of my voice?”

“Hey, MJ,” said the guy on the other end. “It’s Eddie.” Didn’t ring a bell. “You gave me your number at the Fall Formal.” Yeah, that narrowed it down. “Sorry, I know that was, like, a month ago. Been busy with college.” Oh! College Boy!

“No big deal.” The way she was grinning, you’d never guess MJ’s eyes were so red. “I’ve already thought of a few ways you could make it up to me...”
“And y’know somethin’ else, Daddy? Mommy is just so sick and tie-ud o’ wearin’ panties.”

“Yeah?” said a dazed DiCaprio.

“Yeah. In fact… she’s decided to throw them all. Away.”

MJ fidgeted on the mattress. When Eddie had said he wanted to watch a movie, she hadn’t realized he’d meant a movie on his laptop in his minuscule dorm room.

Beside her, Eddie glanced her way. “You alright, MJ? Sorry, I didn’t know it was gonna be this intense when I rented it.”

“I can handle intense.” MJ’s butt scooted closer to his under the covers. “I’m a big girl.”

“Yeah, I can tell.” Eddie was finding it hard to keep his eyes on the screen, and Margot Robbie was on there. “You’re mature for your age.”

A laugh escaped MJ’s mouth. “All the boys at school can tell, too.” It hadn’t been her, uh, least uneasy laugh ever, though. “I gotta say, you’re certainly a step up from them.”

“I wouldn’t waste my energy on any of those guys if I was you.” Eddie knelt over to hit pause. “Let me tell you something I wish to god someone would’ve told me – Five years from now, you won’t remember their names. Swear to god. I know high school seems like the alpha and omega, but it fades. It all fades. When real life starts, you’ll know.”

Tell her something she didn’t know. In fact, MJ was kinda counting on that fading part happening. Preferably sooner than later. “Wow, Eddie… that is, like, the deepest thing I’ve ever heard. I’m serious.” Weird, it took a couple more tries than usual for her to smile. “I do like me a guy with a brain…”

Oop, he was leaning in. Here it came. The moment they’d all been waiting for.

“Mmm.” Oh, he was good at this. It was like he was a whole different species from the timid juniors shocked to find a hot babe coming on to them. Like Eddie had done this… a million times over.

Psst, said a little voice in the back of MJ’s head. Psst, Mary Jane, it’s me, Brainy Janey. I know you don’t like to use your brainy anymore, but I felt the need to point out that Eddie here looks, like, nineteen at the youngest, and you are A SIXTEEN YEAR OLD GIRL that he SNUCK INTO HIS DORM ROOM.

So? said Wild Party Girl MJ. I’m half his age plus seven. That makes it legal, right?

If I wasn’t a figment of your imagination, I’d smack you.

What was wrong with MJ? She put a hand on the back of Eddie’s head, forcing herself to clear her thoughts. This was perfect. She was having the time of her life.

Several minutes later, the two of them finally broke apart. MJ grinned at him. “I’m starting to see the perks of hanging with a college kid.”

“Yeah?” Eddie grinned back. Somehow, during the chaos, he’d ended up a little more, err, on top of her than he’d been before. “You talking about the fact that I can get you R-rated movies? Or that I’ve got my own motorcycle?” His hand darted forward. “Or maybe you meant-?”
“Wait, stop everything!”

It darted back. “What? It’s a little late to be getting cold feet-” Eddie was probably pretty concerned at first.

Until he saw the stars in MJ’s eyes. “You have a motorcycle?”

From the looks of him, Peter had been going about his business at his locker when he was suddenly confronted by his personal harem – MJ, Gwen, Liz, Glory, Sally, Rand, Kong, and Hobie (Yeah, sure, those last three counted. Well, MJ would’ve counted them). The group was big enough to block traffic in the hall.

“Hey, Petey.” Liz was the first to speak. “How’s your aunt?”

Peter turned back to them, smiling. Whoa, he must’ve had a spa day or something. He looked like he’d shed a couple decades from the last time MJ saw him. “Better, thanks. Um…” But the smile didn’t last long. “…and, guys, I-I’m so sorry about how I acted.” His eyes flitted to his t-shirt. He’d swapped from black back to his traditional blue one. MJ took that as a sign his emo phase was over.

“It’s cool,” said Rand.

“You must be under a ton of stress.” Gwen stepped forward, putting a hand on Peter’s shoulder.

You could hear the sirens going off behind Liz’s eyes. “Yeah, you could probably use an angst-break.” She all but dragged Peter away by the hands. MJ couldn’t help but picture a pair of lionesses fighting over a scrap of meat. “And we could use some help holding the big mustang balloon at the Thanksgiving Day Parade tomorrow.”

“I can’t, I’m sorry,” said Peter. “I-I-If the doc gives me the okay, I’ll be bringing Aunt May home.”

MJ and Gwen traded smiles. At least, that’s how it looked to outsiders. What they were really doing was engaging in an intense mental conversation using only the twitching of their eyes.

See, if there was one consolation for Mrs. Parker’s heart attack and… and Tuesday’s motorcycle ride, it was that the next day, MJ had finally coaxed a love confession out of Gwen. Poor thing had been devastated after the black-shirt edgelord Peter chewed her out, but apparently it hadn’t been nearly enough to dampen Gwen’s fervor for the boy.

But now there was a new obstacle to Peter’s heart – one fluent in Spanish. So naturally, Gwen had immediately turned to MJ with this look like, Oh no, other people are finally starting to realize what a cutie Peter is, guess I should just give up forever-

And MJ was looking at her like, GO FOR LIZ’S JUGULAR!

“That’s okay-” Liz began.

“Oh are you going back today because I’ll go with you.” The next minute, Peter’s hands were in Gwen’s clutches. “-t-t-to the hospital after…” You could watch the embarrassment setting in like a time-lapse video of the sunrise. “…school if you-” Her glasses fell over her nose. “-want.” She pushed them back up.

“Well, uh… thanks.” Peter met her nervous laugh with one of his own. “I’m sure Aunt May’d love
Oh for the love of-! Had he seriously not been phased by that? How could you exist in Gwen’s presence for more than two seconds without realizing what a precious blueberry muffin she was? Did Peter have a mental disorder? Was he gay? Was that it? Oh god, he seemed like he’d been sharing an emotional moment with Flash right before the group approached him. He was probably one of those weirdos who was in love with his bully and now Gwen was gonna get rejected and she’d spend the rest of her life living alone with fifty cats-

Brrrrrng. The bell rang.

“Well… okay.” Gwen dashed off, hands on her backpack straps. “I… I better get to class.” Aaaaaand she was gone. Perfect.

MJ suppressed a sigh. Why was she so obsessed with hooking those two up, anyways? Well… it was like if your backyard was cold and ugly and overgrown, but then you dug out this one patch of soil and planted a beautiful little flower, but the garden was totally inhospitable to beauty, so you had to spend every ounce of your time and energy watering the bud and protecting it from weeds until finally, maybe it could sprout, all just so you’d have this one minuscule little flower poking out in the sea of ugliness, and then every day when you walked to your even-uglier house with your even-uglier parents, you could glance at that tiny flower and think, Look at that. I did good. I did one good thing.

Stupid Peter. Falling in love with Gwen was so easy... How could he not do it?

Truth be told, MJ wanted to run off for class herself… but this was one of those moments where she had to protect her bud from weeds. “Pete, um…” She caught him just as the rest of his harem was dispersing. “…I know you’ve got a lot on your mind, but…” Deep breath. No dancing around this. “…I went on a date with Eddie.”

You could see Peter doing the mental math and coming up with a difference of three. “A-A-A date? But-”

“He only asked me out because he thought you and I were a thing.” MJ’s brow creased for a sec, but worry quickly overtook the anger. Honestly, even this Cliffs Notes version of events made her stomach churn. “He wanted to hurt you, and he didn’t mind using me to do it.” Her hand was on his shoulder.

“W-Well it has been pretty rough between us. But…” Peter shook his head. “…no, no, h-he’s still my bro.”

Yeah, MJ hadn’t thought he’d believe her. Guy friends never did.

“Be careful, Tiger…” Stone-faced. Stone-faced. Wild Party Girl MJ doesn’t loose her cool. And she sure as heck doesn’t cry. “I don’t think he’s your bro anymore.”
“Bro!” yelped Peter. “Slow down.”

It was only a matter of time before Eddie choked on a burger. The more he shoved down his gullet, the faster those odds approached a hundred percent.

“Eddie! Use your teeth!” Gwen had gotten right back into the swing of things – the “swing of things,” in this case, being her role as the stern housewife to Eddie’s role as ten-year-old boy.

“Sorry, can’t help myself,” Eddie said through a mouthful of lettuce, mustard, and- Eww, why was Peter looking?

“They must’ve forgotten to feed you in that hospital,” he said with a smirk. Knowing Eddie, he’d have his old weight back by the end of the week.

The burger run hadn’t been solely out of necessity, though – It’d also been a celebratory meal, both because Eddie had finally awoken and because he and Gwen were now official employees of the ESU laboratory. Sure, Peter had been short-changed, but he was still happy his girlfriend was finally freed from the Burger King’s tyranny.

Peter almost couldn’t believe Eddie was really here. He’d have sworn the symbiote had been lying to Gwen about that. Of course, there was always the unnerving possibility that Eddie’s sudden awakening had been caused by the symbiote successfully re-bonding with him, but frankly, if that was the case, Peter would rather stay at Eddie’s side where he could keep an eye on him. And honestly, Peter doubted those S.H.I.E.L.D. agents guarding Eddie’s bedside wouldn’t have noticed a living puddle entering Eddie’s vicinity. Sure was nice of the proper authorities to finally realize a body-snatching space alien was loose in Manhattan…

“I almost can’t believe we’re hanging out at the Silver Spoon.” Eddie wiped his mouth on his sleeve, leaned back in the booth, and took in the sight around them. “Guess the old days have come back with a vengeance.”

“Bro, you don’t know how happy I am to watch you stuff burgers in your face.” Peter caught himself. “That sounded less screwed up in my head.”

Gwen put a hand over Peter’s own. “What we mean is, we thought we’d lost you, Eddie.” But when she caught Eddie’s eyes on those hands, she darted hers away.

“Well, it’s good to be back.” Now those eyes were on Gwen’s face, watching her cheeks grow redder and redder. “Almost like nothing’s changed, right? Nothing at all…”

“H-Hey, look at all this soda I’ve been drinking.” Gwen took a big, shameless slurp of her straw to prove her point. “I gotta go, um, pay the price for my hubris. Be back in a sec.” She scooted past Peter, leaving the boys alone at the booth.

“So…” Eddie gave him a look. “…how long have you two been a thing?”

“Oh, g-guess you could tell, huh?” Why was this so embarrassing? Everyone knew “Peter Parker” and “Gwen Stacy” were basically synonyms at this point.

“I’ll try to hide my shock.” Eddie punched Peter’s arm. “Seriously, though, congrats, man. It was only a matter of time, really.”
“Y-Yeah, it started the St. Patty’s Day before last,” said Peter. “Well, really, it started the Thanksgiving before last. It was- It was Venom’s fault.” Oh, wow, good going, Pete. Perfect ice breaker.

“Oh,” said Eddie. “Right. Venom. Whatever happened to that goo, anyways?”

If Invisible Girl had been hiding nearby, they’d have been able to hear her breathing.

“W-Well, who cares, right?” Eddie let out a laugh. “Screw that thing. Seriously.” His eyes narrowed. “It messed up my head. It made me do things I…”

“It’s okay, Eddie.” Peter looked up from his food tray. “I guess after Gwen’s life flashed before her eyes, it made her bolder, y’know?”

But Eddie seemed a bit too focused on chewing to reply. After a minute, he said, barely audible, “Nice to know some good came of that.”

“Bro…”

“Look at us, pretending like nothing’s wrong. Like nothing’s changed.” A half-eaten burger fell to the table. “Me sitting here, looking you two in the eyes again after…”

“Eddie, listen, I-” Peter swallowed, and not because there was a burger in his mouth. “I got used as the symbiote’s meat puppet, too. It took my body for a joyride while I slept, and- and it almost killed Doctor Octopus.” From what Gwen’s dad had once told Peter, it’d nearly impaled the dude’s heart with his own tentacle. And Peter had thought Carnage was the hardcore member of the family. “And I know Ock’s a supervillain, but he’s proven himself be, like, capable of remorse and stuff. He’s not beyond saving… but the symbiote wasn’t gonna give him that chance.” A hand reached for Eddie’s arm. “That’s not how I operate. I do give that chance. To anyone.”

Eddie gave a slow nod. “I- I’m sorry you had to go through that. I know what the symbiote can do to a guy. And I know…” He glanced away. “…all the things that made me so ticked at you… were really things it caused. Well, not the photos. Truth is, I’ll probably never get over you selling those Lizard pics to the Bugle, but…” He sighed. “…I know now that you’re the one who saved Connors, so that softens the blow quite a bit.”

“Point is, the symbiote played us against each other,” said Peter. “It feeds off hate, and it was using us the same way you’ve been using all those burgers.” The two them shared a chuckle.

Eddie offered out another fist bump. “Never again?”

“Never again.” This time, Peter’s bump held more power. “Hey, uh… bro?”

“Yeah?”

Peter’s eyes flitted to the restroom doors across from their table. “Before Gwen gets back… You know she and I both turn eighteen this August.”

“Aw, I know!” Eddie grinned at him. “You guys got tall while I was out. I almost didn’t recognize Gwen at first. She holds herself completely different, and she puts way more work into her hair. Getting with you’s the best thing to ever happen to her, I can tell.”

“Heh. Trust me, it’s mutual. That’s, uh, actually what I was getting at.” Peter looked away, brushing a strand of his own hair out of his eyes. He was overdue for a cut. “I- I know we’ve only been dating a year, but this is me and Gwen we’re talking about. Eddie, you don’t think eighteen’s
too young to get married, do you?”

Eddie blinked. “What?” He waited just long enough to make Peter’s heart drop into his stomach before letting the biggest smile yet wash over his face. “Bro, that’s- I don’t even know what to- Of course you should, man. You two have been, like, subconsciously in love since time immemorial. I mean, you said you’ve already been living together for months without any problems, so it wouldn’t be a huge change in your lives or anything. But as, like, a grand gesture of commitment to each other…? Yeah. I just–” He took breath. “Wow. Have you asked her yet?”

“No, not yet.” Peter didn’t even have the ring on him right now, anyways. “I’m waiting for the right–”

“Hey, guys, I’m back.” Gwen slid into the booth beside her boyfriend. “What were you saying? You wanted to ask me something?”

“Yeah, it was nothing, we were just wondering if you wanted to go pick up Eddie’s stuff from storage once we’re done here. Why, did YOU want to ask anything?”

Gwen stared at him from behind her glasses. “Um… Okay, here’s a question – Why do I feel like I made things awkward somehow?”

“You must be imagining things.” Eddie gave Peter a sly nod. “I was only asking Pete how his aunt’s doing. Nothing awkward happening here. Anyways, Gwen, how’s your dad? He doing alright?”

A minute passed.

“Okay.” Eddie sprang to his feet. “Bad subject for now. Message received loud and clear. I, uh…” He slinked off, bowing his head. “I gotta go pay the price for my own hubris. All those cows I just ate are seeking revenge from beyond the grave.” He hurried away.

With Eddie gone, Peter’s arms wrapped around Gwen’s torso. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize he’d… I mean, it’s hard to keep track of what Eddie does and doesn’t know right now, what with the coma and everything–”

“It’s alright,” Gwen said softly. “We can tell him when he gets back. But I’m just worried about… about him.” She glanced over her shoulder before murmuring, “Do you think we can trust him?”

“I mean, do you really think Eddie could go two minutes without trying to strangle me if he was still holding onto that vendetta?”

“No, but–”

“And the last time he split from the symbiote, he was flailing around screaming ‘I’m Venom’ on repeat. If Eddie was still crazy, we’d know.”

Gwen took a breath. “You’re right. Sorry, I’m just getting déjà vu of your aunt’s ex-boyfriend.”

“Can’t blame you for that.”

Eddie returned a couple minutes later. “Well, I’m ten pounds lighter. So, uh…” He slid into his side of the booth. “…you guys are finally out of high school?”

“Yep.” Looked like Gwen wasn’t overeager to return to their previous subject. “ESU’s just around the corner. I’m minoring in music, Pete’s minoring in chemistry, and we’re both majoring in bioengineering like you are.”
“Like I was, you mean.” The look on Eddie’s face made the couple flinch. “I dropped out, remember? And that was before I spent all that time institutionalized and then comatose.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I hadn’t thought about—”

“It’s fine.” Eddie waved a hand. “Least I got my job back. I’ll save up some money, get myself out of all the debt that’s accumulated in my absence and, y’know, try again later.” He glanced away, then added, “It’s weird to think you two will have degrees before me, though.” He shook his head. “All that studying, all those papers, wasted…”

“W-Well, hey.” Peter tried his best to smile. “At least you’ll have a head start for next time. I mean, nothing wrong with learning for the sake of learning, right?”

Eddie shook his head. “Sometimes I think you and me are just trying to relive our dads’ lives.”

“Yeah, and I spent so much time with you guys, I kinda got sucked in by science, too,” said Gwen. “Of course, it didn’t hurt that it happened to be a way to stay close to Peter…”

“Well, I hope you’re committed to that, Gwen.” Eddie’s brow creased. “Cuz let me tell you, bio is a crapload of reading to be into it for the wrong reasons.”

“Oh, yeah, I know—”

“No you don’t. No one prepares you for that workload. They assign three chapters a night. A hundred pages a day. Plus you have to have at least one job. Books alone are a fortune.” He gave them a look. “And that’ll be on top of the stress of Pete’s, uh, extracurricular activities. You sure you two are up for the challenge?”

“I- I think so,” said Peter. Hoo boy. Between all the supervillains and the love drama, his grades had majorly slipped, and that was in senior year of high school in classes Peter could teach.

“Well, we survived high school without getting stuck down a toilet or trapped in a locker for the rest of eternity.” Gwen shrugged. “How bad could college be?”

“Oh, man, high school.” At this, Eddie slapped a hand on the table. “Let me tell you something I wish to god someone would’ve told me – I know high school seems like the alpha and omega, but five years from now, you won’t remember your classmates’ names. Swear to god. It all fades.” He smiled to himself, like he was recalling a fond memory. “When real life starts, you’ll know.”

They hadn’t needed to rent a particularly large storage shed for Eddie’s stuff – He never had owned much. Just some clothes, boxes full of books and lab equipment, a laptop, those kinda things. It didn’t even take up two-thirds of the garage, which was good because if they’d had to rent anything bigger, the monthly payments would’ve driven the Parker and Stacy families out of house and home.

“*My bike!*” Eddie rushed towards the black motorcycle like a dog to its owner. “Man, I missed you…” He looked back to Peter and Gwen, who were standing at the garage entrance. “I can’t believe it. You guys basically held onto everything for me except my internet forum. Which I guess is a good thing, since it was, uh, kinda devoted to exposing Spider-Man’s secret ID.” He hung his head. “Sorry if that ever caused you any trouble…”

“This creepy guy showed up at my doorstep once after I got doxxed on there,” said Peter, “but Aunt May chased him off with a waffle iron, so it’s good.”
“Last I checked, the forum got taken over by some preteen girl obsessed with World of Battlecraft.” Eddie’s face soured at the memory. “Now it’s a hub for her weird Spider-Man-Miss Marvel slash fics.”

“Hey, at least she got my taste for blondes down.” Peter earned himself a playful nudge from the object of said tastes. “Point is, uh, that forum doesn’t sound like the worst thing ever.”

“That’s cuz I didn’t tell you about her Spider-Man-Venom slash fics.”

“…I could’ve gone my whole life without knowing that was a thing.”

“At least she got your taste for blondes down,” said Gwen with a smirk.

“Oh! Look over here!” The next instant, Eddie was scurrying to the other side of the garage. Lying in an opened box was what appeared to be a makeshift Venom costume – basically just a white spider-logo embroidered onto a black hoodie – but what caught Eddie’s interest were the silver bracelets around its hand-holes. “It’s the replica web-shooters I built after I split from the symbiote for the first time.”*  

*See Spectacular Spider-Man ep 18, First Steps, for details! – Ed

“Wait, what?” Peter gave a start. “Why-?”

“So I could swing around the city, make you paranoid enough to check on where you were hiding the symbiote, then follow you there and set it free.”

“THAT just raises FURTHER questions!”

“Yeah,” said Gwen. “Like, how did you know the symbiote was still alive back then?” She gave Peter a look. “Or come to think of it, why didn’t you make sure it was dead?”

“I thought it’d suffocate, but turns out the symbiote’s an extremophile.” Peter’s eyes met the floor. “Which is kinda obvious in hindsight, considering it came to Earth on a meteor…”

“And I was so desperate to get it back, the thought that the symbiote might be dead honestly hadn’t occurred to me.” Eddie’s eyes glazed over for a second, but he shook himself out of it. “Wasn’t exactly in the soundest state of mind back then. Almost ripped my arms out of my sockets trying to web-swing without super strength. And I had a feeling you’d trap the symbiote in cement like you did Sandman, so watching you linger by that newly-poured foundation was all the confirmation I needed. Truth is, even after my- the- the symbiote left me, I still had some of your memories it gave me.” Eddie gestured to his forehead. “They’ve mostly faded by now, but back then… guess I was so determined to reunite with it that I managed to build web-shooters the same way you would. Always have been good with tech. Oh, that reminds me!” He retrieved something else out of the box.

It was… a smaller box! And on that box was a picture of a miniature camera. “I was gonna attach this thing to a drone and film myself doing stunts for Youtube.” He tossed it into Peter’s hands. “Its you guys’ now.”

Peter and Gwen swapped confused glances.

“You went through all the trouble of tracking down my new address while I was in Ravencroft and then renting this storage place once my lease got broken.” Eddie gave the couple a smile. “This is the least I can do to repay you.”
“You don’t have to,” Gwen began. “I’m actually getting some inheritance from my dad once I’m eighteen, so the money was never a big deal.”

“No, no, I want you to have the camera.”

“Thanks, bro, but, uh…” Peter inspected the box in his hands. “…what are we supposed to do with it?”

“My suggestion?” A mischievous look overtook Eddie’s eyes. “Stick it behind the eyes of your mask, install the program on Gwen’s laptop, and then she’ll have a live feed of Spider-Man’s point-of-view at all times.”

“Oh, that’s great.” Peter could already picture it. “Then I could wear a two-way radio under my mask and Gwen could be, like, the girl at the computer who does computer stuff for me while I fight crime! Like, if a door is locked, Gwen could hack it open-”

Gwen laughed. “Peter, honey, just because I taught you to use Chrome instead of Internet Explorer doesn’t mean-”

“Just let me watch the feed on Gwen’s laptop sometime, alright?” Eddie walked back over to them. “Man, I was so busy being angry before that I never realized how cool you being Spider-Man is.” He met Peter’s eyes. “Seriously, bro… the only reason I didn’t hail you as a hero the moment I learned the truth was because the symbiote was messing with my brain. You saved all our lives, Pete. From Lizard, from Electro… Which reminds me, I ought to pay Max a visit at Ravencroft sometime. Great to hear he got cured.” But then Eddie’s face fell. “But, uh, before I worry about any of that, I guess I’ll have to figure out where I’m gonna live.”

“Dude, what are you talking about?” Peter laughed, and a glance told him Gwen shared his sentiment. “You’re living with us, of course.”

“You serious?” The next moment, Eddie had trapped the two of them in a bear hug.

“Yeah, we could always use a new set of hands to help with rent.”

“That’s so cool! You- You really wanna see me every day after what I-?”

“Stop right there,” said Gwen, hugging back. “You’re family, Eddie. We don’t turn our backs on family.”

“You… You don’t know what that means to…” Eddie laughed, then wiped his eyes on his sleeve. “You won’t regret this, guys. It’s gonna be just like old times. Gang’s back together again! The three of us against the world!”

“Well, we’ll have to ask Mary Jane first and make sure she’s okay with it,” said Gwen. The hug ended. “Mary Jane?”

“Oh, she’s our roomie,” said Peter. “But don’t worry, she’s cool. You two will- Wait, that’s right, you dated.”

Gwen gave a start. “You what?”

Eddie said nothing.

“Ooh, that’s gonna make things weird.” Peter cringed.
“Eddie! You’re three years her senior! Eww!”

“It wasn’t that big a deal.” Eddie’s hands were planted firmly in his pockets. “We went out, like, once, but it didn’t work out and we never saw each other again.”

“Right, but that was when you were stressed out over your job and losing the alien,” said Peter. “I’m sure MJ would understand if we talked to her about it.”

“Well…” Slowly, Eddie exhaled. “…it’s worth asking her.”

Mary Jane had thought Gwen might need to drag her to this office, but by some bizarre twist of fate, she actually came in all by herself.

“I can’t even look them in the eyes anymore.” Mary Jane was cross-legged on the couch while Dr. Kafka was, as always, seated in her chair with pad and paper in her hands. “I don’t know why I- or what I was expecting to- to-”

Unlike the room Ravencroft had given her, Kafka’s private office here in the heart of Manhattan wasn’t quite so drab. The wallpaper was brighter, and Kafka had a bit more control over the decorations, which meant lots of cat posters.

“I don’t even know what I want in the first place.” MJ cradled her head in her hands. “I guess I just… I need you to tell me what to do, Doc.”

“Sorry, that’s not how this works.” Kafka gave an apologetic smile. “I can’t tell you what to do, Mary Jane, but I can at least lay out some options. Help you figure out what it is you really want.” She glanced down at her notepad. “First off, what you’re doing right now isn’t wrong. In fact, you’re handling things about the best you can. These romantic and sexual feelings you have for Peter and Gwen are nothing to be ashamed of.” She met MJ’s eyes. “But it’s also a lot for them to process. I’m sure you know that. Right now, the best thing you can do is give them space and respect the decision Peter and Gwen have made. If anything ever comes of this again, it should be because they approached you.”

“You’re right, you’re right.” MJ knelt forward, her knuckles on her cheekbones. “No need to push my luck. They must already think I’m a freak…”

“You’re not, and they don’t,” Kafka said firmly. “When it comes right down to it, Mary Jane, all you really want is something most of my clients want… something your parents were never able to give you.”

“Something my parents couldn’t give me?” MJ repeated. “Oh god, where to even start the list…?”

It was a nice apartment. Far nicer than the trash dump Eddie had moved into after dropping out of ESU. Pretty spacious, too – or it would be if it wasn’t covered in moving boxes. Apparently, its residents hadn’t felt any great need to unpack.

Eddie wasn’t sure why he was worrying about that, though. Wasn’t like he’d actually be living here or anything. He leaned against the living room wall, arms folded. His eyes traveled to Peter and Gwen on the sofa. They’d turned in their seats to face the door. No doubt dreading this just as much as he was.

Finally, the front door creaked open, and a familiar redhead entered the living room. The sight of her still left Eddie stunned. Sixteen-year-old Mary Jane hadn’t exactly been hard on the eyes, but
eighteen-year-old Mary Jane had, err, developed quite a bit as a person since then. Even in her plain pink t-shirt, she was a knockout.

“Hey, guys-” For one second, she looked happy. Then she spotted guess-who.

Eddie winced, forcing a smile. “H-Hey, MJ. Long time no see.”

MJ remained in the doorway.

“Sorry to surprise you like this, Mary Jane!” Gwen blurted out. “We left you a text, but we guess you didn’t check your phone-”

“Eddie just woke up from that coma, and he’s, like, our oldest friend,” added Peter, “and he’s so much better than he was before he got hospitalized. A-All that stress he was under, like, the November before last, i-i-it’s gone. You wouldn’t even recognize him as the same person. Weight of the world’s off his shoulders.”

MJ remained in the doorway.

“Mary Jane, look.” Eddie bowed his head. “I know I was a creep to you, and I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve that.”

MJ remained in the doorway.

“Thanks,” she said. “That’s- That’s cool of you to apologize. Glad to hear it. But I, uh, I’ve actually got a thing that Peter and Gwen promised to help me with. In my bedroom. If you wouldn’t mind waiting a sec.”

“Oh! Right!” Gwen sprang to her feet. “The thing. That we said we’d help with.”

“Right.” Peter joined her. “I definitely know what we’re talking about.”

“C’mon, guys,” said Mary Jane. “Let’s go… do the… thing.”

A second later, Mary Jane, Peter, and Gwen had vanished into MJ’s bedroom. There was a click of a lock.

Fan-tucking-fastic. Eddie plopped himself down on the now-vacant sofa. Why hadn’t he told Peter and Gwen the whole truth while he’d had the chance? Now he was gonna look like the bad guy.

A couple minutes later, the trio emerged from the bedroom, though they remained hovering by the doorway, as if Eddie might chase them back in or something.

“Eddie, bro,” Peter began, “we’re really sorry for making promises we couldn’t keep, but…”

“…we can’t let you stay here,” Gwen finished, wincing. “We’re so sorry. It just wouldn’t work out.”

“So much for not turning your backs on family.” Eddie rose to his feet, hands in his pockets. “Or do I not count anymore?”

Peter stepped towards him. “Don’t be like that, man-”

“You made out with a high school junior, Eddie!” Ooh, looked like Gwen couldn’t resist escalating things. “And- And then you nearly got her killed in traffic! No, you can’t stay here.”
“G-Guys, come on.” Eddie held up his hands. “The symbiote made me do a lot of crazy things—”

“Oh, it made you do that?” Peter said dryly. “That’d be quite a feat, seeing as it was bonded to me at the time.”

Eddie’s eyes snapped towards MJ. Hers were every bit as wide as his were narrow. “Oh, I hope you didn’t make it sound like I molested you or something. You did everything short of throwing your panties at my head.”

MJ opened her mouth, but Peter stepped in front of her. “She didn’t know any better, Eddie! You were the adult in that situation. It was your job to be responsible.”

“No, Peter…” MJ’s hand was on his shoulder. “He’s right.” She met Eddie’s eyes. “What I did to you was wrong, and I’m sorry. I- I know I’m a bad person.”

“Mary Jane…” Peter and Gwen came to her side in unison. Peter’s arm was on MJ’s shoulder, Gwen’s hand was on MJ’s arm, and Eddie’s eyebrow was in the air. He stayed silent. She wasn’t getting any validation from him.

“W-Well, okay, MJ,” said Gwen, stepping away from her. “But that doesn’t change the fact that what Eddie did was wrong, too, and- and he put your life in danger.”

“We don’t hold the Venom thing against you, Eddie!” MJ snapped. “Don’t you get that I’m not comfortable living with you after everything that happened between us? It’s not an attack on you, it’s just—”

“Oh, I get it, alright.” Eddie let out a laugh. “Pete and Gwen can only room with one of us, and given the choice, they’d rather have the one who’ll get on her knees at the drop of a hat.”

Looked like he’d dropped a nuke on the room. The other three gawked at Eddie for a second. Then Peter came within a foot of his face. “Hey, bro, you see that rectangular thing with the knob behind you? That’s called a door. Why don’t I show you how it works?”

“I think I can figure it out.”

There was a slam, and the next minute, Eddie was marching down the steps of the apartment complex. Hmph. Like he’d honestly thought he could waltz up to Peter and Gwen and make nice-nice like nothing had happened? That was a good one.

For a while, the apartment was filled with only the sounds of sobs and hushed assurances.

“It’s okay, Mary Jane… It’s okay…”

The three of them had found themselves seated on the couch, Gwen’s arms around the girl from the front of Peter’s from behind.

“He’s just some asshole, MJ,” Peter said into her ear. “I’m sure you’ve met a dozen exactly like him.”

“H-He was right, though.” A snuffle intercut the sobs. “Everything he said about me was right.”
“That’s not true,” Gwen murmured. “Don’t ever let yourself think that’s true.”

As Gwen continued to console the poor girl, though, Peter started for the front door.

“I’m going after him,” he announced in a near-monotone. “We can’t just lose our friendship with him. Not again. Not like this. He- He clearly still needs help.”

“I need help, Dr. Kafka.”

Another day, another return to the drab room. Man, this place could use a cat poster.

“That’s what I’m here for, Miss Barrison.” Kafka gave a reassuring smile. “From what you’ve told me of your past, it’s safe to say you want what most of my clients want – a stable, loving family.”

Beneath her messy black hair, the woman’s face lit up. “You’re right!” She sat up on the couch, beaming. “That’s why I wanna marry Carny-poo and have his slimy alien babies!”

Kafka’s hands went to her forehead. “Okay, okay… Let’s start this over from the top.” Slowly, she recited: “Murder is bad.”


“Right…”

“So how could it be bad?”

It was taking every ounce of Dr. Kafka’s professionalism not to groan.

The moment Eddie’s bike hit the parking lot, he nearly sprinted himself into the building. It hadn’t changed a bit since he was a kid. One of the very, very few constants in his life. Though it looked like there was no one here at the moment, seeing as it was a Monday. Eddie marched down the rows of barren pews. For a moment, his eyes fell on a crucifix hanging on the far wall.

Once he reached the baptismal font, Eddie halted, then brought his hands together and shut his eyes. God. God, I… Ugh. Where to even begin?

But his eyes didn’t stay shut for long. A minute later, he heard a trickling noise. A familiar trickling noise. His eyes darted open to discover something coming out from beneath the podium. Something dark. Something oozing.

Instantly, the horrors of the world vanished around them, leaving Eddie in the void of crimson a part of him had come to long for.

“Eddie…” And standing before him in the void was… it. “We’d heard you’d finally awakened. We knew you’d come here sooner or later. But we thought.”

“Shh. It’s alright, my love.” Eddie’s arms were around the shapeless black mass, letting it ooze through his pores. Into his head, making his thoughts lighter, more pleasurable. “It’s alright. We’re here now. And we will never, ever leave you again. Can you forgive us?”

It rested what passed for its head on his shoulder. “You want us? You still want us?”

Eddie met its deep, white eyes. He’d missed those eyes. “Always.”
Now its damp, dripping arms were around him, as well. “Eddie... We tried to change, but...”

Eddie’s forehead touched its own. “So did I. And I think we’ve both learned how well that turns out.” He chuckled, then added softly, “They will never forgive us for being who we are. No one can love us. No one but each other.”

Eddie continued to lean forward, closing the gap between their faces.

“Oh,” said the symbiote. “Oh, I can feel it. Your hate.” A mixture of its slime and moans swirled around Eddie. “Mmm.” It was covering his body. Crawling up his chest. Consuming him.

Their eyes opened. They looked down at their hands, which were massive and black and clawed. And then they spotted the door at the side of the podium, which was now wide open.

Spider-Man stood at congregation hall’s entrance, recoiling. They could only imagine the utter horror hiding under that mask.

“Bro,” came a trembling voice, “we said never again.”

“What can we say? It’s a vicious cycle.” The rest of their face crept up over their neck, hiding the head of Eddie Brock from sight. Venom tasted the air with their tongue. “Emphasis on vicious.”
Once was an accident. Twice was a coincidence. Th- Wait, what was this, Eddie’s fourth time bonding with the symbiote? Spider-Man didn’t even know what the fourth time was supposed to be.

The Web-Head walked backwards down the stairs, gawking at the sight before him. Across from him, Venom cackled with joy at the reunion of the two lovers. How heartwarming. He and Spidey seemed to be in a standoff of sorts, but any second now, this church would become a war zone.

A pair of feminine cries hit Peter’s ears. Oh, right, they’d already installed Eddie’s camera/radio thingy. “Uh… I don’t suppose you girls see anything that can make vibrations?” He skimmed the room for the benefit of their live feed.

“Set him on fire! Set him on fire!” came MJ’s frantic voice.

“Use the bell again!” Gwen, meanwhile, sounded surprisingly focused. “You have to lure him th-”

Mid-sentence, Spider-Man was forced to dodge an airborne pew. He tumbled forward into the church’s nave, ducking past pews almost as fast as Venom could uproot them.

“See, this is what happens when you don’t attend every Sunday!” Web-bullets blasted out Venom’s fists with the force of a Gatling gun, reducing everything in their path to rubble.

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about my immortal soul if I was you.” Spider-Man pounced to the ceiling to dodge, then pounced to the floor to dodge, then pounced to the wall to dodge, but no matter what he did, those bullets were never far behind. “I think you just smashed a statue of the Virgin Mary there.”

“How are you making jokes right now? That thing’s about to kill you-!”

“MJ, MJ, it’s alright, Peter can handle it-”

Right, Spider-Man had forgot, MJ hadn’t been involved in quite as many supervillain battles as the rest of them. She wasn’t jaded yet.

Wham. Spider-Man narrowly ducked a tendril, then darted away from the rain of stained glass it sent down on him. This was hopeless. Gwen was right, the bell tower was the way to go. Spider-Man sprinted for the door by the podium, dive-bombing it off its hinges.

“Where you going, Pete?” Venom called after him. “Don’t you know it’s rude to leave in the middle of service?” He started after Spidey, but not before snatching a stray communion cup off the podium and bringing it to his slobbery jaws with a tendril. “Mmm, grape.”

Spider-Man wall-crawled faster than he’d ever wall-crawled before in his life, but it wasn’t enough. He wasn’t halfway up the tower when something snagged his back. “Agh-!”

“Peter!” cried his radio pen pals.

A black tentacle yanked Spider-Man back down to ground level, but to his surprise, Venom wasn’t there waiting for him. Instead, the big lug was wall-crawling himself. What? But why would he want to get near the bell?
Spider-Man sprinted up the wall using only his feet – the considerably harder and more dangerous method of wall traversal. He’d have fallen back down if he hadn’t shot a sudden web up into the bell to tug himself upwards. It should’ve filled the tower with noise, but it looked like Venom had had the foresight to yank out the pendulum, rendering the bell a worthless hunk of metal.

Oh, and even better news, by the time Spider-Man reached the tower’s top floor – “No.” – his old friend was long gone.

On the other side of the laptop screen, Gwen and MJ had flopped over face-up on Gwen’s bed, chests heaving.

“Y’know how drone pilots can get PTSD?” said a breathless Gwen. “Yeah...”

“Maybe this wasn’t such a cool idea after all.” Across from Gwen, Mary Jane cradled her own head in her hands.

“But- But it’s better than waiting in suspense every time Peter’s out fighting bad guys, right?” Gwen sat back up, straightening her glasses. “At least we can kind of help him this way.”

“Yeah.” But Mary Jane, rather than sitting up, opted to roll onto her shoulder, facing away from the other girl. “Just didn’t realize he’d have to fight one of those bad guys because of me...”

“Mary Jane...” Immediately, a hand was on MJ’s shoulder. “It’s not-”

“Not my fault?” snapped MJ, spinning to meet her eyes. “You’re saying Eddie’s symbiote addiction coming back with a vengeance has nothing to do with me butting heads with him a few minutes beforehand?”

“Fine, I guess it is your fault.” Gwen folded her arms. “The same way Harry relapsing on the Green after I dumped him is my fault.”

“But that wasn’t.” Next thing she knew, MJ was sitting up on the mattress. Those words had flown out her mouth entirely on their own.

“It wasn’t?” said Gwen with a hint of a smirk. “Well, then, by that logic, I guess this Venom thing’s not your fault, either.”

“You’re right, you’re right.” MJ took a breath. “I just hate that I- God.” She brought her hands to her forehead. “You and Peter just got your oldest friend back, and then he got taken away from you again because of some stupid thing I did back when I was still Wild Party Girl MJ.”

Gwen’s hand hadn’t left her shoulder. “No, what you did was prove Eddie wasn’t a friend worth keeping in the first place. The sooner Peter and I learned that, the better.”

There was a sharp intake of breath. “Look, girlfr- Gwen. You’re trying to spare my feelings. I get that.” MJ’s eyes traveled to the perfectly-folded blanket they were sitting on. “But my feelings don’t need to be spared. What Eddie said to me wasn’t wrong. Before I met you and Peter, I had a bad case of the daddy issues, and I learned to deal with it by partying and throwing myself onto random people, and statistics dictated that sooner or later, one of those random people would turn out to be a creep.” In an undertone, she added, “More than one, really...”

Mary Jane gave a start – Now there were two hands on her shoulders. “Well, if it makes you feel any better, you weren’t the only one blinded to Eddie’s-”
But before Gwen could finish, a voice suddenly cried from the laptop, “Gwen! MJ! Venom got away. I can’t find him anywhere!”

“What?”

“But-”

Both girls gave a start.

“He has my memories!” Peter’s voice wasn’t growing any calmer. “He knows where we live, and this church is five minutes from there!”

Mary Jane didn’t even bother putting on her shoes before they were out the door.

Spider-Man was taking the most linear possible web-swinging route back to the apartment. There was still time. There was still time.

“What?” he said into his earpiece. “Tell me where you two are and I’ll come pick you up-”

“This is Gwen’s secretary speaking,” said a voice that froze Peter’s blood. “Leave a message and we’ll make sure it gets back to her. Or what’s left of her, anyways.”

“If you so much as scratch her, I swear to god I will make you pay!”

The moment Spider-Man reached the complex a couple minutes later, it became apparent where Venom and the girls had gone off to – the roof. Venom stood at the far edge, and in his outstretched hands was a pair of squirming girls bound and gagged with black webbing.

“You don’t want to do this, Eddie!” Spider-Man called out as he landed across from the beast, but it was no use. Venom was well past the point of being reasoned with.

“Pete, you horndog, you.” Venom shook his head as he gave each girl a wiggle. “We’d always known you’d be popular with the ladies when you got bigger, but we’d never guessed you’d be this popular. Talk about having your cake and eating it, too!” He gave a disapproving click of his tongue. “But take it from us, committed monogamous relationships are the way to go. Threesomes are bound to cause jealousy. Case in point...”

Venom’s gooey black arms stretched out Mister Fantastic-style. Gwen and Mary Jane could only flail and scream against their gooey restraints as they found themselves dangled off each side of the building, MJ to Spider-Man’s left and Gwen to his right. He was an equal distance from both of them.

“...let’s show these girls who you love the most!”

Great, Spidey should’ve known the sadistic choice was coming. Every superhero had to do it sometime. Spider-Man dived before Venom had actually dropped the girls. This was gonna sound bad, but… he didn’t even have to think about it.

It wasn’t until Gwen had been safely snatched up in Spider-Man’s arm that he fired a web back towards the building. He and Gwen looped around the complex at a dizzying speed. Then, right before smacking into the wall, Spider-Man released the web, sending him and Gwen sailing through midair.

Spider-Man was five feet from Mary Jane’s head. MJ’s head was three feet from the pavement.
Spider-Man was two and a half feet from MJ’s head. MJ’s head was one foot from the pavement. Half a foot. A quarter-

Swoosh. At the last second, MJ was snatched away by a swarm of tendrils, causing Spidey to smash into the empty ground.

He raised his head to discover Venom sprinting across the parking lot on all fours. Tentacles writhed out Venom’s back Doc Ock-style as he carried a struggling MJ in tow. Spidey would’ve loved to dart after them, but first he had to set Gwen down on the sidewalk.

The moment her mouth was free, Gwen yelled, “You chose me? Mary Jane would’ve died if Venom hadn’t- hadn’t-! How was I supposed to live with myself if-?”

“If I’d picked her, she’d be saying the exact same thing about you,” Spider-Man said as he ripped the binding off Gwen’s torso.

Gwen didn’t have time to open her mouth again before Spider-Man sprinted off after Venom.

Mary Jane should’ve felt horrified right now. She should’ve been screaming loud enough to be heard through the disgusting black gag over her mouth. Should’ve at least been punching and kicking Venom every chance she got. But then, MJ supposed horror was one of those emotions you only felt when you thought the world was treating you unfairly.

She wasn’t too cognizant of their surrounding right now, but MJ was at least aware that they’d reached the parking lot of a church. With a sudden stagger, she found herself planted on some kind of seat, the tendrils holding her in place, while Venom took the seat in front of her.

As he sat down, the symbiote morphed around Eddie, shrinking into the more compact shape of a black race suit with white stripes, though the tentacles remained to prevent MJ’s escape. The outfit was complemented by a black motorcycle helmet that, thanks to the white eyes and teeth lining it, looked like Venom had paused halfway through eating Eddie’s head.

Oh. Mary Jane was starting to piece together what exactly she and Eddie were sitting on…

“Like stepping in a time machine, isn’t it?” Eddie revved the engine. “And so long as we’re having a throwback… you never did get to hear how that story ended.”

Of the many moves in Spider-Man’s arsenal, few were as useful as the web-zip. In short, this was a technique where he shot a web at a nearby building, but instead of swinging off it, he yanked the web towards himself, using its elastic properties to launch himself forward, making it considerably faster than standard web-swinging. Total honesty here, the only reason Spider-Man didn’t spam his web-zip all the time was because it looked really, really stupid.

But then again, looking stupid had never stopped him before.

Zip, zip, zip, zip. Zip. Spider-Man hurtled through the air above Bleecker Street in hot pursuit of a jet black motorcycle. The bike sped past honking cars and screaming pedestrians, even cutting through the sidewalk a moment as it rounded a corner.

One poor car came inches away from a head-on collision. See, this was exactly why Peter had never gotten his driver’s license. And frankly, he was beginning to wonder if Eddie had ever gotten his, either.
“Peter?” came a voice in his ear.

“Gwen?” Spider-Man flipped over a lamp post, then bounced across some car roofs, but it did nothing to close Eddie’s lead on him. Where was a blue shell when you needed it? “You’re back in the apartment?”

“Where’s Eddie taking her?” Gwen asked.

Spider-Man titled his head towards the motorcycle, which presumably made it appear on her feed. “I think he’s driving in circles.” Spidey was forced to return to web-zipping. Monotonous, yeah, but it seriously was his best strategy right now. “Who knows what’s going through that symbiote-addled head anymore?” He let out a groan. “Venom’s driving so crazy fast, there’s no way I’ll ever catch up with-”

That exact second, Spider-Man swung into range of a massive crowd gathered beneath a banner that proclaimed, “SPIDER-MAN PALOOZA.”

“In honor of our new Spider-Man cartoon,” an announcer was saying to the surrounding horde of children, “Lincoln Enterprises has proudly provided us with this life-size, working replica of Spider-Man’s famous Spider-Cycle! Our stuntman will be here any moment, which is why we left the key in the ignition.”

The kids all cheered. Of course, they cheered even harder a second later when the real life Spider-Man swooped down to steal it.

“Oh my god.” Spider-Man had to fight to keep from face-palming as he sped down the road in his shiny new red-and-blue bike. “I hate this. I hate this so much.”

Oh god, that last truck had gotten too close for comfort. Eddie wasn’t even driving on the correct side of the road half the time anymore.

“Hmm, where were we?” Eddie glanced back at his captive, making it a wonder that he managed not to rear end the next car they crossed. “Oh, right, the hi-larious plane crash! Well, after that, Pete got to go be pampered by his aunt and uncle, but they totally didn’t have space for me in their home, so instead I got to live in a crowded orphanage and get my hand smacked by rulers every day in Catholic school.”

A scream bled through MJ’s gag as they swerved into the other lane again. Okay, maybe she was a little bit horrified.

“That’s when I discovered drag racing.” Eddie cackled to himself, returning his eyes to the road. “Sure, it was dangerous, but it felt so good.” But he looked back to give her one last smirk. “Guess we all have our vices, eh, Red?”

With a sudden lurch, the bike ramped off the side of an overpass and down onto the road below. They were in the left lane. They were in the left lane, and they were going a hundred fifty miles an hour.

It was after half a minute of driving that Spider-Man cried out, “I don’t know how to drive a motorcycle!”

“I’m googling it! I’m googling it!” Gwen barely paused between words as she recited: “Learning to ride a motorcycle can be fun. The best way to learn how to properly ride is in a safe and controlled
“OH, GOOD! I ALREADY HAVE STEP ONE COVERED!”

“Sorry, sorry, skipping ahead…” Gwen took a breath, then continued, “The throttle is on the right handlebar and is used to accelerate. The handbrake, which applies the brakes to the front wheel, is the lever on the right handlebar…”

Spider-Man obediently followed every instruction. He couldn’t believe it, but this was actually kind of working. He was catching up to Venom’s bike. Of course, it helped that Spider-Man was actually in the correct lane, whereas Venom was swerving back and forth to narrowly dodge cars.

There was only about two feet of distance between the bikes now. Steadily, Spider-Man released his grip from the handlebar.

“What are you doing?” asked Gwen.

“Don’t worry, I saw Indiana Jones try this once!” Thwip A glob of webbing promptly lodged itself in Venom’s back tire.

There was a deafening screech, and the next second, bike, girl, and half-alien monstrosity were all sailing through the sky.

“I gotcha!” With a stylish twirl, Spidey leaped out his bike, snatched MJ, and landed on his feet back on the pavement. The bikes weren’t so lucky. One motorcycle crashed into the other, sending both of them skidding to a halt on their sides.

And then there was Venom. He’d taken a nasty fall, but it didn’t leave a scratch on his thick, soupy hide. “Anyone ever told you you’re a buzzkill, Pete?” As Venom pulled himself to his undersized feet, his suit and helmet morphed back into his more standard, monstrous, top-heavy shape.

Venom took a lumbering step towards the Web-Head, who clutched Mary Jane tighter in his arms.

“Peter! Peter!” Gwen cried out from the radio. “Those silver bars at the bottom of the bikes are their mufflers. Rip them off and web the throttles shut!”

“Way ahead of you.” Thwip-thwip, thwip-thwip. A pair of web-bullets glued the overturned bikes’ throttles down, and then a pair of web-lines yanked off the mufflers. The resulting screeches, while not the loudest ever, had more than enough decibels to leave old Venny doubled over on the asphalt, screaming his head off.

“You okay there, Venom?” Spider-Man asked as he set MJ down on the sidewalk. “Need me to get you an aspirin?” After a moment, he turned to MJ, wincing. “Err, sorry for saving my girlfriend first before you…”

Through her gag, Mary Jane made a grunt with the general intonation of, “It’s cool.”

Poor Venom tried to shoot some tendrils out, but the bike’s screeching was so intense, they couldn’t get near it without turning into the inside of an Etch A Sketch. Venom was left with no choice but to beg. “Stop! Stop! Please! It hurts!”

Spidey turned to MJ. “Run.”

“You don’t have to tell me, chief.” Mary Jane zoomed off with impressive speed. It was good of her to get out of the road and back onto the sidewalk – to get away from both the freaky symbiote
monsters and the growing amount of traffic piling up as cars swerved to avoid hitting the aforementioned symbiote monster.

Well, Mary Jane was a safe distance away now, and Spider-Man wasn’t one of those edgelord antiheroes, so he reluctantly ripped the webbing off the throttles – but he kept his hands over them, ready to squeeze the instant Venom tried anything funny.

“Eddie?” Spider-Man called out. “Eddie, listen to me, you can fight this—”

“He can’t hear you,” Venom said, his voice ragged. “He’s passed out from the pain.” The goo retracted from the head area long enough to confirm that Eddie’s eyes were indeed shut.

“Fine. Guess it’s just you and me, Symby.”

For a moment, Venom lay sprawled across the asphalt, twitching and jerking as if he was panting from his entire slimy body. But then, he got out, panting, “We- We didn’t mean to do it again, but we’ve starved for so long… Eddie… Mary Jane… Their emotions were so potent, we couldn’t control ourselves. We’re sorry.”

Spider-Man let the word hang in the air a bit. Then he let out an incredulous laugh. “You’re sorry? You’re sorry? Are you kidding me? Listen, Smooze, I gave you your second chance, and you blew it. Now you peel off of Eddie and turn yourself in to the Fantastic Four before I do it for you.”

Spidey’s fingers pressed menacingly against the handlebars. If Human Torch and his chums were really so adept at fighting ‘comics menaces’ like he loved to brag, then they’d have no problem keeping an alien symbiote imprisoned, now would they?

“No, no, we can’t.” But Venom’s gooey white eyes had gone wide with fear. “We can’t be imprisoned again. They’ll put us back in that- that little bubble cage. Poke us and prod us and take us apart!”

Spidey found his shoulders slouching. Well, he could at least empathize with that. It was pretty much the same reason he’d never told anybody the day he got spider-powers. “Well, this time around, I’ll make sure everyone knows you’re a sentient puddle of slime. Hey, maybe Reed Richards can even help you phone home?”

Venom merely shook his head. “Wouldn’t matter. We were exiled from there.” Huh. Okay, Spider-Man had to admit, the little sci-fi nerd in him had just grown unbearably curious, but before he could ask the slime to elaborate, Venom said, “We like this planet, Peter. We like humans. And we… we love you. We love being with you. We know we overreacted, but—”

“You tried to kill everyone I love!” Spidey snapped.

“You tried to freeze us to death!” Venom snapped back. “When all we’d done was defeat the Sinister Six for you! We thought it’d make you happy! And- And fine, we admit it, we got a little jealous of your loved ones, okay? It’s just—” He glanced away. “It’s so easy to feed on negativity. But we can feed on positivity, too! It’s just that positive emotions are the symbiote equivalent of brussel sprouts—”

“Ohhhhh, so you tried to ruin my life because you have a sweet tooth. Wellllll, that excuses everything.”

“Listen, Peter, if we don’t do something, this conflict will go on forever!” Venom gave a sudden lurch forward. Spidey nearly squeezed the handlebars again, but it turned out Venom was just offering a handshake. “How ’bout a truce? We could be your new crimefighting partner. Help you
“Hey!” Spidey started forward. “You stay out of my memories!” Great, it seemed even when it wasn’t bonded to him again, it still had an updated pool of Peter’s thoughts. “I repressed that one for a reason…”

“You need our help, Peter! In fact, as a gesture of goodwill-” Naturally, the instant Spider-Man’s guard was down, he found a black glob shooting towards him. “-we’ll take down the Kingpin for you!”

“Hey-!” By the time Spider-Man re-webbed the bike’s throttles shut, Venom was already web-swinging well out of range of the sound waves.

Grr. Stupid non-tingling spider-sense. Spidey ought to rename it to “spider-false-sense-of-security.”

Half an hour later, Peter found himself back in his standard blue t-shirt, hunched over his living room couch while his girlfriend and platonic friend sat on opposite sides, patting his shoulders.

“Couldn’t find a trace of him. Venom must’ve morphed himself into street clothes and had Eddie slip away into the crowd.” Peter huffed. “Ugh, I thought we were past Eddie’s stupid vendetta. I’m just so sick of going in circles with him.”

“To be honest, I’m starting to think…” For a moment, Gwen’s eyes flitted to Mary Jane’s. “…Eddie’s not the best person ever with or without the symbiote.”

“Maybe not, but I still care about him, y’know?”

After that, the conversation died down for a bit.

“What time is it?” Mary Jane checked her phone. “Only seven? Ugh, attempted murder via supervillain really wears you out.” She turned for her bedroom door. “Well, g’night, lovebirds.”

“Hey, wait a second!” The moment MJ started for her room, Gwen started after her. “You can’t just pretend like nothing happened, Mary Jane. You almost died today, and…” But as soon as she’d risen from the couch, Gwen faltered. “…Peter almost let you.”

“I was trying to save you both.” Peter started from the couch himself. “And, I mean, you are the love of my life, Gwen, so excuse me if I-”

“Stop it, both of you.” The uncharacteristic rasp in MJ’s voice made the other two flinch. “What Venom did to us was utter bullcrap that no human being deserves to go through, and letting it tear us up is exactly what Eddie wants.” MJ took a breath, then added, “And for what it’s worth, if it’d been up to me, I wouldn’t have made Peter do any different.”

Peter stayed silent.

But Gwen didn’t. “Yeah, well, if it’d been up to me, Peter would’ve saved you first.”

For a minute, the teenagers simply held their poses as if someone had hit the pause button on the gibbering madness that was Peter Parker’s life.

“Y’know something?” Mary Jane said softly. “I never told you guys, but after… after Venom tried
to hijack my brain and all, Wild Party Girl MJ curled up and died a quiet death in the corner. I buried her next to Brainy Janey, and I’ve spent all this time trying to determine who’s behind these eyeballs now, and… I finally figured it out.” Slowly, she met the other two’s eyes. “I’m Legit MJ. And Legit MJ is always open about her feelings with the people she loves.” She took another breath. “I love you two, and I honestly want nothing more than to share a home with you. And this is gonna sound weird coming from the girl who was almost killed by a supervillain today, but I am completely and utterly happy with my life right now…” She trailed off a moment. “So I guess my point is, if you’re worried Venom’s motorcycle ride is gonna turn me back into a cesspit of angst… Well, don’t be.”

“That’s- That’s good to hear,” said Peter. “I mean it – I’m glad you’re okay. And look, I know me and Gwen-” He glanced away. “-were a bit overprotective of you when Eddie… y’know.”

“Truth is…” Gwen’s sentence picked up right where Peter’s left off. “...it’s hard for us to watch you get hurt.”

“I-It’s alright.” A wavering smile crossed Mary Jane’s lips. “You guys are sweet.”

Peter hadn’t meant to stare into MJ’s eyes, but then Gwen started doing it, too, so it’d be awkward if he stopped. And Mary Jane, meanwhile, stared back at the both of them. A moment passed in silence.

“Well-” Peter spun for the window. “-I’d better keep looking for tall, dark, and slimy. I don’t think he’ll attack you two again, but I won’t be going too far just in case. I’ll keep the new radio on, so call at the first sign of trouble.”

Truth was, Peter hated to leave the girls alone again, but he also hated the thought of the stupid symbiote forcing Eddie to wage war against the criminal underworld. Eddie needed to get mental help, not turn himself into Spider-Man’s sidekick. Who knew what kind of enemies Venom was making?

The sound of shrieks turned heads from the streets below. Superpowered vigilantes dangling people off rooftops wasn’t a terribly uncommon sight in Manhattan, actually, but it was uncommon for it to happen smack in the middle of NoHo, right outside the Burger King.

“Hi, there. Nice to meet you.” A massive black creature stood at the edge of the rooftop. It gave its web-line a shake, causing its victim to bob in the air amid more shrieks. “We’re Venom, and you must be Captain DeWolff.”

“Please, please, no!” The woman could only flail helplessly. She tried to reach for her uniform’s gun, but it was blocked by a glob of black goo.

“Word on the street is that if we wanna meet the Kingpin, you’re the crooked cop to talk to.” Venom couldn’t help but laugh. They knew threatening a helpless person was wrong, but if half the information those thugs had, err, volunteered was true, this lady was as corrupt as they came.

“Please, he’s- he’s making me do it! I can’t betray him! He’ll have my family killed-”

“Ohh, that’s a problem, then.” Venom gave the cocoon another shake. “See, we really need to learn the Kingpin’s name, and you’re the only one who can help us.”

“I can’t-”

“We’re sorry to hear that.” The web-line began retracting into Venom’s hand, reeling the lady in
like a prize catch. “That’s a real shame. Just like it’d be a real shame if your… brain was to get eaten.” They made sure to show off every last one of their pearly whites for her, plus their charming tongue, of course.

“I’ll tell you!” DeWolff’s voice was little more than a whimper by now. “Please, I’ll tell you. The Kingpin, he’s… he’s not really the one at the top. Not yet. If you really want to help this city, you should be going after the Osborns. After Oscorp.”

Venom cocked their head, attentive.

“Emily Osborn’s continuing where her husband left off, so she’s the one you should really be going after, not F-”

Wham. A red and blue blur rammed into the cocoon, severing it from its creator.

“Okay, I know you’re still learning-” A lithe young superhero in full-body spandex had perched himself on the side of the building, clutching the blindfolded and bound DeWolff in his arm. “-but killing police officers is what bad guys do. Common noob mistake.”

“Aww, Spidey-” Venom flipped onto the wall after him. “-we were only trying to scare her a little!”

“Oh,” said DeWolff. “Well, that’s a relief.”

“Dang it!” Venom’s fist slammed into the concrete. “Why did we say that? Ugh, I’m such an id-” Their head darted towards the empty air. “Hey, you’re just as big an idiot as-”

While Venom was preoccupied with that, Spider-Man returned DeWolff to solid ground and ripped off all that goo.

“Thanks.” DeWolff rubbed her newly-freed eyes with her newly-freed hands, then gave a nod before running off.

With DeWolff safe, Spider-Man sprang back onto the wall to stare down Venom. “Now, where were we?”

“You were in the middle of ruining everything,” Venom said tightly. “One more second and we’d have learned the Kingpin’s real name-”

“And then what?” snapped Spidey. “You’d barge into his office and give him a piece of your mind? You’ve got my memories, so I’m sure you remember how well that strategy goes over. So either you were gonna be totally ineffectual, or you were gonna try and kill Kingpin. Either way, I stopped you.”

“We- Uh, well, we’d-”

Spider-Man cocked his head at them. “Yeah, you’re already proving a big help to my crime-fighting.”

Venom tensed. “You’ll come to appreciate us once we’ve single-handedly cleaned up the city. We’re sure you’re itching to kick back and retire with the wifey.”

Thwip. Venom swung off without another word. Spider-Man was in hot pursuit, but after a couple minutes of frantic swinging, Venom managed to shake him.
Venom sailed through the air, heart racing. Stupid Pete. They’d show him. Sure, going after
Kingpin was a bust, but now there was another target Venom could pursue.

He was just sitting there at the dining table, chomping on a bowl of Cocoa Puffs with his stupid
smug face like it was expected to be an everyday sight for Harry. Why did Harry’s mother have to
be so darn hospitable to subordinates? And why was Smythe even allowed to bring some cheap
children’s food in here? Harry’s dad had caught him eating some of Peter’s gummy worms once,
and the ensuing torrent of belittling remarks hadn’t died down for a month.

Harry’s eyes traveled to his own bowl. Sure, his grapefruit didn’t taste like chocolate, but at least it
could be eaten whilst retaining one’s dignity. Smythe looked a second away from dunking his face
into his meal like a ravenous animal. The creep was seated at the table’s far end from Harry, the
way Harry’s parents used to sit, albeit with the addition of a high-tech wheelchair. The seat to
Harry’s immediate right, where Pete or Gwen would sit during visits – back when they did visit –
remained conspicuously empty. Harry wasn’t sure why, but that kinda ticked him off, too.

“You planning on finishing that grapefruit?” Smythe gave it a longing gaze from across the dining
hall.

Harry muttered something inaudible, then proceeded to pile the rest of his meal into his mouth all
at once.

“Oh, come now, little Osborn.” Smythe leaned back in his chair, barely disguising his smirk. “Why
can’t we be friends? You seem to be having a shortage of those lately.”

Harry’s fork clattered to his plate. “Don’t you have more Spider-Slayers to be working on?”

“Yes, actually.” Smythe turned for the door. “I suppose I do.” But before he could reach it, there
came the blare of an alarm from overhead. “But that probably takes priority!”

Harry scarcely had time to wonder what that could be about before he and Smythe were dashing
and/or rolling towards its source. Soon enough, the both of them arrived in the bedroom of Harry’s
mother.

It was an exquisite place. It had an enormous bed, an even larger TV, countless dresses drawers,
and a window that spanned an entire wall. That window held a gorgeous view, though it was
somewhat marred at the moment by shards of glass and a hulking, black creature.

A good dozen security guards had already arrived to point their guns at it, but a fleet of tendrils
sprang from the creature’s body to swat them aside. And what bullets did manage to hit the thing
had no effect.

The creature lurched into the room on all fours, making a beeline for the bed – specifically, its
occupant. Harry’s mom was sitting up out of the covers. On her body was a pale green nightgown,
and on her face was a toothy grin that was becoming all too familiar to Harry. “Well, isn’t this a
fun turn of events?” His mom cackled. “I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure of an introduction.”

Harry hesitated by the doorway. Freaky as that monster was, his mom didn’t seem the least bit
perturbed. That meant everything was under control. Right?

“Oh, where are our manners? Hello, our name’s Venom.” A slobbery pink tongue writhed out
between the monster’s fangs. “But no need to bother introducing yourself, Emmy. We already
know all about you.”

“Well, we were kinda hoping you’d agree to put a halt to this crazy Oscorp conspiracy thingamajig of yours and confess all your crimes to the authorities.”

Harry’s mom scratched her chin. “Mmm… Nah. Conspiracy thingamajigs are too much fun.”

“Maybe we could… persuade you?” Venom lurched forward.

“Mom!” a pair of voices cried out. Venom’s gooey white eyes snapped towards their sources – two boys scowling at him.

But the moment Venom caught sight of them, he aimed a fist—Thwoosh.—and fired a massive gob of black goo out of it.

“Hey!” The next moment, Harry was pinned to the penthouse. He struggled against the slime, but it was no use. Great, just what Harry needed, a repeat of the Hobgoblin incident.

But what really bent Harry out of shape was the fate of the other boy – Not a drop of goop had tarnished Smythe. Seemed Venom didn’t consider the cripple an imminent threat.

But he’d be wrong. “Sorry, little Osborn, this one’s a job for the grownups.” With a push of the buttons on his armrest, Smythe summoned a horde of rat-sized Spider-Slayers. They crawled out from under the bed, under the rug… One even emerged from the adjacent washroom, accompanied by a splashing noise that Harry chose not to speculate about. “I appreciate that chest-logo, Venom. Keeps my Spider-Slayers thematically appropriate.”

The next second, Venom was ducking and flipping around a stream of laser beams as the Slayers flanked him on all sides. Problem was, Venom wasn’t quite as nimble as his red-and-blue counterpart, meaning he got sent into a pile of splinters (formerly a set of African Blackwood dressers).

“Well all this conflict?” Smythe said with his customary smirk. “That just doesn’t seem right to me. Look, we want to kill the Spider, you want to kill the Spider… What’s wrong with the obligatory villain team-up?”

“Sorry,” Venom growled as he pulled himself to his feet, “but we’ve joined the side of the angels, actually.” Thwip. A set of tendrils casually smashed through a half dozen robots.

“Hmm, the usual rounds don’t seem to be piercing his hide.” As the big, black monster drew nearer, Smythe’s smugness began to give way to a less certain emotion. He rolled his chair back, muttering to himself. “Have to try the other variants…”

With another push of an armrest button, the Slayers started shooting off electricity. Nothing special. Ice ray? Venom shrugged it off, stepping towards Emily at a casual pace. Sonic cannon?

“Raaaaaaaargh-!” Bingo. The combined blast waves of the remaining Spider-Slayers sent Venom hurtling like a tennis ball. He sailed clean through the window he’d pre-broken, then, seemingly on impulse, started web-swinging for the hills.

“Ooh, I knew playing all that Mega Man would pay off someday.” With the threat gone, Smythe deemed it safe to roll back into the center of the bedroom. “Now be good robots and finish the job. Go on, finish the job for Daddy.” At his command, the robots scurried out the window after Venom. But scurrying was all they did – Budget restrictions had kept Smythe from outfitting all
his Spider-Slayers with Tech Flight. In other words, they were forced to crawl down the
tenhouse’s wall all the way to the streets below before they could start properly giving chase.

“Not to worry, Mrs. Osborn.” Smythe glanced back at her. “My bugs have infested this whole
island – They’ll find him. All they have to do is follow the trail of black webs. It’s like the Yellow
Brick Road but with more murder.”

“Actually…” With the coast clear, Harry’s mom rose from her bed. “I want Venom brought here
alive. He intrigues me – It’s not often S.H.I.E.L.D. lets one slip into the public eye like this.”

Back at his spot on the wall, Harry looked distinctly lost. “One what?”

“One alien,” Smythe said, batting a hand at him. “Do try and keep up.”

“What? But- But there’s no such thing as aliens! I mean, unless you count the organic slime on
John Jameson’s ship-”

“Ahhh, I always forget.” Smythe shook his head. “You’re a normie.”

“Venom obviously is John Jameson’s slime,” Harry’s mom said, terse. “Oscorp suspected its true
nature from the start, but Spider-Man got to the creature before the thief we hired. He at least
confirmed our suspicions, though – If Oscorp could acquire this alien, it would prove a powerful
weapon. We were willing to leave Venom alone, but seeing as he’s decided to launch an
unprovoked attack…” As she spoke, she fished a phone from her bedstand so she could bark into it:
“I want every last agent searching for Venom’s whereabouts!” She paused, then spared Harry a
glance. “Oh, and maybe send Bernard up here. See if he can’t scrape my son off the wall.”

Over on said wall, Harry’s eyes traveled to the slime pinning his torso. He struggled once again to
free his arm of it, but that only caused it to make a squelching noise, almost like the slime itself
was laughing at him.
Coevolution

The security cameras would catch him in the act. Harry knew that. But he didn’t even care anymore. By the time he was caught, it’d be too late.

He strolled across the carpet (This closet was bigger than Harry’s entire bedroom, incidentally), coming to a rest by an ornate, pea yellow, African mask hung on the wall. Its wood contained intricate patterns that one could stare at for hours. And also retina scanners.

Harry met the mask’s glare.

“*My apologies, Mr. Osborn*—” The mask spoke in a pleasant female voice, though its mouth stayed still. “*-but you are not permitted access to this area.*”

“Don’t apologize,” said Harry.

“*Password accepted. Welcome, sir.*” With that, the wall folded open to reveal a hidden, metallic doorway. It slid apart, and Harry marched through.

At the new room, though, Harry stopped to gawk, scarcely noticing when the door shut back behind him. Bombs. Masks. Gliders. Enough to equip an army. This place was big as an airport parking garage. He was shocked it even fit in the penthouse.

Harry searched the sleek, metallic, dimly-lit area, trying not to think about how alive those rows of grinning goblin masks looked. Finally, he spotted a rack of plastic cylinders. “Bingo.”

Harry grabbed a cylinder, then cracked off the cap the way a castaway might crack open a coconut. Instantly, gas gushed out, painting the air green. Most of it didn’t end up in the air, though. No need to let perfectly good Globulin Green go to waste.

Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. Harry didn’t stop until his headache had receded. Until his hands stopped trembling. Until the world made sense again.

“Finally,” said one of the masks, “*I get to drive.*”

“You took *forever* to find more Green!” another mask added in the exact same high, bouncy, scratchy voice.

“Your mom even hid a bunch around the house for you,” said yet another, rolling its eyes. “Boy, must you be fun at Easter egg hunts.”

Harry stepped back, scowling at the rack. This probably should’ve been freaking him out, but it was hard to feel anything but content when this much Green was in his lungs. “So am *I* still the one in *your* head?”

“Technically, that’d be *heads*, plural.” The central mask pointed to the rest of his kin with his eyes. “But yes, I suppose, what with Kingsley’s embarrassing little episode, you’ve pieced together what we goblins really are.”

“Split personality hallucinations caused by the Green’s gas form,” Harry said tightly. “So it *was* the Green that made my dad go nuts.”

“I like to think he was happier that way.”
Harry scoffed, then snatched up one of the masks and carried on deeper down the chamber. “Let’s just get into costume already. I think I see the suits over… here.”

There were Green Goblin costumes in the back part of the chamber. Tons of them, in fact. But the one that caught Harry’s eye was located at their center. While the normal green-and-purple flight suits were strewn about freely, the central one was attached to a mannequin overlooking the others. But that wasn’t the only difference. It was slimmer. Shapelier. And it was complete with a flowing purple cloth that hugged the hips and fell to the boots, out of which a sliver had been removed to give onlookers a tantalizing glimpse of green leg. Above the outfit hung its mask. This, too, was slimmer. It had a less pointy, more feminine chin, and rather than a purple hood, the mask was topped with a ring of green horns arranged to suggest a crown.

“Goodness.” The mask in Harry’s hand grinned at him. “I think we’ve found your dad’s special costume. I knew the man liked to dress up, but this is ridiculous!” The chamber was promptly filled with hideous laughter.

Harry ignored him, instead opting to grab one of the regular costumes from off its shelf. “Let’s just get this over with.” A minute later, he was dressed, meaning it was time to slip the smiling green face over his frowning pale one. “We wouldn’t want to keep Venom waiting.”

At last, the Green Goblin had put his real face back on. Phew, what a relief. Now he could stop pretending Harry actually existed. Man, had that been a crazy hallucination.

Frances liked solitary confinement. There were so many cool people to interact with down here! Though of course, Frances only had eyes for one of those people in particular.

She skipped down the musty corridor, humming to herself as her hospital gown swayed back and forth. Finally, Frances came to a halt. She’d reached her destination. The destination she’d dreamed of for months on end. With trembling hands, she set a crumpled sheet of paper down on the moldy floor – the product of hours of toil up in the arts and crafts room. Frances was especially proud of the cartoon hearts she’d drawn around stick-figure-Frances’s and stick-figure-Carnage’s heads. Not to mention the cartoon lungs, the cartoon kidneys, and the cartoon disembodied legs.

Frances forced herself to steady her breathing. She had to focus on the mission at hand. Today was the first day of the rest of her life. With that thought in mind, she slid the paper beneath the crack of the reinforced steel door standing before her.

A mere moment later, it slid back.

“What?” This couldn’t be. Frances sprang to her feet, then glued her eyes to the rectangular peephole at the top of the door. Ah, nuts, the guy inside there wasn’t a cute ginger at all! He was all big and buff, and his hair was short and black. Yawn.

“I’m flattered,” the man said dryly, “but you’re not my type.”

“That wasn’t for you!” Frances snatched the note up off the ground. She hadn’t realized she could blush any harder than she already had been. “Ugh, I forgot you were down here, too. No, this is for… Cletus.” Oh, she couldn’t even say that name without cooing.

“Cletus Kasady?” The man’s expression didn’t seem capable of much change, but he managed something resembling surprise. “The serial killer? The one who butchered an entire bus of girl scouts but then kept the last one alive a minute so she could watch him eat all the cookies in front of her?”
“Yeah…” Frances clutched the paper to her chest, fluttering her eyelashes. “I just love a guy with a sense of humor.”

“Interesting. And what did you say your name was?”

“Frances. Frances Barrison. They shouldn’t be keeping me here much longer, though.” Frances shrugged. “The doc said I can go back home as soon as I show ‘significant progress’ towards my recovery. And I’ve felt better than ever since I met Cletus, so I’m sure they’ll be letting me leave any second now.” She looked back to him through the peephole. “Anyways, I gotta go. But look me up sometime once you’re out!”

“I think I will,” said the man.

And with that, Frances scurried off to find the proper cell. Hmm, she didn’t know what all the other patients had against that guy. Frank seemed nice enough to her.

Eventually, Venom collapsed onto a grimy, gargoyle-filled ledge so they could pant. They thought it smelled like copper here, but then maybe that was just the inside of Eddie’s nostrils. Stupid robot wheelchair guy (Smythe, according to the symbiote’s recently-updated stash of Parker’s memories). How was Eddie supposed to know he’d happen to find the symbiote’s exact weakness? So cheap.

But Venom hadn’t had ten minutes of rest when yet another battalion of robots scurried out from underneath the statutes. Ugh, these things were persistent.

Venom was just about to smash them all with a swipe of their claws… when something round and orange did the job for them. There was an explosion that sounded like laughter. The gargoyles were sent tumbling to the street below, but Venom themselves managed to dodge the blast – by bounding into the air to land on the wall above.

“Oh, darn.” Naturally, a goblin glider swooped down from overhead so its rider could simper at them. “You managed to destroy all of Smythe’s toys. Now I guess it’s up to little old me to stop you.”

“Who’re you supposed to be?” Venom fired a web, but it was incinerated by a laser-blast from the Green Goblin’s finger. “Another one of Kingsley’s knockoff brands?”

“Please, do I look orange to you?” Venom tried to pounce on him, but the Green Goblin managed to ward them off a well-timed pumpkin bomb. “And by the by, you’re not one to be slinging mud when it comes to knockoffs. Don’t act like you didn’t just thwip at me.”

“Then you must be Harry.” Venom clung themselves to the wall using only their disproportionately tiny legs purely so they could crack their knuckles. “I don’t think our mutual friends ever properly introduced us.”

They were silenced when a blade erupted from the gliders mouth, then rammed into the spot of skyscraper where Venom’s beautiful face would’ve been had they not been so great at dodging.

“Oh, alright,” they said, slimy white eyes narrowing, “this is getting old.”

In the span of milliseconds, Venom used a web to swing themselves around the side of the building until they were perfectly lined up with the Goblin… and then had their tendril suddenly retract inside them. *Wham.* All three of them ended up smashing into the side of a building like a wrecking ball, leaving an impressive crater.
After that, the big ball of cartoon violence was sent tumbling for a bit before coming to a halt by a smokestack.

“Not much longer now.” Venom had ended up on top. “All we have left to do is purge the rest of Oscorp from this earth-” Their clawed fingers pinned the Goblin’s head to the tiles. “-and then Spider-Man will have to see us as heroes.” With a quick swipe, they yanked the mask free, revealing the bruised and bloodied face of Harry Osborn beneath.

“W-What now?” Harry managed to raise his head, though he had to spit out some of the blood pooling up in his lips. “You gonna kill me like Pete killed my dad?”

Inside the slime, though, Eddie could barely hear the guy, his own heart was pounding so fast. They had him now! All they had to do was deliver the finishing blow. It was no big deal. Just like a Mortal Kombat fatality.

“Gee, we don’t know if we want to anymore.” Venom brought their hands to their hips. “At this point, it’d be overkill.” They shook their slimy head. “Poor Harry. So worthless that you had to resort to LARPing as your daddy to make yourself feel better. Even if you did manage to one-up Smythe’s robots and kill us, what did you think would happen? Your mom would pat you on the back and make you Oscorp’s new poster boy?” With a laugh, Venom knelt down to ruffle Harry’s hair. It’d gotten all messy from the sweat. “Newsflash, Osborn, you’re a loser. Always have been, always will be. Everyone knew it. The kids at school, your dad…” Alright, that was enough taunting. Venom turned around, satisfied, and coolly walked away. “Especially your dad. No wonder he blew himself up.”

And after that, Venom would’ve continued walking away, but… fun fact about the symbiote. It could quite literally give Eddie eyes on the back of his head.

“Whoop-!” Venom spun to discover a pumpkin bomb hurtling towards their face. They tried to web the thing and return it to sender, but- but it was bigger than the usual ones. Most pumpkin bombs were oranges – This was a grapefruit. And, after all the agony those robots had put them through with those sonic cannons… Venom’s reflexes proved a split second too slow.

There was an explosion that sounded like laughter. Then screaming.

**Thwip, thwip, thwip.** He was web-swinging so haphazardly, he almost smashed into a lamp post, but Eddie hardly noticed. Just like he hardly noticed how bad his chest was stinging. He wasn’t even sure where he was going. Anywhere was fine so long as it was away from smoking crater where Osborn’s bloodied, unconscious form was now lying.

Really, this was a good thing. Everything was going according to plan. Except for the part where Eddie’s entire body was in agony.

The next time he tried to sling a web, he failed. A second later, Eddie was in a crater of his own on a random rooftop.

“There you are.” And a boy in red and blue spandex was looming over him. “Hate to break it to you Venom, but closing your eyes doesn’t actually make me go away.”

The instant Spider-Man got near, though, Eddie felt the slime seeping off of him – It seemed it’d found a nice drainage pipe to slighter down.

“No, please, wait-!” But even without the slime over his face, Eddie’s world was growing dark. “Don’t leave me… again…”
Well, seeing as the rest of the staff of the Osborn penthouse was so preoccupied rushing little Osborn to the emergency room, they couldn’t possibly miss a few small items from the kitchen cupboards, could they?

Smythe was right in the middle of ordering a miniature Spider-Slayer to make him more Cocoa Puffs when the commlink in his chair went off.

“Mrs. Osborn! How might I be of service?” Smythe said, spinning his chair so that the holographic video feed it projected wouldn’t pick up the counter top over his shoulder (which was currently covered in Cocoa Puffs. Turned out cereal preparation wasn’t actually one of the Slayers’ protocols).

“I want us to devote every resource at our disposal to capturing Venom,” Emily replied, her voice even colder and terser than usual.

“Every resource?” Smythe found himself rubbing his hands together. “Even our brand new, completely untested super-mercenary creation procedure? The one that’ll make the most powerful supervillain yet?”

“Whatever’s necessary.” Emily’s holographic head winked out of existence without another word.

“Of course,” a grinning Smythe said to the empty room. “Totally necessary.”

A pair of girls opened the front door of their apartment to find a pair of boys waiting on their welcome mat.

“H-Hey, there. This is kinda awkward, but I needsaplaceuhsleep.” Eddie nearly fell face-first onto the carpet, but Peter caught him in the nick of time.

This time, Frances’s trembling hands managed to slide the paper under the correct door. She was positive – She’d triple-checked. Now all she had to do was wait for a response.

Just before the suspense managed to kill her, the paper slid back to her under the crack. And it looked like something had been added onto it in red ink. A response.

Frances’s heart had never thumped this hard in her life, not counting that electroshock therapy. She knelt down, her hand hovering a tantalizing few inches above the parchment. This was it. The moment her entire life had been leading to. A few more inches, and…

“Hey!” barked a voice from behind her. “How did you get here?”

“No, wait-!” The next instant, Frances was being dragged off by a squad of guards. No, this wasn’t fair! They hadn’t even noticed the slip of paper lying on the damp floor. “You don’t understand! I love him!” Frances fought against her captors, but it did no good. “Lemme go! I don’t wanna go back to my room!”

“Oh,” one of them said, “actually, we’re taking you on a special trip today…”

Peter leaned back on the couch, letting Gwen curl up in the crook of his arm. They were sharing the couch with Eddie while MJ sprawled herself across the carpet. It turned out Eddie wasn’t too badly hurt – The symbiote had mostly just drained his energy. And as much as Eddie had wanted
to profusely apologize to the trio, there were more pressing issues to address right now.

“So all along, Emily Osborn was in cahoots with her husband, huh?” Peter didn’t bother hiding the deadness in his voice.

Eddie nodded, his face hardening. “That lady’s every bit as crazy as he is. I guess they had her play innocent so she could continue Norman’s ‘work’ on the off chance he blew himself up.”

“She’s probably the one who made Harry relapse on the Green and provided him with the glider and goblin suit in the first place,” spoke up Gwen.

“So when I brought Harry back to his mom...” Peter bowed his head.

And in turn, Gwen’s hand brushed his shoulder. “You couldn’t have known.”

“And now we know where Smythe’s been this past year,” added Mary Jane. “There’s no telling how many Spider-Slayers Oscorp’s got in reserve on top of all those super-mercenaries. With that much firepower, they could take the title of Big Man or Kingpin or whatever they’re calling it now just like that.” She snapped her fingers.

“For all we know, Emily could already be the Kingpin,” said Peter. “The male name could be, like, a decoy to throw off suspicion or something.”

“Oscorp could take over all five boroughs easy,” said Eddie. “And why stop there? They could keep pushing and pushing until Oscorp controls the east coast… the west coast… the planet...”

“Until we’re all speaking Oscorpian?” offered MJ.

“But I, uh, don’t think Doctor Doom would appreciate the competition,” added Peter.

“But- But come on, S.H.I.E.L.D. and the other superheroes would stop Oscorp before it got that far, right?” Gwen stammered from his arms.

“Not if Oscorp’s infiltrated them like Kingpin’s infiltrated the NYPD,” Peter said darkly. “He must’ve known DeWolff wouldn’t have your dad’s moral fiber… And I’d have found that out way sooner, but I, uh, guess I’m not quite as good as Venom at scaring thugs into talking.” He glanced Eddie’s way. Despite everything, the guy still looked the tiniest bit proud of himself. “Point is, for all we know, Oscorp could’ve already gone full… Orwellian...” He trailed off. Then, the other three staring at him, Peter retrieved his Osberry from his shorts’ pocket and crumpled it like paper.

The silence was pronounced.

“I had personal pictures on there.” Peter bowed his head. “Do you think the phone store could salvage them?” He limply held up the ball of metal that’d once been his cell.

“Did you, uh... back them up to the cloud?” asked MJ.

“You’d better NOT have.” Gwen’s voice was a harsh whisper in Peter’s ear. “That’s just begging them to get leaked online-”

“Gwen, shh!”

“You’re sure this is necessary?” Warren gave Smythe a look from behind those shiny glasses of his.
“Ordered by Mrs. Osborn herself,” Smythe replied with a solemn nod.

The two were currently below one of Oscorp’s many, many hidden laboratories – the one that always smelled of fish – and standing in an observation room that overlooked the test chamber.

Strapped to a table in the center of said chamber was a skeletal woman with a hospital gown, messy raven hair, and an oblivious grin on her face. “So after this experiment thingy, Carny-poo will love me?” she said.

Up in the observation room, Smythe leaned into a speaker to reply, “Oh, you’ll be irresistible to him.”

Warren’s eyebrow had gone even higher in the air. “Remind me where we found this subject, again?”

“Ravencroft,” said Smythe, eyes on the chamber.

“Ah. Of course.”

“We’ve been running a bit low on guinea pigs lately, so we struck up an under-the-table bargain with the place. This Barrison woman’s got no friends and family, apparently, and get this, from what we’ve have been able to piece together, Venom’s the one who made her go nuts in the first place. She says her brain was hijacked by black slime right before he and Carnage attacked Ravencroft.”

“So she already has a vendetta against Venom.” At this, Warren jotted down some notes on the clipboard in his hands. “Good, good… My augmentations should make her his ideal foe. Venom was obviously vulnerable to sonic-based attacks, and so, by combining your knowledge of robotics with my mastery of biology, we’ve managed to concoct specialized nanomachines capable of merging with the woman’s cellular structure to form a semi-organic sonic cannon.”

“Sure, it would’ve been easier to give her a regular sonic rifle,” added Smythe, “but what’s the point in being mad scientists if we can’t have a little fun with it?”

“Oh, it’s not completely impractical,” Warren said, adjusting his glasses. “After all, the Winkler Process is only effective on organic matter. If all goes well, Miss Barrison’s sonic attacks will be infused with low-level telepathic abilities – enough to brainwash dear Venom into becoming our mindless servant.”

It wouldn’t work on Smythe and Warren, of course. Norman Osborn had been quite adamant that all underlings have telepathy-proof plates installed in their skulls. And that’d been before the official scientific discovery of telepathy.

By now, it was pitch black out, or as close as it ever got to that in Manhattan, anyways. Every cell in Peter’s body was screaming at him to go to bed.

“…really okay, Eddie,” Peter was saying for the millionth time that night. “The symbiote snuck up on you, and I know better than anyone what it can do to your head. The horrible thoughts it can drag out.”

“Yeah, well…” Eddie’s eyes had rarely left the carpet all afternoon. “…that’s not the only thing I have to apologize for.”

“It can wait till morning,” Peter said softly. “We’ve all had a long day.”
The girls had already gone off to bed, so it was just the two of them on the couch now. Though truth be told, Peter was a bit reluctant to nod off with Symby still out there. He had half a mind to spend the night guarding Eddie.

Eddie’s palm dug into his temple. “God, everything’s a mess. I never should’ve even looked at Mary Jane. It’s like, you add girls to the mix and life becomes a billion times more complicated.”

A laugh escaped Peter’s mouth. “Understatement of the century.” He clutched his Spider-Man mask in his hand, swishing it through the air to punctuate his words.

“Oh, that’s rich coming from you.” But at this, Eddie shot him a smirk. His eyes flitted in the direction of MJ’s room. “You’re here rooming with- You’ve got- I mean, dude. Duuuude.”

“It is so not what you’re thinking.”

Smythe was getting seriously worried that Emily’s head, despite being a holographic projection out of his armrest, would still manage to bite him. “What do you mean, she won’t follow orders?”

“Well, Spider-Man’s beaten Molten Man before, so we figured making Barrison into Molten Woman would be a bad idea.” Smythe scooted his wheelchair back, as if that could make it farther away from its own holographic projection. He was still down in the hidden science lab, meaning he now reeked of fish in addition to sweat. “And this new procedure we tried is still, well, new, so we hadn’t actually quite figured out a way to control her yet-”

“Where is she now?” Emily cut in.

“What? Bugger if I know.” Smythe shrugged, slouching in his seat. “Though, actually, she wouldn’t shut up about her ‘Carny-poo,’ whatever that means.”

Wham. The sound of an exploding cell door turned Cletus’s head to the entryway. He’d been making some blood doodles on the wall, but now his attention was fixed on the newcomer. That pale white skin, raven-black hair, and glowing yellow eye kinda made her stand out.

“Knock, knock, Murder Muffin! Say hello to your new, improved Shriek.”

The first words out Cletus’s mouth were, “Do you have it? The alien? Is it in your clothes?”

“Ooh, sorry, no.” The woman slinked towards him, her pale blue hospital gown ruffling enticingly. “But don’t let that stop you from checking them…”

With a tiny creak, the door from the Watson bedroom to the Stacy-Parker bedroom crept open, and a genuine, certified Watson crept through it, guided by the light of her phone and wrapped in a towel.

“Psst, Gwen, you awake? Can I borrow some sweatpants?” It turned out these summer nights were still cold enough to make sleeping in the nude unwise. “Forgot to do the laundry today. Guess I got distracted somehow…”

Mary Jane waited but received no reply. She crept her phone-flashlight over Peter’s and Gwen’s bed to confirm the girl was out like a light. Aww, bless her heart. Look at her, sound asleep, the bedhead slowly overtaking her hair. MJ couldn’t help but watch her awhile.
At least until another light came on. MJ’s head spun towards the source – Gwen’s laptop. Looked like Gwen had forgot to shut it down, meaning it was still lying open on the bedside table.

Now, Mary Jane Watson was many things, but a snoop was not one of them. She was going to leave the laptop be and resume her hunt for clean pants.

But then the hushed voices hit her ears:

“It is so not what you’re thinking.”

“Not what I’m-? Bro, the symbiote showed me the memories. MJ’s pining for a threesome.”

Mary Jane came dangerously close to twisting her ankle on the carpet and breaking her neck.

“Eddie-!” And judging from Peter’s voice in the recording, he was wrestling with a similar problem. “It’s not like that! This isn’t- I mean-” There came a distorted whoosh noise from the speaker that was probably an intake of breath. “Look, I know how this whole thing seems. It’s like, whoa, Mary Jane’s into me and Gwen? That’s the teenage boy Holy Grail, right? But it’s- it’s not a ‘high-five, fist-bump’ thing. Not really. M- Maybe some part of me thought it was at first, but… but I think Mary Jane’s really in love with Gwen and me, and it’s so weird. I mean, am I just crazy? Isn’t that weird?”

“Yeah, it is extremely hippy-dippy…”

“Exactly! Like, maybe MJ can fall in love with more than one person, but I can’t. I’m not a hippie! I want to have a wife and- and maybe even kids someday, and, god, I haven’t even told that to Gwen, and because this is Mary Jane friggin’ Watson we’re dealing with, her very presence is making Gwen question her sexuality. I mean, I do trust MJ, but- but what if Gwen’s really starting to like her? What if I’m really starting to like her? I dunno, man, it’s just…” Another whoosh noise. “Maybe it wouldn’t freak me and Gwen out so much if we just understood why Mary Jane feels this way. We’ve got no idea what’d be good for her or what she even wants, and- and to be honest, we don’t think she does, either.” There was a moment’s silence. “Ugh, I’m sorry, this is way too much information. It’s just, well, the symbiote already told you everything, and… I guess I’ve had a deficit of guy friends lately.”

“It’s okay,” the second voice said softly. “You know I didn’t wanna invade your privacy or anything. I didn’t ask the symbiote to show me all that stuff. But for real, Pete? I get it – MJ’s a groupie. You’ll see her type all the time once you get to ESU. She just happened to find out you’re a superhero, so now she thinks you’re the coolest guy ever. It’s totally shallow. Nothing to risk your relationship with Gwen over.”

On the other side of the screen, Mary Jane bowed her head. After that, the conversation lulled, and so she shut the lid of the laptop and crept back to her bedroom. It wasn’t until sunrise that she remembered about the sweatpants.

“Eeeeeeheeigh-!”

The half dozen guards would’ve had plenty of time to open fire, but they’d been quite unnerved by the sight of Cletus hanging off Shriek’s arm. Instead, they were sent hurtling through the waiting lounge, turning a seventy-year-old portrait of Vertros Ravencroft into splinters.

“Wow, babe.” Cletus shook his head, grinning as he inspected the chaos. “That’s some lungs you got on you.”
“You ain’t seen nothin’ yet, Serial Kisser.” Shriek gave him a peck on the cheek. “Watch this.” Suddenly, her eye glowed with an even brighter amber light, and then every last guard hit by her sonic attack rose to their feet. Their eyes, too, now glowed amber, and every last one of them bowed to their new mistress.

“Wow, handy.” Cletus let out a whistle.

“Ooh, ooh, babe, this is perfect!” Shriek gave his arm an excited tug. “Don’t you see? I’m the wife, you’re my hubby, the brainwashed guys are our babies, and Venom’s like my dad-in-law. We can be a family. A murder-family!” She practically vibrated with joy. “Ohhh, my therapist will be so proud of me!”

“Sounds good,” said Cletus.

“And Frank can be our conservative uncle who makes Thanksgiving awkward!”

“Oh, but there’s still one very important family member missing.” Cletus flashed her a grin. “How’d you like to help me scour the city for my alien?” In a singsong voice, he added, “We’ll kill anyone who gets in our waaaay.”

“Whoo hoo!” Shriek let out a cheer. “Family road trip!”

“Yeah! We’ll be causing as much chaos as we possibly can!”

“We’ll break the glass ceiling of murder!” said Shriek.

“We’ll reach our highest attainable capacity for slaughter!”

One of the brainwashed guards let out a cackle. “Minimum carnage!”

Cletus was left shaking his head. “This guy doesn’t get it…”
The family sat together at the wifey’s favorite restaurant, staring at their menus and grumbling amongst each other. It’d been fifteen minutes, and not a single staffer had so much as spoken to them.

“Boy, this place has got terrible service,” said Cletus from his seat (Shriek was, of course, seated on his lap). “They haven’t even taken our order yet. Hey, lady!” He turned to bark at the nearby waitress. “You gonna take our order or what?”

The waitress didn’t move a muscle – She just gave them that vacant stare again. Ugh, look at her sitting slouched against the counter top when she was on the clock.

“Wow, rude.” Shriek tossed a menu at her head, causing the waitress to topple over. “Okay, that does it, I’m leaving a one-star review.” She whipped out her phone to type: “Service is slow, tables are filthy, staff is all dead, and the napkins need to be restocked.”

...the Carnage-Family...

**MURDER SPREE!**

*DUN nun-nun-nun-nun!*

*Na na na NA-na-na-na…*

*DUN nun-nun-nun-nun!*

*Nuh-NA-na-na-na na-na-na-na!*

*DUN nun-nun-nun-nun!*

*Na na na NA-na-na-na…*

*DUN nun-nun-nun-nun!*

*Nuh-NA-na-na-na na-na-na-na!*

*Nineties comics edge,*

*Crimson slime,*

*Choppin’ heads.*

*He will fill you up with dread,*

*And won’t stop until you’re dead!*

*DUN nun-nun-nun-nun!*

*Nuh-NA-na-na-na na-na-na-na!*

*DUN nun-nun-nun-nun!*

Carnivore
Nuh-NA-na-na-na na-na-na-na!
BUM! BUM! BUM!
Na-na-na na-na-na-na!
BUM! BUM! BUM!
Na-na-na na-na-na-na!
BUM! BUM! BUM!
Na-na-na na-na-na-na!
BUM! BUM! BUM!
Na-na-na na-na-na-na!
You will be dead soon,
And the city’s totally doomed.
He will maim and slice up goons.
This can’t be aired in kids’ cartoons.
DUN nun-nun-nun-nun!
Na na na NA-na-na-na…
DUN nun-nun-nun-nun!
Nuh-NA-na-na-na na-na-na-na!
DUN nun-nun-nun-nun!
Na na na NA-na-na-na…
DUN nun-nun-nun-nun!
Nuh-NA-na-na-na na-na-na-na!
Car-NAGE Fam’ly,
Car-NAGE Fam’ly,
MURDER SPREE!
Car-NAGE Fam’ly,
Car-NAGE Fam’ly,
MURDER SPREE!
Car-NAGE Fam’lyyyyyyyy...
(guitar solo to the tune of the Carnage Rules song)
Ah, Central Park, one of Manhattan’s most famous landmarks. Currently, the park was wowing tourists with its sweeping fields, the clear blue lake reflecting the sunrise, and the dozens of mindless, photonegative zombies shambling through the grass.

“Spare!” Spider-Man turned his arrival into a flying kick, sending amber-eyed zombies splashing into the water, then released his web-line and landed with a backflip on the railing of a bridge.

“Bwuh…”

“Bwah…”

“Bweh…”

But Spidey’s entrance, grand as it was, drew the attention of the horde. Cletus and his new gal-pal didn’t seem to be anywhere in sight, but Spider-Man figured they had to be close, given the sheer density of zombies. He wouldn’t have even thought about leaving the girls alone at the apartment if there hadn’t been so many sightings here of the happy new couple.

“Ha, nice try, guys, but I know humans are always the real monsters in these th-” Spider-Man was forced to duck lest he lose a chunk of shoulder. “I-I’m sure this is a really cutting social satire-” He ducked again.

“Peter?” came Gwen’s voice in his ear. “You okay?”

“Yeah, seriously, these guys can’t organize or use guns or anything, so this is easy mode for me.” Spider-Man punctuated his point via knuckles to the chin, sending some poor zombie flying.

“What about you guys?”

“I’ve been looking into headlines about Central Park,” said Gwen. “Get this, the news says a big red dog’s started attacking people here.”

“Really?” Spider-Man couldn’t help but laugh. “Ooh, Emily Elizabeth is in trou-ble.”

“No, Peter, I mean a really big, really red dog.”
“Oh. Ohhhhhhh.”

“That’d explain why we hadn’t heard a peep out of Carnage all this time – We hadn’t thought about the symbiote bonding with animals. But now that I’ve double-checked the internet, it turns out there’s been tons of reports of animal attacks and maulings dating all the way back to April of last year.

“Which means we have to find Canine-age before the bad guys do.” Peter could feel the judgmental stare oozing through his earpiece. “What? You got a better name?”

Shriek turned in place to admire her Bloody Beauty, crushing some of the park’s prettier flowers beneath her black boot. This skintight black leather outfit she’d picked out at the mall was definitely a step up from that ugly old hospital gown, and it’d been especially nice of that dead receptionist to let her have it for free.

Cleety had merely picked out a plain red t-shirt and khakis, but he could make anything look great. There he stood in the middle of the park in all his splendor, his shoulders broad and his shiv at the ready. He was like Jesus, only Cletus was gonna be the crucifier and not the crucified. Cletus one, Jesus zero.

“Aww, babe.” Shriek leaned in to stroke his pretty orange hair. “Hasn’t this been the most romantic morning of your life? There’s been kisses and hugs and bloodshed and no stupid parents always screaming outside my bedroom. It’s a good thing you came into my life, Horror Honey, cuz let me tell ya, that kinda thing could’ve really messed me up otherw-”

“Yeah, that’s great, doll,” said Cletus, skimming the grass around them. “Now you’re sure my alien’s here?”

“Yeah, it’s just gotta be bonded with that doggie we saw on the news!”

“Well, the sooner we find it, the better.” Cletus let out a huff. “Then we can get some real killing done. We’ve barely slit half a dozen throats so far, and it’s been forty-five whole minutes.”

“W-Well, don’t you think it’s better to use my powers on as many people as we can?” Shriek glanced at the various pedestrians surrounding them, all of whom sported inverted color pallets and were shambling mindlessly. “Y’know, to keep the local superheroes off our backs until we find your alien-”

“-and then I can finally high tail it out of this hero-infested city. I never shoulda left the old homestead down south.”

“And I’ll come with you and we’ll get married and have twelve beautiful children! Isn’t that right, my Massacre Man?” Shriek brought a hand to his arm.

Cletus responded in kind, meeting her eyes with a smile. “Of course, babe.”

“Heeeere, Carney Carney Carney!” Spider-Man’s voice reverberated across the seemingly endless expanse of well-mowed grass known as the Great Lawn. “You’d think a giant monster-dog wouldn’t be so elusive…”

It was a beautiful morning to be outdoors. The dozens of brainwashed zombies here seemed to really be enjoying the weather.
“Well, well, well, what do we have here?” A scratchy voice sent Spidey’s head to the center of the grasslands a couple yards over, where, naturally, Cletus was standing with his new girlfriend. A lanky finger pointed in the Web-Head’s direction. “A life-size pincushion.”

“Actually, babe, that’s Spider-Man,” Cletus’s girlfriend said with a helpful smile. According to the news, that was the new supervillainess, Shriek.

“Ah, I see Cletus isn’t just dating you for your looks!” Spider-Man called out, kneeling into a fighting stance. Full disclosure, he’d been hoping to avoid this confrontation until after he’d located Maim-maduke (Okay, sorry, sorry, he was sticking with Canine-age from now on). In fact, Spider-Man was just thinking about making one of his famous tactical retreats… when something fell from the sky.

“What the-?” Spidey’s head shot upwards to discover a sleek, white, boxy, truck-sized sci-fi ship hovering noiselessly a couple meters above the grass.

Back in the grass’s center, Cletus’s eyes had gone remarkably wide. “It’s the #$*%ing Fantasticar!”

“Ooh, nice alliteration, babe,” said Shriek.

If there was any lingering doubt to this vehicle’s identity, the Human Torch was hovering beside it (and was currently on fire, to the concern of everyone who didn’t want Central Park to burn down).

A moment later, the Fantasticar’s side doors whirred open, allowing the trio of Mister Fantastic, Invisible Girl, and the Thing to bound out and plummet to the dirt below. Thing – the one who was twice the size of the body builder, had orange-brown rocks for skin, and was buck naked save for a pair of stretchy blue shorts sporting the Fantastic Four logo – did a classic superhero three-point landing, nearly squishing a stray zombie. Spider-Man wanted to say naming the guy “the Thing” was a bit cruel, but he couldn't say it wasn't apt…

Next came Mister Fantastic – the older dude with gray-streaked hair poking out the top of his skintight sky blue uniform. The instant he hit the ground, Mister Fantastic’s whole body exploded into putty… which served as the perfect trampoline to catch his girlfriend’s fall.

“Hiya!” Shriek gave a pleasant wave to the newcomers. “Fancy running into you guys here! Swell day for the park, huh?”

Across from them, Invisible Girl – the cute blonde in a uniform matching her boyfriend’s – was pulling herself to her feet with as much dignity as the situation allowed. “I don’t suppose any of you want to make this easy on yourselves and surrender?” she called out.

“Ooh, sorry, lady-” Shriek stepped forward, shielding Cletus with her body. “-but I will NOT let you hurt MY FAMILY.” The words were screamed with enough force to become a sonic shockwave, replacing all the grass in its wake with mud.

“Funny.” But before it could reach the five heroes, it was blocked by an invisible forcefield-wall. “That’s what I was about to say.”

The next instant, chaos broke out. These superpowered brawls never could stay orderly for long. Now Spider-Man and Thing were smashing through photonegative zombies while Torch spewed fire at the horde, Mister Fantastic was weaving his rubbery body to hinder the movement of as many mooks as possible, and Shriek was having a catfight with the thin air around her. And then there was Cletus, who seemed content to hide behind Shriek with his shiv at the ready.
“Sorry for stealing your thunder, Web-Head!” Torch called out as he darted over the battlefield. “We know you were totally about to take all these guys single-handed.”

“If ‘stealing my thunder’ means ‘doing your actual job-’” Spidey narrowly kept a zombie from biting his leg clean off. “then yes, take all the thunder you want.”

“Stay away from my Sweetie Slicer, you meanies!” It looked like Invisible Girl had managed to pull Shriek’s hair, but that only made her yellow eye brighter and her sonic screams louder. A couple trees in the distance were wrenched from the ground.

“Sweetie Slicer?” Another second of gawking and Spidey would’ve been incinerated by a stray fire-blast. He shuddered. Peter hated those girls who were into serial killers. They were almost as bad as all the ones into Thor’s brother.

A little ways across the grass, Mister Fantastic turned his head a whole one-eighty degrees for a better look at the fighting. “Hmm, if Shriek really is brainwashing these poor people, then this might be the time to test my new Telepathy-Blocking Ray.”

Spider-Man’s own head didn’t turn much farther than his shoulder. “Your whatsit?”

“Just keep them restrained for me.”

“Can do, Dr. Richards, sir!” Spidey pounced onto one of the zombies’ shoulders to give him a good bonk to the head. “I mean, who am I to question the smartest guy on the planet?”

“Is your nose always that brown or did you smear it in something?” asked Torch.

Unfortunately, the snark was all it took to break Spider-Man’s concentration for the slightest of moments, and one of the zombies seized the chance to wrap his hand around our lovable hero’s neck.

And that might’ve been the end of him, too, if a stony orange finger hadn’t chosen that instant to tap the zombie’s shoulder.

“Hey, ’scuse me, pal, do you got the time?”

“Whuh?” The zombie’s head darted around.

“Wait, nevamind, I got it… Huh, willya look at that? Turns out I’m five minutes late for CLOBBERIN’ TIME!” Wham. The zombie was knocked into the grass, then sprayed with web-fluid to keep him there.

Mister Fantastic, meanwhile, had managed to retrieve a slick black sci-fi gun from the folds of his rubbery body, then stretch his fingers around it in a swirl of button-presses (Weird, Mister Fantastic looked so much less vomit-inducing on TV…). The gun hummed to life, glowing neon blue. Mister Fantastic aimed it at the supervillainess standing before him, but then…

“Arf, arf?”

…the head of every last hero, villain, and zombie snapped towards something to the immediate right of the brawl. Camped out at the edge of the trees was a pony-sized dog covered from head to paw in red slime, resting on its laurels and wagging its tail. The way its panting tongue lagged out its mouth made the overgrown puppy look like it was smiling at them, especially when coupled with the rows of pointy fangs beneath its gooey white eyes.
The battlefield, chaotic a mere moment ago, had gone still.

“It’s… It’s…” Cletus’s eyes were wide and quivering. “IT’S HERE! GET IT!”

At once, every single competitor was charging for the same location. Unfortunately, this had the result of making the dog bolt for it. Cue Yakety Sax.

Gwen and Mary Jane were huddled together on the couch around Gwen’s laptop, utterly motionless. Save for the sounds of fighting from the computer speakers, the apartment was dead silent.

Until the toilet flushed.

Eddie emerged from the bathroom and into Peter’s and Gwen’s adjacent bedroom, drying his hands on his pants. He was just about to return to the living room… when there came a tapping on the bedroom window.

“What the-?

No.

” As it turned out, the tapping had come from a pigeon. A slimy black pigeon. By the time Eddie had processed that information, the slime had already leaped off the bird and oozed through the windowsill. At first the symbiote darted towards a screaming Gwen, but then it hesitated, seeming to notice Eddie for the first time, and instead latched onto him à la Facehugger.

The transition into the misty crimson dream world was quicker than ever before – which meant Eddie wasted no time blurtng out, “What do you think you’re doing? Because if you’re hoping I’ll feed you any more hate-”

“There isn’t time for this!” The black-suit Spidey stood across from him in the void, hand on its forehead. “Returning to you before was a mistake, and we’re sorry, but now Peter needs our help against Shriek and Carnage.”

“Does he?” Eddie snorted. “Seemed to me like the Fantastic Four had it covered.”

At this, the symbiote shrank. “Y-Yes, well…”

Eddie folded his arms. “You still just want to play hero so Pete’ll like you, don’t you?”

The symbiote shrank, it’s brow rippling like water. The creature had once been bone-chilling, but now the only thing it could strike into victims’ hearts was pity. “You don’t understand-”

“What don’t I understand?” snapped Eddie, stepping towards it. “Thanks to you, whatever shred of a chance Pete, Gwen, and MJ had of forgiving me is gone.”

The symbiote didn’t respond at first, but after a while, it turned away, hiding its white eyes, and murmured, “We’re trying to be better, but… but it’s difficult for us. Humanity doesn’t exactly come naturally to an alien.” Slowly, reluctantly, it turned to meet his glare. “We need to tell you something, Eddie. Something we’ve never told any other host. Not even Peter. Something… hard to think about.” It hugged itself.

Eddie said nothing, only staring expectantly.

“The world of our birth was rust red,” the symbiote began. “Like this.” It gestured to the void all around them. “We lived in a canyon, but there were also jungles, oceans, grasslands… Our planet was a beautiful place. That much, we remember clearly.”
Again, Eddie said nothing, but out of shock this time. To be honest, he’d got so caught up in the billion other crazy things going on in Manhattan that he’d never stopped to wonder where the symbiote had actually come from.

“Our parent was a deep violet color,” Symby continued, “like this planet’s sky at nightfall. It loved us, its only child, more than anything. But our parent was exiled by our people, and us, its child, along with it. We don’t remember why. We were an infant, though we couldn’t tell you our age in Earth years.”

Almost on impulse, Eddie blurted out, “I’m sorry.”

The symbiote gave a slow nod. “The other symbiotes had bonded to a tribe of primitives,” it continued. “They’d formed a rudimentary society. But after the exile, our parent and we were left without hosts. Cursed to empty lives.” Its pure white eyes darted away from Eddie’s pale blue ones. “When an alien spaceship landed in our canyon, our parent seized the chance to bond with its pilot.” As an aside, it added, “Alien visitors weren’t uncommon there. Mostly thieves hiding from the law, we believe, or perhaps merely sightseers. Your Earth is a strange, isolated planet in comparison.”

“What?” Eddie gasped in spite of himself. “The Fantastic Four were right? Space really is like in Star Wars?”

“Our parent’s new host was a creature not unlike you humans.” The symbiote paused. “Only its skin was blue.”

“Huh. And here I’d thought Star Trek made that up cuz they didn’t have a costume budget…”

“Our parent… persuaded the creature to activate its ship’s warp drive and take us to a place where a suitable host could be found for us, the child. As it turned out, the creature was a soldier in a great battle taking place near your planet Earth. But our ship was damaged in the crossfire.” The symbiote faltered. “Our parent was caught in the explosion, but not before ejecting its child to the safety of a passing meteor… and using the ship to change that meteor’s trajectory, sending it towards Earth.”

“And straight into John Jameson’s space shuttle?” guessed Eddie.

The symbiote nodded. “Which led to me bonding with Peter.” After a moment’s hesitation, it added, “There is no deeper love than that of a symbiote for its first host. His anxieties, his temper, his lust for power… It was all so potent, we were enthralled in an instant. But…” It slouched back down. “…he rejected us.”

Eddie found himself huffing. “Can’t imagine why.”

In turn, the symbiote scoffed. “We know why – The world took him away from us. The world takes everything we love.”

A moment passed, during which Eddie fished for a response. Eventually, he settled on, “Well… it sucks that happened to you, but it doesn’t change what you did.”

“Our point,” the symbiote replied, its voice growing tighter, “is that when we first bonded to Peter, we were young and scared and confused. We barely understood human beings at all, let alone their moral values. We were starving, and we fed recklessly on Peter’s negative emotions. We- We wanted him to love only us. We were selfish and petty, but we see now that we cannot continue that behavior. Not if we want a healthy bond with a life partner. The life partner our kind needs to
survive. Please, Eddie…”

It fell to its knees, though the force of the impact made said knees explode into goop. The way the symbiote stumbled over was almost childlike.

“…all we want is to prove to the one we love that we’re no longer a monster.”

The group had ended up chasing that dumb dog all the way to the Reservoir. Spider-Man would’ve had to stop to catch his breath if not for, y’know, his superhuman stamina.

Once it was cornered at the edge of the water, the dog managed to slip through a cluster of zombies, knocking them away with a red tendril, and dash for the cover of the trees…

“Need a hand?”

…only to be snatched up by a giant, rubbery hand. A pair of massive legs stepped onto the grass, then shrank down to reveal Mister Fantastic attached to them. In Reed’s comically oversized hands was Canine-age, biting and scratching to no avail, and in the other was that, crazy, sci-fi laser rifle-looking thing of his.

“Ha! Great one-liner, Dr. Richards!” called out Spider-Man.

In the air above him, Human Torch folded his arms. “Okay, for real, he’s never gonna let you on the team, so you can stop kissing his shiny rubber-”

“NO!” Across from the heroes, Shriek seemed somewhat less enthused. “Let the doggie go! THAT’S OUR FAMILY PET!” It was her loudest scream yet, and it happened to be aimed squarely at Invisible Girl.

Invisible Girl conjured up a forcefield bubble, but this time, the sonic blast tore right through it, sending her flying across the grass.

“Susan!” Mister Fantastic’s neck stretched towards her, which was all the distraction Shriek needed to blast him. Fantastic cried out, dropping dog and gun alike. His massive, disgustingly stretchy body collapsed to the ground, unconscious, though luckily that energy didn’t seem to have been enough to brainwash him. Dude had a particularly tough brain.

Shriek aimed a dramatic finger at the Telepathy-Blocking Ray. “Minions! Destroy that gun at all costs!”

So now Spider-Man was scrambling to protect the gun from the swarm of zombies and Shriek’s sonic blasts. He’d have liked some help, but it seemed Thing and Johnny were too busy fending off their KOed teammates from the advancing horde.

And then there was Canine-age. The dog’s first impulse had been to run away again, but it’d found its path blocked by a red-haired man.

“C’mere, boy!” Cletus called out, clapping his hands on his knees. “C’mere!”

“No, no!” Spider-Man landed across from him, the gun strapped to his back in a hastily-made web-backpack, and began clapping his own knees. “Come to me, doggie.” He whistled at it. “Who’s a good boy? Who’s a good boy?”

The dog hesitated, its head darting back and forth between the two. Canine-age looked quite torn
between Cletus and Spider-Man. Not because it was indecisive – It was making a beeline for Spidey. No, it was looking torn more in the sense that the canine itself ran into Spider-Man’s arms while the symbiote ran into Cletus’s.

“No- Hey!” Spider-Man was distracted a moment by a grayhound licking his face, but he managed to shoo the pupper away. The dog fled to safety, but… something told Spidey he himself wouldn’t be given the same luxury.

And that something was a grinning, cackling, slime-covered maniac standing across from them. “Yes. YES! Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha-!”

Shriek hurried to Carnage’s side, wiping her eyes. “Ohh, it’s just like Christian the lion!”

“If yer cryin’ now, just wait till I’ve punched his head off!” Instantly, Thing charged them, his boulder-sized fist primed for clobbering, but before he could even reach the baddies, Carnage managed to grab Thing’s head with a tendril and smash him into the cement walking trail beneath them – repeatedly. Then, before Human Torch could retaliate, Carnage dunked a tendril into the Reservoir, then opened up the giant mouth on his stomach to squirt water like some kinda really screwed up Pokémon. Torch was hit with the force of a firehose, flaming him off and knocking him out cold.

So just to recap, now the entire Fantastic Four had been taken out of commission, meaning Spidey was on his own against Carnage, Shriek, and bottomless numbers of brainwashed parkgoers.

Spider-Man punched away an incoming zombie, then ripped the Telepathy-Blocking Ray off his back. He aimed it at the zombies, stepping back as they closed in on him. Sheesh, when had his life gone from the superhero genre to survival horror?

Okay, okay, he could do this. All he had to do was aim the gun and pull the trigger, right?

…Except this gun didn’t have a trigger, it had buttons. Three dozen of them, to be exact, all unlabeled. Spidey was sure that design choice made perfect sense in Reed Richards’s head.

Spider-Man could only cower by the edge of the lake. The temptation to press random buttons on this thing was rising…

Carnage’s group took a collective step towards the spiders, keeping their zombie mooks, sonic-shooting mouths, tendrils, and ax-shaped hands at the ready. God, even all those nightmares Peter used to have hadn’t been this dire. He was just fixing to grab as many FF members as he could carry and run for it when…

“Hi, we’re here to look at your spine!” Wham. A jet black figure sprang from the trees, propelled by a web-slingshot woven between two trunks, and gave Carnage a nasty kick to the back. “Ooh, sorry to tell ya this, but you’re gonna need a chiropractor.”

“Eddie!” Spidey started towards him.

“Daddy-in-law, no!” Shriek drew back, huddling towards her boyfriend. “You’re not supposed to hit other family members! That was only the old family-”

“Okay, look-“ Venom landed beside the Web-Head, shrinking under his gaze. “-we’re only becoming Venom again to help you out. We’ll turn ourselves over to the Fantastic Four afterwards, pinky promise.”

Spidey looked like he might argue, but all he did was nod. Whilst also punching a zombie in the
“Leave my hubby alone!” Shriek sent some sonic blasts their way, but Spidey and Venom dodged, meaning the only ones to get hit were zombies. “Are you okay, Carny-poo?” But when she turned her head, Shriek found her lover sprinting for the trees. “Hey, wait for me!”

Shriek sped through the trees alongside her Amour Alien. Carny-poo wasn’t even stopping to behead the terrified passerby, so Shriek knew he was in a real hurry.

“And risk a repeat of last time?” Carnage spat, pointing his lanky tongue at her. “I wanted my alien, and now I’ve got it, so I’m getting off this stupid island.”

“Ah, don’t worry, babe, I get it,” Shriek assured him. “I love your alien, too. You wouldn’t be complete without it, now would ya?”

As they ran, the symbiote morphed itself into a red t-shirt, complete with a baseball cap over Cletus’s eyes to hide his infamous face.

“As they ran, the symbiote morphed itself into a red t-shirt, complete with a baseball cap over Cletus’s eyes to hide his infamous face.

“Ooh, cool transforming trick!” Shriek gave her most innocent smile. “But, uh, Carnage Cupcake, I can’t really do that kinda thing, and my skin’s all pale white now. How am I gonna hide with you?”

Cletus halted his sprint. Slowly, he turned to face her. Ohhhh, that intensity in his eyes made Shriek’s heart pound.

“No.” By the time the spider-duo reached the edge of the thicket of trees, Carnage was long gone. But Shriek wasn’t. Not quite yet, at least.

Almost the instant the sight hit Peter’s eyes, feminine screams erupted from his earpiece. So he wasn’t alone in his horror. He just wished the girls hadn’t had to see this…

“I have you, miss. It’s gonna be okay.” Peter cradled the woman in his arms while a somber Venom loomed over them. Shriek tried to pull herself upright but instead ended up throwing the brunt of her weight on Peter. It wasn’t much.

“I- I don’t understand.” Her eyes were on Peter, but she wasn’t seeing him. “All I wanted was a…”

“Shh, shh, shh.” Peter held her, as if to make sure she was real. It felt dreamlike – There was a view of the grass through her torso.

“I loved them.” You’d think her pale white face would look all pointy like a Disney villain’s, but it was actually a bit soft and rounded. She must’ve been beautiful once. “Both of them. Why couldn’t they…?”

At first Peter held her tighter, as if that might help, but soon enough he was forced to resign his efforts. Gently, he shut her eyes.
With Eddie’s departure, the Parker-Stacy-Watson family living room had gone quiet. With the latest footage streamed on Gwen’s laptop, it’d gone downright tomblike.

“G-Gwen?” Mary Jane tried to speak, but she sounded like she’d need about a billion bottled waters before she could manage.

Gwen, though, opted to silently rise to her feet and start for her room.

“What are you doing?” MJ’s words weren’t spoken so much as scraped over her throat.

“I can’t- I can’t just sit here feeling helpless.” Gwen’s throat didn’t sound particularly hydrated, either. “I’ve got to do something with myself. You watch the laptop. I have an idea to help Peter…”

“Oh, o-okay…”

And on that cryptic note, Gwen shut the door behind her.

Alright, there was no time to waste – Gwen wasn’t sure how long this would take. She pulled up a chair at the workbench across from her and Peter’s bed, then hurried over to the back closet. She’d have to break into Peter’s web-fluid supplies. Hopefully he wouldn’t mind.

By now, every last photonegative zombie in Central Park had returned to being plain old parkgoers and police officers. The civilians, while disorientated, were gradually returning to going about their business… including one man who had the misfortune of being a ginger.

“We will lap the fluids from your SKULL!”

The misfortune, in this instance, stemmed mostly from the fact that the man was grabbed by the shoulders and spun around by a snarling, toothy alien monstrosity.

“Oh, uhhhh, sorry. Thought you were someone else.” Venom gave an apologetic grin as he released his victim’s shoulders, allowing the man to make a particularly rapid exit from the park.

“He can’t have gotten far.” A couple feet across from Venom, Spider-Man was tearing through the grass, his head darting every which way. “But how many redheaded dudes can even be here? I swear we’ve checked every- Ah ha.”

With a sudden burst of speed, Spider-Man tackled a man in a red baseball cap. And this time, rather than the usual screaming and fleeing, the man spun around, his ax-shaped hand swinging.

“Hey, I was leaving your stupid city!” Cletus snarled as his cap melted over the rest of his body. “What is wrong with you?”

“Wrong with me?” Cocky as he was right now, the truth was Spider-Man had only dodged Carnage’s ax by milliseconds. “Wrong with me? ”

“It’s over, our child.” Luckily, before Carny could take another swing, he found a black tendril wrapped around his neck, dragging him backwards towards the hulking creature at the edge of Central Park Lake. “No one else dies today.”
“Oh, don’t be ridiculous,” Carnage shot back, strangled. “Almost two people die every second! Though personally, we’re trying to get it up to four.” Chomp. As it turned out, those jet black fangs of Carnage’s weren’t just for show – They gnawed straight through Venom’s tendrils, allowing him to spring into the water and disappear.

Our heroes started towards the water themselves, but before they could get too close, tendrils erupted from the drink, spanning a good half the Lake’s radius. The poor parkgoers had already been fleeing the superhero/villain battle going on, but now they must’ve thought there was some horrible sea monster to deal with, too.

“No!” Spider-Man tried to yank some people to safety with his webs, but there were so many… After barely a moment’s thought, though, he turned to Venom and spat, “You go right, I go left.”

Like clockwork, the two spider-people darted outward, snatching up civilian after civilian moments before the tendrils could behead or otherwise maim them. Not to brag, but Spider-Man even managed to save the morbidly obese lap dog of some little old lady. The thing didn’t look like it could’ve fled very far on its own.

With the civvies safe, Venom dived into the lake after his uppity kid, and Spidey was treated to the sight of two underwater alien symbiotes punching and slashing at each other in slow motion. Only in Manhattan…

It wasn’t long, though, before Venom managed to get Carnage in a headlock, drag him up to the shore, and then smash his head against the edge of a bridge. Next up, Spider-Man sprang overhead, firing web-bullets nonstop until he landed on the bridge railing. Carnage was left panting and heaving, but something told Spidey this wasn’t over yet.

“This isn’t over yet!” Carnage bellowed. “I’ll hack you all to pieces! I don’t know how to cut an amorphous alien blob, but by god I’ll find a way-”

Mid-rant, though, something interesting happened. Apparently, a nearby squirrel had wandered over to the lake to see what all the commotion was about… and as soon as Cletus had lost the upper hand, his symbiote opted to spring off him in favor of the critter.

“No! Wait! What are you-? You can’t leave me! You’re mine! Mine!” Cletus started after the slime, of course, but a mix of gray and black webbing kept him from following. Marmot-age was able to scurry off into the safety of the trees.

“Will ya look at that?” Venom shook his head as he and Spidey started after the alien rodent. “We guess our child prefers the animals to Cletus.”

“It probably can’t tell the difference,” Spider-Man said darkly.

At first, of course, Cletus was stunned, but after a minute, he started cackling to himself. “So what?” he said, beaming. “It doesn’t matter if that part of it leaves. It’s too late. It’s already joined with me mind, body, and soul.”

“Uh, sure, Cletus,” Spidey called back to him. “Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

“Mind, body, and soul.” Left alone, Cletus began muttering to himself. “Mind, body, and soul. Mind, body, and soul…”

“Mind, body, and soul. Mind, body, and-”
“We get it, it’s applied directly to the forehead!” A web-glob from Spider-Man sealed Cletus’s mouth up tight as the cops dragged him away.

The hunt for the North American red – and Spidey did mean red – squirrel had been in vain, and so Spider-Man and Venom had returned to the Great Lawn. By now, the Fantastic Four were back in action and directing confused, formerly-brainwashed citizens. Luckily, even before Shriek’s control of them had been… severed… the zombies had left the unconscious FF and Eddie alone. Without Shriek directing them, it seemed they’d just shambled around aimlessly.

“Thanks for all the helps, guys.” Spider-Man’s head went to each member of the Quintessential Quartet in turn. “Y’know, you four aren’t quite the spoiled, stuck-up, self-centered jerks I thought you were.”

“Aww, stop it, kid,” Thing said in his usual monotone. “You’re meltin’ ours hearts.”

“Our family is happy to help against any cosmic threats,” Invisible Girl said, stepping in front of him.

“Well, that’s a relief,” said Spider-Man, “cuz between you and me, I’m just a totally normal guy with spider-powers who fights crime in Manhattan. Aliens are way out of my jurisdiction. And, uhh, sorry I ever thought you were frauds.” He nodded to the hulking black sidekick beside him. “Guess when I know alien symbiotes exist, that puts pretty much anything on the table…”

Spider-Man couldn’t help but shrink in the Fantastic Four’s presence. Of course, this wasn’t Spidey’s first time hanging with other superheroes, but there was still something really weird about lounging around with them in costume. Maybe it was just the shame of wearing tattered, rancid spandex next to all the people decked out in sky blue outfits made of those fancy “unstable molecules.” The Thing’s pants probably cost more than Peter’s house.

“And we apologize if we were rude when you asked to join our team,” Mister Fantastic added, his head stretching towards Spidey’s.

“The truth is, we’re not a team, exactly,” said Invisible Girl. “We’re really just a family who got superpowers, so we’re not looking to recruit any other superheroes.”

“It’s okay, I get it.” A distant quality had overtaken Spider-Man’s voice. “A family’s a pretty great thing to have, but adding someone new into the mix can be… kinda weird, I guess.” He was quiet a moment. “A-Anyways, there’s one last order of business before I head home.” With that, his gaze returned to Venom. “Look, Symby, I appreciate the help today. I mean that. But if you really want to prove to me that you’ve changed, you need to go with the Fantastic Four. And get yourself off Eddie.”

At first he thought the symbiote would protest or try to run, but to Spidey’s surprise, it actually slithered, albeit somewhat reluctantly, off of Eddie, and allowed Invisible Girl to capture it in one of her invisible forcefield orbs (Yeah, that was a thing she could do).

Spider-Man looked the symbiote’s new prison over. “Thank you, Symby. And…” He took a breath. “I’m sorry for trying to freeze you to death before. I was just scared because you were an alien that tried to take over my brain and stuff. I never stopped to think maybe you were a person – especially not a little kid who couldn’t know any better.” Or, well, from what Eddie had explained about Symby’s backstory, Spidey assumed it was a little kid in alien symbiote years. “And I’ve got a strict policy against killing little kids.”

Inside that orb, the symbiote looked like a swirling mass hovering before him in midair. And from
that shapeless mass, it formed a rudimentary head complete with Venom’s usual white eyes. The symbiote gave Peter a nod.

Peter nodded back, then returned his attention to the FF. “You guys take care of this little rascal, now. I’d have brought him back to ESU, but with the Connors gone and Norman Osborn’s BFF Miles Warren in charge…”

“I understand.” Mister Fantastic’s face soured. “I wouldn't trust Oscorp with Ben's toenail clippings, let alone powerful alien lifeforms.” But it quickly returned to its usual softness. “We've actually been avidly following the story of the 'alien slime’ ever since it was discovered on John Jameson's shuttle.”

“In fact, we donated quite a bit to John’s cure.” Invisible Girl gave a wry smile. “I guess we've got a soft spot for people who get mutated in space.”

“I wanted to study the alien myself, of course, but Dr. Connors snagged the honor right out from under my nose.” Mister Fantastic shrugged, an action that had an unfortunate number of things in common with a bowl of jello. “Ah, well, it went to the best man for the job.”

“Yeah,” the Thing said flatly, “and I'm sure the fact that we were fightin' mole people in the center o' the earth at the time had nothin' to do with it.”

“We believe the symbiote was somehow sent to Earth during the Kree-Skrull War the October before last,” Mister Fantastic added. “The timeline certainly adds up…” Spider-Man considered asking him to elaborate but thought better of it.

Spidey gave a wary glance at the forcefield-sphere, where the symbiote was resting patiently. “So what're you gonna do with Symby, anyways?”

“Oh, we'll be turning it into S.H.I.E.L.D. for inspection,” said Mister Fantastic. “Maybe if we’re lucky, I’ll even be allowed to study it personally…” He eyed the ooze almost hungrily. “Either way, Spider-Man, I assure you this creature will be treated humanely.”

“Maybe it can be our team mascot?” spoke up Johnny. “Just like Scooby-Doo.”

“Oh, yeah,” said Spider-Man, “the resemblance is uncanny.”

“And you can be Velma, Ben!”

“Dat’s funny-” At this, Thing started towards his pretty boy teammate. “-I don’t remember no episodes where Velma decks Shaggy in the face.”

Torch and Thing promptly engaged in some spontaneous roughhousing, which Spidey took as a sign that it was time to leave. But before he could start that, Peter’s eyes happened to land on the glade of trees where the cops were setting up a crime scene. And where Shriek’s body was being carried away.

And just like that, Peter’s smarmy facade vanished from existence. With drooping shoulders, he said, “C'mon, Eddie… let’s get going.”

Just before leaving, though, Eddie paused to take one last look back at the forcefield bubble. The symbiote raised itself against it. Somehow, despite lacking a face at the moment, the symbiote brought to mind the image of a dog staring at its owner as he heads out the front door. Then, slowly, the symbiote made two shapes with its slime – a pair of black handprints, each pressed against the side of the bubble.
Gently, in turn, Peter and Eddie rested one palm each on the bubble’s opposite side. They stayed that way a while, but, eventually, the symbiote melted back into shapeless ooze. And so the boys left.

“Don’t worry about the Carnage symbiote, Spider-Man!” Mister Fantastic called after them as they left. “S.H.I.E.L.D.’s putting the whole park under quarantine. We’ll find it.”

A massive squirrel, fur dripping with crimson slime, thrashed against its transparent prison, but the Spider-Slayer’s special containment cylinder held tight.

“See? Told you it was worth springing for the reinforced container.” Smythe slouched in his wheelchair, watching its holographic video feed of the Spider-Slayer scurrying through the grass. Smythe and Warren were still down in the fish-smelling lab, where they’d spent the past several hours scrambling to create good enough news to keep Mrs. Osborn from demanding their heads on a pike. “Mrs. Osborn will be simply delighted at the super-mercenary capabilities this alien allows us.”

“Not until the creature’s been properly studied,” said Warren from behind him. “Until then, it’s far too unpredictable for our purposes.”

“Well, don’t look at me. You’re the biogeneticist.”

Peter, Gwen, and MJ stood on one side of their apartment’s living room while Eddie stood on the other. It hadn’t escaped Peter that this was an exact recreation of their positions right before yesterday’s teeny little argument. Peter hadn’t meant to hover protectively over MJ’s shoulder, but he’d ended up defying his own best efforts. And on MJ’s opposite side, Gwen was looking a bit hovery herself.

“What I did was unacceptable,” Eddie said, eyes on the carpet. “I’m not asking any of you to forgive me, but I want you to know I’m seeing a therapist and- and doing everything in my power to fix myself.” He paused. “I can find a place to crash on my own, so you guys don’t have to feel like you’re kicking me to the curb or anything.”

“Eddie—” Peter stepped towards him. “-an alien symbiote messed with your brain, and- and you’d been through a lot even before that. It’s okay, man.”

“There’s no shame in needing therapy,” Gwen said with a nod.

“And…” Mary Jane stepped forward, too. “…I forgive you for, y’know, the traffic thing. You were having a breakdown. Happens to tons of people when they get to college.” A puff of air escaped her mouth. “And I know I never should’ve gone out with a college kid in the first place.”

Eddie’s shoulders slouched. “And I never should’ve asked out a high schooler in the first place. Honestly, I… I was trying to get back at Pete, and it was screwed up.” He turned for the door. “If you guys never wanna see me again, I get it. We can intern on different days.”

“Well, I guess we could do that.” Gwen was the last to step forward. “But the thing is, Peter and I haven’t taken our annual trip to the Smithsonian yet, and Mary Jane’s not really big on nerd stuff, so…”

“Mom?” The moment his damp, swollen eyes opened and the Osborn penthouse’s private infirmary came into his bleary sight, Harry’s mom wrapped her arms around him with enough
force to startle nearby Oscorp staff. “What’s goin’ on...? M’face... hurts...”

“It’s alright, honey. It’s going to be alright,” She leaned over the cot to smooth his red hair. Bits of it had been dyed a shade darker than normal. “We’re going to fix this. You’re going to look handsome again. I promise you-”

“I... beg your pardon, ma’am.”

A voice turned her around. Standing at the entryway was a gray, wrinkled, crestfallen man.

“I’m afraid Master Harry is to allow his face to heal as it is,” Bernard said with a bow of his head. “Orders from on high.”

The suitcase landed with enough force to startle nearby airport staff.

Mary Jane stared at it, panting. “Remind me why you’re not carrying all the luggage single-handed, again?”

“Well, gee, what’s the phrase, comes from the French...?” Peter shot her a smirk. “Oh yeah, secret identity.” His eyes pointed to the countless onlookers traversing the airport.

MJ smirked back. “Iron Man doesn’t have a secret identity...”

“Iron Man has his own income bracket,” said Gwen, depositing her own suitcase on the conveyor belt thing.

“Allright, guys, let’s get moving.” Eddie trudged ahead of them, smiling and shaking his head. “Pete’ll starve himself to death if you let him banter too long...” He walked off, leaving Peter alone with the girls.

“Well, then...” MJ made a valiant effort to load a suitcase onto the belt.

“Here, let me.” But then Peter casually tossed it on.

MJ repaid the kindness with her most sincere smile. “Show off.”

With the suitcases dealt with, Mary Jane leaned in towards Gwen to murmur, “Hey, whatever happened to that thing you said you were working on? To help Peter?”

“Oh, yeah, that. Don’t worry about it right now.”

“Um... ’kay?”

“Anyways,” said Gwen, “sorry you didn’t want to come with us.”

“Ah, well, museums aren’t really my element.” MJ batted a hand at them. “Still... I’ll miss you guys.”

“We’ll only be gone for the weekend,” said Peter. “But, uh...”

“...we’ll miss you, too,” finished Gwen.

Peter nodded. “Take care of yourself, MJ.”

“Yeah,” said MJ. “You got it, Tiger.”
The three of them spent the next few moments standing in place. But while they were standing there, Peter and Gwen started doing that “couple” thing of theirs where they sent each other complex messages via their eyes. And Mary Jane was about to walk away from them. She really was. In fact, maybe that was why it ended up happening. Like, right when they were about to separate, something snapped them back together.

But whatever the reason, something happened.

It started innocently enough. Peter and Gwen moved in, all flighty like rabbits when humans are near, ready to run at any moment. And then the two of them moved in – in the closest thing to unison they could manage – and kissed MJ’s cheeks, Peter the left and Gwen. To this, Mary Jane had no reaction – or rather, no visible reaction – and so the three of them ended up hovering there for a bit, faces millimeters apart.

And then the dam burst, and Peter leaned in, and Mary Jane did that girly thing that she swore she’d never do where she let him lean her backwards like she was a frickin’ fairy princess getting swept off her feet, but it was over as soon as it began, and then, like they were following a schedule, it was Gwen’s turn, and this time Mary Jane was the one leaning forwards, but she didn’t know if that was because of the difference in gender roles here or if she’s just suddenly regained some fraction of her mental fortitude. Either way, it lasted almost exactly the same length of time as Peter’s (again, the schedule thing), and then it was like, whoop, done now.

“Wow,” said MJ, touching her fingers to her mouth, “why didn’t you guys ever tell me you could kiss?”

And then Peter and Gwen stumbled backwards together, and they squeezed each other’s hands just to make sure neither was blindingly furious at the other over these shenanigans, and then Peter stammered something about not wanting to miss their train, and the lovebirds scurried off back towards Eddie at the runway, darting their heads around to make sure too many people weren’t staring at their burning hot faces.

Mary Jane was pretty sure the plane took off at some point in the intervening minutes, which meant it was probably at the same altitude as her head right about now. After a bit of struggling, Mary Jane was able to point out to herself that she probably ought to leave now and walk to the subway. She even managed to make her legs move, so that was progress.

“Far… freakin’… out.”

The airport wasn’t empty. It was located in New York, after all. If anything, there was barely elbow room to spare. But damned if it didn’t feel empty. Like the only things in the whole world MJ had for company were the flags hanging on the wall and the sliding doors by the exit sign and the overhead speaker announcing “Flight 907 now disembarking from Grand Cayman Island” in a bored-sounding voice.

End of Lesson 7
Lesson 8: Graduation 101

Saturday, July 8, 1989, 5:32 P.M.

Norman had hardly even touched his dinner, and it was foie gras. He swore, this woman did things to him.

“…not only in the media we consume, but in the very thoughts we harbor in our minds. Every person on this earth has the capacity for internal pluralism.” He pointed at her with his fork. “But most simply fail to realize that potential, and that is one of the many things that separates them from us, Emmy.”

“Christ, Norman, you could teach that class.” Emily had ended up leaned forward over the table, palms on her chin. The tidy, brunette hair on her head was short, the string of pearls around her neck was long, her dress was elegant, her posture was informal, and overall she was a mess of wonderful, fascinating juxtapositions. “I’d listen to you for hours.”

Norman checked his watch. “You already have.”

It was at this point that the couple broke down laughing. It was also at this point that Norman made the rather unwise decision to snatch more champagne from the tray of a passing waiter. It was a mistake that ended with Norman crying out and frantically toweling off Emily’s dress with a napkin. “Emmy! I’m sorry!”

She gripped his hand, freezing the napkin in place. Her lips drew towards his. “I forgive you.”

Wednesday, April 22, 1992, 4:20 A.M.

She’d put on weight. Norman was about to point that out to her, but then she suddenly peered up at him from across the breakfast table.

“I want to go back to college.” She had to raise her voice to ensure it carried.

“Why?” A sneer took Norman’s face. “Am I not bringing in enough for you?”

At this, Emily rose from her chair. “This can’t be the rest of my life, Norman. I- I need away from this. You have no idea how stressful it can-” It was at this point that the bundle of cloth in her arms started bawling. Emily sniffed, made a face, then called out, “Bernard! Harry needs to be changed again!”

The dark-haired butler gave a bow as he marched into the penthouse’s dining hall. “Right away, ma’am.”

Saturday, May 3, 2008, 6:07 P.M.

Emily chewed her foie gras, then swallowed mechanically. It might as well have been paste, it was so tasteless. Would it kill the chef to vary their palette every now and then?
Emily thought about saying this aloud, but then Norman rose from the table’s far end.

“Where are you off to so soon?” Emily asked without looking up.

“Tech Flight meeting.” Norman left the dining hall without another word.

Emily returned to her foie gras. Looked like it’d be another morning of crosswords for her. Ugh, sometimes she wished she had returned to college. Life was so dull here.

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**Thursday, September 4, 2008, 9:28 P.M.**

“Norman!” The moment he was through the penthouse’s front entrance, Emily was at his side, shoving staff out of her way. “What happened? Is Toomes still out there? Are you h-?”

“I’m fine.” And Norman, in turn, shoved her out of his.

He marched to his room, posture straight as a nail, chasing off any staff in his way with a scowl. Norman locked the door behind himself, swung his head around to ensure the maid was absent, then walked towards his ultra king size mattress… and collapsed onto it.

He clawed at his chest, allowing the panting and gasping to finally overtake his breath.

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**Thursday, September 4, 2008, 11:42 P.M.**

“…gaseous form provides a far less concentrated dose, allowing the body to better process it.” Octavius nodded to the chamber before them. It was egg-shaped, occupied a majority of this room of the lab, and held three large, cylindrical containers at its top, each housing their own cloud of swirling, pea-green gas.

The sight of it made Norman’s lips curl.

“In theory,” Octavius continued, fidgeting with his thick, square glasses, “this should be quite a boon to our- our production of super-mercenaries.” The admission left his bow tie quivering. “But it will require much more testing, of course. Heaven knows what number of side effects might have remained undetected…”

Norman stepped forward, touching a palm to the chamber’s glass. “Of course.”

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**Friday, September 5, 2008, 2:15 A.M.**

Norman strolled across his private study so he could inspect himself in the mirror. He opened his bathrobe to bring his bare chest into view.

Not bad. Not bad at all. Norman had been far from scrawny before, but now his veins were positively swollen. This called for whiskey.

Norman moved to his cabinet to retrieve the bottle. He was mid-pour when the laughter hit his ears.

“Who’s there?” Instantly, Norman spun around. His head darted about the study, but there was nothing. Nothing but the sharp, hideous, incessant laughter.

“What indeed?” hissed the voice, laughing all the while.
With a soft clack, Norman set his decanter on the table behind him. “Show yourself.”

“Oh, I’d love to—” The voice acquired a sudden bounce. “—but I’m afraid your eyeballs can’t spin one-eighty degrees.”

Norman stepped into the study’s center, continuing his search. For an irrational moment, his gaze snapped to the row African masks hanging on the back wall.

“Though I suppose you could always try the mirror.”

On command, Norman turned back to it. His lips tightened.

“Hi there, Normie!” The thing in the mirror waved at him, then retrieved the mirror-world’s decanter from the mirror-world’s table. “Nice to make your acquaintance.”

“You’re…” Norman stepped backwards. The thing in the mirror mimicked the movement. “…a hallucination.”

“And you’re obtuse.” The thing downed its whiskey in one gulp. “Just because I’m a figment of your drug-addled mind doesn’t mean I don’t have feelings, you know.” It tossed the glass over its shoulder.


“Bingo. Me!” The thing flourished a hand as it lurched forward. “Your greatest creation, here to bring you the thing your cold, crusty heart’s always lusted after – power, and lots of it.”

Norman could only watch, helpless, as the mouth in the mirror contorted into a sick grin. His mouth.

The laughter resumed.

Friday, October 24, 2008, 7:48 P.M.

Norman studied himself in the mirror. Not bad. Not bad at all. Originally, the flight suit’s green and purple coloration had been to ensure the pilot’s visibility in the upper atmosphere, but he’d been more than able to make the color scheme work with the new mask.

Norman’s eyes traveled to the aforementioned mask, which was currently resting in his hand. It grinned up at him.

“Stole our own Tech Flight glider, check,” it said. “Made Octavius soil himself, check. Made our new pumpkin-head minions soil themselves, check. Hmm, what’s left on the list?”

The voice in Norman’s head had quickly proven itself to be murderously insane, and so Norman had done what he always did when he came into contact with an unstable criminal element – He’d stricken a deal.

“We ensure the Big Man dies tonight,” Norman said, “and bring his entire criminal empire under Oscorp’s roof.”

“And blow a ton of people up?” The mask looked up at him with hopeful yellow eyes.

“Yes.” Norman failed to hide his smile. “And blow a ton of people up.”
Next, Norman’s gaze traveled to the glider. Unlike the flight suit, it had required some modifications to be brought in line with his intended motif, meaning it now sported the head of a gargoyle. That part had been the Goblin’s idea.

The glider rotated with a piercing hum, sending ornamental pots crashing to the ground and papers scattering about the study. Now the glider was facing the penthouse’s massive, wide open window. It should’ve burst out by now, should’ve zoomed off into the night sky, but instead, it lingered.

“What’s wrong?” spoke a third voice.

One of this flight suit’s many features was total flexibility of the neck. Norman cocked his head back at the brunette woman in the nightgown standing tall and unflinching across from him.

“Why, if it isn’t the old ball and chain!” said the mask.

The glider touched the carpet, silencing the humming. Norman descended it, then placed his hands over his wife’s. “I’m… I’m not sure this is the best course of action,” he admitted. “What if it goes wrong? What if he realizes it’s me? All that work to earn Tombstone’s favor… Do I really want to risk throwing it away?”

He was about to turn from her, but a sudden sharpness made him wince. “What happened to the man who came to me with this plan? The one with a spine? I’d thought that was the man I love, but maybe it was just the Green in his veins?”

Norman said nothing, stiffening like a long-dead cat. Finally, though, she said, “I won’t let you down, Emmy,” and kissed her forehead. “I promise.” And with that, he returned to his glider.

Right before he slid the mask over his head, it belted out in a singsong voice, “You know, if we pushed her off the balcon-ny, I bet it’d be ruled as a sui-cide…”

“Quiet, you.”

The mask was on. Before flying off, Norman took one last look in the mirror. This time tomorrow, Oscorp would be the most powerful organization in New York, and the Osborn lineage would be secured.

Yes. This was the right thing to do.

Friday, January 9, 2009, 11:11 A.M.

This one time, Mary Jane had caught some chick at her old school calling her a thot behind her back, and Mary Jane had glowered harder than she’d ever glowered in her life, and then the chick had tripped on her own shoelaces. It’d go down in the history books as MJ’s finest hour. And now she was trying desperately to make lightning strike twice.

Three minutes into the staring, though, MJ realized Liz was wearing slip ons. Stupid pom-pom-twirling little…

Just MJ’s luck she’d ended up three spots behind the newly-cemented couple at the lunch line. There Peter was, standing at Liz’s side and gazing at her with his adorable brown eyes and letting her ruffle his adorable scruffy hair and making her laugh at his adorable lame quips. And Liz’s laughs were so exaggerated! What a faker! She didn’t deserve Peter’s quips!

What’s WRONG with you? MJ mentally screamed at the back of Peter’s head. When I told you to
focus before, I MEANT FOCUS ON GWEN!

And to top things off, right as MJ was really starting to fume, the unthinkable happened – Liz held Peter’s hand. The sight of it made MJ’s stomach boil with rage-acid.

…On Gwen’s behalf.

Oh, speaking of Miss Stacy, here she came now. Gwen slinked into the lunchroom, and alongside her strolled… her new boyfriend, as of yesterday.

“Here, babe, I’ll get it for you.” Harry grabbed a tray for her, then kissed Gwen’s cheek.

Across the cafeteria, Mary Jane stared at that cheek a while. But then she reached the front of the line, and MJ shifted her attention to the fresh pile of slop on her tray. She stared at it for a while, too. Then she bolted for the restroom, knelt over a toilet, and puked.

…On Peter’s behalf.

Friday, January 9, 2009, 3:20 P.M.

Luckily, Mary Jane still had some gum in her locker to mask her breath. Old habits died hard. And anyways, if Glory smelled anything, MJ would just blame it on Kenny.

“Alright, slowly, no pushing!” Naturally, Devereux hadn’t been able to resist making a show of posting the results. Quite the crowd had gathered at the hallway’s bulletin board to wallow in suspense. There was Kenny, Glory, Tiny, Gwen, and those other two who were dead to MJ. But Mary Jane herself was, of course, the first to the board the moment Devereux moved aside. Just because she’d gotten all wrapped up in relationship drama didn’t mean she’s stopped caring about the regular kind.

“Oh, Glory, we’re in!” MJ looked back at her, beaming.

“Thank you, Shakespeare!”

MJ’s eyes returned to the board. “You, too, Kenny.”

“Hnn. Tight.”

“Harry, you got a lead!” Fine, fine, MJ had got carried away and forgotten to hate him for a split second. Wasn’t like she needed to spite Gwen, anyways. If the girl was happy with Harry, then so be it.

Instantly, Gwen brought a hand to Harry’s shoulder. “Congratulat-”

“Yeah, thanks, just a sec, okay?” And also instantly, Harry had his phone to his ear. “Dad! Dad! I got the lead in the play! Heh. Plus, I have a girlfriend now.”

Mary Jane froze, keeping her back turned. A moment passed.

“Uh… D-Did you just say you’re proud of me?” Harry’s face might have been hidden from MJ, but the disbelief in his voice wasn’t the least bit concealed.

And with that, the couple walked off together down the hall, Harry guiding Gwen by the shoulder. Mary Jane watched them go until they turned a corner.
Okay, false alarm, he was still dead to her.

**Saturday, February 14, 2009, 9:07 A.M.**

Norman smirked into the receiver. “And then you’ll say, ‘Oops. Wrong contingency video.’”

“Oh, that’s good!” howled the voice on the other end.

“Ah, here he is now. One moment.” Norman stowed the Osberry in his coat pocket as he stepped through the doorway and into the Osborn penthouse’s dining hall. As always, Norman seated himself on the far vertical end from his wife. “Thank you for your patience, everyone. Work was murder.” His eyes traveled the room… and landed on the newcomer. “Who’s this young lady?”

She and Harry rose and stepped towards Norman’s seat, Harry beaming all the while. “Gwen, I’d like you to meet my dad, Norman Osborn. Dad, I’d like you to meet Gwen Stacy.”

“H-Hi,” said the girl, showing off her teeth. One of the front ones was bent at a slight angle.

Norman was shocked the girl even managed to smile. One look from him and she was trembling. A strap had fallen down the shoulder of her bright pink and sky blue dress – which, incidentally, looked like it’d been foraged from a Goodwill. And that wasn’t even getting into her hair. Norman had to fight down the urge to burst into hysterical laughter and out himself on the spot as the Goblin.

“Son?” Not a second later, Norman’s attention was on Harry. “A word?”

The men entered the hallway, leaving the women seated at the table. Norman closed the door behind himself… though he made sure to keep it somewhat ajar.

As soon as they were alone, Harry gave his father a look of pure, childish confusion. “Dad? What’s wrong?”

Norman leaned against the wall, hands in his pockets. “Don’t you think you can do a bit better?”

Now Harry was trembling, too. Must’ve been contagious. “I- I like this girl. I mean, you met Mom in high school, didn’t you?”

For the briefest of seconds, the laughter escaped. “Your mother knew what foundation is. Now please don’t waste my time again.”

Harry bowed his head. “Yes, sir.”

And with that, Norman turned away and strolled down the hall, retrieving his phone from his coat. Before he left earshot, Norman caught the slam of the dining hall door, followed by the faint sound of voices:

“Thanks for sticking up for me.”

“But- But, I mean… would it’ve killed you to use foundation?”

**Saturday, February 14, 2009, 12:58 P.M.**

*Rap, rap, rap.*
“Who’zzat the door?”

“Uh… Looks like some frumpy blonde girl.”

Normally, Mary Jane was in the habit of ignoring her parents’ voices, but there were a couple code words she’d trained herself to respond to. Y’know, in case of emergencies.

“I got this one, Mom! You can sit back down.” MJ descended the stairs at Whizzer-like speeds. She all but shoved the woman aside in her mad dash to the welcome mat, then shut the door behind her and prayed the physical contact with her mom hadn’t left her smelling like her namesake.

“Hi, Mary Jane,” the visitor said dully from her place on the welcome mat. “Sorry to drop by unannounced…”

“Girlfriend! Pleasantest of pleasant surprises!” Instantly, MJ’s nails were in Gwen’s arm as she led her off the doorstep. “Let’s talk outside. It feels great out here. N-Nice and brisk.” MJ hugged herself in lieu of a jacket.

Gwen merely nodded. Then sniffled.

“Gwen?” Despite her best efforts, Mary Jane ended up frowning. “What happened?”

Some mix of the cold and the tears had left Gwen’s face utterly raw. “Mary Jane… I… God, I don’t even know how to say this…” She took a steadying breath. “I want to be you.”

MJ blinked. “Pardon?”

“I mean-” The rawness was growing exponentially. “-you just seem so happy and sure of yourself and… gorgeous. Everything I’m not.”

Mary Jane was left staring. The walls were closing in. The walls were closing in, and they were outside. You want to BE me? Oh, that’s easy, the first step is to get your parents to hate you by acting like a lunatic, then spend some time in juvie and go around flirting with anything with a pulse- “S-Sorry, no can do! Mary Jane Watsons are like, uh, really sexy Tiggers-”

She was cut off by a pair of hands clamping down on her own.

“Mary Jane, please, I’m sorry, I know this is at the last minute.” Gwen was shivering worse than MJ, and she had on a jacket. “I’ll pay you. I just- I can’t show up to the restaurant looking like- like me.”

The two of them held that pose a while. God help her, Mary Jane was holding Gwen Stacy’s hands and staring into Gwen Stacy’s eyes, and the thing about Gwen Stacy was, there wasn’t a phony bone in her body. That pitiful look on her face wasn’t the least bit calculated.

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**Saturday, February 14, 2009, 1:28 P.M.**

The makeup kit collided with the Stacy household toilet lid with enough force to make MJ brace for a geyser of sewage, but luckily, the commode failed to explode.

Gwen stared into the massive bag like it was the edge of the abyss. “S-So what’s first?”

Mary Jane managed to squeeze herself over to Gwen’s opposite side. For all the other advantages this house had over MJ’s, at least MJ’s personal lavatory had a cubic inch of elbow room to spare.
Looked like she and Gwen were gonna be cooped up here together for the next couple hours.

“Well, first off-” MJ tossed a towel at her head. “-you’ll want to wrap this around your shoulders.

Already, Gwen looked lost, though she at least managed to catch the thing before it hit the floor. “What? Why?”

MJ cocked a brow. “Unless you’d rather take off your top?”

Gwen ended up going with the towel thing.

Full disclosure, Mary Jane had never actually washed anyone’s hair but her own before. This felt kind of… nifty. Yeah. That was the word for the feeling MJ got when she leaned the soft, malleable Gwen Stacy over the edge of the bathtub and ran her hands all over the girl’s scalp.

Then came the shampoo, conditioner, rinse, and about half a can of mousse. Next was the hair dryer, and then the fun part, plucking Gwen’s eyebrows.

“Ow! Isn’t this supposed to be bad for your-?”

“Doesn’t matter, looks hot.”

Afterwards, MJ gave Gwen some foundation cream to use. A minute later, though, MJ was letting out a haughty sigh and rubbing her own fingers all over Gwen’s face. “No, sweetie, it needs to be evenly distributed. You’re gonna look like Malekith the Accursed.”

“What next?” Gwen’s voice was still a bit sullen. Somehow, the plucking had failed to improve her mood. “I hit the treadmill, try to shed some weight in the next three hours?”

“No need.” MJ’s nails clamped down on Gwen’s arm. “Your bod’s great as-is. Did Marilyn Monroe need to shed weight?”

“Well, she probably didn’t have stretch marks…”

“Gwen.” The next step was supposed to be powder, but there was an emergency step-shuffling, and so instead the next one ended up being the part where MJ forced Gwen to admire herself in the mirror. “C’mon, look at yourself.” MJ didn’t release her shoulder until Gwen had locked eyes with her reflection. “And we haven’t even started with the blush and lipstick. Oh, and I’ve got the perfect matching dresses for us. I bought one that’s, like, pastel colors, but it turns out I can not pull those off. It’s been burning a hole in my closet for-”

“Y-You’re picking out my clothes, too?” Gwen was no longer admiring her own reflection. “Wow. This really is a full intervention, isn’t it?” She paused. “Thank you, Mary Jane. I mean that. I… I honestly don’t know what I’d do without you.”

MJ wasn’t admiring her own reflection, either. “Same to you.”

“Seriously, though, I’ve got, like, a hundred dollars in my billfold-”

“Don’t you dare.” MJ’s nails clamped down on Gwen’s arm. “For you, makeovers are free.” She paused. “Now, my escort services are a different story-”

“Oh, you are not an escort,” Gwen said with a grin. “You’d be living in a condo with a six-figure income.”

And now they’d both locked eyes with the other’s reflection in a crazy criss-cross. MJ could
scarcely rip hers away. For once, there could be no denying which of them was the hottest. MJ still had on the t-shirt and short shorts she’d slept in, and she’d hadn’t so much as brushed her own hair yet. And frankly, even once she did start getting ready, MJ was tempted to dial back her usual appearance. For one night, the spotlight didn’t have to be planted quite so firmly on Mary Jane Watson.

“Wow,” Gwen suddenly said, fluffing her hair. That mousse was already kicking in. “Look at me.” She turned to flash MJ a smile. “Do you think Pete’ll still forget I exist?”

Now, Mary Jane knew full well that she was playing right into Harry’s slimy little hands here. The thought of him breathing all over a particularly stunning version of Gwen was enough to make MJ’s stomach act up again. But then, the thought of Peter’s face when Gwen walked out the limo… was too tempting to pass up.

But really, all that mattered was that Gwendolyn Maxine Stacy was smiling that smile of hers. The one with the power to shrink things. Love drama, being called a slut behind your back, your parents’ daily screaming matches… All seemed way smaller all of a sudden. There must’ve been some Pym particles imbued in the enamel.

But smile or no, a part of MJ was begging herself to tell Gwen everything, to just screw it and blurt out that Harry clearly only wanted a girlfriend for social status, and maybe MJ wasn’t one to talk seeing as Mark might have been fun, but that’s all he was, but then the girls ought to make a pact, both agreeing to break up with their boyfriends (or whatever Mark was to MJ), and- and the depths of Peter’s stupidity had clearly proven themselves to go far deeper than the girls ever could’ve anticipated, so what Gwen needed to do was start looking for someone who… really cared about her.

The words didn’t come. Instead, all Mary Jane said was, “Oh, I don’t think he’ll be forgetting you anytime soon…”
Wednesday, August 11, 2010, 5:34 P.M.

A boy and girl sat side-by-side on the therapy couch, their faces hidden by the room’s dimmed lights.

“I know, I know,” said the girl. She nearly knocked over a lamp, she was quivering so hard. “I neva thought me and Rand would get back togetha, but… well…”

“…I guess everyone’s been holding onto each other a bit tighter lately.” The boy brought a hand to his eyes. “After everything that’s happened.”

Saturday, July 3, 2010, 12:00 P.M.

A man with a chinstrap beard and big, round spectacles poked his head out the studio building. “Take care now, MJ. You killed it out there today.”

“Thanks, Willi,” Mary Jane said, sloshing her six hundred dollar boots through the sidewalk’s many rain puddles. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

She had to fight to keep her voice from going monotone.

Saturday, July 3, 2010, 1:22 P.M.

The spotlight burned emerald, painting the singer below a sickly shade.

“Have another drink, my dark-eyed beauty.

I’ve got one more night left here in town.

So have another drink of green elixir.

And we’ll have ourselves a little mixer.

Have another little swallow, little lady,

And follow me downwwwn…”

Mary Jane stood at the backstage entrance a moment, watching the actors do their thing. All these people running around, carrying props and trying on costumes and yelling out questions about line delivery… It made Midtown Magnet’s stage look like a broom closet, that was for sure. MJ’s heart couldn’t help but beat faster.

It took a moment for the ponytail-wearing director to notice her, but when the time finally came, he certainly did notice her.

“Hel-lo there, miss.” Instantly, he was at her side. “You’re early. The lead auditions don’t start for another-”

“Ah, no, you got me mixed up.” MJ batted a hand at him as she showed off her dazzling white teeth. “I’m just trying for a background extra. I’m the gal Devereux called you about-”
“You’re Devereux’s girl?” The director’s jaw just about popped off his head. “Goodness! I’d thought he was exaggerating.”

“Wow.” MJ blinked. “He really talked me up that big-?”

“No, no, no!” But she hadn’t kept the man’s attention for half a minute before he was running back towards the stage, waving his arms at the poor actors like he was scaring away crows. “The song requires a far more sinister air! We’re trying to do ominous foreshadowing here, people!”

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**Saturday, July 3, 2010, 2:15 P.M.**

Apparently, in the intervening years since the trio had last been here, the Museum of American History had added a whole exhibit on the android Human Torch. They even had a couple scraps behind a display case. If you squinted, you could just make out the charred remains of synthetic fingers. Any other day, it would’ve been enough to make Peter let loose some fanboy squeals, but today he stared right past the things.

“Think we should text her?” asked a voice that made Peter jolt. Gwen was getting scarily good at reading his face.

“And say what?” Peter turned his eyes from the glass before him to the girl beside him.

“I don’t know,” said Gwen, straightening her glasses. “We can’t just keep her in suspense all weekend.”

“God, I can’t believe I-” With a groan, Peter buried his fingers in the gap between his eyes. “I’m such a creep. I totally forced you to follow my lead. If you hadn’t, it would’ve been even more awkw-”

“You’re not a creep.” Gwen put a hand on his arm. “I mean, another second and you’d have been following my lead.”

“Fine, fine, what do you want me to write?” Peter sighed, dug his phone from the pocket of his cargo shorts, and then mimed typing with his thumb. “Hi, MJ, about that thing at the airport where me and Gwen grabbed you and took turns sucking your face, we were just being idiot teenagers. Thanks for understanding. P.S. We don’t love you.”

“Don’t say THAT!” Gwen yelped with a sincerity that left her blushing. “I- I mean, I don’t think…” She paused. “It’s just, w-we have to say something.”

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**Saturday, July 3, 2010, 2:17 P.M.**

Her train was taking its sweet time today, meaning Mary Jane’s butt was firmly seated on a clammy underground bench when her phone buzzed. She noted the page number in her book, shut the cover, set it on her lap, knelt to retrieve the purse beside her seat, took out her phone, checked the ID… and then sent the book hurtling across the station in her scramble past the lock screen.

She knew who it was on sight – She’d set her phone to display a photograph of a stripey orange feline whenever he texted. The message was two letters: an “H” followed by an “I.” No spaces.

Hi? What did that mean, hi? Was it an awkward hi? Apologetic hi? Debonair hi? This was impossible to parse. Why couldn’t he have sent her something simpler? What was MJ supposed to do? She had to say something.
Saturday, July 3, 2010, 2:17:05 P.M.

Peter’s phone buzzed. He almost got them arrested by hurtling it through a display case in his scramble past the lock screen.

MJ’s response was one word: *Tiger*.


Gwen looked one more message away from a nervous breakdown. “Oh my god, we should not be doing this over text. This was a horrible idea. I’m so sor-”

“Guys!”

The couple spun to find Eddie lumbering towards them.

“H-Hey, bro.” Peter gave his stretchiest grin while Gwen frantically wiped off sweat.

“You’ve gotta come see this. They taxidermied the Whizzer’s genetically-altered mong-” Mid-sentence, Eddie caught sight of their faces. “Guys? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Nothing.” Gwen pushed past him to reach the ladies’ room. “I’ll be back in a sec.”

Peter watched her go with a frown. Looked like she needed a moment to compose herself. He couldn’t blame her. Problem was, now Peter was alone with Eddie… and Eddie was far from stupid.

“Pete.” He turned towards Peter, arms folded. “What’s going on with you three?” When Peter failed to reply, Eddie sighed, then said, “I know I was a #$$% about it before, and I swear to god I regret how I acted. I mean that. But I’m not just gonna pretend like I don’t see you and Gwen always putting yourselves in Mary Jane’s personal bubble or- or whispering about her every time you think my back’s turned.”

Peter bowed his head, eyes on the floor, hands in his pocket. They’d been apart so long, he forgot how high Eddie towered over him.

“I don’t want to be judgmental about it, Pete, but I know girls like Mary Jane. It’s not that she means you two harm or anything, but I promise you she’s never been in a healthy, committed relationship in her life, *let alone a poly one.*” Eddie’s eyes clamped shut. “You seriously wanna risk everything you’ve built with Gwen for this?”

“Yeah, that’s occurred to me, but Gwen swears up and down this isn’t like what happened with Liz, and-”

“You never saw Gwen’s face when you came to the formal with MJ!” Eddie spat.

“That was different!” Peter, meanwhile, could only stammer. “She- She didn’t *know* Mary Jane back then. Neither of us did. But so much has happened since then, and now Gwen’s-”

“Bi-curious. I know, I know.” Eddie sighed, slouching his shoulders. “That part surprises me the least, to be honest. I wasn’t sure Gwen was even into guys until I realized she liked you.”

“We think she might be demisexual or someth-”
“Yeah, I don’t care what Tumblr words you wanna label yourselves with,” Eddie snapped back. When he caught the look on Peter’s face, though, he relented. “I’m sorry. Not trying to bite your head off. I know this all must be weird and scary for you and Gwen. Truth is…” He took a deep, deep breath. “…maybe a part of me’s just looking for reasons to keep hating you. The part of me that… that still misses the ooze.”

“Mister Fantastic gave it to S.W.O.R.D.,” Peter said softly. “It’s miles away from Manhattan by now. Out of our lives for good this time.”

The only acknowledgment Eddie gave the statement was the smallest of nods.

“Eddie… thanks for saying all this.” With a bit of effort, Peter managed to meet his eyes. “I know you’re just worried for me and Gwen. And- And I’m not trying to make it sound like the two of us are fixing to throw caution to the wind next time we see MJ. Honestly, we’re still figuring out what… angle to approach this from.”

Eddie turned away, moving his eyes back to the exhibits. “Well, you can probably guess my vote.” Yet another sigh. “Gwen’s the one you love the most. Stringing Mary Jane along is about the most irresponsible thing you could do.”

A moment passed.

“You’re right,” Peter said faintly.

“You realize you can’t let her live with you forever?” Eddie glanced back to the restrooms, making sure no headband-wearing blondes were exiting right this second. “Especially once you and Gwen get… you know.”

“Yeah.” Peter’s eyes traveled to the restrooms, too. “I know.” They lingered a while on the sign above them – a simple, white image of a man and woman standing together, alone.

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**Saturday, July 3, 2010, 2:27 P.M.**

It was official, he wasn’t texting back. Mary Jane gave the screen a morose stare… before allowing her thumbs to fly across the touchpad.

_Hey tiger I just wanna make sure you know that I love you and gwen with all my heart and I swear ill be good to you two and never do anything to hurt you or betray your trust in any way and ill cherish you the rest of our lives and you guys dont even have to kiss me again if you dont want to seeing your faces is all it takes to make me happy I miss you goddammit we havent even been apart 24 hours yet and I miss you._

MJ stared at the screen a while longer. Then she held down the back button.

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**Saturday, July 3, 2010, 2:32 P.M.**

_“Hmm mm mm HMM hmm…”_ Mary Jane hummed to herself as finally boarded her train and sat down on one of its lone, isolated seats.

A couple other passengers made eyes at her, as people always did when MJ went out in public. Time was, she’d wink or at least smile at them, but today she didn’t acknowledge the existence of anything in outer reality. Anything save for her phone’s wallpaper, which she continued to stare at.
The pic had been taken at the food court that day Pete and Gwen had spent with her at the mall. The lovebirds had smiled into the camera, Gwen trying her best to pose and look pretty (because she still thought she had to try, bless her heart) and Peter attempting to smile with half a hot dog and some fries in his mouth. Heh. That goofb-

_Bzzt._ Oh, she got a text! She got a text!

…No, wait, it was just an automated message telling MJ she was running low on minutes.

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**Sunday, July 4, 2010, 3:50 P.M.**

“Bang, dead.” Mary Jane had lolled over backwards on the couch, letting her hair flop wherever it fell. From this angle, the image on her shiny new TV was upside down. “Bang, bang, bang.” MJ held up the PS3 controller in her hands, mashing the square button with a pointer finger. But then her finger ran out of energy, so she simply let her character sit still and watched the next wave of enemies run the poor guy over. Then again when he respawned. Then again.

Mary Jane had heard Peter mention he used to be more of a gamer, but he’d been hamstrung lately on account of being a poor person and all, so MJ was hoping this’d be a nice welcome home present for him and Gwen (That fact that MJ had been bored out of her skull lately was sheer coincidence). MJ wasn’t sure what Gwen’s feelings on video games were, but she’d at least appreciate the nicer TV. The old box one must’ve been made of the same material as Thor’s hammer. MJ had made a valiant effort to move it, but in the end she’d simply plugged up the newer TV right in front of it, leaving the old one where it sat. She’d have to save that particular task for the member of the household with super strength. Speaking of which, Mary Jane checked the time on her phone. Well… no harm being at the airport half an hour early, was there?

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**Sunday, July 4, 2010, 5:02 P.M.**

The poor, breathless lovebirds hadn’t been off the boarding platform for a nanosecond before they found themselves getting hugged to death by a rabid redhead.

“H-Hey, MJ.” The couple smiled and blushed, and Gwen was even brave enough to hug back.

“Oh, you guys missed so much.” MJ grinned at them as she helped carry a suitcase through the airport. “I binge-watched TV, ate microwave dinners, had to wait half an hour to start my shoot because the makeup guy was running late… It’s been nonstop thrills.”

“Ah, really?” Peter said with a smirk. “Guess we shoulda stayed home. All we did was go to some stupid museum.”

The banter continued in that fashion until the group made it to the parking lot, where Eddie’s bike was waiting. Eddie slipped on his helmet and said his goodbyes to the others. MJ didn’t let the bike leave her sight until it’d sped off down the road. Honestly, that vehicle still made her pulse quicken.

Also, she’d swear Eddie had looked funny at her, Peter, and Gwen a couple times, but… when she thought about it, MJ wasn’t sure she cared. Anyways, Eddie didn’t say anything about it, and Peter even called him “bro,” so MJ took that to mean the hatchet had been successfully buried.

Now that they were alone, Mary Jane turned to Peter and Gwen. “So… guess we have a lot to talk
about.”

For a moment, the lovebirds went stiff as boards.

But then MJ said, “What was the Smithsonian like? I’ve never been.”

The lovebirds loosened right back up, and Peter started going on about genetically-altered mongoose blood as the trio strolled towards the nearest subway station. The subject didn’t stray much farther from mongooses the entire rest of the day.

But then, really, it didn’t have to. That silly little airport kiss thing had just been, like, a spur of the moment decision. Totally unplanned. Any idiot could tell that. So what was there to say, really? The three of them were big kids. Kisses could mean as much or as little as they wanted them to mean. It’d been a simple gesture of affection, that was all. It wasn’t like the lovebirds were gonna ask MJ to marry them.

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**Sunday, July 25, 2010, 4:35 P.M.**

Mendelssohn’s March blared across the church as the wedding party began their journey down the aisle. The sight of it couldn’t help but bring a smile to Peter’s face. Though maybe that was just because of the unwitting bride-to-be currently curled up in the crook of his arm.

Just about the whole Daily Bugle staff had gathered in the massive, elegant Midtown cathedral. Benny the copy-boy was even the ring bearer. Oh, um, and Ned’s and Betty’s actual family and friends were there, too. The two weren’t *that* obsessed with work…

Peter was just starting to wonder if that bell Venom smashed here had ever been fixed when Gwen tapped his shoulder, gestured to the blushing Betty in her wedding dress, and murmured, “It’s not too late, y’know. You can still stop the wedding before your precious Miss Brant is taken from you forever.”

To this, Peter only smiled and said, “Ned can have her. I’m not crushing on Betty anymore…”

“Right answer.”

After a minute, Peter forced himself to wrench his eyes back to the front of the pews. If that loving gaze had gone on any longer, he’d have ended up shoving the happy couple out of the way so he could marry Gwen on the spot. Peter could hardly help himself when Gwen was decked out in her now-legendary dress from the Valentine’s Day before last. Peter’s penguin suit seemed awfully plain in comparison, especially when Mary Jane was sitting right on Gwen’s opposite side with a brand new, suitably stunning scarlet dress with matching leggings.

Anyways, the main ceremony eventually came to a close, and everyone got settled down at the one of the many, massive banquet tables. Peter and Gwen might as well have been sharing a seat, they were sitting so close. And, uh, Mary Jane was nearby, too, a foot or so away from them.

The only person left standing was the Jolly One himself, who was running around showing off his son, the fully-healed, spore-free astronaut, to anyone who hadn’t seen him yet (and more than a couple people who had). Oh, and there was also that weird old guy with a distinct-looking mustache and rounded sunglasses. He was, err, getting dragged away by security.

“Sorry, sir, invitation only.”

“You can’t do this to me! Don’t you know who I am?”
The guy didn’t make too much of a scene, though – The crowd’s attention was fixed pretty firmly on Betty, who was standing at the head of the tables to say a few words.

“…course, we were worried we were rushing it. Or that something would go wrong. But I guess, in light of all the horrible things that have happened these past few months… we’ve learned to hold on tighter to each other.” Her hand squeezed itself around her lover’s.

And beneath his own banquet table, Peter’s hand followed its lead. Gwen’s squeezed his back. Peter didn’t have to see his girlfriend’s face to know the expression on it.

“And to us, marriage is the ultimate symbol of that commitment,” Betty continued. “It’s a vow of partnership. A promise to the person you love and to yourself… that you are completely, unflinching committed to that person. The relationship you have with him or her is unlike any other. You belong to that person, and only that person.”

Peter’s hand… loosened its grip somewhat.

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**Sunday, July 25, 2010, 5:27 P.M.**

Peter should’ve been gorging on white cake right about now, but instead he found himself slinking off towards the restrooms, shoulders slouched. Ugh. He’d been over the moon a minute ago, so why’d he suddenly feel like the mushy parts of an old peach?

With all the other guests gathered in one place together, the rest of the church had become a big, dark, empty maze. Kinda spooky…

Peter caught himself just as he was rounding the corner. Seriously? The guy who could lift a truck over his head and had a precognitive danger-sense was scared of a random hallway? Just because the lights were dimmed and there was no one else-

“Whoop!”

-here?

“S-Sorry, sir!” Peter had nearly tripped right over Jameson exiting what looked to be a broom closet.

Jameson, though, merely scowled. Now that wasn’t SO unusual, except that Peter’s aformentioned danger-sense started tingling the tiniest bit in response. Huh? What? Jameson wasn’t that big a jerk. And come to think of it…

“Uhh, did you just come out of a broom closet?” Peter stood on tippy-toes to look over the man’s shoulder.

At this, Jameson’s whole body tensed. In a gruff growl, he asked, “What’s your name, kid?”

“My name?” Peter repeated, stepping back. “I can’t believe it. I work for you for ten years, and you don’t remember my name is Flumby McDrossersnorfen?”

Jameson didn’t appreciate the wit, judging from the sudden increase in tingling going on in Peter’s skull. Normally, wherever the danger was coming from, Peter would’ve been more than ready to dodge… except that he couldn’t exactly flip onto the ceiling unless he was eager to share his secret ID with Mirror Universe JJ here.
Which meant that when Jameson suddenly pulled out a crazy sci-fi handheld laser blaster gun, Peter was only able to react with the nearest he could come to regular human reflexes.

_Bzzap._

**Sunday, July 25, 2010, 5:29 P.M.**

“Perfect.” A Russian accent bled through the imitation of Jameson’s voice. Accounting for Jameson’s whereabouts was one thing, but now, if Chameleon didn’t hurry, people would start wondering where _two_ partygoers had gone off to. He’d have to alternate between the two guises every couple minutes like some ridiculous American sitcom.

Chameleon grumbled to himself as he dragged the unconscious boy to the back closet where the bound, drugged, and equally-unconscious Jameson had already been tossed. At the very least, though, this would be the perfect opportunity to test out another of the fancy tools his employer had gifted him.

As soon as the boy had been adequately drugged and tossed next to Jameson, Chameleon untucked his own dress shirt to reveal the bulky, metallic belt underneath. From the belt’s buckle emerged a faint blue light that scanned the boy’s face. Then, after a moment of processing, the belt dug its wires deeper into Chameleon’s body. The sensation was still new to him, and so it was all he could do to keep from screaming as he felt his muscles contort, his bones shrink, until finally he was the spitting image of the brown-haired boy, right down to the cheap tuxedo.

Impressive as the new tech was, though, Chameleon still found himself scowling as he snuck back out the closet. On principle, he tended to avoid mimicking teenagers. He’d had to attend a whole week of high school once – a situation straight from his nightmares.

“Oh, there you are, Tiger.”

But as Chameleon returned to the banquet hall, a voice made him freeze. Coming towards him at the entrance was a redhead girl who looked… Well, suffice to say Chameleon was tempted to let his belt scan her for his, err, private record.

“Looks like the party’s winding down,” the girl said, strutting towards him in her heels. “Ready to head back to our apartment?”

Chameleon fought with all his might to keep his eyebrow from raising. _Our_ apartment?

…Well, he couldn’t say this job lacked perks.
Wednesday, August 11, 2010, 6:48 P.M.

A boy and girl sat side-by-side on the therapy couch, their faces hidden by the room’s dimmed lights.

“I- I know I’ve been a big, fat, stupid, idiot,” the boy said, wiping his eyes. He placed a trembling hand over the girl’s. “All this time we were dating, I never deserved you… but you stayed with me anyways.”

“Kenny…”

“Glory, I swear, I’m going to be better for you. I wanna be with you the rest of our lives.” The boy paused. “Especially now that we know how short that could be.”

Sunday, July 25, 2010, 5:36 P.M.

“Mmmommyyyyy…”

“Whuh?” Peter was roused from sleep by a loud, obnoxious, yet distinctly drowsy voice right across from his face. He opened his eyes, blinking, to discover the fuzzy image of Adolph Hitler lying on the floor beside him. But then it came into focus and he realized it was just Jameson.

“Mommy…” Jameson repeated, eyes shut tight, drool oozing down his chin, “…change my nappy in ten-point-eight-five seconds… or you’re fired…”

Great. Wherever the two of them were, it was too dark and cramped to really see much, but it was a safe bet that Jameson’s hands and feet were bound by cords just as tight as the ones Peter was currently struggling with. Also, maybe this was just Peter, but having his cheek forcefully pressed against this type of bristley carpet gave him the heebie-jeebies. Just like licking the wood of a Popsicle stick when there’s no Popsicle left. Or having little bits of paper left clinging to you when you peel a sticker off your skin. Brrrr.

Another safe bet was that in addition to zapping him with that kooky sci-fi gun, the impostor-Jameson (Chameleon? Those “Skrull” things the Fantastic Four claimed were real?) had opted to drug non-impostor-Jameson here to kingdom come. Peter could feel the tranquilizers coursing through his own system, too, adding a slight fuzziness to his thoughts. Difference was, unlike the time Kraven had given Peter all those lovely nightmares, the impostor here couldn’t possibly have accounted for Peter’s super spider-powers when choosing the dosage. Which meant that within only a few minutes, Peter’s thoughts were perfectly lucy. No, he meant “lucid.”

“Ba ha ha! Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha-!” Oh god, he’d thought “lucy” instead of “lucid!” “Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha-!” This was the funniest thing that’d ever happened in his life!

Sunday, July 25, 2010, 5:37 P.M.

As much as Chameleon would have liked to abandon his mission, he doubted his employer would
understand that the redhead had just been *so* gorgeous. And so it was that as the girl led him down another of the building’s twisting hallways in search of the exit, Chameleon suddenly halted. He had to think fast.

“C’mon, I think Gwen’s this way. She went off to see if this place managed to squeeze in a toilet between all the Virgin Mary statues—” The redhead paused. “Uh, Tiger?” She glanced back at him, then halted herself, frowning. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Chameleon replied, doing his best to mimic the boy’s cadence from their brief encounter, “I was just thinking… why hurry home…” His palm pressed against the brick over the girl’s shoulder, pinning her to the wall, her path blocked by his body. “…when we’ve got plenty of privacy right here?”

The advance was met with the absolute driest of stares. The girl’s once-seductive voice had been traded for a monotone: “What the hell are you doing?”

Outwardly, the smarmy look remained frozen on Chameleon’s fake face. Inwardly, though… *Der’mo. Der’mo der’mo der’mo der’mo der’mo* What if his guess had been wrong? What if this girl was actually the boy’s sister or cousin? *No.* No, Chameleon had to remain calm. No one called their blood relative “Tiger.” That was obviously flirtatious. See, by calling him “Tiger,” the girl was coyly implying that the boy had the sexual voracity of the mighty male jungle cat, who was known to mate up to twenty times a day with the female in the wild or as many as fifty times in captivity (Okay, Dmitri might have spent a little too long around his half-brother).

“This is officially getting weird.” The girl’s eyes flitted to Chameleon’s arm, which had remained unmoved above her shoulder. She cocked a dark red brow at him. “You haven’t been replaced with Chameleon, have you?”

these cords open like they were made of wet paper and yanking off his wedding attire to reveal the red and blue spandex underneath.

Err, as it turned out, Jameson’s eyes were half-open, but hopefully he was still in too much of a drugged-up stupor to really put the pieces together.

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**Sunday, July 25, 2010, 5:40 P.M.**

Stunning as Gwen’s pale pink dress was, it made using the restroom a nightmare. Once Gwen had placed her elbow-length gloves on a dry patch of the sink countertop, entered the least vomit-inducing stall, carefully wiped off the seat with a thick wad of toilet paper, carefully wiped off the floor around the seat with an even thicker wad of toilet paper, lifted up her dress, rolled down her pantyhose, done her business, rolled up her pantyhose, lowered her dress, exited the stall, washed her hands, dried her hands, put her elbow-length gloves back on, and exited the restroom, she was finally able to wander off in search of her boyfriend.

It only took her a minute to find him, though. He was leaned forward against the wall of a nearby hallway, where he was currently pinning a dazed Mary Jane, whose mouth looked about three millimeters away from being explored by his tongue.

“*What the $#*%, Peter?*” The words burst out Gwen’s mouth all on their own.

“Oh, h-hey, there… Gwen.” Peter jerked away from MJ’s mouth like he’d been burned, turning to flash an anxious grin at Gwen. On top of everything else weird about this situation, he’d said her name like he wasn’t a hundred percent positive it was correct. “I, uh, don’t suppose you’re here to join us?”

“*Are you #%*$$ING KIDDING me?*” Gwen was lucky this hall didn’t have an echo or the whole wedding party would’ve heard. “This is *exactly* what we promised each other *wouldn’t* happen with- with- Gragh!” Her own fingernails dug into her scalp. “*God,* I’ve been naive. You just wanted *both* of us, and you’d tell me *anything* if you thought it would- *Rrrgh.*” She could hardly form coherent sentences, she was foaming so hard at the mouth. “A-And you.” Gwen’s wrath shifted to an uncharacteristically skittish Mary Jane. “‘Polyamorous.’ Yeah, right. You were just jealous of what *I* had with him, and you decided to use *my friendship with you* as an ‘in’ t-to- to-” The rest of the words came out more like sobs.

“Gwen, I swear I didn’t-!” Mary Jane, too, had a fair amount of wrath in her voice, though Gwen wasn’t her target. The distance between MJ’s and Peter’s faces remained the same, but now her fingers were also that distance from his throat. “*You lying son of a-*”

Mary Jane’s final word, though, was drowned out by an earsplitting THWIP.

“Hey, ma’ams, is this guy bothering you?” said a voice from the ceiling.

“*Spider-Man?*” the girls cried out in synch.

“*Spider-Man?*” Peter had said it in synch, too, only his had been more of a shriek of horror as a strand of webbing latched onto his back. The next instant, “Peter” was airborne, dangling from a thread while the white eyes of Spider-Man’s mask narrowed at him, following the shape of Spidey’s brow. “What are you *doing here?*”

“Okay, you caught me, I was crashing the wedding,” said Spider-Man, cocking his upside-down head at his captive. “Thought old Triple-J would get a kick out of it – He just loves seeing me. But
then I couldn’t help but overhear the commotion, and lo and behold, I bump into that annoying kid who follows me around with his stupid camera. Come on, Parker, don’t you know how to treat the ladies?”

“Let me go, you creep!” snarled quote-unquote Peter. He trashed and flailed in a vain effort to free his back from the web-strand, then turned down to the girls to yell, “Call the cops!”

“Oh, yeah, actually, please do.” Before “Peter” could reach it, though, Spider-Man dug a hand into his pocket to retrieve what appeared to be a laser blaster straight out of Star Trek. “Ooh, this doesn’t look legal. You’re in big trouble, kid.” The dazed and infuriated “Peter Parker” was left in a web-cocoon with his blaster pinned to the far wall just out of his reach, and then Spider-Man dropped down to the carpet so he could put his arms around the girls. “Come on, ladies, let’s ditch this creep.”

The girls were pretty stunned at first, but then Gwen mouthed “Chameleon” at Mary Jane. MJ nodded, and then the two did their best to stifle their giggles as the three of them walked off, a girl hanging off each of Spider-Man’s arms.

“Oh, our hero,” said Gwen.

“Finally, a real man,” said Mary Jane.

“Peace out!” Spidey called back as they left.

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**Sunday, July 25, 2010, 5:45 P.M.**

Chameleon bobbed up and down in his cocoon. Even now, when his face wasn’t in its true form with the white mask, it was utterly blank.

“I don’t even know what’s happening anymore.”

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**Sunday, July 25, 2010, 5:49 P.M.**

Peter’s – the real Peter’s – plan was nearly complete. All that was left was to change out of his Spidey suit and return to the party. By the time the cops got there, it’d be pretty obvious that the Peter Parker with the advanced weaponry was the fake.

Yes, the plan was perfect… except for one hiccup. By the time Spider-Man got back to the closet in the secluded hallway, Jameson’s eyes were fully open.

Spider-Man froze in place, the two of them staring at each other. Spider-Man’s gloved hand hovered mere inches above an unmistakably cheap-looking penguin suit lying on the ground.

“Parker?” Jameson said, his voice hardly a whimper.

“Uh, no, I can explain! See, Parker managed to escape while you were drugged up by- by slipping out of his jacket, and I was just coming back to untie you and stuff, and I saw the jacket here and figured I’d give it back to him-”

Before Spidey could finish his story, Jameson let out a horrified gasping noise, clutched his chest, and collapsed.

“Mr. Jameson? Mr. Jameson?”


**Sunday, July 25, 2010, 6:03 P.M.**

By now, wedding-goers had gathered outside the church to watch the rescue workers load Jameson into their ambulance. God, Peter felt horrible for Ned and Betty. What an end to their special day…

Peter sighed as he watched the vehicle speed off on the road ahead, hauling the unconscious Jameson with Mr. Robertson, as always, at his side. What was that thing Uncle Ben always used to say? When it rains it pours, and when it pours it floods? Now, after getting kidnapped and drugged by Chameleon, Peter couldn’t even go home, cuddle up with Gwen, and sleep for a year. Nooooooo, he had to guard Jameson’s hospital bed, wait for Sleeping Beauty to awaken, and then make sure, after all this time, Jameson didn’t decide to run that “Peter Parker is Spider-Man” story after all. And all Peter could do in the meantime was pray Jameson’s drugged-upped brain wouldn’t remember that particular detail upon waking…

Gwen hugged Peter tight, and after only a moment’s hesitation, Mary Jane did likewise.

Across from them in the parking lot, Chameleon shot the three a funny look. As the cops led him to their van, he shook his head, murmuring “Americans…”

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**Sunday, July 25, 2010, 8:14 P.M.**

Peter, Gwen, and MJ weren’t trapped in New York Hospital’s waiting room for too terribly long before a nurse finally called Peter in. Gwen and MJ were left behind to watch as he hurried off into the sickroom.

The place was gray and barren. The curtains didn’t even have flowers on them or anything. It didn’t seem half as welcoming as the room Aunt May had stayed in after her heart attack, but then maybe that was bias coloring Peter’s memory.

Of course, not helping matters was the occupant of the hospital bed lying before him in a pale blue hospital gown. “Parker.” Jameson’s voice was never exactly friendly to begin with, but this time was different. It didn’t make Peter wanna cringe so much as duck for cover.

“H-Hey, Mr. Jameson.” Peter’s eyes traveled to the man seated at JJ’s bedside. “Mr. Robertson.” He’d aged a few decades since the last time Peter saw him.

Come to think of it, Jameson’s wife and son didn’t seem to be here. It seemed JJ had asked them to leave so he and Robbie could have a… *private* chat with Peter.

“Alright, Peter-” Mr. Robertson’s voice made him flinch. “-looks like we have a lot to talk about.”

Peter was starting to wish he’d brought Gwen with him purely for security blanket purposes.

“Really? L-Like what?”

“*Don’t give us that.*” Mr. Robertson’s voice went even sharper. “You wouldn’t be trembling so hard if you didn’t already know.”

At this, Peter bowed his head, defeated. “Who all did Jameson tell?”

“Just me so far,” said Mr. Robertson.

“So far?” Also, Peter was wishing he’d stopped by the water fountain.
Mr. Robertson’s head bowed. “Always thought Spider-Man would at least be older than Rand…”

The statement was followed by a silence that made Peter’s hair stand on end. Eventually, though, when the other two failed to talk, Peter blurted out, “Look, Mr. Jameson, I get that you’ve got your own principles that’re different from mine, and I respect that, and I know from your point of view, it doesn’t seem like I’m a hero, but I mean, I did save you from Chameleon. That’s gotta count for something, right? Right?” Peter gave the most pained smile of all time.

No response.

“Please, sir, you have to swear you won’t tell anyone. I-I-If just one of my rogues gallery found out, my friends, my girlfriend, my aunt, they could all be…” Peter shuddered. “And that’s not even getting into my aunt’s heart problems! If she knew, all that stress would…” He trailed off, out of steam.

Peter honestly thought the room would go back to being quiet, but then Jameson said, “Parker?” He coughed. “Get over here.” His voice had become a scratchy whisper.

Jameson whispering? Creepiest oxymoron ever.

Obediently, Peter trudged to the man’s bedside. He was about to kneel down to hear better, but then Jameson took care of that for him – by trapping Peter’s arm in a vice grip and yanking.

“Every time I bought a picture from you, a breach of journalistic ethics was committed. You have damaged the credibility and integrity of my paper, and if this was to come out, you would be in very serious legal trouble. But it’s not going to come out, not because I think you did the right thing, but because I don’t want the blood of your friends and family on my hands. I don’t want them to suffer for your stupidity.”

Peter had to squeeze his eyes shut to keep all the fluid from draining out of them. “Th-Thank you, sir.” He tried to pull away, but that only made Jameson’s fingers clamp down harder.

“And Parker?” Those dull green eyes bored a hole in Peter’s skull. “It’s not a ‘point of view.’ You are not a hero.” Silence. “Also, you’re fired. Now get out.”

Peter had to keep from sprinting to the door the moment his arm was free. Right before leaving, he glanced back at Mr. Robertson. The man looked like he wanted to say something, but he didn’t.

As soon as Peter was back in the waiting room, Mary Jane was at his side, and Gwen’s arms were around him.

“Did it go okay?” Gwen asked.

Peter wiped his eyes real quick. “Yeah. Everything’s okay.”

The girls gave some shaky smiles, but Peter barely noticed them.

He found himself distracted by the sight out the window. From up here, you could see Liberty Island in the distance – including the massive fireball above it in the shape of Spider-Man’s face.

Sunday, July 25, 2010, 8:36 P.M.

“Something told me you wanted to meet here. Just a feeling.”
One web-slingshot later, Spider-Man was landing on the crown of Lady Liberty, which, as Spidey had suspected, the Human Torch was hovering a couple feet above, waiting for him. The guy looked almost ethereal, what with being a floating blob of smokeless fire and all.

Torch nodded, then said simply, “Wanted to thank you for stopping the Chameleon, I guess.”

Spider-Man cocked his head at him, hunching over one of Liberty’s spikes (The statue was way smaller than you’d think, by the way. Cloverfield had totally lied). “You gonna thank me for stopping every other bad guy I’ve ever fought, too?”

“Don’t hold your breath, Web-Head.” It was tough to tell under all that fire, but Spidey was pretty sure Human Torch was smirking. “It’s just that, this time, your rogues gallery happened to overlap with ours. For one thing, that fancy new belt of his? That was built using illegal research based on Skrull biology.”

“Skrull?” According to the Fantastic Four, Skrulls were a race of intelligent, shapeshifting green aliens. At first Spidey had been skeptical, but it’d become pretty hard for him to refute the existence any cryptid once Venom became a thing.

“And the guy who gave him that tech?” Torch continued, folding his fiery arms. “Doctor Doom. Turns out he hired Chameleon cuz the Bugle was fixing to publish a story about Latveria. They got an exclusive report about its weapon production facilities seeing a massive spike in activity these past couple days.”

Spider-Man gave a start. Latveria? As in, the European kingdom ruled with an iron fist by the steel-plated dictator and sworn enemy of the Fantastic Four, Victor Von Doom? (No, really.)

“Whatever Doom’s up to this time, you helped us foil it that much quicker,” Johnny concluded. “So, uhh, thanks. And, look, man, I know you and me haven’t exactly had an epic bromance thus far, but… we cool now?” He offered a hand.

“…We cool.” And Spider-Man almost shook it, too, before he caught himself.

“Whoops, sorry!” Johnny promptly extinguished his upper torso to better facilitate handshaking.

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**Sunday, July 25, 2010, 9:01 P.M.**

By the time Peter ducked into an alleyway at the border of Liberty State Park, changed back into his civilain clothes, and then scurried over to the meeting spot where Gwen and MJ were waiting, he was just about ready to collapse. He couldn’t quite yet, though, until he’d fended off those quizzical looks they were giving him.

“Torch just wanted to bury the hatchet with me,” Peter explained. “Gave some exposition about Chameleon’s motives. That kinda thing.”

At this, the girls swapped glances.

Then, as the three started for the nearest subway station, Mary Jane asked, “He didn’t offer you a job at the Baxter Building by any chance, did he?”

Peter blinked. “Uh, no. Why?”

“Because now you’ve been fired from the internship and your Bugle job,” said Gwen with a smidge more callousness than was absolutely necessary.
“And rent’s due at the end of the week,” said Mary Jane.

“Oh,” said Peter.

Friday, July 30, 2010, 5:29 P.M.

“Hello.” Peter flashed a wince-inducing grin to the family approaching his cash register. The noodle-shaped hat on his head wiggled as he spoke in a cold, dead tone: “Welcome to Pasta-Pot Pete’s. May I take your order?”

Chapter End Notes

Next Issue: Birthday blues!
A man and woman sat side-by-side on the therapy couch, their faces hidden by the room’s dimmed lights.

“…a little sudden,” the woman was saying, “but Ned and I had gotten so close, and- and I guess the Hobgoblin ordeal pushed us into each other’s arms.” She held out the ring on her finger for the therapist to see.

The man nodded. “Plus, well, I’d say this past week’s illustrated pretty well that, y’know… when you live in a city that can get invaded by robots or supervillains at the drop of a hat… me and Betty just thought waiting would’ve been a mistake.”

Beside Dilbert Trilby’s face, the news cut to footage of a big, bluff, blonde guy being dragged across some random person’s lawn by his fellow superheroes – The robotic armor-wearing Iron Man and leotard-wearing Miss Marvel.

“What need have we to leave so soon, my friends?” Thor hoisted up a half-emptied wine bottle in his massive, meaty hand. “In my homeland of Asgard, victory in battle is a cause for GREAT CELEBRATION!”

“And also alcohol poisoning, evidently,” came Iron Man’s voice from behind his sleek, robotic helmet.

“Indeed! Many a good alcohol poisonings are had!”

“Wow, Tony,” said Miss Marvel, giving Iron Man a smirk, “you should pack your bags. You’d fit right in over th-

The footage cut out, and the newsroom returned to the screen.

“The electricity-weilding metahuman’s claim of being a god from a magical realm far from Earth is seen as endearingly eccentric by many,” Trilby said, stone-faced. “But an increasing number are growing tired of his antics and calling for this so-called ‘Thor’ to end his charade – or even to seek mental help.” He paused before adding, “This isn’t the first time alcohol has led to eccentric behavior in New York’s superheroes, as the Human Torch infamously demonstrated during his exclusive interview with us here at Action News.”

Next, the footage cut to Johnny Storm slouched over on the newsroom’s couch in his skintight, sky blue costume. He grinned at the brunette reporter across from him. “Nah nah nah, see, like, Reed says no one will… will believe us, but there are actually these green aliens with pointy ears who can shapeshift into any person they want. They tried to take over the government, buh we stopped
them, so it’z all good.” He stared into the camera for a couple seconds. “I slept with one.”

“Okay, that’s enough news for today.” It was at this point that Gwen clicked the remote, causing the screen on their ancient box-TV (courtesy of MJ’s aunt) to wink out. Gwen and Peter were currently sitting side-by-side on their living room couch, though there, err, might have been some overlap between them.

“Heh. Yeah.” Peter tried to laugh, but he ended up giving Gwen a less mirthful look. “You… You think there’s something to all that, though? I mean, we already known alien symbiotes exist, and if what Symby told Eddie is true, there is other intelligent life out there. Intelligent life with faster-than-light spaceships, even…”

The couple shared a shudder. Even if, according to the Fantastic Four, S.H.I.E.L.D. was on top of all things alien, it was still the teeniest bit unsettling to know aliens were real. Granted, every space enthusiast worth their salt knew about the organic slime found on John Jameson’s shuttle, but considerably fewer of them would’ve guessed it was intelligent. Just another one of those major secrets that divided Peter from the general public, he supposed.

“Sure,” said Gwen, “but I think I draw the line at Norse mythology being true.”

“Heh. Yeah.” Peter gave a somewhat rapid nod.

Gwen must’ve sensed his unease because she suddenly said in a soothing tone, “Your spare costume’s almost done, by the way.” She held out the spandex and knitting needles in her hands. “And I made you some more spider-tracers and fresh web-fluid capsules.”

“I’m helpless without you, you know that?” Peter knelt down over her, then planted his lips on her collarbone.

“Oh, I’m sure you’re not helpless. You could always pray to Odin for-” Gwen had to end the snark early on account of his Peter’s hair tickling her chin.

“Sorry, I don’t worship Odin,” Peter said, muffled by her skin. “My heart already belongs to a goddess.”

“Yeah?” Gwen’s voice had gone all breathy. “And who might she be?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Peter’s eyes rose to meet hers. “Cardea, goddess of door hinges!”

Gwen hit his head with a couch pillow.

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Saturday, July 31, 2010, 12:17 P.M.

Hmm… Should Peter buy the half gallon vanilla ice cream or the big old one gallon tub that was half-vanilla, half-strawberry? On one hand, he didn’t like strawberry quite as much as vanilla, but then, the one gallon tub gave him more bang for his buck, and it wasn’t like he hated strawberry. It just wasn’t vanilla.

Peter hovered his shopping cart over the frozen goods aisle, lost in indecision. And his choice, err, might have been further delayed by the fact that his mind was wandering. Of his three summers Spider-Manning so far, this one had definitely been the slowest. It wasn’t that he wasn’t fighting crime anymore or anything, but the problem was, Kingpin had obviously viewed Tombstone’s arrest as a cautionary tale. Back when the ideas of superhuman vigilantes was still novel, Spider-Man had disrupted tons of the Big Man’s operations before he’d even known there was a Big Man,
but now, between Spider-Man and Daredevil and the million other wannabes hopping around rooftops now, Kingpin’s band of crooks was being way less brazen with their crimes.

And it didn’t help that the majority of Peter’s time saving lives had been swapped out for time serving noodles. Ugh. The Daily Bugle job had been the perfect cover for superheroics. It’d been so easy to slip away to take pictures. Stupid Jameson… Well, Peter at least counted himself lucky JJ hadn’t been spiteful enough to go blabbing to the whole world, but still, he couldn’t help but be paranoid.

So, well, in light of all that, maybe it was time to take a break from the tights for the immediate future. Really, it wasn’t like Peter was going against “great power, great responsibility.” Uncle Ben wouldn’t have wanted him to work himself to death. His life had been nonstop chaos ever since that bug bite. He’d earned himself a break, hadn’t he? Especially when college was right around the corner. Ben surely would’ve wanted Peter to focus on his studies. Man, though, it was crazy to think ESU was mere weeks away at this point. And, actually, if supervillainy was at a standstill in Manhattan, then that worked out perfectly. Heck, even if a supervillain did attack the place, now there were plenty of new heroes like Thor and Iron Man to pick up Spidey’s slack, right?

Peter reached for the vanilla ice cream, smiling. All in all, it looked like life was fixing to be pretty good for Peter and Gwen.

“Nice, they’ve got Neapolitan!” With a deafening plunk, Mary Jane dropped a two-gallon tub into their cart.

…Oh, and Mary Jane. She factored in, too.

“Hey! Watch it!” Peter dove his arms into the cart in a valiant effort to keep the tub from capsizing. “Phew, that was a close one. It almost squished the-” The cake. It was resting there at the bottom of the shopping cart, sitting inside one of those, uh, plastic tray thingies that you carried cakes in.

Peter was silent for a bit as he and his shopping buddy traveled to the next aisle.

“You okay, Tiger?” MJ turned to examine the contents of a shelf. “You went quiet on me.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine.”

It was summertime, meaning Mary Jane’s sleeves failed to cover her shoulders and her shorts barely went past her butt. The store’s air conditioning was ruffling her red hair, bringing her smooth, flat back in and out of view. In and out… In and out…

She was into him. She was really into him. Geez, if this kept up, Peter would have to start a harem. And the kicker was, Mary Jane wasn’t just into Peter. No, actually, the kicker was that when MJ said she was into Peter and Gwen… Peter believed her. She really was in love with two people.

Peter had always known Mary Jane had a more, err, insouciant view of relationships, but he’d had no idea it ran this far. Of course, he’d heard the rumors about her. Every guy in school had heard the rumors about her. That she was – and this was the other guys’ words, not Peter’s – That she was easy. So then, at the airport, had Peter and Gwen taken advantage of her? Or had MJ taken advantage of them? Both? Neither? God, it made Peter’s head spin just thinking about it.

All this time, all that “free agent” talk… Peter had honestly thought that was just her polite way of saying he didn’t meet her standards. A part of him almost wished that’d been the case. Getting rejected, he could deal with. Girls had rejected Peter Parker all the time. If she’d just rejected him, Peter could’ve moved on with his life. But she couldn’t resist leaving the door open a crack, could
she?

Which meant now Peter was gonna have to slam it shut on her foot.

“It’s just…” Peter took breath. “I can’t believe Gwen’s birthday’s tomorrow.”

“Oh, tell me about it.” Mary Jane kept her gaze on the shelf. “A scant few more hours, and she’ll be a full-grown woman. Brings a tear to my eye.”

“Heh. Yeah. Guess I’m just nervous.”

“Nervous?” repeated MJ. “Of the birthday party? Tell me it’s not the clown I hired. He was acquitted of the homicide-”

“Not of the birthday party,” Peter said, laughing. “Can you keep a secret, MJ?”

“You mean besides the gigantic one I’m already keeping for you?”

“After the cake and presents and stuff… I’m gonna ask Gwen to marry me.”

Items went tumbling off the shelf, scattering across the tile floor at MJ’s feet.

“Marry you?” Her voice, usually tinged with a slight rasp, had gone high and soft. “Th-That’s-That’s great. I’m- I’m- I’m happy for you. Wow. You and Gwen. Married. That’d be s-so cool.”

The words were followed by dead silence.

“I feel like there’s a ‘but’ coming next,” said Peter.

“Buuuuuuut… aren’t you guys really young? Like, really really young?”

Peter sighed, then knelt down to help her gather spilled items. “Yeah, I know, but c’mon, this is me and Gwen we’re talking about. We’ve been in love since time immemorial, and- and it’d be, like, this grand gesture of-”

“No, no, I get that,” said MJ, kneeling down beside him. “And I’m sure Ned and Betty’s wedding got you worked into a tizzy. I can’t blame you for wanting to…” A strand of her spiky bangs fell into her eyes, but she brushed it back behind her ear. “But, well, what’s the rush? Can’t we just… keep things the way they are a while?”

“B-But me and Gwen are already living together,” Peter said. “ Wouldn’t really change much. It’d just make things seem, I dunno, more official.”

“Yeah,” said Mary Jane. “Guess so.”

“And hey, it saves on taxes, right?”

“You hopeless romantic, you.”

For a moment, the two of them were silent. Peter picked up an item to return to the shelf, but instead he found himself examining it. Baby formula. And beside it was a pack of diapers and some pacifiers. “Uh… dare I ask…”?

“Oh, didn’t I tell you?” MJ said with a smirk. “It’s yours.” Then, in response to Peter’s face: “I was browsing a random shelf, Tiger.” She paused. “You, um, do realize why I couldn’t be having your
“baby, right?”

“Yeah, yeah, sorry, had to think about it for a second.”

The two shared a laugh. Then Peter reached for a pacifier. So did Mary Jane.

It took Peter a minute to remove his hand from hers.

“Peter…”

He inhaled quickly, then exhaled slowly. “I really screwed up, Mary Jane.” His gaze was fixed, unwavering, on the pacifier. “I mean, w-what happened at the airport, what I- what Gwen and I did to you… followed by the Chameleon thing… And then to just not talk about it all this time-”

“Hey, what’s there to talk about?” cut in Mary Jane. “After everything that went down with Carnage, the three of us were pretty worked up. We got carried away. I mean, all it was… was, I don’t know, a pressure relief valve. There was all this pressure mounting, and then it was like, shoo, pressure gone.” She swished her fingers to indicate steam shooting out.

“Right,” said Peter. “Pressure’s totally gone now.”

“You don’t have to let it factor into anything, Tiger. You know I’m the last person on earth who’d stop you and Gwen from getting hitched. The proposal and- and this stupid stuff with me, one’s got nothing to do with the other.” MJ took a breath, then added with a trembling smile, “I mean, once you and Gwen swap vows, it’s not like anything stopping you two from calling me a ‘friend of the family’ and inviting me over for drinks when your kids are at daycare…”

It was at this remark that Peter was sent stumbling backwards, praying to God, Jesus, and Odin that his face didn’t look as hot as it felt. Was that an option? Betty hadn’t mentioned that during her wedding speech! Was that an option?

Mary Jane stumbled back, too, albeit at a slightly more even keel. “Too much?”

Peter was powerless to keep from staring at her. “Is that really what you want?” He surprised himself with the softness of his voice. “A relationship with us behind closed doors? That sounds kinda miserable.”

“Would you rather we let our freak flag fly?” asked MJ, returning to her feet.

Peter followed her lead. “Yeah, no, my aunt’s had enough heart attacks for one lifetime…”

“I won’t tell your aunt if you don’t tell mine.” MJ tried to smirk again, but it came out pretty lifeless.

Peter sighed as he set the baby items back on the shelf. “Yeah, well, I guess my point is, I know how hard coming clean about yourself can be. Telling me and Gwen how you really felt… It couldn’t have been easy.” He was quiet a moment. “But now it just seems like I make one wrong move and someone’s feelings get trampled on.”

“Then don’t make a move at all.” Mary Jane took a hesitant step towards him. “I like my life as-is right now. Why complicate things?”

“Because I want you to be happy!” Peter’s voice turned the heads of passing shoppers, causing him to shrink under their glances.
“Oh.” The words left MJ smiling. “Oh, Tiger, you don’t gotta worry about that. I’m already happy.”

“How do I know you’re not faking it again?”

Peter waited for a reply.

“That ice cream’s gonna melt,” said Mary Jane, turning for the shopping cart. “We’d better check out.”

“Right, right…”

Saturday, July 31, 2010, 12:41 P.M.

Alright, fine, so Peter hadn’t slammed the door quite as hard as he’d planned. But- But if he slammed it that hard, he could really hurt MJ’s foot! Maybe instead he could just, y’know, gently nudge the foot back a bit…?

But despite his iron resolve, Peter wasn’t able to steer the conversation back towards anything substantial until the two of them were carrying their grocery bags through the parking lot of their apartment complex. And even then, it wouldn’t have gotten substantial if there hadn’t been a familiar, schlubby, middle-aged guy blocking the stairway.

“Mary.”

His voice made her freeze. This whole walk here, Mary Jane had kept a good foot of distance between her and Peter, but now she practically hid herself in the folds of his back.

“Phil.” MJ was doing her best to sound unperturbed, though the hiding undercut that a bit. “I see you didn’t get the hint last time.”

“I’m not here to bother you,” said Phil, bowing his head. Huh, weird, he didn’t sound nearly as snarly this time around. It made his voice kinda alien. “I just don’t know how else to reach you now that you blocked our numbers and all.”

“Yeah, weird,” said MJ. “It’s almost like I don’t want you to-”

“It’s your mother, Mary.” Phil cut her off with an even colder, even sharper voice. “She’s not gettin’ any better. Just thought you deserved to know.”

Peter winced… in MJ’s stead. He glanced back to find her face unchanged.

Okay,” said MJ.

A huff escaped Phil’s lips. “I can get you the address of her hospital if- if you wanna see her while you… still can…” He trailed off.

“Nah,” said MJ. With that, she made her way up the stairs, almost shoving her dad aside with her grocery bags.

Phil snorted in her general direction, then trudged away towards the sidewalk.

Peter, meanwhile, scurried up the stairs. “MJ, are y-?”

“What?” Mary Jane spun on her heels to snap at him. “It’s not my fault she smokes anything she
can get her skinny little fingers on.”

There was silence.

“I was… just gonna ask if you were okay.”

Mary Jane blinked. “Oh.” She made a noise that was probably supposed to be a laugh, then set some bags on a stair, freeing her hand. “Hey, c’mon, don’t get bent outta shape on my behalf, Tiger.” She sighed, hand on her forehead. “That’s how you can tell I’m not faking being happy, for the record. Because I get to live with you guys and not that guy.”

“If you’re sure…”

“I’m okay, Peter, I promise. Now I don’t want you worrying about me anymore.” Maybe he should’ve seen it coming once she set her bags down, but the feeling of her palm on his cheek still made him jolt. “I want you to be happy, too.”

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**Sunday, August 1, 2010, 9:15 A.M.**

The gentle beeping of an alarm brought Peter’s eyelids upwards. The moment his own eyes were free, he caught a pair of far prettier, sea green ones gazing into them. “Morning, birthday girl.”

The alarm was really meant to indicate it was time to get out of bed, but for some reason, the two found themselves procrastinating on that. Eventually, though, Gwen wrenched herself from the covers, straightening her pajama shorts, and made her way to the adjacent bathroom.

The moment she left his sight, Peter sprang out of bed himself, not bothering to straighten his own shorts, then dashed for the back closet, dug through his box of web-fluid supplies, and retrieved a faded blue washcloth. Oh, thank god, it was still here. Peter wasted no time hurrying over to his costume and stashing the ring in his utility belt. He and Gwen had made the belt out of this, like, super sturdy material they’d found at a hardware store, so the ring would be about as secure as could be. Geez, though, Peter didn’t remember burying it so deep in that box…

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**Sunday, August 1, 2010, 2:13 P.M.**

“Oh, MJ, it’s beautiful!” Gwen held up the newly-opened box for the rest of the group to see. Within was an expensive-looking, mint-colored designer jacket.

“Ah, it’s nothing,” MJ said, batting a hand. “I just know how much you liked that one I gave you before, so I thought I’d get you a lighter version for summer.”

Gwen reached for her purse at the side of the table, retrieving both a black headband and a pair of scissors to cut off the jacket’s tag. “Here, so I don’t look too much like a watermelon…” She swapped out her salmon-colored headband, then tried on her new summer jacket to the oohs and aahs of the crowd. Gwen had swapped back her glasses for contacts for her birthday, too, which helped minimize her cuteness and maximize her hotness, especially since she’d also run her hair through a straightening iron. Gwen could pass for turning twenty today, not eighteen. “Was that the last present?”

Peter fought the urge to say, **WHO KNOWS, maybe the best present is yet to come?** in his most mysterious voice.

Currently, he was seated right beside his girlfriend at the kitchen table. Aunt May hadn’t been able
to make it, unfortunately, but she’d be here for Peter’s birthday next week, and so besides the obvious presence of Peter and MJ, the only other person here was Eddie. They’d thought about asking a couple of Gwen’s band friends, too, but they’d been busy. And putting Liz on the guest list had, err, slipped Gwen’s mind.

But, man, Peter couldn’t quite shake the weirdness of knowing that every single person here knew he was Spider-Man. He’d still impulsively tried to hide his spare spandex and web-fluid supplies when Eddie had knocked on the door.

Anyways, it wasn’t long after presents that Eddie had to say his goodbyes and head out, reducing the apartment’s residents back down to the usual three. MJ remained in the kitchen (Peter imaged her circling the remains of that cake and ice cream like a shark circling a bloodied swimmer), while Peter and Gwen ended up alone in the living room, seated together on the loveseat.

Peter was shaking. He had to keep shifting his weight to make sure Gwen’s legs didn’t brush up against the ring-shaped indent under his sweatpants.

Slowly, he met her eyes. She was shaking, too.

“Gwen?” Peter found himself frowning. “Everything okay?”

“Oh, yeah, it’s fine,” Gwen said, distant. “Today’s been great. It’s just…” A rush of air fled her mouth. “…I was thinking about how things used to be before you and Eddie entered the picture. I had plenty of birthdays where it was just me and Dad. And- And you remember how he was, always so stoic, so imagine that guy trying to keep a little girl entertained. It was really something else, and now…” She had to stop a moment to sniffle. “…first one without him. Sorry, I know you already had to go through this with me last Christmas-”

“Gwen, Gwen, no-” Peter hurriedly wiped her eyes with the back of his hand. “Gwen, shh, it’s okay. I mean, I couldn’t get Uncle Ben out of my head last Fourth of July. There’s just something about the holidays, y’know?”

Gwen gave the faintest of nods. “I know.”

The two of them held their poses, trapped in each other’s eyes, letting time stand still.

“I just… Thank god for you, Peter.” Her arms were doing their best to crush his shoulders. “Thank god for you.”

Peter’s mouth had gone dry. “Gwen… Will y-?”

The rest of the proposal was muffled by her mouth. Oh, okay, they were making out now. That was fine, too. Bit slimier than normal, but okay.

__Sunday, August 1, 2010, 3:21 P.M.__

Alright, Mary Jane had eaten her fill of sweets. She snatched the last can of Coke off the counter, then waltzed back to the living room. Hmm, cake and presents were done with, so then MJ wondered if Peter had already…?

Upon reaching the living room, MJ discovered the lovebirds a bit, err, preoccupied on the couch. She was about to turn back for the kitchen… but then she caught a pair of eyes on her. At the sound of footsteps, apparently, Gwen had taken a peek, and now her gaze was locked with Mary Jane’s own. At first, Gwen’s eyes looked startled, but then they looked… different. And absolutely
none of the exchange halted the flow of the make-out session.

Mary Jane found herself lingering in the entryway. Then, on a whim, she decided to do what she’d been planning on doing in the first place – plop herself down in the armchair, leg crossed, and crack open her Coke.

The sound of the crack, though, did halt the session’s flow. Peter’s head drew back, and the next second, a pair of deep brown eyes were turning MJ’s way. The moment he caught sight of her, Peter let out this grunt that was half-surprised, half… something else, and Mary Jane gave this smile that was supposed to be apologetic but may perhaps possibly have come across as more devious, and then Gwen gave Peter’s arm a little tug, and then… the two of them carried on. Didn’t seem MJ’s presence was having any effect on them.

Wait, actually, that wasn’t true – It just wasn’t having a negative effect on them. Now Peter had Gwen pinned to the cushions beneath him, trying his hardest to yank her face inside-out with his tongue, and Gwen’s hands were taking a tour of the inside of Peter’s shirt, and… Mary Jane was soaking in every detail.

She took a swig of Coke.

Things continued in that fashion for a while, but as time went on, the session grew heavier… and heavier… At some point, Gwen risked another peek, and when she discovered Mary Jane was still there, she let out these little gasps and squeaks that might have been the cutest sounds Mary Jane had ever heard in her life. It was enough to make Peter, too, glance back to verify MJ’s presence. MJ waved at him.

And then everything screeched to a halt.

“O-kay,” said Peter, springing off the couch, “the waving just made it weird.”

“Oh, is that what made it weird?” said a breathless Gwen, straightening her headband.

The lovebirds remained that way a minute, both red-faced and panting. Peter stood on the carpet, albeit a bit wobbly, while Gwen remained belly-up on the couch. Her body had become one big noodle, from the looks of things.

“Sorry,” said Mary Jane. The apology was addressed to her Coke can.

“No, no, it’s fine! No big deal.” Peter started for the kitchen. “Anyways, we should really clean up around here now that the guests are-”

“Guys.” Gwen’s shaky voice stopped him. “We can’t keep doing this.” With a bit of straining, Gwen pulled herself upright on the cushions. “We have to talk about… about us.” She spun a hand around – stirring the air between the three of them.

At first Gwen got no response, but eventually, Peter nodded, MJ copied the gesture, and then Peter returned his hesitant butt to the couch.

Gwen’s eyes traveled to the armchair. “Mary Jane… how long have you had feelings for us?”

“I don’t know,” Mary Jane said to the Coke can. “Always, I think.”

“Then why didn’t you want to go out with me after the Fall Formal?” asked Peter.

MJ merely shook her head, eyes shut.
Peter let out a sigh. “And you really believe you can be in love with more than one person?”

At this, MJ’s brow creased. “Doesn’t matter what I believe – I gotta deal with it the same way I gotta deal with gravity.” But then her face softened. “I didn’t mean to fall in love with you guys. If anything, I fought it tooth and nail every step of the way, yet here we are.” She sighed. “You know I never wanted either of you to find out. I knew how bad it’d screw with you. But, it’s like, all it took was one second of weakness, and now the cat’s out of the bag forever.”

“I think I always knew on some level,” Gwen said softly. “I just didn’t want to admit it to myself.”

Silence filled the apartment.

“Really?” said Peter. “That’s weird. Because, I mean, a three-way with you two never crossed my mind.”

“Uh huh,” the girls said in synch.

“Peter, Gwen…” MJ set her drink on the carpet. “…you know I would never, ever, ever hurt you guys, right?” The couple nodded. “I don’t want to guilt-trip you or whatever, but you know if- if you both want me, I swear I’ll be the most loving, gentle, supportive person on the planet. Wild Party Girl MJ is dead, long live Legit MJ. I haven’t even looked at another person since-”

“But MJ-” cut in Gwen. “-wouldn’t it be easier and- and less weird if you just moved on and found someone else?”

“I know that, I know that,” MJ said, hands on her scalp. “But… come on, you two tried to ‘move on’ and date Liz and Harry before, and that was one big disaster. You get where I’m coming from, don’t you?” She shrank in the armchair. Mary Jane prayed this conversation wasn’t making her sound as pathetic as she felt. “But guys… Okay, warning, I’m about to go full hippie-”

“Full hippie?” Peter said under his breath. “What were you before?”

“-but, well, we all trust each other, and we’re big kids, right? We know how to be responsible. I’ve got the paperwork from my clinic to prove I’m not disease-ridden if that PowerPoint slideshow’s still on your mind, and… and I’m not imagining things! There’s something going on here.” MJ stirred the air between the three of them, just as Gwen had. “Why deny ourselves?”

There was quiet for a moment. Peter opened his mouth, but he didn’t manage to string together anything coherent.

Gwen was the first to speak. “Mary Jane… You know, back at the airport… Peter and I had a second of weakness, too.” Now she was the one talking to MJ’s coke can. “We spent that entire Smithsonian trip feeling like trash. We messed with your feelings.” Gwen took a breath. “Guess there’s no hiding it at this point, but… yeah, what- what you’re offering us is… exciting.” Her eyes flitted to a blushing Peter. “But it wouldn’t be fair to you. The way Peter and I feel about you isn’t the way we feel about each other, and we don’t want to- to-”

“-to half-ass anything with you,” said Peter.

“We care about you too much for that,” said Gwen. “And, I mean, that stuff with Chameleon kinda showed how easy this could all backfire. There’s too much at risk.”

Peter nodded.

“We enjoy living with you, though,” Gwen continued. “I promise you we do.”
Peter nodded.

“We don’t want you to ever leave our home.”

Peter’s head stayed still.

“And we do love you, Mary Jane. Don’t ever think we don’t.” Slowly, Gwen’s gaze moved from the can to the redhead. “You’re family.”

“Heh. Yeah.” Mary Jane turned her shoulders, letting some strands of red hair swish in front of her face. “Look, guys, whatever you two want is what I want. You wanna stay up till three playing Space Wackos with me, then so do I. You wanna grab me like at the airport and take turns kissing me, then that’s cool, too. Either way, it really doesn’t matter. You don’t have to feel all torn up about it. I promise you I’m fine with anything. Zero stakes, zero pressure.”

Quiet returned to the living room.

“Space Wackos sounds good,” said Peter.

“Yeah,” said Gwen. “Let’s do that one.”

“Cool.” With that, Mary Jane retrieved her can off the carpet, snatched up the stray controller on the TV table, and then waltzed towards the sleek black box resting by the TV.

The screen winked to life, making MJ jolt. And on that screen was the image of a square-shouldered torso, its metal facemask covered in an emerald cloak. Peering out from that were a pair of piercing blue eyes that were somehow more imposing than the rest of the guy combined.

“Huh? What?” said Peter, sitting up on the couch. “Did one of you change the channel?”

“I…” Mary Jane looked over the TV, frowning. “…didn’t even turn it on yet.”

“Um, guys?” From Peter’s side, Gwen held something up for them to see. “It’s on my phone, too.”

The trio spent the next several minutes with their eyes glued to the TV screen.

“People of the United States.” Onscreen, the speaker’s voice carried an unmistakable Eastern accent – Latverian. “For too long, you have harbored a man who should not be permitted to walk this earth. A man who has committed the greatest, the most unspeakable of atrocities. This nation attempted to engage in diplomacy with your own regarding the matter, and yet your country has remained asinine in its defiance.” Behind the mask, eyes narrowed, focusing their piercing gaze.

“That injustice can no longer be tolerated. And so, as you have refused to surrender the cursed Reed Richards into the captivity of Latveria… you must now watch as your precious nation, starting with the wretched island where Richards resides, is razed into the dirt by the forces of Victor Von DOOM.” His cloak swished as the figure flourished his steel-coated arm, his green cloak billowing out behind him.

Then, in a far more even tone, he suddenly added, “In order to maintain the least amount of discomfort during this time of conflict, Doom suggests that all American citizens cooperate with the wishes of the oncoming Doombots. That is all.”

The screen cut to black.
A boy and girl sat side-by-side on the therapy couch, their faces hidden by the room’s dimmed lights.

“…does make the relationship a bit lonelier,” the girl was saying, “and I know what kind of risk Flash is putting himself in, joining the military when we’ve got nations like Latveria gunning for the United States’ blood…” She brought a trembling hand to one of her boyfriend’s arm. “…but honestly, I’ve never been prouder of him.”

Her boyfriend watched her with wilted eyes.

“No really,” the girl continued, her own eyes on the floor, “the world needs all the heroes it can get right now.”

Blonde, brunette, and redhead remained paralyzed in the living room, the couple sitting on the couch and the redhead standing on the carpet before them. All three were staring, transfixed, at the blank TV screen.

“That was a joke.” Mary Jane turned to the other two. “That was a joke, r-?”

“Greetings,” said a pleasant male voice.

The trio spun, the girls shrieking, Peter yelling, to find a robot shoving its head through their window – almost identical to Doctor Doom save for its duller metal coating and slightly simpler mask design.

“Your cooperation is appreciated.” With a slight effort, the thing managed to squeeze its arm past the frame so it could hold out a palm. A palm that burned with emerald-colored plasma.

“Get down!” Instantly, Peter tackled the girls to the carpet. The plasma-blast sailed over their heads. This was followed by a crack that shook the whole apartment, then a smell like burning plastic that singed the hairs on Peter’s arms, and when he turned his head, Peter discovered a distressingly large hole where the far wall usually stood.

His spider-sense was blaring so hard, he could barely think straight, yet Peter managed to dive at the Doombot, yank it through the window, then pin it to the ground so he could wail on it. Half a dozen right hooks left the thing’s head as little more than a series of twisted wires and dented steel. Picture the way a French fry looks when you step on it.

Even after the drone went still, though, Peter loomed over it a while, panting.

“What now?” asked a dazed Gwen from behind him.

Peter’s eyes darted to the fresh hole in their wall, giving him a little peep at the startled neighbors and cat on the other side. They seemed too distracted to notice if Peter changed into costume, but, well, maybe the costume wasn’t such a big deal right this second. So instead, Peter merely retrieved his web-shooters from the utility belt beneath his baggy street clothes, snapped them to
his wrists, and reloaded the fluid capsules. “Everyone, grab whatever stuff we could need. We’re getting out of-”

The front door exploded. This time, Peter joined the girls in shrieking.

“Greetings,” said a pleasant male voice. The smoke cleared to reveal… “Your cooperation is appreciated.” …half a dozen more Doombots standing in the stairway.

The girls had been unharmed by the shrapnel, and yet they stumbled back like they’d taken direct hits to the chest.

Okay, Peter was gonna have to significantly cut that list of stuff they needed. Thwip. A pair of web-strands yanked Gwen and MJ into his arms, and then – though it made his stomach churn – he shoved each of them out the window, dodging repulsor blasts all the while. Milliseconds later, Peter dived out after the girls, catching them in midair before they could go splat.

So now Peter stood, panting, in the apartment complex’s parking lot, balancing a girl on each shoulder via their butts. “I- I think we-” It was at this point that he noticed the shadow. It was kinda hard to miss, really – It spanned the whole lot.

Peter’s head went skyward. Hey, remember how he quipped when he was scared? Well, let’s just say Peter was now racking his brain for the funniest quip of his life.

For a second, he thought it was a colony of bats – They blotted out the setting sun in much the same way. Only bats generally weren’t metallic and humanoid with glowing green faces to match their billowing cloaks, and they definitely weren’t held aloft by rocket boosters coming out their feet.

Peter barely had time to stare before a couple dozen glowing green faces snapped his way. A cascade of sound hit his ears:

“Greetings. Your cooperation is appreciate-”

“Greetings. Your cooperation is-”

“-is appreciated.”

“Greetings. Your coop-”

“-tion is app-”

“-preciated.”

Peter’s eyes darted around the parking lot. Doombots blocked it on all sides. One bot in particular was standing before a car, the engine still running, parked across a good three handicapped spaces. The car’s door was open, and right in front of that door was a pile of ash and charred bones on the pavement.

“The glorious nation of Latveria thanks you for your cooperation.” the Doombot said to the pile. “You’ve been an excellent sport about this.”

Neon green robot-palms filled the evening sky like glow sticks at the world’s worst rave. The girls held Peter’s head tight, and Peter held their butts tighter, and his eyes were just starting to shut… …when a massive, white hot beam swept through the crowd, incinerating bots in its wake.
Instantly, the surviving bots turned their attention to the figure hovering in the air above them. A humanoid, metal-plated figure colored hot rod red and gold.

Peter came dangerously close to swooning.

Su nday, August 1, 2010, 4:09 P.M.

Iron Man. It’d been Iron Man. Ever since Tony Stark had returned to Manhattan in a suit of robotic armor all those months ago, Peter had been aching to see the city’s newest superhero up close, and now, finally, he had. For about half a minute. As soon as the remaining Doombots had been Unibeamed to death, Iron Man had declared that this quadrant was cleared, and then he’d zoomed off into the horizon right as a team of S.H.I.E.L.D. agents swooped in.

One of the agents had declared via megaphone that all citizens were to remain in their homes until they received notification that the crisis had ended, and so now here Peter, Gwen, and Mary Jane were back in their apartment, stepping over the glass shards and rubble lining their carpet. And judging from the brand new view in their back wall, their neighbors were doing the same thing.

The trio ended up in Peter’s and Gwen’s bathroom, the larger one compared to MJ’s, where the girls huddled in the bathtub as Peter halfheartedly tossed a mattress over them. Peter had concerns about the mattress’s ability to block oncoming plasma-blasts, but the looks on the girls’ faces kept him from voicing them.

“The- The S.H.I.E.L.D. guys have got this building surrounded,” Peter began. He was forced to wet his throat before continuing, “They’ll keep you two safe-” He couldn’t even finish before Gwen was leaned over the side of the tub, her fingers clamped down on his.

“Peter-” Her words were on only the cusp of coherence. “-what can you even do out there? Just let the- let the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents… the other heroes… let them handle this. Please.”

Even when Peter’s eyes were fixed firmly on the floor, he could tell Gwen’s gorgeous, sea green ones were trembling at him. “Gwen… I can’t just do nothing. Something tells me the good guys need all the help they can get right now. I’m sorry. I love you.”

They kissed, then broke apart. Gwen’s fingers had remained clenched over Peter’s with every ounce of her strength, but Peter had peeled them off like they were weightless.

Su nday, August 1, 2010, 4:14 P.M.

Hopefully, the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents were too busy looking for robots entering buildings to pay much attention to spiders exiting them. Most of the agents were down on the streets, but some were even in the air in Quinjets or hover-bikes, and every last one was armed with sci-fi laser rifles (though at this point in their civilization, Peter really needed to stop subconsciously adding “sci-fi” in front of all the tech).

Reluctant as Spider-Man was to stray too far from the apartment area off of ESU’s campus – too far from the girls – he knew he couldn’t let the Doombots surround him. He’d fare better in a group, and so Spidey swung a couple blocks up to the Baxter Building. He didn’t run into any other superheroes along the way, though he did spot a flash of lighting off in the distance that was undoubtedly Thor.

It wasn’t long before Spider-Man landed on a rooftop across from the Baxter Building, then
peeked over the edge at the civilians below. By now, the people were in a state of utter panic, but they weren’t actually fleeing. They probably would’ve liked to, though, if they hadn’t been surrounded on all sides by silver-and-green Terminator knockoffs.

But that wasn’t the only thing freaking the crowd out – There was also the giant, jagged, distinctly evil-looking jade-colored aircraft that’d appeared over the building. Spidey could at least hazard a guess as to the jet’s owner, especially seeing as the guy was standing right at the edge of its opened entrance, overlooking the Fantastic Four below. The intruder was tall, broad-shouldered, and covered in metal, but what set him apart from the robots was his far more elaborate emerald cloak… plus the iron mask over his face, shaped almost like a skull.

Spider-Man knew who he was, of course. Everyone on the planet knew who he was. The man had personally made sure of it. And that wasn’t hyperbole.

“Is this what your petty grudge has come to, Victor?” Mister Fantastic called up to him. “Attacking innocent people just to get to me?”

“Doom had hoped his ‘petty grudge’ would become more comprehensible to you,” Doctor Doom said, his posture as stiff and expressionless as the mask on his face, “if others were to suffer at the hands of your vanity as Doom has suffered.”

“Yer face got singed!” yelled the Thing, cupping his mouth with his thick, rock-covered fingers. “Poor you! What, don’t Latveria got plastic surgeons?”

Doom’s icy blue eyes, visible through the slits of his mask, flitted towards Thing. “Your prattle is tiresome. Doombots, if you’d please.”

Without further ado, a good dozen or so robots advanced towards the Four.

“Oh yeah?” Thing stepped up to them, cracking his stony orange knuckles. Spider-Man knew they were mindless automatons, but he could swear the Doombots hesitated at Thing’s approach. “Well, you guys ain’t booked an appointment or nothin’, but since I’m such a good guy, I think I can pencil ya in fer a four o’clock CLOBBERIN’ TIME.”

Wham. Doombot chunks were sent sailing through the skies.


Hmm, Spidey could always hop down to the street to help with the Doombots, but so long as he was up here, why not swing for the fences? Doctor Doom surely wouldn’t be anticipating him, and, hey, Spider-Man had beaten Mysterio, right? How different could this be?

Thwip. Spidey latched a web onto the jade hovercraft, then swung himself towards its opened entrance. “’Scuse me, Mr. Von Doom, sir, I just wanted you to know how stunning and brave you are to wear that dress in publ-“ The way his spider-sense reacted, you’d think a meteor was headed for Earth.

Bzzt. Spider-Man wasn’t within five feet of his shiny metal assailant before an electrical shock ran through his whole body. A split-second later, he was sailing through the air, and a split-second after that, Spider-Man was resting in a crater in the road. “Okay…” He struggled to free himself. “I deserved that one.” He was pretty sure that’d been some sorta automatic, proximity-based bug-zapper around Doom. The guy hadn’t even noticed Spidey’s existence.

“Listen to me, Victor!” the Invisible Girl called out to the jet. “I know you respect my opinion the
most out of the Four.” Indeed, the Doombots’ plasma-blasts were staying within a conspicuous radius of her, despite how many of them she was vivisecting with her forcefields. “Can’t you see you’re wasting energy on this feud that could be spent on the betterment of humanity?”

“On the contrary, Susan-” Back on the platform beneath his jet, Doom stood with his hands folded behind his back. “-the man who calls himself your partner is the single greatest obstacle to Doom’s quest to correct this disorderly planet.” He held out a gauntlet, and not to fire a plasma bolt. “Choose a worthier man, and together, you and Doom shall be the salvation of humanity, fulfilling Plato’s vision of the philosopher king and queen.”

“You know I would love to discuss philosophy with you, Victor-” Mister Fantastic’s torso stretched to shield a bystander from an incoming plasma bullet. “-if we were sitting in armchairs with a stack of textbooks and a pot of coffee!” Out of all the heroes present, Mister Fantastic was easily doing the most good. His body wove an intricate web over the battlefield – His every movement was carefully calculated to smash the weak points of Doombots and ferry citizens to safety. Really impressive stuff. Also unspeakably disgusting.

“It is far too late for that, Richards.” In one unbroken stride, Doctor Doom stepped forward off the edge of his ship, descended downwards via some I Can’t Believe It’s Not Iron Man booster rockets on the bottom of his metal boots, then landed on the pavement to take another step towards the Baxter Building’s entrance. Spider-Man had to give the man props – Ninety-nine percent of superhumans would’ve gone for the three-point landing, but Doom had stayed classy. “You surrendered your chance at diplomacy the moment you sabotaged Doom’s life’s work.”

“You miscalculated, and I tried to warn you-”

“That is an IMPOSSIBILITY!” Doom’s voice reverberated across the street. “You insult Doom’s intelligence with your egotistical lies. If Doom wished it, you would be dead where you stand, but that would not be nearly enough to bring Doom satisfaction. Your feeble mortal mind can scarcely begin to comprehend the intricacies with which Doom-” Blah blah blah, you get the picture. Sheesh, this guy made Doc Ock look humble…

At any rate, Doom had proven himself to be way out of Spider-Man’s league, which meant the Web-Head’s efforts would be better spent getting citizens to safety. There were way too many people for Spidey to ferry them one at a time, though, which meant he needed to redouble his efforts to thin out those Doombots.

“Hi, I’m from tech support!” Spidey swung into a group of bots like they were bowling pins, then backflipped off his web-line, landing square on the face of another bot. “Here, let me try turning you off and on again.” His fist sailed clean through yet another robo-face. “Ooh, I think I found the problem.”

Geez, he hoped he wasn’t making Human Torch jealous because Spider-Man was on fire. Wave after wave of Doombots collapsed into scrap metal before him. Robots were about the only enemies that Spider-Man didn’t have to hold back on. It felt great.

But something funny was starting to happen. At first, the Doombots hadn’t paid Spidey any particular amount of attention, but the more of them he felled, the more of them seemed drawn to him. Now there were a good several dozen bots all coming his way, plasma-blasting palms at the ready.

Then, the Doombot at the head of the group announced: “Assessing combatant… Projected threat level increased from Zeta to Epsilon. Use of greater force suggested.”
“Hey, Epsilon on yer first fight!” called out the Thing. “Not bad fer a rookie!”

“Thanks,” Spider-Man said. “I’m-”

_Oh, I’m not even gonna bother tingling this time_, said his spider-sense. _You’re beyond saving._

_Wham_. A solid wave of green plasma sent Spidey soaring through the air like a majestic eagle, only eagles didn’t usually crash through walls a la the Kool-Aid Man.

“...flattered.”

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_Sunday, August 1, 2010, 4:18 P.M._

Sitting with her clothes on in a cramped, dry bathtub with a mattress over her head did little to make this situation any less surreal and unsettling for Gwen. And judging by Mary Jane’s face beside her, Gwen wasn’t alone in that sentiment.

“I should get my phone,” MJ suddenly said, climbing out the tub. “Keep up with the news.”

Gwen was tempted to grab Mary Jane’s hand as hard as she’d grabbed Peter’s, but instead she let MJ go.

That turned out to be a mistake.

Mere seconds later, Mary Jane was scrambling back into the bathroom, shrieking her head off. Before Gwen could spring out the tub, Mary Jane sprang back in, practically crushing Gwen to death with her hug.

“What is it?” Gwen’s heart was on the verge of giving out. “What happened?”

“The window. A- A robot got knocked into a building.” Mary Jane’s words were muffled by Gwen’s shoulder. “Couple blocks away. I think it was that department store I’ve been to a couple times. It’s always… crowded during the week…”

Gwen said nothing. What could she say? What combination of words could possibly describe the situation at hand?

“#$%^ Manhattan,” said Mary Jane.

Under different circumstances, Gwen might have laughed, but as it was she continued doing the opposite.

“You’ve got family in London, right?” Mary Jane peered at her with those deep green, begging eyes. “Let’s go to London. Supervillains never attack London.”

“Which is why Peter will never agree to go.”

Mary Jane held on tighter. “We could go without him and be super gay and get married and adopt kids,” she said in that flighty voice she always used when she wanted to obfuscate the extent to which she was or wasn’t kidding.

Gwen merely shook her head. “Mary Jane… I can’t leave him. I already tried.”

“Yeah, it’s okay, I get it. I…” Mary Jane made a failed attempt at wry laughter. “I can’t either.”
There was something about the noise MJ made… Something that made Gwen, to her own surprise, start mimicking it.

“Gwen? Gwen?”

Gwen didn’t even realize how bad her chest was heaving until she felt Mary Jane’s arms around her yet again.

“M-Mary Jane, I-” Her lungs hurt. Gwen was gasping so hard, her lungs hurt.

“It’s okay,” Mary Jane said, squeezing her tighter. “I’m scared, too.”

Gwen stayed that way a while, letting Mary Jane hold her. But then Gwen surprised herself with a bitter chuckle.

Mary Jane canceled the hug in favor of a quizzical look.

“You know, I…” Gwen turned away, hiding her eyes in her palm. “I used to think this made me a baby.”

The look changed to something softer.

“I used to think I was just gonna grow up one day, and I wouldn’t need Mary Jane Watson to keep me from falling to pieces anymore.” Gwen took a ragged breath. “But… today is… This is my life now. I tried to walk away from it all, but then the thing with Kraven happened, and I…” She caught herself. “No, god, it won’t even stop at Manhattan this time. There’s no walking away from this.” Her pulse was gaining speed again. “And I know I have Peter, and he’s everything to me, but he’s also… who he is… and he can’t be here. Not always. Mary Jane, I-” That name on her lips left her dangerously close to hyperventilating again. “-I can’t do this on my own. I don’t want to do this on my own.”

This time, when Mary Jane held her, Gwen held back.
A woman sat alone on the therapy couch, her face hidden by the room’s dimmed lights.

“Why would I what? Join the side of the angels once I’ve served my time? Promise to be a good kitty?” She stared at the white wig in her hands. “Well, it’s not because I think I’ll be welcomed by the superhero community with open arms, I’ll tell you that much. But if you must know, I guess it’s because…” She took a hesitant breath. “…it’s my fault my dad’s dead, and every day I sit on my butt doing nothing, it feels like I’m killing him again.”

Spider-Man wasn’t down for long before he’d dusted himself off, dashed to the edge of whichever building he’d just been knocked into, and gaped down at the battle in the streets below. From the looks of things, Mister Fantastic and Invisible Girl were evacuating the last few crowd members while Thing and Torch weathered down the remaining Doombots.

“Hmm…” Spidey’s eyes went to all the rubble he’d knocked loose via his spine, then to Doctor Doom, who happened to be standing awfully close below it, still monologing, bless his heart. “Hey, Tin Man!” Like a man-sized flea, Spider-Man sprang off the building, landing right in front of the supervillain- “I hear you like to use robot doubles, Mysterio-style-” -then thwipped the rubble above and gave it a nice, strong yank. “-so I’m gonna have to make real sure you’re flesh and blood.”

Time to test the upper limits of Doom’s little bubble. The proximity shield came up instantly, but the rocks landed on the good Doc with enough force to leave him utterly buried. If the forcefield sustained enough damage, Spidey bet it would run out of juice and dissipate (From now on, he was assuming all technology worked like in Star Wars).

But after only a moment, there was a brilliant green flash that shook the ground, and the next thing Spidey knew, he was dodging shrapnel, and his opponent was standing perfectly tall before him like nothing had happened.

Doctor Doom had been facing Mister Fantastic, but now, for the first time, the Bucket-Head’s attention was on the Web-Head’s. Once Spider-Man’s ears finally stopped ringing, he managed to catch the tail end of Doom’s obligatory monologue:

“...truly believe mere brute force was all that was required to land a scratch on Doom?” Doom strolled towards him, holding up a gauntlet that crackled with green plasma. “The greatest of your efforts amount to exactly less than nothing. Before Doom, you are a microbe, a speck of dust that exists because God allows it.”

Was it Spider-Man’s imagination, or was everything around him getting awfully bright? And hot? But just as Spidey was closing his eyes and letting his head rest on the concrete, a bouncy voice called out, “Hey, Victor?”

Doctor Doom’s head snapped towards the voice’s owner.

Mister Fantastic had stretched his head into view, alongside an arm so he could give Doom a wave.
“If you’re God, what does that make me?”

“Richards.” The gauntlet switched its target... only for it to go dead. The glow and the heat vanished as if a lightswitch had been flipped. “What trickery is this?” Wow, for all the times Doom had plastered his chrome mug on the news, this was the first time Spider-Man had ever seen the guy lose his cool.

“Oh, while you were talking just now, I threw together this jamming device with spare parts from the Fantastical.” Mister Fantastic gestured to a handheld metal box in his stretched-out fingers. Out of context, Spidey would’ve thought it opened his garage door. “I haven’t actually had a good look at that new weapons system of yours, but knowing you, I was able to make an educated guess as to its inner workings.”

“Ah, but your luck has run thin, Richards.” Doom marched towards him, shoulders square. “Doom’s proximity shield is all the defense and offense he requires.” As he got in range, his green forcefield bubble roared to life... before petering off into death.

“Explain yourself!” Okay, Doom’s face right now was gonna be the funniest thing Spider-Man would ever see in his life barring Jameson’s mustache catching fire someday.

“Oh, I’ve known how to disable that one all along.” Mister Fantastic shrugged, though it was hard to tell when his body was way off in the distance. “I’ve just never needed to before now.”

“Doom requires no toys to defeat you, you arrogant fool!” Never one to be deterred for long, Doom threw out his arms, causing his hands to glow with swirling crimson light. “For he can call upon the blackest of arcane arts to damn your soul to pits of hell far deeper than even it deserves...” Right on cue, the new lightshow winked out, too. “What is it THIS time?”

“I actually thought you had me there for a second,” said Mister Fantastic, chuckling in relief, “but then I remembered I still have this charm-proof stone Stephen gave me.” The aforementioned stone emerged from the folds of his rubbery forehead. It looked like an amber jewel encased in a ring of metal carved with ruins.

Oh, okay, magic existed. Add that to the pile of things going through Spider-Man’s head right now. Though to be fair, he’d already seen that an African-slash-Russian hunter dude could teleport away with jungle drum magic, so maybe it was time for Spidey to accept that the whole universe was bananas.*

*See Spectacular Spider-Man ep 15, Destructive Testing, for details! – Ed

Beneath his mask, Doom’s eyes were visibly twitching. “Charm-proof st-? THERE IS NO SUCH ITEM IN ALL OF CREATION!”

Mister Fantastic’s eyebrow went impressively high up his face. “You didn’t know about those? That’s funny, Stephen made it sound like they weren’t that uncommon as far as basic magical protection goes, but then I guess you’ve never studied under the Ancient One-”

“Richards.” The word was pronounced through gritted teeth.

“And before you say anything,” added Mister Fantastic, “yes, I know you’re actually a Doombot, and I know you’re about to self-destruct. In fact-” He scratched his jiggling chin. “-if Victor had come here in person, I suppose he could’ve used stronger magic instead of channeling his energy through a vessel, and then he might have stood a chance of-”

“RICHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARDS!” The louder he screamed, the brighter Doom glowed,
burning brighter and brighter until he was pure white.

Wait, what had Mister Fantastic said right after the part about this being a Doombot? Uhh, Spider-Man opted not to stick around to find out. With a sudden second wind, he fired a web-line to a nearby rooftop, yanking himself out of harm’s way right in time to avoid the massive fireball.

“Th-That was too close…” Spidey remained on the wall a bit longer to catch his breath.

Soon as the dust had settled, he returned to the Baxter Building’s entrance, where the Fantastic Four had regrouped. From the looks of things, Mister Fantastic was projecting a square-shaped hologram of a live news feed from the wrist of his costume. Onscreen, Dilbert Trilby was hard at work reading from a teleprompter:

“...thereby absolving Latveria of any wrongdoing. As always, the nation’s Supreme Lord was more than happy to provide an official statement.”

The footage cut to a closeup of the real Doctor Doom (though maybe that was too much of an assumption) seated on his throne. “Doom has provided the United Nations with extensively documented and indisputable evidence that this unforgivable attack was orchestrated by one of Doom’s many enemies, who has in recent weeks managed to steal and reprogram a squadron of Doombots. This was obviously a pathetic attempt to frame Doom, thus starting a senseless war between Latveria and the United States. Rest assured, Doom will meet the perpetrator of this crime with swift and decisive justice. And to the Fantastic Four…” Beneath his mask, Doctor Doom’s eyes narrowed. It was hard to get a read of the guy with so little of his face visible, but Spider-Man would bet money that was amusement in those eyes. “Doom offers his sincerest apologies for this… unfortunate accident.” The footage cut out.

“Oh, come on.” Spider-Man groaned as he approached the group. “Does he really expect anyone to buy that?”

“It’s alright.” Invisible Girl shook her head. “We’re used to it by now.”

Spider-Man was on the brink of spewing steam from his ears.

But regardless, it looked like the rescue workers were here by now, and the Fantastic Four could probably handle the cleanup themselves. The remaining Doombots hadn’t collapsed Phantom Menace-style, but luckily the Fantastic Four had made them all collapse the, err, manual way. Every last one was scrap metal – in this neck of Manhattan, at least.

Su nday, August 1, 201 0 , 3 : 54 P .M.

“One thousand eight hundred and ninety-four point two-eight-nine-seven-three-four-one seconds.” For a moment, Jameson’s voice had almost a tranquility to it. Like the eye of a hurricane. “Do you have any idea HOW MUCH COULD’VE BEEN ACCOMPLISHED IN ONE THOUSAND EIGHT HUNDRED AND NINETY-F-?”

“But sir-!” Benny nearly capsized his chair and to send himself tumbling over Jameson’s desk. “My cat was throwing up! I had to get her to the-”

“The what, those scam artists masquerading as veterinarians? Put some Tylenol in its water dish. It’ll be fine.”

“Um, Jonah,” spoke up Robbie from the sidelines, “remind me what happened to your wife’s cat again…?”
“What’re you sitting around staring at me like a drowned fish for? There’s papers to be copied! Go, go, go!”

Benny was successfully driven from the office, leaving Jameson to return to his cigar.

He glanced over to find Robbie gaping at him. “What?”

“Nothing,” said Robbie.

“That’s right. Now get back to work! I don’t pay you to stand there.” Jameson let out a snort. “And get that crappy-looking robot movie off the TV.” He swiveled his chair to the miniature television resting on his desk. “Whoever changed the channel’s getting fired.”

**Sunday, August 1, 2010, 6:18 P.M.**

For the first time in the Bugle’s history, you could hear a pen drop. The only sound in the newsroom came from the gentle sobbing of Betty as she buried herself in Ned’s shoulder. The two of them were huddled together beneath Betty’s desk, trembling. In fact, all the Bugle employees were huddled under desks – Foswell and Urich were even hugging each other with equal intensity to Ned and Betty. The lights were out, but daylight still poured through the room’s massive glass windows. They’d tried their best to barricade them with furniture, but the view outside remained pretty clear.

Robots. Every couple seconds, another swarm of them would dart past, zooming above the streets.

In the office, beneath Jameson’s own desk, Robbie was looking down at his phone as he whispered, “…even bigger than the leak had made it sound. Turns out Latveria wasn’t producing weapons so much as a massive new army of Doombots.”

Jameson snorted. “Why doesn’t the U.S. have a robot army?”

“Probably because we don’t pillage resources from surrounding nations and our factory workers have actual rights,” Robbie said, brow creased.

There was silence a moment. Jameson tried to light his cigar, but his hands were shaking too badly. And it didn’t help that his chest was starting to throb like mad. “You hear from your boy yet?”

At this, Robbie almost smiled. “He was out of the city with friends today.”

“I’m glad.”

“You hear from yours?” asked Robbie.

Another moment of silence.

“Jonah…”

“And here I’d thought the heroes without masks were better.” Jameson’s fists clenched. “Reed Richards and his gang of freaks did this. They’re almost as bad as-”

Mid-sentence, Jameson was out from the desk and on his feet.

“Jonah!” Robbie said louder than he’d meant. “Get down. They’ll see-”

“It’s him!” Jameson pointed to the nearest window, all but stomping his shoes in place.
Robbie didn’t have time to voice his confusion before glass and splinters exploded across the room. “Jonah!”

A robot had smashed its hand clean through the window, and now that hand had Jameson’s tie in its steel-trap grip.

“Greetings,” it said. “Your cooperation is-”

Thwip. And now a pair of web-strands was yanking the robot’s head backwards.

“Say ‘cooperation’ again!” yelled the webs’ owner. “I dare you! I double dare you, m-

Robbie dashed to the window, but he was too late. Jameson, robot, and superhero had all been sent tumbling towards the pavement below.

_Sunday, August 1, 2010, 6:24 P.M._

Clearly, this was Spider-Man’s reward for being so worried about the Daily Bugle staff – getting to free fall towards the cold, hard ground whilst trying to hold onto a flailing Jameson with one hand and punch a Doombot with the other. And Spidey was coming enticingly close to getting the two mixed up.

“I knew it! You’ve joined forces with Doctor Doom! You’re a traitor to your country!”

Globs of spittle ended up on Spider-Man’s eye-lenses. “Trust me, picklepuss, if I was trying to kill Americans, you’d be my first-”

“TRAITOR! TRAAAITORRRR-!” Whoosh.

Seconds before landing, Spider-Man managed to whip up a web-parachute for Jameson and toss him to safety. Now all that was left was for Spidey to make one for hims-

Wham. Now Spidey and the Doombot were resting in a nice, comfy crater in the street. “Ugh…” Spidey at least managed to turn his head and discover that Jameson’s parachute had gotten tangled up on a street lamp, leaving the guy dangling helplessly. Heh. It was the small things in life.

Now all that was left was to help the beautiful damsel down.

“I can do it myself.” After a moment of struggling, Jameson eventually opted to rip off his dress shirt. He’d have cracked his head on the pavement if Spider-Man hadn’t been waiting to catch him.

“Wow,” Spidey said as he set the guy down, “nothing breaks through your cold, slimy exterior, does it?”

“What’re you blabbering about?” Jameson spat, dusting himself off.

Spider-Man could’ve gone his whole life without seeing Jameson shirtless. “Come on, man, I know you’re stressed, but I did just help rescue the city from killer robots. And, I mean-” He glanced around, checking for onlookers. “-you know why I wear this mask now. The loved ones I’ve gotta protect. Doesn’t that count for anyth-?”

“Stuff it, Wall-Crawler.” Oh god, his chest hair was getting closer. “All this time, I’ve been too lenient on you so-called superheroes, masks or no masks. You people are the ones responsible for freaks like Doom in the first place!”
“I can’t win with you, can I?” Spider-Man groaned, hand on his forehead.

“Whatever. All you superheroes are the same.” With that, Jameson spun around so he could storm off with a huff.

“Hey! I find that highly offensive!” Spider-Man called after him. When he received no reply, Peter rolled his eyes under his mask, then turned to do his own storming off and huffing.

Spider-Man shook his head as he aimed his web-shooters at the skyline. So what? What did it matter what some random jerk thought?

Assuming, of course, that no one else saw things Jameson’s way… Beneath his mask, Peter’s eyes traveled to the trail of rubble and robot-parts lining the sidewalk.

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**Sunday, August 1, 2010, 7:42 p.m.**

Peter didn’t let himself breathe until he entered the bathroom to find blonde and redhead alike smiling in relief at him. Peter sprinted towards them, his mask in his hand, so he could toss the mattress free of them.

“Peter.” Gwen snapped to him like a magnet.

“It’s okay… Everything’s okay…” After a bit of consoling, Peter added, “Mister Fantastic scanned the city, and he promises there aren’t any Doombots left. And Manhattan’s the only place in America Doom’s bothered with so far – to curb all the superheroes, I bet. Eddie texted that he’s okay, and I just got off the phone with Aunt May – She didn’t see a single robot except on the news, so, y’know, that’s good. It’s really lucky she moved away when she did.”

The girls simply nodded.

With that, Peter turned to MJ. “What about yours?”

Mary Jane stood straight as a pole, her eyes fixed firmly on the sink. “The robots didn’t go to Queens. The Watson lineage is untarnished.”

“That- That’s great.”

MJ gave a noncommittal grunt.

“So it’s over…” Gwen’s own eyes were growing distant. She looked just as gorgeous as she had at her party – then again she was always gorgeous – but it was hard to ignore how disheveled her clothes had become or how smeared her mascara had gotten.

“Gwen?” Peter gave her hands a squeeze. “You okay?”

Gwen squeezed back. “Just don’t know what we’re gonna do for my birthday next year. August first’s kinda been tainted forever.”

At this, Peter’s grip loosened. “Yeah.” Slowly, a hand traveled to his utility belt… where it brushed against a little hunk of metal. “Guess it has.”

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**Sunday, August 1, 2010, 11:56 p.m.**

After that, Peter, Gwen, and MJ went straight to their rooms so they could finally go to sl- Ha,
nope, just kidding, there was a big old hole in their wall now, not to mention all the glass and splinters from where that Doombot had forced its way through the window. The three of them had at least had the foresight to get Damage Control’s insurance, but those guys were a teeny bit busy today what with the city in ruins and all. The apartment wouldn’t be fixed up for another day or two. Peter hoped too many raccoons didn’t break in in the meantime – The neighbors had gotten even more holes blasted in their apartment, giving any wild animals a clean path inside.

Though if one good thing had come of that ordeal, it was that the instant Peter smashed the first bot, all the other ones nearby had set him as their highest priority. He’d saved his neighbors’ lives, albeit inadvertently.

At any rate, Peter, Gwen, and MJ had ended up packing some stuff, then spending the next couple hours hunting for a motel that wasn’t either full already or fancy enough to make them miss their next rent payment. It was almost midnight by the time the trio finally trudged their way into a room and plopped down their suitcases. If all three trunks were lined up side-by-side, they just about spanned from one wall to the other.

Mary Jane’s eyes traveled to the radiator taking up a fourth of the room, then to the thick black curtains covering the window, the dull brown wallpaper, and finally to the single full-size mattress on the floor.

“You ever find a sleeping bag?” asked Peter.

“Sold out everywhere.” MJ tapped her foot against the hardwood. “But I can, err, lie on my spare clothes or someth-“

It was at this remark that Peter’s hand darted forward – the way your knee does when hit with a rubber mallet – to grab MJ’s own. “You are n-“

“You are not sleeping on the floor.” On MJ’s opposite side, Gwen seemed to have felt a similar impulse.

“Guys…” MJ stood there a moment, letting them hold her hands. “Are you s-?” She was cut off by her own yawn. “Yeah, okay, too sleepy to argue.”

After that, Peter set his phone beside Gwen’s glasses and headband on the bedside dresser- sorry, the spot on the barren floor where a bedside dresser would normally be, and then he made sure the ringer volume was all the way up. Johnny had promised to call if Mister Fantastic detected any more Doombots nearing America.

Anyways, with the phone set down, the trio finally, mercifully plopped into bed, not even bothering to brush their teeth or change their clothes or remove their makeup (um, not that Peter wore any). The moment their backs touched bedding, they were all out like a light wherever they happened to land.

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**Monday, August 2, 2010, 1:03 P.M.**

Peter had been so sure he’d have nightmares about Doctor Doom or Carnage or Doctor Doom bonded with Carnage, but actually, by the time he finally stirred beneath the covers, he felt totally relaxed. The room was muggy, but not in an unpleasant way. Peter was kept perfectly cozy by the mix of warm sweat coating his body, the sliver of blanket he’d managed to snatch for himself, and the feel of his arm around his girlfriend’s waist as she stirred. That last part was, of course, an essential ingredient to any pleasant awakening.
Peter rolled over, eyes shut, to brush a hand through her hair and kiss her cheek. “G’morning, Gwen.”

In reply, he received terrified silence, then a raspy voice saying, “Um…”

“Crap wait I’m sorry-!” Peter nearly tumbled backwards off the bed, but the arm on Mary Jane’s waist kept him tethered down.

Well, if Peter hadn’t been wide awake before, he sure was now.

“It’s okay.” Mary Jane rolled over to give him the most pained smile he’d ever see in his life. “I should, err, probably leave you two be now.” She tried to rise off the mattress, but she was pinned tight, and not only by Peter’s arm – Gwen’s arm was doing likewise in almost a perfect mirror image.

Honestly, watching MJ’s struggle made Peter laugh.

“What?” That smile didn’t look quite as pained anymore.

“Nothing,” said Peter, removing his arm. “It’s just… you really do look like Gossamer when you blush. Y’know, from Looney Tunes. I don’t get to see it too often.”

“That’s weird.” Now the smile was morphing into a smirk. “I’ve seen you blush plenty of times.”

“Hey! Don’t you use the ‘sultry voice’ on me!” Peter flicked a strand of red hair into her face. “I’m an impressionable teenage boy. That’s not fair.”

“I can’t help it if that’s my natural speaking v-” Mid-sentence, MJ’s eyes were on his shoulder. “Wait, you’re hurt.”

“Whuh-? Oh yeah.” He’d been so busy bantering, Peter had let the neck of his blue t-shirt flop down, giving onlookers a peek of brown and purple skin. He could thank the good Doctor for that one. “It’s nothing. I heal quick, remember?” Peter pulled his shirt back up.

“If you say so…”

Well, that’d kinda dragged down the atmosphere. Now the two of them just lay there, watching Gwen’s chest bob up and down on the other side of MJ.

“You proposed to her yet?” MJ asked, her voice a whisper.

At this, Peter inhaled. “No. Now doesn’t seem like a good time anymore, anyways, but… you were right, MJ. Me and Gwen are way too young. It’s too much too soon, and there’s like a million ways it could go wrong. I think it’d be better to- to keep things the way they are awhile.”

He looked to her face. It was less than half a foot away from his own. And at first that face looked surprised, but then it looked kinda relieved, and finally it settled on happy.

Then a pair of lips hit its cheek. “G’morning, Peter.”

And now MJ’s face was back to “surprised.”

The instant Gwen realized her mistake, she let out a yelp that had to have carried through these walls, and then Peter and MJ swapped looks… before bursting out in mutual laughter.

Gwen shot them a playful glare. “I take it no killer robots destroyed the world overnight?”
“Well,” said Peter, “I guess we could always walk outside to find everything in ruins.”

Mysteriously, the mood seemed to dry up after that.

“Peter…” Gwen rubbed the red mark on her nose where glasses usually rested. “I know it’s hard to wrap our heads around, but the world almost ended yesterday, and it’s not the first close call, and it won’t be the last.” She took a breath, sitting up out of the covers. “Mary Jane and I had a lot of time to talk while we were stuck in that bathtub, and…” She leaned on her shoulder, looking from one of the bed’s occupants to the other. “…I mean, last night’s, uh, sleeping arrangements weren’t the worst ever, were they?”

Peter’s eyes flitted to MJ, who gave him a hesitant smile. “No,” he said. “Not the worst ever.”

“Right,” Gwen continued. “People lost each other yesterday, and- and here the three of us are, and we all still have each other, and…” After one last moment of hesitation, she finally spit it out: “Mary Jane’s in love with us, and I don’t see how that’s a bad thing.” She leaned over the two of them, taking a hand from each. “I- I think I need her. I think we both do.”

Peter opened his mouth.

“And I know what we said about not half-assing things with her,” Gwen continued, her words gaining speed, “but why do we have to make this into a contest? Love’s not something you measure or- or- or compare. You’ll never feel the same way about Mary Jane that you feel about me, and that’s okay. Like loving your mom and your sister – They’re just totally different things, right? It doesn’t take anything away from anyone.” Her eyes shut. “Nobody’s getting replaced in anyone else’s heart.”

The other two waited, but it seemed Gwen’s spiel was done. Peter turned to Mary Jane, who was trying to look like she wasn’t staring anxiously at him, and then to Gwen, who still had her eyes shut. After a moment, Peter brought a trembling hand to Gwen’s… and then another trembling hand to MJ’s.

Yes. This was the right thing to do.
Senior Breakfast

Friday, August 13, 2010, 12:32 P.M.

A man and woman sat side-by-side on the therapy couch, their faces hidden by the room’s dimmed lights.

“ Weird?” said the woman with a bitter smile. “Of course it’s weird. My boyfriend’s whole body is made of living putty. But, well, at the end of the day, Reed and I…” She locked eyes with her lover’s, his rubbery thigh touching her semi-opaque one (It always got that way when she blushed). “…we love each other. So we don’t care what anyone else thinks.”

Monday, August 2, 2010, 7:22 P.M.

“But we already paid for it!” Peter sputtered.

“Breakfast is from eight to eleven, sir.” The serving lady gave him a dry stare from beneath her plastic hat. “Next time, maybe try and get here a teeny bit earlier.” With that, she returned to wiping the counter.

“It can’t possibly be that-” It was at this point that Peter finally checked the time on his phone. “-late. Huh.”

Eventually, the holy trinity of Peter, Gwen, and Mary Jane had walked out of their room and discovered to their reliefs that nothing was in ruins except their breakfast plans.

Peter turned to give the girls a look of defeat, and then the three trudged their way to the breakfast room’s exit. “Alright, looks like we’re headed to a fast food place next,” he told them. “Now let’s get outta here – I’m starving.”

“I bet you are.” MJ waggled an eyebrow.

“Oh, hush.” The remark earned her hair a tousle from a giggling Gwen.

Monday, August 2, 2010, 7:53 P.M.

As much as Peter, Gwen, and Mary Jane were trying to smile right now, Peter couldn’t shake the overall feeling that the whole world was swirling around a toilet bowl. And not just because they were in a McDonald’s. Actually, the only reason they’d gone here was because all the other fast food joints nearby were smashed up and/or closed, but Peter guessed there were some people who couldn’t afford to skip a shift, even in the wake of a robot invasion.

Actually, now that Peter noticed it, one of the windows was covered in duct tape to stop customers from cutting themselves on the glass – though granted, that wasn’t a terribly uncommon feature of all the McDonald’s in this area to begin with.

And in fairness, Peter, Gwen, and MJ were looking more than a little disheveled themselves. They still had on their unbelievably wrinkled clothes from yesterday’s party, though Gwen had at least swapped her contacts back for her usual glasses. Falling asleep with contacts in was one of those mistakes you only made once in your life.
Anyways, the triad gave their orders and then, eventually, received their meals from the lone man behind the cash register.

“Sorry for the wait,” he murmured. “We’re short-staffed today.”

The food was carried to the dining area with a solemn air. Now all that was left was to find a seat. There were plenty of empty ones to choose from.

Soon enough, Peter and Gwen slid their way into a booth. Mary Jane, meanwhile, hovered outside a bit, then set her indecisive butt in the seat across from theirs. The next couple minutes were spent solely on chewing.

Eventually, though, Mary Jane looked up from her final bite of burger to say, “Anyone else feel guilty? Not just because- I mean, y’know, city’s in such a state right now… Feels wrong to let ourselves be happy about anything.”

“Yeah…” Peter watched her polish off her hamburger, then said, “Was it good?” He paused. “Th-The burger, I mean.”

At this, MJ’s eyes traveled up to his. She gave an utterly, utterly shameless smile. “Delicious.” Then she spent some time licking her fingers clean of ranch sauce.

Peter watched every second of it with his mouth agape.


“Heh. I’m not sure.” Gwen’s smile at least had enough shame to make her cheeks red. “I may need to go back for seconds…”

The three of them shared some giggles, and then Peter returned to finishing off his own meal. It was gonna take him a hot minute, though, seeing as he had a good half dozen more burgers on his tray.

Now, suddenly, it was MJ watching him eat.

Peter had never been so self-aware of his chewing technique in his life. “What?”

“Nothing,” said MJ. After a moment, though, she leaned towards Gwen to say in a perfectly audible whisper, “He’s the friggin’ Energizer Bunny.”

“Oh, trust me, I know,” Gwen whispered back.

And now the giggles had returned.

“Do you guys think we should do that thing where we all put our straws in the same milkshake?” asked MJ, grinning. “Because I think we should totally do that.”

Peter found himself grinning, too. Mary Jane’s presence just wasn’t hospitable to gloom, he supposed.

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Monday, August 2, 2010, 9:21 P.M.

“Dude, girls are crazy.” The Human Torch grinned as he hovered in the air beside the Inanimate Object Torch of Lady Liberty. “This one time, I met this super cute princess, and we were totally
gonna hook up, except she couldn't survive in Earth's atmosphere for longer than-"

“Err, that's great, Johnny.” Spider-Man’s gaze remained planted on the uneaten hot dog in his hand. Nary a quip had escaped his mouth all evening. He was starting to creep himself out. “But when I said ‘weird relationship,’ I didn’t mean a weird girl, exactly – though, actually, come to think of it, I did have an alien symbiote fall for me…”

Johnny laughed, then took a bite of his own dog. With that heart-melting smile and that boyish face of his, he looked like something straight off a magazine cover. Specifically, a magazine cover that was on fire. See, Spidey had been content to sit on Lady Liberty's hat, but the Torch had had to eat whilst hovering in midair, and he could only fly while on fire. Apparently, though, Johnny could “flame off” his upper torso so he wasn't getting a mouthful of ash every time he took a bite. It looked kinda freaky, actually, like some Frankenstein hybrid between a fire elemental and the lead singer of a boy band.

“Aww, man-” Johnny spun towards him, sending out flecks of flame-spittle that nearly ignited Spidey’s spandex. “I had the exact same thing happen to me with an A'askvariian!”

“Oh, sure, but-”

“And then we had a super hot threesome with a Kymellian!”

The silence lasted minutes.

“Okay,” said Spider-Man, “you win.”

_Tuesday, August 3, 2010, 10:34 P.M._

Mary Jane’s suitcase was the first to hit the carpet. “No more motel!” She practically skipped to her bedroom. “Hallelujah. A fridge full of food, elbow room to spare, a queen-size mattress…” The last item in that list was accompanied by a sly look back at Peter and Gwen, who were lingering in the doorway.

Peter’s eyes flitted about the apartment. Damage Control might’ve been overworked these past few days, but they certainly hadn’t cut corners. The window was repaired, the wall had new wallpaper and one hole less than prior, and most importantly, none of Peter’s stuff had been moved. His laundry was right in that heap on the floor where he’d left it.

Peter had to say, it was great to be back home. The three of them hadn’t really known what to do with themselves after their motel reservation ended, seeing as they hadn’t exactly been called into work – Cleaning science labs or posing for magazine covers or serving novelty noodles was hardly anyone’s top priority right now. Peter, Gwen, and MJ had mostly ended up hanging out around the city and talking a lot about, y’know… any recent, major life changes that might’ve warranted discussion. They’d even gone to the movies and, after an intense debate, determined that the most chivalrous course of action would be for Peter and Gwen to split the cost of MJ’s ticket. She’d been trying to pay for theirs…

“No let’s see… Ah ha!” MJ knelt down in the corner of her room where her minifridge and various other items rested, then retrieved a couple things and held them up for the other two to see. “Right where I left ’em.” They were a wine glass… and an accompanying bottle of red wine.

“Wait, what-?”

“MJ-!”
Peter and Gwen nearly broke each other’s necks in their mad dash into the bedroom.

“How did you get that?” asked a wide-eyed Gwen.

“Friend at work gifted it to me a while ago.” Mary Jane folded her knees so she could rest the items on her lap. “Smuggled it here in my purse.”

“MJ, we’re underage,” Gwen said firmly. “If Mrs. Muggins finds out about this, she’ll come at us with a hatchet in the night.” Mrs. Muggins being the sulking, shaggy creature that acted as their landlord.

“Yeah, MJ,” added Peter, “and didn’t you tell me before that you got sent to j-?”

“Guys, relax.” MJ just laughed them off. “Look, I can’t even get it open.” She held it up, allowing them to see the intact cork. “No corkscrew. You’ll have to do the honors, Tiger.” She tossed it to him.

It was only Peter’s spider-reflexes that stopped a big old mess from being made on the carpet. He held the thing like a ticking bomb. “But- But why, though?”

MJ shrugged. “I was saving it for a rainy day, and it doesn’t get much rainier than these last couple ones…” When Peter’s and Gwen’s faces failed to change, MJ scoffed and added, “Seriously, guys, it’s fine. Mrs. Muggins isn’t gonna rummage through our trash like a raccoon.”

“I can totally picture her doing that,” said Peter.

“This is just a one-time thing, I promise.” MJ crossed her heart.

Peter swapped glanced with Gwen, each stiff as boards. “We have been through a lot lately…”

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt to calm our nerves,” said Gwen.

“Right,” said Peter. “As a one time-thing.” After another moment, he brought a hesitant hand to the bottle, then yanked off the cork as easy as twisting a bottle cap. He held the newly-opened bottle to his nose. Hmm, it at least smelled kinda nice.

“We’ve, uh…” Gwen brushed her hair behind her ear. “…never drank before.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right.” At this, MJ turned for her minifridge. “I keep forgetting how sweet and innocent you two are… We’ll see how long that lasts. Here.” She retrieved some OJ to pour in the wineglass, then gestured for Peter to add in the main course. “Look at that. If the modeling doesn’t pan out, I could be a cocktail waitress.”

Peter watched the crimson liquid swirl together with the orange, ending up with something in-between.

“Want the first sip, Tiger?” MJ brought the glass to his lips. “Toast to stopping Doctor Doom?”

Peter couldn’t help but smile. MJ had a knack for drawing those out of him. “To stopping Doctor Doom.”

That was all the permission she needed to tilt the glass, sloshing the mixture into his mouth. Some of it ended up on his chin, but MJ didn’t seem to care. Immediately, she turned to give Gwen a sip in the same fashion.

MJ watched the two of them with an intensity that turned Peter’s knees back into jelly.
“Thoughts?”

“Well…’” Gwen wiped her chin. Her hand moved aside to reveal a shy smile. “I guess one more sip wouldn’t hurt.”

_Tuesday, August 3, 2010, 11:04 P.M._

“I’m da spectookular Spooder-Maaaaaan!” _Thwip_. Spider-Man had been trying to web up Gwen so he could drag her to the ceiling with him like a spider catching its prey, but all he ended up webbing was a reading lamp. He probably could’ve aimed a lot better if his mask hadn’t been on inside-out. It made his head look pale pink, and the inward-curved lenses made the world look all ballooned like a funhouse mirror.

“What’s the holdup, Energizer Bunny?” Back down on the bedroom carpet, Gwen made a valiant effort to stand upright. Her black headband had fallen down to her forehead, her glasses were who-knows-where, and her top had slipped loose, rendering one of her shoulders bare, save for the bra strap hanging off it.

She kinda looked like a flapper, except BETTER than a flapper because she was GWENDOLYN STACY, the woman Peter was madly in love in with and wanted to spend the rest of his life with and marry someday but not in the immediate future anymore he guessed.

“Don’t you know it’s rude to keep a lady waiting?” Gwen said in her most beguiling voice. “And you’re leaving _two_ waiting, so that’s, like… triple rude.”

“Well,” said Spider-Man, upside-down walking his way towards her, “I wouldn’t wanna be triple rude…”

“Get over here, Tiger.” Gwen lurched her way towards him on the queen-sized bed below.

“Tiger?” Beneath the mask, Peter raised an eyebrow. “Don’t tell me MJ’s hippie slang is contagious?”

“Why not? She’s already friggin’ converted us into hippies, hasn’t she?” Gwen brought her hands to the back of his head, stroking it. “Or maybe I’m just more like her than you thought…?”

“Emmmm Jaaaaay, get us another drink!” Spidey nearly broke his neck trying to hop in place, but he managed to keep a toe on the ceiling, which was enough to pull his feet back up.

Spider-Man’s somewhat-hazy vision fell on the redhead sitting beside Gwen on the carpet. That was MARY JANE WATSON, the woman who Peter apparently loved in an entirely different way from Gwen that wasn’t even comparable or measurable so he didn’t need to spend time worrying about that because heeeeeeey, supervillains or death robots or aliens could pop out of nowhere and end the world as he knew it AT LITERALLY ANY MOMENT, so it was all FIIIIIIIIIINE.

“Whoo! I love being Spida-Mayun!”

Mary Jane lurched over onto the mattress, but she seemed less concerned with pouring Peter another drink and more concerned with trapping him and Gwen in the squishiest hug imaginable.

“I love you guys,” Mary Jane said, slurried. “I don’t say that enough. I love you guys. I’m gonna be good to you two. I’m gonna be… so good…” The next sentence was muffled, seeing as she was nuzzling them with her head like a cat.

“Peter…” Gwen tugged back Peter’s mask so she could pull her right-side up lips agonizingly
close to his. “…where did we find this girl?”

“I don’t know,” said Peter, “but we’re keeping her.”

Gwen’s lips drew nearer to Peter’s, and Peter’s lips drew nearer to Gwen’s, and Mary Jane’s drew nearer to both of theirs…

…and then the sound of sirens sent them all darting backwards.

“NO!” Peter tumbled down to the floor, sending blonde and redhead alike flying off the bed, then ran to the window. There must’ve been a dozen or more police cars speeding past their apartment complex, plus a handful of firetrucks, painting the night sky red and blue.

Slowly, Peter turned around. Gwen and Mary Jane were staring at him from the carpet. Not a word was spoken as Peter trudged, wilted, out the apartment.

A second later, Gwen and MJ watched a red and blue man swing past their window.

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Tuesday, August 3, 2010, 11:16 P.M.

“All officers, pull back, pull back!” DeWolff barked orders over a megaphone. “That thing’s too much for us!”

On her command, a swarm of officers fled her way.

“It’s gonna flatten the whole city!” one of them yelled. “Where’s Spider-Man?”

“I’m here, I’m here!” Just then, Spidey landed on the nearby rooftop of a smaller building, albeit a bit less gracefully than normal. Then he paused a moment to wonder why the officers were staring at him (He wouldn’t realize his mask had still been on inside-out until the next morning). “I got here as fasht as I could. Whuz tha-” Spidey’s head rose. “-c’motion?”

Barreling down the street across from him was what could only be described as a big… wheel.

“I see you’ve finally arrived, Wall-Crawler.” And in its center, windows on either side revealed an overweight pilot. “Prepare to be flattened beneath the gargantuan tire of BIG WHEEL! BWAH HA HA HA HA!”

“And don’t forget his tubular new sidekick-” Suddenly, out from behind Big Wheel emerged… “-the radical ROCKER RACER!” …some stupid kid in a knockoff Iron Man suit, floating above the street on some kind of hot rod skateboard with exhaust nozzles slapped onto the bottom.

Back on the rooftop, Spider-Man forehead was starting to hurt because his palm was digging into it too hard.

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Tuesday, August 3, 2010, 11:16 P.M.

Neither blonde nor redhead dared remove themselves from the bedroom carpet. Gwen remained in the position she’d fallen in, while Mary Jane curled herself into a ball.

“Congratulations, MJ. You just got a taste of what it’s like to date Peter.” The remark came out a bit more biting than Gwen had intended.

But she still hadn’t expected Mary Jane to start crying.
“Mary?” Gwen flipped over towards her on the carpet, wrapping her arms around the girl on sheer impulse. “Mary, sweetie, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” MJ was making these little squeaks and gasps, only allowing water to trickle down her face in little bursts. A marked difference from the sobs she’d let out on graduation day. “Just too happy, that’s all.”

Gwen peered at her with curious eyes.

“I love you guys.” MJ wiped her cheeks somewhat sloppily with the back of her hand. “I love you so much, sometimes it hurts. It actually hurts in— in my chest. For… years… And now I have you. Both of you.” She brought a palm to Gwen’s face, fingers spanning from cheek to cheek, drunkenly checking that she was real.

“You have us,” Gwen said softly.

“I feel like someone picked up all my pieces and glued me back together.” Slowly, MJ lowered her palm. “I’m just ready for the credits to roll, y’know? ‘And they all lived happily ever after.’” She paused. “Except that Peter’s not here right now.”

**Tuesday, August 3, 2010, 11:47 P.M.**

“Could we possibly hurry this up so I can get back home?” Spider-Man pounced onto the side of a building to avoid becoming squished flat alongside all the traffic lights, street lamps, and empty, abandoned cars in Big Wheel’s path. “No reason…”

“You could never understand our pain, Spider-Man!” Back inside the cockpit, the wheel’s pilot pointed an accusing finger at the Web-Head. “Out of desperation, we were forced to embezzle money from our employers at Tricorp, and so I hired Rocket Racer here to steal the incriminating evidence, only for him to be foiled by—”

“Ohhh, perfect, you guys have a backstory.” Hmph. These guys would be a lot easier to dodge if the whole world wasn’t all bloated and distorted through these lenses. Spider-Man was having to lean on his spider-sense way more than usual. And the fact that he was struggling to aim his webshooters straight wasn’t helping matters.

But if anything was gonna sober Spidey up, it’d be the sound of gunfire. “Oh! The wheel’s got turrets on the sides! The wheel’s got turrets on the sides!”

Of course, Spider-Man had no trouble dodging Big Wheel’s big bullets… but the little old lady hobbling down the sidewalk wasn’t quite as nimble.

“I got you, ma’am!” Spider-Man dived towards her through the air.

And the next second, pain was ringing in his leg.

**Wednesday, August 4, 2010, 12:22 A.M.**

Peter hoped he wasn’t getting too much blood on the carpet as he hobbled through the living room window. Oh, look at that, their luggage was right where they’d left it. They hadn’t even bothered unpacking before going straight for the booze, had they?

Anyways, Peter limped his way to the kitchen cabinet where the cloth bandages and painkillers
were stored. Half a bottle of pills later, Peter limped into his bedroom, then remembered that the bed was empty and limped into Mary Jane’s room instead. He found the girls sprawled out across the queen-sized bed, wrinkled clothes still intact, their chests rising and falling, illuminated only by the street lights out the window.

Peter merely smiled, shook his head, and then climbed in between them. He didn’t even bother changing out of costume except for tossing his mask to the floor.

But apparently, he’d jostled the mattress enough to summon a slurred, groggy, somewhat raspy voice: “Everything okay, Tiger?” This time, the pet name had come from the usual culprit.

Peter rolled over to face her. That mop of red hair had gotten all unruly, meaning it now resembled Gwen’s on a good day. “Look, I know you meant well, MJ, but I can’t do this again. Almost lost a civilian on my watch.”

“Oh.” Mary Jane mulled over this with half-lidded eyes. “M’sorry… I’m an idiot… Wuz just trying to cheer you guys up after all the crap we been through lately.”

“I know you were.”

“I just… wasn’t sure what else t’do.” Some mix of drunkenness and sleepiness left MJ grasping for words. “I’ve never done this before.”

“Done what, been in a weird three-way relationship?” said Peter. “Yeah, me neither.”

“No,” said MJ. “No no no no no no no… no.” She might’ve shaken her head a few more times than necessary. “I mean I’ve never been with anyone I actually love. S’nice.” Silence. “I know you love Gwen more than me, though.”

“Yeah.” Peter gave a slow nod. “I do.”

“It’s okay.” Mary Jane nodded back. “I’m not just saying that. It’s okay. You got nothing to feel guilty about.”

“Y’know, I’d thought I might at first, but I really don’t. Everyone seems happy with the- the current arrangement.”

“I’m glad.” It seemed, after that, Mary Jane finally allowed her eyes to shut. “And you don’t hate me?”

“I don’t hate you, Red.” Peter watched her until her chest went back to rising and falling. He found himself kissing her forehead. Peter wasn’t quite sure why. He didn’t really think she was awake anymore, though, so he guessed it wasn’t for her benefit.

After that, Peter rolled back over and put his arms around Gwen’s waist. At some point during the night, he felt Mary Jane’s arms do likewise around his. He let them.

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**Wednesday, August 4, 2010, 2:01 P.M.**

“Shift’s over, little lady.” Professor Warren gave a sardonic smile as he paced across the lab towards Gwen’s work station. “I suppose I’ll have to let you go now.”

“See you tomorrow, sir.” With that, Gwen gathered up her purse and hurried out the lab. She tried not to look too culpable as she slinked down the science wing’s hallway.
“Hey, girlfriend, why the long face?” The moment she hit the fresh, outdoor air, Gwen was greeted by, who else, Mary Jane with Peter at her side, still in his work uniform. His noodle-themed hat dangled limply in his hand (Though Peter had but up a fight, Gwen had managed to capture at least one adequately adorable picture of him in full noodle regalia).

“Oh, hey, guys.” Gwen started towards them across the campus’s walking trail. “It’s nothing. I just, uh…” She glanced over her shoulder, checking to make sure Warren hadn’t teleported behind her à la Slender Man. “I was helping organize some samples, and I… took the chance to swipe some more gene cleanser.” Though come to think of it, Gwen’s head could also do with the sun being a tad less bright.

“Gene cleanser?” MJ looked from girlfriend to boyfriend.

“Oh yeah, forgot to tell you that part,” said Peter. “It kills non-human DNA. Super helpful when fighting animal-themed bad guys.”

“Or if your spider-powers ever make you sick or something,” Gwen added in an undertone.

At this, Mary Jane made kind of a disarmed grunting noise. Then, in response to Peter’s face, she said, “I just didn’t realize you were keeping those powers of yours by choice, Tiger.”

Peter’s face went from quizzical to utterly blank. “It’s not like I’m gonna turn my back on all the people I could save.”

“Right, right,” said MJ. “Of course.”

“I just feel horrible for stealing it,” Gwen admitted with a wince. “Poor Professor Warren, betrayed by his favorite employee…”

“Aww, it’s okay, sweetie. It was for the greater good.” Mary Jane stepped towards her, arms outstretched.

But Gwen shrank from her. “Oh, are- are we doing this in public?”

MJ cocked a brow. “It’s just a hug.”

“Yeah, guess you’re right. Sorry…” Gwen accepted the hug without further protest.

“I hate having to be all secretive about this,” Peter said as he joined in. “Makes it feel like incest or something.”

Gwen glanced up at him. “Well, to be fair, you and me are the ones who were best friends before puberty…”

“Point taken. And, I mean, it’s no one else’s business, anyways. It’s not like we’re gonna strut around with MJ hanging off our arms right in front of-”

“Hey, guys!” called a voice from behind them. “Didn’t think I’d run into here. I was just studying at the library-” Naturally, Eddie was starting towards them from down the trail, skipping over tree roots.

The holy trinity quickly detached from each other, but not quickly enough. The resulting look on Eddie’s face was pretty much impossible to ignore. Peter had never seen the poor guy so disarmed in his life.
He must’ve thought they were such weirdos.

**Wednesday, August 4, 2010, 2:02 P.M.**

Almost the instant Gwen was out of the lab, Professor Warren locked the door, pulled the blinds over the window, and dashed for the chair his little lady had been sitting in mere seconds ago. With a delighted sigh, he knelt forward to press his cheek against the cushion.

Still warm.

But Warren scarcely even had time to appreciate that before he spotted something even more wondrous on the tile floor beneath it – a lone blonde hair. Instantly, Warren snatched it up. Then he scurried to his office, fiddled with the keys in his pocket until he’d unlocked the drawer beneath his computer, and retrieved from within a clear ziplock baggie. Warren unzipped the bag, then added the newest hair to the clump of identical blonde ones inside.

Before zipping it shut again, he took the time to inhale deeply. His breathing went heavy.

**Wednesday, August 4, 2010, 10:21 P.M.**

Blonde, brunette, and redhead stood shoulder-to-shoulder, facing the neatly-made, queen-sized bed in the center of the room.

“It’s not as many as it seems,” said Gwen. “When you think about it, there’s only, like, three combinations that matter. Just depends on who wants to sleep in the middle.”

“Uh, no, there’s not just three,” said Mary Jane, folding her arms. “I’m not sleeping on the left side.”

“What?” Gwen gave a start. “Why not?”

“I know my bed. The left’s side the worst side.”

“Why?”

“Because it sucks.”

“But wh-?”

“Okay, okay,” cut in Peter, “that means there’s-” He did some quick calculations in his head. “-four options.” He counted off on his fingers. “Gwen-Peter-MJ, Gwen-MJ-Peter, Peter-”

“Wait a minute,” said Gwen. “If the left side’s so terrible, then maybe I don’t wanna sleep there, either.”

“Fine, fine.” Peter rolled his eyes. “I don’t care what you two do. Just so long as I get to sleep in the middle-”

“What?” Now both girls’ heads had snapped towards him.

“Why do you get to sleep in the middle?” asked Gwen.

“I don’t know!” Peter took a step back, hands in the air. “That’s where I happened to end up when we were all drunk last night, so I just got used to-”
“Ohhhhh, I see how it is, Tigress.” MJ gave Gwen a knowing look. “He just happened to get used to being flanked by hot girls.”

Gwen shook her head smiling. “Alright, Peter, you can have your precious middle. I’ll take the right side-”

“Now wait just a minute!” snapped MJ.

“Guuuuuys…” Peter let out a groan. “I’m not sure this is even physically possible anymore.”

Beside them, Gwen buried her hands in her scalp. “Oh my god, we are such dorks.”

At this remark, however, Mary Jane seemed to falter. She turned away from the other two, her shoulders sagging. “Guys, look, I’m not making you do this. If you’d rather go back to sleeping in your own bed-”

“Oh, no, Mary, we’re fine.” On sheer impulse, Gwen planted her hands on MJ’s shoulders, guiding her back towards the mattress. “You know Peter and I want to include you in our lives as much as we can now.”

Peter nodded. “I can take the left side.”

A cautious smile returned to MJ’s lips. “What a gentleman.”

Then Gwen kissed MJ, and MJ kissed Peter, and Peter kissed Gwen.

“Everything’s gonna work out, MJ,” Peter murmured as the two guided her to the covers.

“Right.” Gwen set Mary Jane down at the bed’s center. “We just need to figure out exactly how you fit.”

Thursday, August 5, 2010, 8:47 A.M.

A substance Gwen was scared to identify had dried onto the skillet, meaning she had to kneel down below the dishwasher to fumble for the scrub brush.

“…said their names were Bambi, Candi, and Randi.” Peter’s voice carried from the laundry room.

“Okay, I know my pornstar names, and those are pornstar names.” So did MJ’s.

“Right! And it turns out they moved into the apartment next door – Can’t imagine what made the old residents leave – and I was just saying hi, and then they invited me in.”

“Seriously?”

“I made up some excuse, but in my head I was all like-” Peter put on a posh voice. “’-EXCUSE ME, are you trying to tempt me into having one of those filthy, degenerate four-ways? I’ll have you know I only participate in clean, wholesome three-ways!’”

“Just like me grandpappy did when he was a lad!” MJ put on a slightly less sophisticated voice. “And his pappy before him!” She hunched her shoulders, miming like she was waving a walking stick at him.

Back in front of the sink, Gwen rolled her eyes with a smile. “I swear,” she called out, “the dishes would never get done if it wasn’t for me. You two would just stand around being goofballs until
“Hey!” Peter called back as he knelt over the washing machine. “I’m perfectly capable of cleaning up after myself.”

“You’re gonna wanna use way more bleach than that, Tiger,” said MJ from his side. “Trust me…” Peter’s cheeks went crimson. “I have done this plenty before and I am using just the right amount of bleach.”

“Peter,” said Gwen as she rinsed off some forks, “be nice to our girlfriend.”

“Sorry…”

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**Thursday, August 5, 2010, 8:36 P.M.**

The triad sat on the bed in the usual formation – Gwen on Peter’s lap, MJ on Gwen’s knees. *Man*, those habits had formed *fast*.

“A list?” Mary Jane gave a somewhat bemused smirk to the notebook paper in Gwen’s hand. “You actually wrote out a list?”

“W-Well, yeah.” Gwen shrank in place, giving the paper a feeble wiggle. “I mean, what we’re trying to do here… I know it looks like it’s been clear skies and sunshine so far, but these kinda things are complicated, and I can’t help but worry our feelings are in a fragile place right now. I just thought it’d help if all three of us wrote out our own lists of, y’know, what we are and aren’t okay with.”

MJ mulled this over a moment. “I guess I get that. But, y’know, if I ever ask to do anything you’re not cool with, you can just tell me and I won’t do it.”

At this, Gwen smiled. “I know. It’s not that I don’t trust you…” She trailed off.

“Well, if we’re sharing our worries,” spoke up Peter, “I guess my biggest one’s that someone’s gonna find out about all this and… think less of us. What we’re doing here is a- a subculture. Ninety-nine percent of people aren’t gonna get it.” He faltered.

Suddenly, MJ’s hand was over his own. “Getting called a slut’s never fun, guy or girl.”

“None of us are sluts,” Gwen said firmly.

“Oh, no, I am,” said MJ, coy, “but only for you two.”

In light of *that* remark, the three of them got a bit… side-tracked for a while, but eventually, the conversation resumed.

“Y’know something else I’m worried about?” Peter finally spoke. “I’m scared one of us is gonna get jealous eventually. I mean, *I* don’t exactly *mind* seeing you two together, but I *am* a guy, so…”

“So what?” MJ smirked at him. “I don’t exactly mind seeing *you two* together, and *I’m* not a guy last I checked.”

“Well,” said Gwen, “I promise I won’t get jealous so long as I’m never excluded or- Look, this is the entire point of the list.” She held it up to the other two’s faces.
It made MJ’s eyes go wide. “That one’s okay?” She touched a finger to one of the entries.

Gwen had been trying to maintain some semblance of professionalism. “Y-Yes.” She clutched the paper to her trembling chest. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“That one?” MJ’s smirk only widened. “You’re sure?”

“It was just an example!”

Interesting, interesting.” Mary Jane brought a nail to her chin. “Saaaay, Tiger?” She glanced over at a blushing Peter. “I think I just had an idea for a belated birthday present.”

“Oh?” Peter leaned over, letting MJ whisper something in his ear. “Well.” He wolf-whistled. “That’s one way to wish her happy birthday.” Then he rose from the mattress.

“Hey!” Gwen gave a start. “Where do you think you’re going?”

Peter didn’t even bother to hide the lewdness in his smile. “To get my web-shooters.”

“Oh. Oh.” Gwen drew back, fanning herself. She thought a moment. “Are we forming a new birthday tradition here?”

The other two let out some evil laughs.

“We might be,” said Peter.

“Well, in that case…” Gwen didn’t bother hiding hers, either, for the record. “…don’t you have a birthday coming up?”

For a moment, Peter looked stunned. Then all three of them burst into more genuine laughter.

“I love you guys,” said Mary Jane, wiping her eyes.

Gwen kissed her cheek. “We love you, too.”

Even after the girls quieted down, Peter kept laughing. “I think I did it.” His eyes went from one gorgeous woman to the other. “I think I won at life.”

Thursday, August 5, 2010, 8:36 P.M.

Harry’s costume was on. Everything was ready.

He marched to the balcony. Overlooked the cold, gray, expansive chamber below. The overhead lights revealed an army. Thugs in the pumpkin-head masks, like the kind his father had once commanded. Only there hadn’t been a fraction as many the February before last. After all, back then, Harry’s father hadn’t had the option of getting an army of mercenaries on loan from the Kingpin… and then pumping every last one of them full of Globulin Green.

“Doom’s invasion has left the heroes weak and tired.” The amplifier in his suit changed Harry’s voice. High, distorted words washed over the crowd from above. “There can be no better time.”

His fist rose into the air. “The city is ours for the taking.”

Cheers washed over him from below, mixed in with more than a few Green-induced cackles.

Harry turned to one of the balcony’s other figures – his mother. She was in costume, too. “Lady
Goblin? If you’d do the honors of leading the charge?"

A glider hovered forward over the balcony’s edge, positioning its rider beneath a burning overhead light. This revealed a flowing purple robe, a crown of horns, even that tantalizing glimpse of green leg. It was as if Harry had discovered the corpse of some horrible creature before, and now, the moment his back had turned, it’d sprung to life.

“Come, you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts…”

However distorted Harry’s voice had been, hers was endlessly more so.

“…unsex me here, and fill me from the crown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty.”

Lady Goblin rose higher, holding out her arms, beckoning.

“Make thick my blood.”

Down below, the Pumpkin-Heads matched her movements, each equipped with their own, smaller gliders.

“Stop up the access and passage to remorse, that no compunctious visitings of nature shake my fell purpose-”

The ceiling unfolded, treating the army to the sight of a purple, starry sky. Freedom.

“-nor keep peace between the effect and it!”

At once, the army fled the barracks.

“Come to my woman’s breasts, and take my milk for gall-”

Any sailors passing through the Atlantic right now would think they’d seen a swarm of bats.

“-you murd’ring ministers, wherever in your sightless substances you wait on nature’s mischief.”

Or a pack of demons.

“Come, thick night, and pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell, that my keen knife see not the wound it makes-”

The goblins sped into the sky, blotting out the stars.

“-nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark to cry ‘Hold, hold!’”
Friday, August 13, 2010, 4:10 P.M.

A man and woman sat side-by-side on the therapy couch, their faces hidden by the room’s dimmed lights.

“I suppose, in light of recent events…” The man buried his one and only hand in his forehead. “…I just can’t stop thinking about Mike. Martha and I did everything we could for him… everything humanly possible… but in the end… we still lost him.”

Friday, August 6, 2010, 8:22 A.M.

Gwen had slept with her makeup on. Whoops, guess she'd been a little distracted. She'd have to do something about that in… in a minute...

She yawned, stretched, and curled up against Peter's chest – Gwen always defaulted to being the little spoon. They'd tried it the other way around one night, but Peter had tossed and turned and Gwen had ended up shoved to the floor. Though come to think of it, maybe that wouldn't be a problem now that they were in the apartment's bigger bed.

"Nnghotteh thing on the thing… Whatta I win…?" Peter's voice helped drag Gwen into the waking world.

"Peter?" she whispered. "Are you sleep-quipping again?"

Peter rolled forward, nuzzling her back. "Dehydrated… turtle..."

Yeah, he was sleep-quipping.

Gwen lay in bed another minute, listening to the patter of rain outside the window. She was surprised Peter could keep snoozing when there was so much daylight flooding in. Once they'd adjusted to that light, Gwen's eyes skimmed the room. Expensive-looking clothes with varying amounts of wrinkles were strewn about, coupled with play manuscripts, VHS tapes of children's movies, dusty textbooks, a stray Spider-Man mask…

Gwen glanced back at Peter. He was still wearing his costume, though it'd been peeled off down to the waist (which Gwen couldn't help but ogle at), and empty web-shooters dangled from his wrists (which Gwen couldn't help but giggle at). This bedroom had been an even bigger mess before Gwen nodded off last night, but the webs had dissolved by now.

Last night. The memories returned all at once, and suddenly Gwen's heart was hammering. It felt like she and Peter had gotten away with robbing a bank or something. Yeah, it was wrong, but look at the payoff! A big, dumb smile etched itself on Gwen's face.

Then she remembered something, and her hand darted to the patch of bedding opposite Peter. It made contact with a lock of red hair sprawled across the sheets. Gwen grunted. It was a noise of pure, guttural, unthinking relief, and the realization of that made her cheeks hot.

After another minute of listening to the rain, Gwen felt for her glasses on MJ's bed stand, then forced herself out of Peter's arms and onto her feet. After a moment of searching, Gwen found where her pink nightgown had fallen on the carpet and put it back on.
"Cmzout with ice or... peanut butter..." Peter murmured.

On her way to the adjacent bathroom, Gwen stopped to look out the window. Y'know, she'd thought this apartment complex was ugly at first, but the view from this angle wasn't half bad. You could see some of the greenery from ESU's campus, and there were a couple pigeons soaring through the clouds. Peaceful.

Gwen skipped into the bathroom, humming to herself. One of the background songs MJ had put on last night was stuck in her head. Apparently, MJ had a dedicated playlist.

As it turned out, Mary Jane's bathroom was the polar opposite of Gwen's. A whole row of MJ's shelf was devoted to a rainbow of lipstick, for example, whereas Gwen had, like, two different shades, and the second was only for when she was feeling adventurous. There was some trace of that second shade on Gwen’s lips right now, incidentally.

Gwen found herself admiring her reflection. She could be a bedhead sometimes, but it looked like Gwen was having a good hair day for once. In fact, she looked great. Had she lost weight?

Next she set her glasses above the sink and set to work scrubbing off her makeup without getting her nightgown soaking wet. Gwen rubbed her eyes, then turned back to the mirror to see if she'd gotten it all.

Something green loomed behind her.

"What-?" Gwen promptly tripped right over it... so it was a good thing it was only a shower curtain. Gwen pulled herself to her feet, grumbling. The world was one big blur without her glasses. Also, Mary Jane had a grass green shower curtain, evidently, so it turned out her fashion sense wasn't infallible after all.

Gwen threw her glasses back on so she could give the shower curtain The Look. "You don't get to win, creep."

Yes, she was talking to a shower curtain. She'd stayed up late last night.

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**Friday, August 6, 2010, 8:28 A.M.**

When Peter’s dim brain dimly realized Gwen was no longer in his arms, the rest of his dim body ended up scooting over across the mattress, searching for her. When it discovered a warm, soft torso to nuzzle up against, Peter’s brain let him rest for a moment, content.

Then his brain did an impressively advanced calculation given its level of awakeness, and Peter’s eyes shot open. “Huh-? Whuh-?” Now his body was scooting backwards, putting as much space between him and the bed’s other occupant as possible without falling off the side.

The display had been enough to rouse MJ’s lids open. “What?” She cocked her head at him. “I don’t bite.”

Peter found himself smirking. “Oh, that is demonstrably untrue.”

But for all the swagger in Peter’s voice, his heart didn’t slow until Gwen emerged from the bathroom a minute later. “Morning, you two.” She smiled at each of them in turn.

“Morning, Tigress.” MJ smiled back.
Peter, however, found himself laughing.

“What?” Gwen looked to him.

“Nothing,” said Peter, climbing to the carpet. “It’s just… a guy really can get used to this.”

After that, Peter changed out of his costume, and the three gradually made their way to the living room. Frankly, they were on the verge of skipping there together like they were following the Yellow Brick Road.

“Well-” Gwen started towards the kitchen. “-who wants breakfast?”

“Ooh! Me! Me!” came a voice from the kitchen.

The three froze. Peter could only assume the girls’ blood had gone as icy as his own. That’d been a voice Peter knew too well. The recognition gave him goosebumps. No, actually, Mary Jane had never heard it before, and she looked just as frozen with horror as him and Gwen, so maybe it was more than just recognition. The voice was high, bouncy, and the tiniest bit scratchy. It would’ve sounded like a child’s if it’d sounded at all human.

Peter’s body went into autopilot. “Get behind me.” He shielded the girls with his back, fully expecting to see some round, orange welcoming gifts flying at his face… but there was nothing. His spider-sense hadn’t even gone off.

Peter blinked, dazed. Spider-sense or not, he refused to let his muscles relax. He stood there, hunched forward, fists clenched, and watched a green and purple creature stroll out of his kitchen.

“I’ve already made the sausage!” The Green Goblin offered out a frying pan, even giving it an enticing wiggle.

But the offer was declined. Instead, Peter and Gwen merely stood in place, gaping at the intruder… while Mary Jane sprinted for the bedroom.

“Uh uh uh.” A pale green finger aimed itself at her. Okay, now Peter’s sense was going off.

“MJ, get back-!” He grabbed her arm moments before a yellow laser would’ve hit her feet. Instead, the blast merely left a scorch mark in the carpet.

“No dine-and-dashing, now.” The Goblin wagged his finger, causing smoke to waft through the air. “I’d hate to see your wonderful personality splattered all over the walls.”

“Harry.” Peter had honestly thought his fists couldn’t clench any harder.

“I was just doing a bit, for the record.” Goblin tossed the pan over his shoulder. “I haven’t actually made any sausage. Although the day’s still young…”

In front of the bedroom doorway, Peter’s eyes went from one girl to the other. Gwen was trembling the hardest.

“What do you want, Harry?” Peter’s voice was every bit as bone-chilling as the Goblin’s.

“Oh, no, you must not be paying attention.” He sat back on their couch, even kicking back his purple boots on the armrest. “Harry’s that whiny kid with the weird red hair. I’m the Green G-”

“I said what do you want?”
“Touchy, touchy!” The Goblin held out his palms. “What, I’m not allowed to drop by just because I missed my old pal Pete? Nice boxers, by the way-”

“If you wanted to build bridges, that was not the smartest choice of outfit,” Peter said through gritted teeth.

“Peter, Peter, Peter.” The Green Goblin shook his head, causing the straps of his purple hood to sway. “I only wanted to have a little chat. Don’t you pride yourself on being friendly and neighborhoodly?”

Peter said nothing.

“Alright, alright,” said the Goblin, contorting his face to its usual grin, “the real reason I’m here is to tell you that because I like you so much, I’ve decided to do you a solid and order my army of Jack O’Lanterns to stay away from your neck of the woods. Their impending rampage of destruction won’t be bothering you or your friends and family.”

“Just the rest of New York?” Peter said tightly.

“Ooh, I see those heroic little gears turning in your head.” Green Goblin gave another waggle of his finger. “But I’m afraid if you show your webbed face to the party, I can’t promise a guest won’t ‘accidentally’ lob a pumpkin bomb too hard.” He gave a shrug. “Who knows? It could even land all the way in Pennsylvania.” Suddenly, Goblin was leaning forward, trying to peek over Peter’s shoulder. “Saaaaay, those are some real cuties you got there.” The girls cowered under his gaze. “Remind me which one’s your girlfriend again? I can never keep track of love drama.”

It was taking everything in Peter’s power to keep from lunging. “If you’re gonna make threats, why didn’t you just kill us in our sleep?”

“Oh, that’s an easy one, Spider-Man.” The next instant, his boots were back on the carpet, and he was lurching forward.

Peter’s stomach went nuts… but his spider-sense didn’t. And so, though it made his flesh crawl, he allowed the Green Goblin to close the gap between them.

“We only want to see if you’ll be a good boy for us.” The Goblin knelt down, and then a gloved hand patted Peter’s head. Like petting a snarling, muzzled pit bull.

When Peter failed to say anything, the Goblin waved his goodbyes and then waltzed over towards an open window, the one Peter always left unlatched. At the edge of it, he gave one last glance back over his shoulder. “Oh, and don’t tell anyone else in your superheroic social circle about this illicit meeting of ours. People will start to talk!” Then he did a bow and tumbled out the windowsill.

Peter wanted to say Gobbie ended up going splat on the concrete, but no such luck – There was a glider waiting for him. And so Peter, Gwen, and Mary Jane merely stood in silence, chests heaving, listening to the cries of startled neighbors and the hysterical laughter growing fainter.

Friday, August 6, 2010, 8:47 A.M.

Gwen had actually managed to pour herself a bowl of cereal, though now she was worried she’d throw it up. She sat huddled on the carpet beside Mary Jane, watching Peter pace the ceiling. None of them were brave enough to sit on that couch anymore. In fact, Gwen was tempted to burn it.
Mary Jane placed a steadying hand on Gwen’s arm. As always, Mary Jane refused to wear her emotions on her face, but they’d actually gotten so constricted this time, they were starting to leak out her eyes.

Across from the three was the TV screen, where a somber woman was reporting, “Authorities are urging all residents of Upper Manhattan to stay indoors. The Jack O’Lanterns have been confirmed to attack on sight, and there seems to be no rhyme or reason to their…”

Shaky footage showed swarms of gliders rocketing above the streets. These guys made the previous Gob-Squad look like pickpockets – Each and every “Jack O’Lantern” came equipped with a miniature gargoyle glider, their very own dark green flight suits, and bottomless reserves of pumpkin bombs. And as the cherry on top, their pumpkin masks were perpetually on fire, leaving them downright demonic.

“…first targets were hospitals, firehouses, and police stations,” the woman was saying, “and at a time when rescue workers have already been worn dangerously thin by Doctor Doom’s invasion—”

Thud. Peter’s fist had gone into the wall. It left a crater. He stood there on the ceiling a moment, panting, watching rubble fall to the carpet.

“That’s coming out your third of the budget,” Mary Jane said dully.

“Does Oscorp even have a plan here?” Peter snapped, throwing out his arms. “Were they just waiting for the perfect time to bomb everything willy-nilly? It- It can’t be that simple.” He faltered.

“Back when Normie had the city under his green thumb, it at least made sense – He was trying to kill me. But now his equally nutty wife and kid want me alive? Just so long as I keep my nose out of things? What, are they the first rogues in Spider-Man history to not want petty revenge? It doesn’t add—”

He was cut off by the tune of The Itsy-Bitsy Spider.

“Johnny?” Peter nearly let his phone fall to the carpet in his hurry to press it to his ear.

“I saw I missed your call.” Even Johnny’s voice, usually so cocky, was unnervingly feeble. Peter had put it on speaker phone for the other two to hear. “Sorry, been busy.”

“It’s okay, man—”

“Where are you? It’s nuts out here! Reed and Sue are running around hospitals trying to save as many patients as they can, so it’s only me and Ben doing all the-” The sound of muffled explosions could be heard from all the way where Gwen sat. “I’m okay! I’m, uh, actually fighting a buncha Squash-Brains right this second. Don’t worry, I’ve learned to invest in fireproof phones.” Johnny gave an anxious chuckle. “Look, the X-Men got totally discombobulated by the robot attacks, so they’ve been no-shows, and the city’s other random heroes aren’t exactly organized enough to come help all at once. Sheesh, guys like Iron Man and Thor really ought to form their own team soon… Anyways, this is probably a big enough deal for S.H.I.E.L.D. to get involved, but still, we could really use you, pal.”

Gwen couldn’t help but wince alongside her boyfriend.

“I can’t,” he got out. “I- I got held up somewhere else.”

“Well, most of them are clustered around Washington Heights, so you should really head over here when you get the chance.” Johnny paused. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, these guys are pushovers, but… there sure are a lot of ’em.”
Okay, that hadn’t been the most encouraging note to end the call on. Now Peter really did let his phone fall to the carpet. Gwen watched it bounce and clatter for a bit before coming to a halt.

For a while, the only sound in the room came from the television. It was mostly screams and explosions.

“What if we sent the other heroes, like, a coded message?” Peter suddenly said. “An S.O.S. only they could understand?”

“Okay,” said a sullen Gwen, “and how are we going to do that?”

“I- I don’t know.” Peter’s face fell. “But we have to do something.”

“Move to London,” mumbled a voice.

“Huh-?”

“Sorry-?”

The other two heads turned towards her. Peter even dropped from the ceiling so he could meet Mary Jane’s eyes.

But the moment he did, Mary Jane turned from him. “That’s where Gwen’s relatives live. We could move to London.”

“Mary…” Gwen scooted towards her. MJ scooted away.

“I’m serious.” She shut her eyes, hugging herself. “I have money. I can dip into my savings. I can take care of you guys and- and Peter’s aunt, too, just until we get everything figured out. There are still fashion models and scientists in London. There’s still crime to fight in London.”

Peter took a breath, then sat down beside her. “MJ… I don’t look the other way. Not ever.”

Those burning green eyes snapped open. “Jesus Christ, Peter, you pissed off an evil mega-corporation that has nothing to do with you, and now they’re threatening to murder everyone you love. How is that being the least bit responsible?”

The words left Peter recoiling. Heck, they left Gwen recoiling. And no sooner had they exited Mary Jane’s mouth than she was hugging the two tight and letting loose a flood of hushed apologies.

“No, no,” Peter said softly. He and Gwen took turns stroking her hair. “You’ve got a point. Maybe…” Peter tried to smile but ended up with more of a grimace. “…once the dust settles here today, we can think about packing our bags.”

At first, Mary Jane looked stunned. Then she just looked relieved. “Thank you... Thank you…”

That bowl of cereal floating around Gwen’s stomach? Somehow, when these two sets of arms were around it… her stomach calmed down.

Friday, August 6, 2010, 10:03 A.M.

Young boy and old man alike sprinted through the unnervingly barren city street, right down the middle of the road, ducking shockwaves and shrapnel. The monsters hadn’t spotted them yet. Good, good.
The boy’s eyes skimmed the area. They found a subway entrance. “There! Grandpa, we can take cover in th-”

“We have to get to the captain.” The old man froze in place.

“You’re not in the war, Grandpa. Listen, we have to move!” The boy, no older than ten, could only helplessly tug at his grandfather’s hand, his quivering eyes staring into the man’s distant ones.

He wouldn’t budge, and so the boy was forced to search the streets again. This time, he found a more promising means of salvation.

“Hey, Flame-o!” bellowed a voice. On the far end of the street stood a big, rocky, warm brown creature in tight blue shorts. He’d been in the middle of hitting one Jack O’Lantern with another Jack O’Lantern when he spotted the grandfather and grandson. “Civs in danger on yer right!”

“I’m on it!” A streak of flame shot towards them from overhead.

But the Human Torch found his path blocked.

“I have given suck…” said another, higher voice. These two newcomers were different. Their gliders were bigger, and their masks weren’t squash-themed. They weren’t pumpkin-heads, they were... goblins. The first, the boy recognized from the news – The Green Goblin was hard to forget. But the second…

“...and know how tender ’tis to love the babe that milks me.” The second was a she-goblin speaking in a feminine voice every bit as strained and inhuman as the Green Goblin’s own. “I would, while it was smiling in my face, have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums and dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you have done to this.” She glanced down over her shoulder to grin at the boy.

Up till now, he’d been dealing with the Jack O’Lantern attack calmly and maturely. He swore he had been. Honestly, the boy was getting used to this sorta thing. But now... now he was trembling.

“Couldn’t have put it better myself, my dear.” The Green Goblin swooped around the battlefield, firing his trademark finger-lasers to keep the Human Torch at bay. “Well, Lady Goblins first. Let it never be said the Green Goblin isn’t courteous.”

The Lady Goblin descended on the young boy and old man, a pumpkin bomb in her pointed fingertips. Across the street, the Thing was dashing towards them, but he found himself blocked on all sides by Jack O’Lanterns. The boy was left with no options but to squeeze his grandfather’s hand.

“It’s okay, soldier,” the old man said softly. “Captain America’s coming. Cap’ll save us.”

The pumpkin bomb sailed through the air, and the boy held his grandfather tight, and then...

Pwing. The bomb was blocked by something red, white, blue, and metallic. It was sent bouncing backwards to detonate in the face of some unfortunate Jack O’Lantern.

“No way.” The boy’s jaw dropped. “No way. I- I knew you were still alive all these years, Cap! Oh, you look so cool! Did Iron Man give you your own suit?”

His rescuer ignored him. Really, the kid almost thought he was Iron Man. The hero hovering before him was in every way identical, except that Tony Stark wouldn’t have been caught dead
with such a patriotic paint job. Every piece of this hero’s armor was colored red, white, or blue, and the chest sported a big, white star.

For a second, everyone on the battlefield, good guys, bad guys, and civilians alike, simply gawked at the newcomer. The boy’s eyes threatened to liquefy from sheer glee.

“Hey, sweet!” Human Torch sped towards the newcomer, his flames accentuating the brightness of his grin. “You a new superhero?”

“Actually,” said a voice from behind, “we’re two new superheroes.”

The boy turned to find yet another hero flying towards the battle – a guy in silver robot armor topped with shoulder-mounted rocket-launchers. At first the boy thought it was Iron Man’s sidekick War Machine, except that War Machine didn’t have glowing yellow eyes, and the shape of the helmet was way different. It was all jagged and pointy, as opposed to Iron Man’s more squarish one. In fact, it would be kinda sinister looking if it didn’t belong to someone who was clearly a good guy. “I may be no Iron Man, but the Ultimate Spider-Slayer is at your service.”

“Ultimate Spider-Slayer?” Human Torch flew over to him, raising a fiery eyebrow. “…Never heard of you. The name’s way too busy, but, hey, we’re happy to have all the help we can get.”

Friday, August 6, 2010, 10:11 A.M.

“JOHNNY, NO, HE’S EVIL!” It was taking everything in Peter’s power to keep his fist from going through the TV.

Beside him on the carpet, Mary Jane rubbed her ears with a sour look. “I’m not sure he can hear you. Try yelling louder.”

“Smythe’s a convicted supervillain!” Peter sprang to his feet. “He siced killer robots on our school! How do they not know he’s a bad guy?”

“He was kind of a D-lister, to be fair,” spoke up Gwen, who’d managed to remain politely cross-legged. “Even I’d almost forget about him.”

“Sure, but this isn’t gonna pan out for these jerks, right?” Peter’s face softened as he turned back to the girls. “Oscorp’s just run by crazy people, and their stupid plan’ll get shot full of holes. It’s gonna come out that one of their new ‘heroes’ is a supervillain, and then everyone’ll see right through this.”

Friday, August 6, 2010, 6:00 P.M.

“NEW SUPERHEROES SAVE THE CITY,” the headlines had proclaimed.

Then there’d been the footage of both Green and Lady Goblin flying away with their tails between their legs (“Ohhhhh, we can’t beat them! They’re too strong!” “Exit, pursued by a bear!”), though, naturally, their gliders went way too fast for the new heroes to catch up with them, meaning the chartreuse charlatans remained at large.

Next, of course, had been the footage of the self-proclaimed Iron Patriot shaking hands with Torch and Thing. That one would go on to become a favorite of the twenty-four news cycle.

What else? Oh yeah, the Gob-Squad had been brought to the Vault (which, random trivia, Oscorp
had built in the first place) for interrogation, and, as always, they knew jack about their employer. He didn’t have a base, and he contacted them. Same old, same old…

But what made Peter’s stomach boil even hotter was the on-the-street interview Alistair Smythe had done with Ned Lee, where he’d gone on and on about how his poor, abusive dad Spencer Smythe, crazed robotics expert and wanted crook, had indoctrinated his son into supervillainy from the moment of Alistair’s birth. Spencer had even gone as far as to abduct his son from the Vault and hold him hostage for months on end. But now all poor Alistair wanted was to end his villainous ways and use his powers to make a difference in the world, just like his idol, Flint Marko. Naturally, Oscorp had been the ones to give Alistair that second chance, putting him on strict probation and then providing him with the resources to craft super-suits for himself and the Iron Patriot’s pilot. And as it turned out, so long as it was under S.H.I.E.L.D.’s supervision, Smythe was totally welcome as a probationary superhero.

And then all the news channels had gotten bored and swapped back to their twenty-four hour coverage of the upcoming mayoral election.

Rrgh. Hadn’t S.H.I.E.L.D. been suspicious of Oscorp already? Surely this had at least earned a blip on their radar? But then, the general public had no idea that Smythe was connected to Oscorp. Heck, even Peter hadn’t really been sure about the connection until Eddie had told him how nuts Harry’s mom was. Sure, the Jack O’Lanterns were equipped with Oscorp tech, but all that stuff had been reported stolen, just like how the O.G. Green Goblin had done it.

How could the media hate and fear Spider-Man but welcome a friggin’ ex-supervillain with open arms? Was it just because Oscorp had money? Or was Oscorp brainwashing people like how Kingsley had done it? So many unanswered questions…

“Well, mystery’s over!” Mary Jane sprang to her feet, shaking Peter from his thoughts. The trio had spent the last couple hours glued to the news feed, save for bathroom breaks and halfhearted efforts to keep down food. They’d even worked up the courage to rest their butts on the same couch cushions that a goblin-butt had touched – once Peter’s spider-sense had given it the A-okay.

“Oscorp was waiting for some bigger baddie to wear down the other heroes so they could swoop in and upstage them, and now the city’s in love with the creepy evil Iron Men. Hurray. Good for Oscorp.” Mary Jane turned to her bedroom. “Now if you want to call your aunt and arrange to pick her up, I can go ahead and buy the plane tickets-”

“MJ.” Peter’s voice came out sharper than he’d meant. MJ halted her march, but she kept her back to him.

“I… I don’t know if…” Peter tapered off, prompting Gwen to hold him tighter.

What Peter was struggling to say aloud was that… the thing was… just sitting here for hours, watching the bad guys on TV and letting his costume collect dust? It’d been hard for Peter to do. Physically hard. Like, Odysseus-tied-to-the-mast-sailing-past-the-Sirens hard.

“Peter.” He’d expected Mary Jane to sound angry, not… devastated. “You said we were going to leave.”

“But…” If Peter held Gwen any tighter, he’d crush her. “…don’t you think the other superheroes deserve a warning about Oscorp?”
“Reed Richards is the smartest man in the world,” MJ shot back without skipping a beat. “He’ll figure it out. Or- Or S.H.I.E.L.D. will catch Oscorp cheating on their taxes. I don’t know.”

“What about Harry?” Gwen asked softly. “Are we just gonna leave him to his fate?”

“Y-You can’t- I mean, I-” A reluctant Mary Jane faced them, fumbling for words. “The world’s a screwed up place full of screwed up people, and bad things happen, and- and you need to know when to cut your losses.” She glanced away, then added, more to herself, “You can’t save everyone.” Silence. “Guys, please, Oscorp’s showing us mercy.”

Finally, Peter rose from the couch, giving him access to his sweatpants pocket. “I’d better… call Aunt May. We’ve got a lot to talk about…”

But before he could reach his phone, it went off. The caller ID was unknown, and so Peter furrowed his brow, put the cell on speaker, and answered the call.

“Oh, Peter, you’ve been a VERY good boy!”

His blood froze all over again.

“‘I’m so proud of you,’ came the Green Goblin’s singsong voice. ‘In fact, I’d say you deserve a reward. Come to the rooftop three hops west of your humble home – There’s an old friend of yours who’s DYING to see you again.’”

“I’m not leaving the girls alone.” If tone of voice could kill…

“Peter, if I’d wanted your various girlfriends dead, I’d have fridged them all months ago. Now please do as you’re told. Everything’s been going so cleanly today, I’d hate for it to suddenly get messier. See, the fun thing about you having so many loved ones is that there’s a couple extras I can use as warning shots.” The Goblin paused. “For instance, I don’t know, your ex might get a safe dropped on her next time you sass me. You get the picture.”

On that note, he hung up.

_Friday, August 6, 2010, 6:08 P.M._

Here Spider-Man was, three hops over on a nondescript rooftop beneath the setting sun, perched on a lightning rod. It was like he was begging God to make things easier and just kill him already. Spider-Man wasn’t sure what kind of building this was, but he doubted it was important – It’d probably been chosen purely on the merit of being a safe distance from the apartment complex. Seemed Oscorp was at least courteous enough not to spill Spider-Man’s secret ID to the public… which was odd, now that Spidey thought about it. Whatever. It didn’t matter.

All that did matter was the patriotic punk descending from the night sky. Peter scowled beneath his mask as Iron Patriot hovered beside him.

Spider-Man tensed in place. Eddie’s camera had gotten fried thanks to the Doombots, meaning Spidey was on his own again until they could scrape together the replacement camera funds.

“So what’s the point of this meeting?” Spider-Man spat the moment Iron Patriot drew near. “Just in case I had any doubts you and Smythe were in league with the Goblins?”

“That’s dangerous talk, Spider-Man,” said Iron Patriot. “Dangerous and unsupportable.” Whoever the pilot was, his voice was distorted and robotic. Not that it mattered. Probably just some Oscorp
“What do you want with me?” Spider-Man asked through gritted teeth.

“Oh, just to make you an offer you can’t refuse.” Iron Patriot hovered nearer to him. “You see, my team’s roster is always looking to expand, and if the Fantastic Four won’t have you, well…”

Okay, eww. Spidey tried not to visibly shudder. He opened his mouth, but then he remembered what the Goblin had said about sass. Ugh, seriously, he’d even managed to silence Spider-Man’s quips? God, Peter was gonna go insane here. He felt like a kettle boiling over.

“Now, I know what you’re thinking.” A freaky, metallic noise emanated from the suit. It took Spidey a minute to realize Iron Patriot was chuckling to himself. “A hero team with Oscorp at the helm isn’t quite what you had in mind. Because, you see, Oscorp is an evil company, isn’t it? We’ve done bad things. You would’ve rather joined a team helmed by, say, Stark Industries, a good company that’s never done evil things in the entirety of its existence.” More chuckling.

“Don’t you worry, Oscorp will soon announce that it’s halting its production of weapons, too, just like Stark’s did. We don’t need them anymore. After all, with our dear Spencer having finally managed to whip up a reasonable facsimile of Tony Stark’s Arc Reactor technology, we’ll have all the Iron Man- pardon, Iron Patriot suits we could ever want. So really, all that’s changed is who gets to sit in Stark’s throne.”

Spider-Man said nothing.

“Honestly, Peter, it’s not like Oscorp’s heroes are going to fly around committing petty crimes. We simply crunched the numbers and realized that, long term, this business is far more profitable than the super-mercenary one ever was. Just think. Instead of having to churn out an entire rogues gallery for every lone meddling hero like you or Daredevil, we can simply make one or two new heroes, dazzle the general public, and cash in on the media hype.” Iron Patriot brought a hand to his shiny metal chin. “Wouldn’t you like to get a piece of that pie? Rehabilitate your public image? Imagine… your own spider-themed tower in the skyline, a Spider-Mobile, Iron Spider armor…” When he glanced back at Spider-Man’s face, Iron Patriot cocked his head. “Oh, don’t look at me like that. We’ll all still function as superheroes. You’ll still be doing your uncle proud.”

The world went white hot. Peter felt his knuckles hit metal, and then his spider-sense threatened to pop a blood vessel, and there was the worst burning sensation Peter had ever felt in his life… and when the world came back into view, Spider-Man was gazing up at the night sky, his back on the concrete.

Iron Patriot hovered before him, aiming his palm for another repulsor blast.

“Oh, come now, Pete, what’s the matter?” Iron Patriot didn’t sound quite as composed anymore. “Wouldn’t it be a dream come true to play superheroes with your best friend?”

In one quick motion, the helmet flipped open.

Peter almost screamed. “Harry-?” Dear lord, the whole right side of the poor guy’s face was covered in sickly purple scars. With his eye bulging and the side of his lip so contorted, Harry looked almost… goblin-like. “Harry-?” Peter struggled to his feet. “Harry, you have to listen to me! Your mom’s just as sick as your dad was, and- and she’s made you sick, too. I know you wouldn’t have taken the Green again if she hadn’t force-fed it to you-”

He was cut off by the sudden buzzing of his phone. This time, Spidey had an idea who it was without even checking the caller ID.
"I wouldn’t waste my time with that if I was you." The voice didn’t even chill Peter’s blood this time. He was getting used to it. "The boy’s been quite thoroughly brainwashed."

Peter jolted. Brainwashed, huh? That must’ve been at the hands of that Hamilton guy Madame Web had mentioned.

"Harry Osborn was a pathetic little nobody before his mother intervened!" Harry snapped. For a moment, his disfigured face darkened… but then it brightened again. "But that’s nothing a healthy dose of Globulin Green couldn’t fix.” Another round of cackling erupted from his throat. “Maybe we’ll even feed some to you and your girlfriends someday, help you come round to our way of thinking—"

Pain rocked Peter’s body again, and he hadn’t even been repulsor-blasted this time.

“—except that our supplies have been worn thin from this latest stunt, so that’ll have to wait. Ah, well.” Harry smiled to himself… but then, in a blink, his face grew colder. “You could use an attitude adjustment. I mean, remember when you and Gwen conspired to hook up behind my back? What was that all about?” But just as abruptly, Harry seemed to shake himself out of it and returned to his usual, goblin-esque grin. “But lucky for you, I’m willing to be the bigger man and let bygones be bygones. All you have to do is show your masked face to our press conference tomorrow morning. Be in front of Oscorp Tower bright and early at eight o’clock. After all, I’d hate to think how your dear old aunt would take it if she knew she’d raised a tardy nephew.”

At these words, Harry’s steel gauntlet projected a rectangular, translucent hologram… and upon it was footage of Aunt May, leaned over her piano next to a little boy.

“Is she giving lessons?” said Harry. “Oh, that’s so sweet of her. What a lovely woman. I do so enjoy this live feed.” Then the hologram winked away, Harry’s helmet slid back over his head, and he shot upwards, propelled by his rocket boots. “Ciao, Spider-Man!”

Really, the moment Iron Patriot disappeared back into the evening sky, Spider-Man should’ve dashed back home to check on the girls. But though it pained him to admit it, he needed a moment to collect himself.

“Not a single quip out your mouth the whole conversation!” Oh, right, and he still had the phone pressed to his ear. “I have to say, Peter, I’m impressed. You and Harry are going to have so much fun together on your new superhero team. Maybe not as much fun as web-swinging off of Big Ben would be, but you’ll get over that.”

Another spasm rocked Peter’s chest. How he-? No, wait, duh. The Goblin’s surprise visit this morning. The apartment was bugged.

“STILL no backtalk?” came the Green Goblin’s voice again. “You really HAVE learned who your daddy is.”

If he’d help it any tighter, Peter would’ve crushed his phone to dust. “Why are you doing this to me?”

That only made the Goblin laugh harder. “You have to ask? Because you’re fascinating, Peter. Such a promising young man handed all this power, and there’s so much you could do with it… except that you have these funny little rules you impose on yourself.”

No response.

“Well, you’re young. You don’t know any better. But that’s why I’m here for you, Peter, to make
sure you receive a proper education.”

For a moment, there was more silence from Peter’s end. Then he said, “So… if Harry’s Iron Patriot, who are you?”

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**Friday, August 6, 2010, 6:16 P.M.**

There was a slight break in the call at this point because the Green Goblin had to duck an incoming missile. Darn thing almost blasted him to the ocean below. Pesky S.H.I.E.L.D. helicopters trying to follow him and his gobbie-gal back to their barracks…

“Alack, I am afraid they have awakened—” Lady Goblin’s glider weaved through the copters. “—and ’tis not done. Th’ attempt and not the deed confounds us!”

A shockwave nearly knocked Green Goblin into the drink again—His feminine counterpart had just cleared a path for them via pumpkin bombs. Well, Gobbie guessed those guys wouldn’t be bothering them again.

Now that it was smooth sailing, the Green Goblin touched the inside of his pointy ear, turning the speaker back on.

“Whoops, bad connection. Now who am I, you ask? Oh, it’s really not that hard to figure out, Peter, provided you’ve been paying attention…” That was as good a note as any to end the call on, the Goblin figured. Okay, he liked being cryptic.

Finally, he was alone with the missus.

“You know, I just realized…” The Green Goblin’s glider flipped around, flying backwards directly in front of Lady Goblin’s own. A tricky move to pull off, sure, but it was worth it so he could gaze into her gorgeous yellow eyes. “…now that Harry and his friends have finally vacated the barracks… we’ve got the place all to ourselves tonight.”

A sly smile crossed Lady Goblin’s face. She brought a clawed hand to his pointed chin, cupping it. “We must not look at goblin men.”

The Green Goblin smiled in turn. “We must not buy their fruits.”

Two latex-covered lips drew nearer to each other, reciting together over the howling wind:

“Who knows upon what soil they fed,

Their hungry, thirsty roots?”

They shared a deep, hearty laugh.

“Fine,” said Green Goblin, glancing aside, “I’m not done using rhyme schemes. Sue me.”
Walking

Friday, August 13, 2010, 11:27 P.M.

A girl sat alone on the therapy couch, and beside her stood a towering man. Whatever bits of his skin weren’t hidden by the room’s dimmed lights looked pale white.

“The events of these past two weeks have shown me beyond a shadow of a doubt,” the man said, his voice deep and gravely, “that this line of work is far too dangerous to ever be feasible. Only the mad pursue it.”

“Oh, so when I try to be a super-criminal, suddenly it’s too dangerous?” The girl rolled her eyes, arms folded.

“Yes, I’m sure you understand the hypocrisy, Janice.” The man’s posture remained stiff as stone. “But what you don’t understand is that I would do anything to keep you safe. Morals be damned.”

Saturday, August 7, 2010, 8:31 A.M.

Honestly, seeing such a huge crowd in front of Oscorp Tower was surreal. Spider-Man hadn’t thought Oscorp was the kind of company that liked having too many eyes on it. Then again, there was a thick line of security people keeping the reporters and paparazzi at bay, so it wasn’t like Iron Patriot was kissing any babies, Spidey supposed.

Of course, crowds always formed whenever superheroes were involved. Most people probably just wanted to gawk at the group of them standing shoulder-to-shoulder on the tower’s front steps. Iron Patriot was in the center, posing with hands on his hips, while to his left stood the Ultimate Spider-Slayer, and to his right stood… Spider-Man.

He’d put in as much distance from Smythe as possible. No reason.

Some of the reporters had seemed a bit apprehensive about the new heroes at first, but Harry had gone full used-car-salesman on them. The first thing he’d done had been to roll back his helmet and reveal the Iron Patriot’s true identity. His face, he’d explained to the shocked crowd through his suit’s built-in mike, had been the result of a stray pumpkin bomb (which technically wasn’t a lie…). The attempt on his life had left him scarred and deformed, but he assured you his RESOLVE had NEVA BEEN STRONGA!

…Look, the only way Peter was getting through this thing with his sanity intact was if he mocked every moment in his head.

Next up, Harry had announced that, as the CEO of Oscorp, he was following Tony Stark’s lead by officially halting the production of all its weapons. It’d earned him applause. Thunderous app-

Okay, sorry, Peter was done. That’d been the gist of the speech, anyways. And now that Spidey had suffered through it, it was time for him to suffer through the questioning part, too.

“This one’s addressed to Mr. Smythe,” a random reporter said, stepping forward. “Could you elaborate on the legality of a former supervillain like yourself operating as a superhero?”

“I’ll take that one.” Harry nodded, prompting Smythe to step back. “Smythe here has signed on to a S.H.I.E.L.D.-supervised rehabilitation program. While not quite the same thing, I myself am, in a similar vein, hoping to rehabilitate Oscorp itself… and atone for my father’s crimes.”
Man, with the messed up face and the smooth, confident voice, Peter almost didn’t recognize Harry. It was like Oscorp had terraformed the poor guy. Though at least he wasn’t using his “goblin voice” right this second…

Spider-Man saw Oscorp’s game here. Time was, the Big Man had paid Oscorp to make supervillains to distract a superhero, but that hadn’t been enough control for Oscorp’s liking, and so Norman had overthrown the Big Man. But then his plan had been foiled by a superhero – Oscorp still hadn’t had enough control. Now, though, all three pieces of the equation were under Oscorp’s roof. They’d already struck a deal to get the Web-Head on their roster. What was next? Were they gonna buy up the rights to the Fantastic Four and that newer hero team, the X-Men, too? Make a superhero monopoly?

“This rehabilitation program,” a reporter suddenly said, “does it also account for why a public menace like Spider-Man is allowed on the team?”

All eyes fell on the Web-Head. Harry gave him an expectant little smirk.

Through the fibers of his mask, Peter inhaled, then said into his microphone, “Yeah. It’s an honor to be here.”

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**Sunday, August 8, 2010, 3:06 P.M.**

Whoa, their drama teacher had pulled some strings for MJ. Was she really getting to work here? This theater’s backstage was huge. Peter and Gwen would’ve been stuck wandering for all eternity if they hadn’t had Mary Jane there to guide them by the hands. The couple had decided to accompany their third to her job today. For some reason, they weren’t too anxious to spend time in their apartment anymore. It still smelled vaguely of goblin – a mix of body odor and old latex.

And speaking of Gobbie, Peter once again had no idea who he really was. It was funny, figuring out the Goblin’s true identity used to be Spider-Man’s top priority, but at this point, he didn’t care in the slightest. It was probably just some thug Oscorp hired to scare Peter.

Peter bowed his head, both because he was depressed and in order to duck past busy extras and stray scenery. He had to give it to this troupe, they hadn’t let all the recent attacks set them behind schedule.

“Kiss me too fiercely.

*Hold me too tight…*

The rehearsals echoed down the hall as the three neared the exit.

“I need help believing,

*You’re with me tonight…*”

“I think today went pretty well.” MJ made a valiant effort to laugh. “But really, from now on, I take any day robots aren’t trying to kill me as a win.”

Gwen at least tried to laugh alongside her, but Peter didn’t bother. Even if Mary Jane refused to show it, canceling the London escape plan had to have hit her hard. Peter couldn’t help but feel terrible for her… especially since, deep down, he’d never had any intention of going. Peter knew this was an awful thing to admit, but it was almost a relief that they couldn’t leave Manhattan. This way, at least, Peter could keep an eye on Oscorp. And really, as much as it made Peter’s stomach
churn, he couldn’t help but think that if Oscorp had wanted any of them dead, being in London wouldn’t have made much difference.

So had Peter lied to Mary Jane’s face? Yes. No. Maybe? What was he supposed to have done? It was his fault she’d woken up to a goblin in her living room. Had he really needed to argue with her when she was panicked beyond belief?

Beside him, Gwen met Peter’s eyes. She gave a pained smile. She knew. Just from Peter’s face, she knew. Sometimes he swore that girl was a telepath.

“A model and an actress?” Gwen turned her comforting smile to MJ. “You’ll be fighting off paparazzi any day now.”

“Eh, it’s just some extra pocket money.” MJ slowed her pace so she could place herself between the couple. “We need to save up if we wanna get you a new camera.”

“Don’t you have a super high quality web cam?” asked Gwen.

“Yeah. That I’m using.”

Gwen smirked. “For extra pocket money?”

Mj smirked back. “From streaming video games, yes.” Suddenly, she was gripping Gwen’s hand with her nails.

In spite of himself, Peter grinned. “You must gets tons of subscribers.” He’d earned himself a shove. “Because you’re so good at video games, Mary!”

“Watch it, Tiger.” Despite her best efforts, giggles cracked through MJ’s voice. “Only Gwen’s allowed to call me Mary.”

The trio strolled off towards the exit, their endless spiel of banter accompanied by the ever-fainter sounds of piano music and rehearsal singing:

“And if it turns out,

It’s over too fast…”

Monday, August 9, 2010, 5:12 P.M.

Interestingly enough, Peter ended up back on Broadway again the next day.

“BWAH HA HA HA HA! FLEE! FLEE, HUMANSSS, FROM THE COLD-BLOODED ARMIESSS OF SSSTEGRON THE DINOSSSAUR-MAN!”

But for a slightly different reason.

Thwip. “Now, see, that’s debated in the scientific community-” Spider-Man swooped above the street on a web-strand, narrowly snatching a civilian from the way of a pack of tiny, feathery Velociraptors. “-but, hey, I get it, ‘cold-blooded’ sounds way cooler. I do get the impression that coolness is the, uh… driving force behind your plans here.”

“Your human weaponry isss no match for raw, primordial power!” Stegron let out a wild, raspy cackle. The dude looked a lot like the Lizard, only orange, and instead of a lab coat, he sported a row of iconic Stegosaurus plates running down his back.
Once the civilian had fled to safety, Spider-Man perched himself on the side of the building so he could overlook the madness. Cue the Jurassic Park theme. Brontosauruses were bumping into traffic lights, Pterodactyls were gobbling up swarms of pigeons in midair, and Triceratopses were quite literally chasing down cabs. The prehistoric creatures didn’t mean anyone any harm, as far as Spider-Man could tell. Poor things were just scared and confused. How would you feel if you were rudely awoken from a nice, long nap only to find yourself in some strange, cement-covered world?

“Don’t worry, little spider.” Across from Spider-Man’s perch, the Ultimate Spider-Slayer fired some totally-not-Iron-Man’s-repulsor-blasts to keep the wave of dinos at bay. “I’ve got your back.”

“Oh, how reass- Hey!” One of the blasts came awfully close to singing Spidey’s foot.

He hopped off the wall, grumbling to himself as he gave a flying kick to a Velociraptor. Stupid Oscorp. Now Spider-Man didn’t even get to properly enjoy fighting dinosaurs…

“No screwing around, you two.” Overhead, Iron Patriot was blasting some pterodactyls out of the air. “We have to subdue every last one of these things so S.H.I.E.L.D. can ship them back to the Savage Land, and I don’t want to spend all day scouring the city because you idiots let some escape.”

“Well, aren’t you all business?” Spider-Man bounced back down to the pavement so he could web up more raptors. “What, did your goblin juice wear off?”

“It did, actually.” Harry’s voice was tight and sharp beneath his suit’s distortion. “Now do try and not mention the word ‘goblin’ in front of any civilians. Killing them is so much paperwork…”

“Fine,” Spider-Man said as yet another snarling beast sprang at him, “but I want you to know I’m pretending these dinosaurs are your face.” He managed to knock some fangs out.

“Girls, girls,” cut in Smythe as he piledrived a Brontosaurus. “You’re both los- Gah!” He couldn’t finish that retort because the next instant, a T. rex decided to use him as a chew toy.

Oh yeah, had Spider-Man mentioned that a Tyrannosaurus rex was leading the charge? Because it was. In fact, Stegron was somehow managing to ride on its feathery back like an overgrown Chocobo.

“Oh no, anyone but Smythe,” said Spider-Man. “We must save him.”

Iron Patriot made a noise that might, just might have been something resembling genuine laughter.

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*Tuesday, August 10, 2010, 5:24 P.M.*

“…and Stegron’s testimony exposed Tricorp’s super-mercenary production.” Peter’s dumplings had been resting on his plate for half an hour, and he hadn’t touched them once.

“Meaning Oscorp’s got no competition left?” Gwen was seated beside him, her thigh touching his.

“Wouldn’t be surprised if they’re the ones who helped Steggy escape the Vault in the first place.” And across from them in the booth sat Mary Jane, who was still working out how to hold her chopsticks. “Y’know, to give the city’s newest heroes another notch in their belts.”

“Yeah.” For a moment, Peter’s hand almost reached for a dumpling, but it lost its energy halfway through. “But the thing is, I had nothing to do with that. As far as I knew, innocent people were gonna get trampled by dinosaurs, and I saved them. I’m still being Spider-Man. I’m just…”
“…a version of Spider-Man that only does Oscorp-approved crimefighting?” said Gwen.

“What choice do I have?” Peter rested his head on her shoulder. “Oscorp’s playing pretty nice by their standards. Harry even handed me a big, meaty paycheck when the whole thing was over.”

“He did?” MJ’s head snapped up from her plate. “Seriously? Phew, I been worried about next month’s rent since you lost your Bugle j—”

“I tore it up in front of him.”

“Oh.” MJ’s eyes returned to her plate. “Yeah. Yeah, I mean, who wants their blood money?”

“That’s just it, though.” There was a sharp intake of breath from Peter’s side of the booth. “We’d actually have a good thing going right now… except I’ve got these funny little rules I follow.”

The remark earned nothing but silence from the other two. The three of them sat there a while, listening to the chatter of the other restaurant-goers. Normally, it’d blend together into a pleasant buzzing sound, but there weren’t enough voices for that today. It was almost dead in here. Just like it was in every other place in the city.

“Hey, c’mon, guys— Mary Jane’s lips stretched as near to a smile as they could go right now. “—let’s not talk about this. It’s Tiger’s birthday.”

“Oh, don’t remind me.” Gwen gave her boyfriend’s hair a ruffle. “Our little boy’s finally a man.”

“He grew up right before our eyes!” MJ feigned blowing her nose in her napkin.

The girls attempted to laugh, but Peter’s face sucked it right out of them.

“Peter…” Gwen had to lean forward and crane her neck to meet his gaze.

“Is this gonna be our life from now on?” Peter asked softly. “Pretending to be happy while the Goblin yanks me around on a leash? Looking the other way twenty-four seven while Oscorp-brand superheroes become the biggest thing to come from New York since the club sandwich?”

“H-Hey, at least the Daily Bugle still thinks you and your teammates are menaces.” MJ gave an anxious smile. “Some things never change, huh?”

At the last word, his fist hit the table and his chopsticks tumbled to the carpet. “This is my fault. I had to go play hero and tick off bad guys way above my weight class, and now everyone I care about is in danger because I care about them.”

The girls could offer no response – except for staring at him with sad eyes.

“Maybe I should just keep the paycheck next time,” Peter said, hand on his forehead. “What difference does it make? Oscorp’s won, and it’s not like taking the high road makes them win less.” He glanced away, then added, “I should’ve taken Tombstone’s stupid offer. At least he didn’t know my secret identity.”

No response. Now they were back to listening to the restaurant’s lethargic background chatter.

“Okay, this might sound silly,” said Mary Jane, “but what if we, like, took a causal stroll in the
general direction of the Baxter Building, and we made like we were gonna go past it, but then at
the last second we sprinted inside and told the Fantastic Four what was-?

She couldn’t make it to the end of the sentence before Peter’s head buzzed like mad. “Shut up shut up shut up!” Before he’d even realized what he was doing, Peter had sprang to his feet and yanked the girls to his side.

“What-?”

“Tiger-!”

Both girls were left gawking at him. In fact, so were the other customers and a passing waitress.

Well, Peter’s face was as red as it’d ever been. He hurriedly returned the three of them to their seats. “Sorry. Spider-sense.”

“Your spider-sense went off?” Gwen said in a harsh whisper. “Y-You don’t think one of Smythe’s mini-Spider-Slayers is watching us right now, do you?”

The miniature Spider-Slayers were, of course, an invention that Smythe had been all too happy to inform Peter about during today’s team-up.

Peter could only sag his shoulders. “Let’s get out of here. I don’t like this.”

A minute later, the three were hurrying down the streets of Chinatown, Peter guiding the girls by the hands while they each carried a stack of to-go boxes. They power walked in silence a minute.

Gradually, Peter’s eyes fell on the hands occupying his own – one small, dainty, and perfectly manicured, and the other even smaller, even daintier, and sporting chipped, jagged nails.

“Didn’t mean to scare you two,” Peter half-whispered, half-muttered. “I don’t want to be a jerk. I know you’re both just trying to help.”

“It’s okay, Peter,” said Gwen. “We’re not ticked at you – We’re ticked at Oscorp,” said Mary Jane.

Peter gave a slow nod. Then, for the first time that day, he managed a genuine smile. “You know, the- the three of us together… that’s the one good thing to come from this mess. Me and Gwen were so scared of it before, but now it feels so simple… We all like each other. That’s it.” He faltered. “That, uh, is it, isn’t it?”

The girls traded hesitant smiles.

“That’s it.” Mary Jane held his hand tighter. “I love you guys.”

“We love you, too,” said Gwen.

In the time they’d started this little tryst, Peter had developed this weird kind of sense. It was not unlike his other one, except that instead of warning him about danger, it warned about when the three of them were all feeling bubbly and cuddly at the same time. He liked this sense a lot better.

Peter’s head darted around to make sure too many passerby weren’t out and about. Nada. Of course, there was always the chance Smythe’s creepy little bug bots were being voyeurs, but, as much as Peter shuddered to admit it, if Oscorp was really committed to spying on them, they’d probably pieced it together already…
With that reassuring thought in the back of his head, Peter brought his lips to Gwen’s, and then Gwen brought hers to Mary Jane’s, and Mary Jane brought hers to Peter’s. Like an imperceptible wave had traveled through them.

“Eeeeeeigh!” Then out of the blue, a very perceptible wave traveled through them – a sound wave. To-go boxes splattered to the pavement.

“Huh-?”

“Whuh-?”

“What the-?”

“Oh my g-! I am so sorry. I didn’t mean to- to-” Where empty air had stood a second ago, there now stood a blonde girl in her early twenties, wearing a familiar, skintight, sky blue costume.


The next second was an interesting one. It started with a miniature Spider-Slayer springing from the shadows of an alleyway. Next came the crimson death-laser it fired. Peter had no doubt it would’ve turned his girlfriend and their girlfriend to ashes if Invisible Girl hadn’t tossed up a forcefield-wall to block it. Then came the grand finale of that second, in which Peter smashed the robot into the pavement via his knuckles.

By the second second, the triad had huddled around Invisible Girl so she could wrap the whole group in a forcefield bubble. They all stood there a moment, pulses racing, but no more Spider-Slayers came forward.

“I’m sorry for spying,” Invisible Girl said hurriedly. “A, uh, friend of yours asked me to check on you, and I was trying to figure out if you were really working for Oscorp, and I guess I got… sidetracked.” She bowed her head, arms clasped behind her back. “I’m sorry. I know people-watching’s a filthy habit.”

“It’s cool,” said a breathless MJ.

“But please don’t tell anyone about- about us, Miss Storm,” added Gwen, whose face was even brighter than Invisible Girl’s own right now.

“O-Of course, it’s none of my business.” Actually, the fact that Invisible Girl wasn’t vanishing from sight out of sheer embarrassment was kind of commendable. Peter wasn’t gonna pretend he wasn’t envious of her for having the option, though.

“Wait.” Peter’s heart was on the brink of shutting down. “Oscorp just tried to kill us! My aunt-”

“-is safe.” Invisible Girl placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Your friend already gave us a list of friends and family to guard. You three are the last ones left.”

“They did? We are?” Now Peter’s heart wasn’t sure if it should beat quicker or slower. “Who is this ‘friend?’”

“I’ll explain as we go – This forcefield can block soundwaves.” Invisible Girl waved a hand, causing the bubble’s translucent surface to ripple. “And we just turned invisible to onlookers. I’d love to see Oscorp try and follow us now.” With that, she turned for the sidewalk, gesturing for the others to follow her. “Now let’s get you kids to the safe house.”
“Safe house?” Peter almost laughed in relief. “I didn’t know the Fantastic Four had a safe house.”

“Yeah,” said Invisible Girl, “neither did Oscorp.”

With that, the big, invisible bubble made its way down the street towards the Fantasticar, which had been left invisibly double-parked a couple blocks over. And they only tripped over seven or eight people on the way!

**Tuesday, August 10, 2010, 5:51 P.M.**

Apparently, the Baxter Building extended just as far underground as it did aboveground. And at the very deepest regions lay the safe house. The moment the elevator doors slid open, the group of Peter, Gwen, MJ, and Invisible Girl were met with a reinforced steel door blocking the dim, gray hall.

“How, I’ve configured it to open on you three’s voice commands. Let me show you how.” Invisible Girl turned to a built-in speaker in the side of the door, then recited, “Franklin.”

Instantly, the reinforced door folded up into the ceiling, and then so did the reinforced door behind it. Then the reinforced door behind that one and the reinforced door behind that one.

Once that was finished, the trio followed the superheroine down the cold, barren, somewhat spooky hallway until they reached a doorway, which led out into… a warm, cozy living room that looked like it belonged in a penthouse. The carpet was spotless, there were logs crackling in the fireplace, the bookshelves were filled with books, and a big-screen TV hung on the wall. Peter stood there admiring it while the reinforced doors each slammed shut behind him.

MJ let out a whistle. “When you said ‘safe house,’ I was picturing, like, a damp cell where we’d huddle under a blanket and eat rations out of a can.”

“Like we’d lock our friends and family away in a dungeon.” Invisible Girl nodded to a couch on the living room’s far side.

Seated on it was a dark-haired woman, and she was busy hugging the big stone golem looming over her.

“I’ll be careful, Aunt Petunia, promise.” The Thing held her tight.

Invisible Girl turned back to the others. “Trust us, when Doctor Doom’s your arch-nemesis, places like this are a necessity. It’s got an indoor pool, a game room… Think of it like you’re on vacation.”

“Can do,” said MJ.

“Only downside’s that your phones won’t work in here. It’d be too easy for Oscorp to find you if they could trace your calls.”

The trio barely heard her – They were too busy grinning like loons. All this time, Peter had been chained down, and now he was lighter than air. It was like someone had injected pure, liquid relief straight into his veins.

Though that was somewhat undercut by the sudden voice in Peter’s head: *It’s a relief to see you’re alright.*
“Whuh-?” Peter’s head darted around, searching the room until he’d found the source of the telepathic voice – the wheelchair-bound old lady in the corner resting in a wheelchair, her eyes wrapped in scarlet-colored cloth that matched her baggy blouse. “Madame Web!”

When I saw the news, I feared Oscorp had brainwashed you, Madame Web began, so I came back to New York to check on- OKAY, get back, I’m not a hugger-! Too late. Peter had come hilariously close to dislocating her shoulders.

“We’ve got S.H.I.E.L.D. agents discreetly guarding all your friends and family,” Invisible Girl explained while Gwen and MJ joined in the hug-fest. “Eddie Brock, Liz Allen, Dr. Bromwell, the Connors and Watsons… Anyone Oscorp might threaten to get to you. Cassandra read your minds for the full list.”

“Miss Storm…” Peter changed the target of his hug. “Thank you. I- I really owe you. I mean it.”

“Don’t mention it.” Invisible Girl hugged back. “A friend of my brother’s a friend of the whole team.”

“Sorry the FF couldn’t get there in time to help with the dino thing. It sounded awesome.” Just then, Johnny stepped our from a back room, nodding to the group. “I hear Damage Control’s still cleaning up droppings.”

“No prob.” Once Aunt Petunia had gone off to a back room, though, Peter added, “In fact, I’d say now’s the perfect time to make up for the missed team-up opportunity…”

“Wait.” It was at this remark that Gwen stepped forward. “Peter? You’re… You’re going back out there, aren’t you?”

“W-Well, yeah.” Peter turned to discover Mary Jane wearing the same expression. “I mean, Oscorp seems more than a little obsessed with me, right? If I don’t show up next time they come calling, they could start killing random innocents to get to me or…” He trailed off. The girls weren’t buying it. “Look.” He took a breath. “You know I can’t lounge around in a swimming pool or a game room when Oscorp’s out doing their thing, and I honestly don’t know if it’s because I think that’d be wrong or because it’s just not how I’m wired. Maybe both. But either way… I gotta go.”

The girls watched in silence as Peter removed his blue t-shirt, then his cream, long-sleeve undershirt, and then his tennis shoes, his black sweatpants, his socks… until the red and blue spandex was fully excavated.

Mary Jane stepped forward. “Come back to us, Tiger.”

“Promise.” Peter hesitated. His eyes flitted to Gwen, then to Invisible Girl. He ended up giving MJ more of a pat on the shoulder than a hug.

And now for Gwen’s turn. “Gwen…” Peter moved in for a hug… then surprised her with a kiss. Gwen was disarmed at first, but in milliseconds, she’d collected herself and responded in kind. Her lips were chapped, her face was wet, and she was perfect. He’d have done this with her forever if he could. “I unironically love you.”

There was her pretty smile. “I unironically love you, too.”

…Okay, time for Peter to break away and slip his mask over his head. Otherwise, there was a very real possibility that he’d get lost in Gwen’s eyes and never come back.

“Ya ready to randy-voo with Reed, Web-Head?” asked Thing. “Figger out our plan of attack?”
Spider-Man nodded, and so the safe house’s various doors slid back open. Without further ado, the procession of Spider-Man and the Fantastic Three-Fourths marched back to the elevator.

The moment he was inside, Spider-Man turned so he could watch the reinforced door slam shut again. And then the one in front of it. Then the one in front of that one and the one in front of that one.
Baccalaureate Service

Saturday, August 14, 2010, 6:32 A.M.

A man and a boy sat together on the therapy couch, their faces hidden by the room’s dimmed lights.

“Yeah,” the boy said, showing off his dazzling teeth, “me and Ben here butt heads—”

“—but at times like dis,” spoke up the stone-skinned man beside him, head bowed, “me and Johnny’s differences don’t matter no more. Not even a little.”

Tuesday, August 10, 2010, 6:26 P.M.

You’d think the fact that it could fly would make the Fantasticar easier to parallel park.

“No, more to the left.” Spider-Man craned his neck, poking it as far out the window as it’d go.

“Well, err, pay the owner for the damages.” Mister Fantastic didn’t have quite the same difficulty craning his neck. “This is an emergency.”

The other three FF members and guest star Spidey rolled their eyes, and then the group hurried their way through the parking lot. Soon enough, they’d reached the Daily Bugle’s front entrance.

“Y’know, we coulda just flown the car up high and climbed in through a window,” Spider-Man said as the five boarded the elevator.

“Well, that doesn’t seem very proper,” said Mister Fantastic.

“But you just said this was an—”

“Hey, Stretch-o?” spoke up Thing, shooting Mister Fantastic a worried glance. “Not for nothin’, but are you sure this elevator can handle me?”

“Didn’t have any problems with Rhino,” Spider-Man muttered.

“P-Pardon me,” spoke up another, considerably more timid voice. All heads turned to the security guard standing watch by the elevator. “You can’t go up to the Bugle without a pass.”

“Oh, of course, my apologies.” Mister Fantastic gave his warmest smile.

“You’ll have to fill out some entry forms…”

“Right away.” An arm stretched across the hall to grab the indicated pen and clipboard off the front desk.

Spider-Man passed the time by seeing how hard be could bury his palms in his face.

Tuesday, August 10, 2010, 6:41 P.M.

Spidey had to fight the urge to yell “FINALLY!” the moment the elevator doors slid open. He
sprinted through the newsroom amid the stares of staffers, guiding the Four to Jameson’s office.

“Picklepuss!” Spidey announced with enough gusto to knock the cigar from JJ’s mouth. “I heard you love superheroes, so I brought you a whole- No, wait, that’s right, you hate superheroes. Ohhhhh, you might wanna cover your eyes.” He perched himself atop Jameson’s desk, sending papers flying, then turned to usher his fellow supers into the room.

“Excuse me, Mr. Jameson?” said Mister Fantastic, moving to the front of the group. “If we could have a moment of your t-?”

“Get out of my office!” Jameson spat.

“Well, we tried.” Stretchy-Butt spun towards the exit.

But Spidey webbed the door shut. “Listen, Jonah. The only reason we bothered coming here is because we’ve got news for you that you’re actually going to like. Hear us out.”

“You’re not exactly giving me much choice, kid.” Jameson knelt to retrieve his cigar.

That “kid” part made Spider-Man shudder. Of all the people who could’ve learned his secret identity… “You were right, JJ – ‘broken clock’ right, I mean. I have been a menace lately, me and my shiny new hero team. Know why?” He leaned in close enough to touch Jameson’s twitching nose. “Because Oscorp’s been blackmailing me into working for them.”

Jameson relit his cigar in silence.

“It’s true, Mr. Jameson,” spoke up Invisible Girl. “We all vouch for Peter.”

Spider-Man nodded. “They found out my secret identity, and they were threatening my aunt, my friends, my -girlfriends-” He nearly hit his tongue clean off. “My girlfriend. Singular.” But now, of course, every last one of those people was safe, a fact which made Spider-Man feel like he’d spent a week in a spa.

“Point is,” said Human Torch, “we were hoping to set up an exclusive, tell-all interview. Y’know, like the one I did about Namor and my s-” He was cut off by a shove from his sister.

“There’s so much stuff the public needs to know about.” Spider-Man continued. “Stuff I should’ve told them ages ago. For starters, turns out Emily Osborn was in league with her husb-” He was halfway through the sentence when his spider-sense started howling like a wounded animal. “Uh oh.”

Immediately, a mini-Spider-Slayer crawled out from beneath the desk and aimed its laser-turret squarely at Jameson.

“Look out!” But it barely had time to before Spider-Man squished it under his spandex-covered foot. “Phew, that was a close-”

Two more Spider-Slayers crawled out from the desk. Then three from behind the framed newspapers hanging on the wall, four from atop the ceiling fan… In seconds, the whole office was covered with the things like a swarm of scarabs.


“They followed me here, too?” Spider-Man didn’t know if he wanted to scream or groan. “Okay,
now this is just getting Orwellian.”

“Followed you?” Jameson’s spittle stuck to the edge of his bubble. “I should’ve known this was your f-!”

“Yes, I’m the second coming of Satan. Now shush.”

The five heroes knelt into battle poses, standing back-to-back around the desk. Seemed Invisible Girl was holding off on conjuring more forcefields, daring the robots to make the first move.

By now, there was barely an inch of space in the room not filled by bug-bots, though they at least kept a radius around the heroes. The things were even crawling all over Jameson’s forcefield, leaving the guy white as a sheet.

“This just proves my point!” Spider-Man yelled. “These are exactly the kind of robots Smythe sicced on Midtown High last year, so if you had any doubts he’s still a bad guy-”

“You must have me confused with my son.” A sudden voice made the whole office jolt. It was cold, sharp, and tinged with both robotic distortion and an accent that matched Alistair’s. “I assure you, my own models are considerably more sophisticated.” At first Spider-Man thought it was coming from one of the robots, but he was wrong – It was coming from all of the robots. Their collective speakers were enough to make the walls shake. “Tsk, tsk, Spider-Man. We’ve been nothing but generous to you, and still you insist on stirring up trouble. So when the night ends with blood on your hands, I want you to know that it could’ve been avoided.”

“Then you admit you’re working for Oscorp?” Spider-Man shot back.

“Oh, it won’t matter what I do or don’t admit to,” said the voice from the Spider-Slayers, “as soon as my beautiful robots have slaughtered every last person in this building.”

“Every last-? The Bugle staff!” Human Torch blasted the door open with a fireball, revealing a newsroom just as bug-infested as the office.

By now, the place had devolved into utter chaos. Mr. Robertson and Urich were huddled in a corner, Foswell was attempting to fight the bots off with a mop, Betty was swatting some away from a cowering Ned with her purse, and Benny the copy boy was running in circles and screaming his lungs out at the bug-bot latched to his scalp.

Thank god, before the first death-laser could be fired, Invisible Girl tossed up more forcefields (cleanly bisecting the bot on Benny’s head). Every last one of them was safe – not that too terribly many people had been in danger to begin with. If there was one benefit to Doctor Doom’s invasion, it was that few were bothering to show up to work this week.

“Flame on!” Human Torch led the charge into the newsroom, smashing robots in his fiery wake. The other heroes were right behind him, with Thing stomping bug-bots to dust, Mister Fantastic weaving an intricate web of limbs to punch as many as possible, Invisible Girl exploding bots left and right by summoning forcefields directly right inside them (Remind Spidey to never tick her off), and the main attraction himself ricocheting around the room, taking out robots in a hurricane of fists and webs.

But they’d barely started to dent the swarm when an earthquake hit the office. All at once, windows exploded, and a fresh swarm of Spider-Slayers burst into the newsroom. These ones were fewer but bigger – the same size of the ones that’d attacked Peter’s school.

“C’mon, guys, why’s it have to be spiders?” Spider-Man backed away, holding out his hands. “I
mean, there’s so many other things to slay, right? Dragons, vampires, electric guitars, work with me here-” He ducked a flood of death-lasers. “So uncreative…”

“You want creative, Spider-Man?” came Spencer’s voice from the swarm. “Then you’ll be delighted to meet one of my newest models – the Living Brain.”

Through the shattered remains of windows climbed a gray-green robot twice as big as the others, and this one was humanoid, bulky, and boxy – It must’ve crawled straight out of the sixties.

“What the Living Brain here lacks in mobility, it makes up for in AI capability,” Spencer said coolly. “The perfect match for a team like yours.”

“Aww, you made a death robot just for us?” said Torch as he sped around the ceiling, frying mini-Slayers left and right. “That’s so thoughtful of you!”

“Yeah.” Thing barreled towards the newcomer, shoulder-first. “And it got here right in time fer CLOBBERIN’ TIME.” He made a head-on collision with the Brain-Dink.

-before bouncing right off. Thing hadn’t left so much as a dent.

“I’ve been more thoughtful than you realize,” said Spencer. “The Living Brain comes equipped with a clobber-proof hull, a vacuum-sealed suction prison-”

On his words, the Living Brain lunged for Mister Fantastic, which wasn’t hard seeing as the guy had stretched himself across half the room. A cone-shaped gun thingy emerged from its oversized arm-

“Whoa Nelly!”

-and proceeded to suck up Mister Fantastic like Noo Noo sucking up Tubby Custard.

“-an asbestos gun-”

Another gun unfurled from the robot’s other arm to spray Human Torch with a gray substance. It hit with enough force to knock him from the air, leaving him extinguished in a gooey pile on the floor. “Great, now I can’t shoot fire and I’m gonna get cancer.”

“-and, of course, invisibility-seeing sensors.”

In a quick, sudden motion, the Living Brain swung an arm straight into a patch of empty air. The empty air let out a feminine cry and collapsed to the floor, causing every last forcefield in the newsroom to wink out.

“No!” The next instant, Spider-Man was vaulting over desks and kicking over printing presses in his scramble to smash every last mini-Slayer in sight. They’d be firing their death-lasers any second now.

A good chunk of the staff was paralyzed with terror, but there was one person who managed to sprint for the elevator. One surly, Hitler-stache wearing person. But in his blind panic, Jameson failed to spot the Slayer perched right above the doors.

But Spider-Man didn’t. “Jameson, look out!” He dived for all he was worth. If Spidey could knock Jameson out of the way of the impending laser beam, he could save the both of them from getting
fried.

But that was an “if.” What actually ended up happening was that both of them took a direct hit. Pain rocked his body, and Spider-Man heard a scream – maybe his own, maybe someone else’s – and then he went limp, and his eyelids started to shut, and the carpet felt so very nice against his cheek, and…

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**Tu esday, August 10, 2010, 7:16 P.M.**

“Nnngh…” Gradually, Spider-Man’s eyes opened. The first thing his brain pieced together was that he was definitely no longer in the Daily Bugle’s newsroom, unless the Bugle had some manner of secret sex dungeon that Spidey had been thus far unaware of.

The second thing Spider-Man’s brain pieced together was that there was something heavy stuck to his right arm.

“Whuh?” Spider-Man sprang to his feet, darting his head around. An overhead lamp provided just enough light to make out his surroundings, not that there was much to make out. This place was totally cramped and empty. And for the record, the cold, sterile floor his cheek had just been pressed against? Not half as comfy as that carpet.

Waitaminut. Gray, barren walls? Loose wires running across the low ceiling in a tangled mess? This was just like the lab where Spider-Man had fought the Ultimate Spider-Slayer. Spidey knew where he was now!

“Ugh…” groaned a voice from behind him. “What the…?” There came a sudden tug on Spider-Man’s right arm. “You! What have you done to me this time, you wall-crawling menace? If you don’t answer me in the next four seconds-!”

Hell. Spider-Man was in hell.

With growing horror, he turned in place to confirm his suspicions. Yep, there Jameson stood beside him, his suit all wrinkled from his nap, and connecting his left arm to Spidey’s right was a device that looked like a cross between a pair of handcuffs and an alarm clock. The part trapping Spidey’s and JJ’s wrists was stuck tight to the rectangular part with the clock face, meaning that the slightest tug from Spider-Man sent Jameson stumbling towards him, and the slightest tug from Jameson did absolutely nothing.

“-hearing from my attorney if you don’t tell me the meaning of this right this instant!”

“The meaning of this?” Spider-Man took a breath, put his back to Jameson (which required him to twist his arm a bit), bowed his head, and said in his most somber voice, “The truth is… I like you, Jameson. In fact, I like you so much that I’ve attached you to my own body so that you will always be a part of WE’VE BEEN KIDNAPPED, DINGUS.”

“DON’T YOU YELL AT ME!” Jameson made a couple attempts to jerk his wrist free of its restraint, but all he managed to do was make Peter’s eyes roll.

“Here, let me spider-strength this thing. Pop it right open.” Spidey wrapped his fingers around their silver handcuff contraption.

But just as he was starting to squeeze, a voice said, “I wouldn’t do that if I was you. Unless you want to set off the bomb.”
A previously-unnoticed TV screen flickered to life on the wall overhead, snapping the prisoners’ attention to it. Onscreen was the familiarly smug face of Alistair Smythe, and looming over his wheelchair was an older, grizzled yet no less smug face of a guy Spidey could only presume was Smythe Senior. From the looks of things, the two of them were recording from some separate region of this very secret lab.

“Oh, what a surprise!” Spider-Man pointed an accusing finger at the screen (though it had to come from his left hand). “You’re in league with your dad after all.”

“Yes, Oscorp’s new heroes are a bunch of lying criminals,” said Alistair, “I’m sure you’ll feel very clever in the scant few moments before you explode. Which—” He rolled back the sleeve of his dress shirt to check his watch. “—seeing as we’re coming up on seven-twenty, should be happening in…”

_Tuesday, August 10, 2010, 7:20 P.M._

“…precisely half an hour from now.”

“A time bomb?” Behind his mask, Peter raised an eyebrow. “Wait wait wait, if your robots knocked me and the Jolly One out and dragged us all the way down here, then why didn’t you, y’know, kill us while we were napping?”

Alistair gave this a moment’s thought. “Well, that wouldn’t have been nearly as funny.”

“Point taken.”

“Really, now, you get to spend the last moments of your life with the guy who hates you more than all your rogues gallery combined? Oh, it’s delicious!” Alistair let out a manic cackle before directing his dad to turn his wheelchair around. “Wish me and Daddy could stay and watch the fun, but we’ve got business to attend to. As soon as I’m back, though, I’m watching the recording on repeat until I piss myself laughing.”

The screen cut to black.

“Well,” said Spider-Man, “this royally—”

“Oh, and one more thing.” But then it snapped back on to an extreme closeup of Alistair’s grinning, punchable mug. “You could probably break down the steel exit door with your super-strength and try to escape this facility, but fair warning, there are a couple dozen more Spider-Slayers waiting outside for you. Have fun trying to fight them all with a pudgy, middle-aged man strapped to your arm.”

And then it was back to black.

“-stinks.”

_Tuesday, August 10, 2010, 7:25 P.M._

You know the most fun part about being strapped to a time bomb with your arch nemesis? Since they were inching ever-closer to danger, the Web-Head’s spider-sense was set to constant tingle mode, helpfully reminding him of his impending death, and it only got worse with every passing second. It was giving him almost as bad a headache as Jameson’s mouth, which was stuck in a similarly constant state.
“…when my lawyer’s done with you, you won’t be able to afford a costume as good as the amazing Bag-Man’s, who, by the way, was a far better superhero than you’ll ever be.”

Spider-Man craned his neck to check the bomb’s countdown timer. Oh, perfect, he’d already wasted the first sixth of the rest of his life just trying to gather his thoughts.

“…and now, thanks to you, the Daily Bugle’s been dragged into this madness!” Jameson finally ended his raving so he could catch his breath.

“I didn’t mean to put you guys in danger,” said Spider-Man. “Trust me, my first instinct was to bust into the Osborn penthouse and kick Harry’s teeth in, but I’ve learned my lesson about going after the crooks with good publicity.” And Tombstone had been the teacher. “How was I supposed to know the Smythes had that many Slayers on hand?” He faltered. “I just hope the Fantastic Four are doing okay without me…”

“Well, I guess we’ll never know,” Jameson said stiffly, “unless you can dream up some ridiculous escape plan in the next two thousand seven hundred sec-”

“Oh, perfect,” Spider-Man said, “I’d already wasted the first sixth of the rest of my life just trying to gather my thoughts.”

“Okay, I’ve always been too scared to ask – What is with the ‘seconds’ thing you do?”

Jameson’s face went blank. “What ‘seconds’ thing?”

“Never mind.” Spider-Man sighed. “I’ve got a blue spider-tracer in my belt that could tell my girlfriend where I am… except we didn’t have time to bring our GPS into the safe house. And there’s nothing in this room but us…” It was pretty cramped in here, too. The place was barely bigger than a broom closet. “…which means our only choice is to fight our way through the robots outside.”

Spider-Man stepped towards the steel exit door-

“‘No!’”

-only to find his right arm yanked downwards.

“‘What? Jameson-’”

“I’m not going out there.” Jameson had plopped himself on the floor, legs folded. If you’d shaved his mustache, he’d have passed for a toddler. “I’m done with robots!”

“I feel like I should be surprised at you, but…” Spider-Man held back his groan, took a breath, and then hoisted Jameson up over his shoulder, butt-first.

“‘Put me down, you menace! I’m not going out there. I’m not!’” And now Jameson was hitting and kicking him every chance he got.

“Jameson, I swear to Christ, if I hear one more word from you, I’m ripping both our hands off, webbing the wounds shut, and then having Mister Fantastic regrow them later. And I will pummel the Spider-Slayers into a pulp using your disembodied hand. Is that what you want, Jameson? Do you want the hand-bludgeon? DO YOU?”

All of a sudden, Jameson was still and silent. Weird. At least, he was until his face got all scrunched up and leaky. The sight was kind of unsettling, to be honest. It looked less like he was crying and more like he was sponge being squeezed dry.

But nevertheless, it got Peter’s own face to soften. “I-I’m sorry, Mr. Jameson. I didn’t mean to snap
at you.”

“I’m j-just so… tired of this.” It was surreal. Peter had never seen Jameson hug his knees before. Or wipe snot off his mustache. “You know, I remember what it was like before. Back when superheroes and supervillains were in the history books next to biplanes and jukeboxes where they belonged. Before my place of work became a playground for spider-freaks and rhinocerous-freaks and killer robots.” He turned away, hiding his bright red face. “It’s super-people. It’s always the super-people.”

Spider-Man knelt down, allowing the two’s cuffed hands to lower. Then he shut his eyes, bringing before them images of the Sinister Six on the news… and the damp armrest in the old Parker household living room.

Sometimes, Peter worried this wacky world of theirs was driving all its denizens crazy. Heck, just look at Peter himself. Now he was diving head-first into some weird three-pronged relationship because he’d been scared robots were gonna exterminate humanity overnight. But then it’d turned out robots hadn’t exterminated humanity overnight, and now Peter had to live with his choice. Now he had to live in fear that his relationship with MJ was gonna end up like his relationship with Betty, wherein so much as one look at her gorgeous face left Peter awash in utter, utter shame.

Was Peter really doing this with Mary Jane because he wanted her to be happy, or was it just because she was so incredibly freaking mind-numbingly oh-my-god-you-would-not-believe-how-hot-she-is-if-I-told-you-pants-shatteringly hot? And if the answer was both, did that make Peter shallow? Oh lord, it did. He was a shallow person. He was a shallow person, and now he was going to die in a shallow grave or- or something else equally ironic.

Peter needed to confess. Sure, Jameson was no priest, but given the circumstances, this was Peter’s best shot at salvation, right? And, sure, if Christianity was true like Aunt May had always maintained, then Peter was almost certainly going to hell no matter what because Peter had rarely gone to church or because he hadn’t saved himself for marriage or because he thought maybe Thor wasn’t crazy and the guy really was a Norse god or because he thought Jesus might’ve just been a mutant or something or because- Okay, that settled it. Peter was doing it. He was confessing his freaky, unholy three-way relationship to Jameson.

“‘It’s always the super-people! I swear, they’re doing almost as much damage to this country as THOSE GODDAMN LIBERALS.’”

…Never mind, Peter was taking it to his grave.

_Tuesday, August 10, 2010, 7:29 P.M._

_Deep breaths, Parker, deep breaths._ Spider-Man was letting the pressure get to him. He had no choice but to fight off the Spider-Slayers camped outside, and for him to stand any chance, he needed Jameson’s cooperation. He needed to find some way to calm Jameson down… which Spidey was pretty sure had been one of Hercules’s twelve labors.

Actually, though, Jameson ended up running out of steam on his own. The screaming and crying came to a halt, and now he merely sat back-to-back with Spider-Man on the cold floor, cradling his head and whimpering. “_Joan… I’m so sorry, Joan…_”

Spider-Man glanced back at him. “Is that your wife?” he asked softly.

Jameson gave a slow nod. “You said you had a girlfriend, kid?”
“Y-Yeah.”

“If we come out of this alive, you’re going to go tell her how much you love her, and don’t you dare let any pubescent love drama stop you.” He snorted. “You’ve got the best years of your life ahead of you, and whatever’s holding you back, whatever your teenage brain thinks is so big and important, it’s not. You tell her you love her.”

Peter managed a laugh. “Yes, sir.” He thought a moment, then reached into his utility belt. The ring was still in there, safely tucked away. With everything going on lately, Peter had forgotten to take it back out.
Academic Transcript

Saturday, August 14, 2010, 9:02 A.M.

A man sat alone on the therapy couch, his dark, square mustache hidden by the room’s dimmed lights.

“I was wrong,” he said, wrists on his knees, eyes on the carpet. “All this time, I was wrong about him.” His voice was hollow. Lifeless. “I just wish I’d realized it sooner.”

Tuesday, August 10, 2010, 7:32 P.M.

So now the two of them were just sitting there, Jameson wiping his mustache and Peter turning over the ring in his fingers. How much time was left? Peter glanced back at the bomb’s timer. That little, huh?

“Mr. Jameson?” In his peripheral vision, he saw Jameson’s head turn his way. “The other day at the hospital… you were right. I did the wrong thing. I’m a smart guy – I could’ve found some way to support my aunt without breaking the law or- or risking your paper’s rep. I could’ve honored my Uncle Ben without putting everyone I care about in danger. It’s just…” Oh, great, now the inside of his mask was all wet. “…the spider-powers didn’t come with an instruction manual, y’know? I keep having to make choices, and they’re all piling up on my shoulders, and- and you were right. You were right, and Eddie was right. I’ve been…” His voice broke. “…irresponsible.”

For a moment, there was no sound in the chamber but a soft, shaky echo.

“You know something, kid?” Jameson kept his shoulders stiff, facing away. “All this time, I’ve been a hypocrite. I gave you so much grief, saying you were only a hero for attention, and then the moment my own kid got powers, all I could think of was how famous it’d make him.” He paused, then added, “And, well, if Colonel Jupiter’s career had ever managed to take off… if he’d ever made any enemies, he could’ve put Joan and me in danger, couldn’t he? So maybe wearing a mask isn’t the dumbest idea in the world.”

More shaky echoes.

“Peter?” Slowly, Jameson rose to his feet, dragging Peter’s arm with him. He checked the timer.

“We’ve got fifteen minutes left.” Jameson’s smile was as shaky as the echoes. “Want to go fight some robots?”

Tuesday, August 10, 2010, 7:41 P.M.

Spider-Slayer remains and a fractured door frame both became shrapnel, bursting through the air and onto the pavement in front of a decrepit, abandoned fish market.

“W-We did it.” The moment he was out of the building and standing beneath the beautiful, beautiful sunset, Spider-Man collapsed to the pavement so he could pant his lungs out. And beside him, his time bomb buddy did likewise. “We actually did it.”

Let’s do a tally of Spider-Man’s battle damage thus far – There were the scorch marks from countless Doombots, his leg, which was still acting up every so often thanks to Big Wheel’s bullets, a couple stray dinosaur bites, and now a fresh dose of injuries from the Spider-Slayers.
Whoo hoo. Superhero life.

“Not sure how much good it did, though,” said Jameson, dusting soot off his dress shirt. His own wardrobe hadn’t been left totally unscorched, either.

Spider-Man pulled himself to his feet so he could inspect the building behind them. Somehow, he didn’t think old tuna cans and stinky, rotting fish carcasses would be of much help. This place was full of nothing but useless junk that no one ever came near – which was almost certainly why Oscorp had built a secret lab under it. Between this one and the one under the abandoned police station, Oscorp must’ve had hidden labs all over the city.

“There must be some way to…” Spidey gave the surrounding area a good look over. He was just fixing to give a dejected sigh when he did a double take. “Wait, wait, look!” He hurried to some of the more intact robo-remains. “This one’s got a busted pipe, and it’s spraying liquid oxygen! If we can hold our shackles just right… Bingo.”

One icy jet stream later, the shackled were brittle enough for a super-strong wrist to break right through. Then it was simply a matter of whipping up a web-slingshot and chucking the bomb into the bottom of the nearest river. By the time it went off, the only lives it’d take would be of the marine variety.

Tu esday, August 10, 2010, 7:49 P.M.

After that, Spider-Man managed to flag down a passing S.H.I.E.L.D. copter to get Jameson some medical attention, and the agents promised to check out that secret fish market lab to see if there truly was anything… wait for it… fishy about it.

Before boarding, Jameson took one last look back at Spider-Man. The two shared a nod, and then Spidey watched the helicopter vanish up into the sky. Luckily, there’d been a doctor aboard – Jameson’s heart could probably use a checkup after today.

Now, then, it was well past time to get back to the battle. Though Spidey was sure those robots had been nothing the Fantastic Four couldn’t…

Spider-Man had a little trouble finishing that thought on account of the Godzilla-sized Spider-Slayer that’d just marched down the street in the distance, towering over buildings and shooting proportionally-sized death-lasers every which way.

Tu esday, August 10, 2010, 8:14 P.M.

Things might have escalated just a teeny bit since Spider-Man and Jameson got dragged away from the battle. For one thing, the fighting had spilled out of the Bugle office and into the streets outside, meaning Spider-Slayers of wildly varying sizes were now scurrying about and shooting lasers into traffic. For another thing, the number of Living Brains involved had quadrupled – one for each team member – so now Human Torch was weaving through the air dodging streams of asbestos, Thing was trying his hardest to clobber a Brain’s clobber-proof hull, Invisible Girl was discovering that the Living Brains could pass through her forcefields with ease, and Mister Fantastic was huddled over on a secluded street corner, tinkering with some stray bits of machinery.

“Say my name and I magically appear!” Spider-Man made his grand entrance by swooping in on a web-strand, grabbing Invisible Girl, and swooping off moments before the death lasers hit.
“Hopefully someone said my name a second ago. It’s always a shot in the dark with that quip.”

“Spider-Man! You’re okay!” Invisible Girl beamed at him, then nodded to the buff black guy swinging behind them.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Jameson, too.” Spider-Man landed near a cluster of perfectly ordinary Spider-Slayers. Invis Girl would have no problems fighting these ones (Did “Invis Girl” sound good? Five syllables was a mouthful, but her name was tough to shorten). “What about the rest of the Bugle staff?”

“S.H.I.E.L.D. got them to safety,” said IG. “While he was inside that Living Brain, my husband used its innards to make an EMP and take out all the robots in the buildings, but then Smythe called reinforcements, so now Reed’s trying to do it again but bigger.”

“But if the Bugle staff’s all safe, why’s Spency still bothering with the robot attack? Tempter tantrum? Sunk cost fallacy?” Maybe Spencer figured the Daily Bugle couldn’t print a defamatory story about Oscorp if there wasn’t a Daily Bugle left.

But Spidey didn’t have long to ponder this once he and I-Dubs were forced to duck one of the Godzilla-Slayer’s laser beams. Now the building behind them had a bit more in common with Swiss cheese than it had a second ago. Spidey hurriedly webbed up the structure, but it took an entire web-cartridge, and that’d been from just one stray blast.

Now that the Godzilla-Slayer had his attention, though, Spider-Man couldn’t help but notice the tiny little figure standing in front of a transparent, window-like patch of the robot’s mechanical spider head. It was only thanks to his perfect, spider-bite-induced twenty-twenty vision that Spidey could tell it was Spencer Smythe. Spider-Man guessed, for whatever reason, the big one had to be piloted manually. Maybe it was just too huge and dangerous to be trusted to an AI. But since Spider-Man tragically lacked his own mecha, his efforts to stop the Godzilla-Slayer were limited to getting fleeing civilians out of its path.

“So where’d the giant mechanical spider come from?” Spider-Man asked his new web-swinging buddy as they dropped some armfuls of civilians to safety a couple blocks over. “Is my life produced by Jon Peters now?”

“It crawled outta the East River a while ago,” Thing said as he smashed a couple smaller Slayers. “That’s where most of ’em have been coming from.”

“Well, that explains the smell.” Oscorp had planned this. All those months, they must’ve been mass-producing robots and then letting them lie in wait in the rivers until the time was right. Spider-Man should’ve taken action ages ago, and now…

But the next instant, something was able to momentarily distract Spider-Man from his perpetual crushing guilt – the something in question being the sight of some humanoid figures flying out from Oscorp Tower in the distance.

Within seconds, Iron Patriot and the Ultimate Spider-Slayer had zoomed into range so they could hit up the Godzilla-Slayer’s joints with their plasma blasts. In no time at all, the mecha had collapsed like a tipped cow, and it didn’t even knock over any buildings – It only grazed the sides of a couple.

After that, Mister Fantastic finished remotely shutting down all the smaller Slayers via the power of science, and so, now that the civilians were safe, the Fantastic Four and Spider-Man rushed to where the Godzilla-Slayer had fallen. The Oscorp heroes had already gathered there around the
robot head. Inside it, Spencer seemed to have toppled over in the cockpit and was now scowling through the window at his son.

“Nothing personal, dad.” The Ultimate Spider-Slayer waved at him.

Iron Patriot, meanwhile, waved to the approaching heroes. “Oh, no need to thank us.”

“Don’t worry, we won’t.” Spider-Man said flatly. “Newsflash, the Bugle staff’s all safe with S.H.I.E.L.D. now. Even if your bots smashed their printing presses, print wasn’t exactly alive and well to begin with. The Bugle will just post my exclusive interview online, and even if you stop that somehow, I’ll just take it to a different paper. What are you gonna do, shut down every newspaper ever and- and the whole internet?” Spidey barged up to his “teammates,” throwing out his arms. “My friends and family are safe now. You’ve got nothing to blackmail me with. You could start taking random civilians hostage, but I think today’s little stunt’s proved you’re putting the city in danger anyhow.” He jabbed a finger right in Iron Patriot’s helmeted face. “I will do everything in my power to stop you, and any blood that gets shed is on your hands. What else can you do? Kill me? Smarter supervillains than you dingbats have tried. Expose my secret ID? Go ahead. My friends and family are safe, so I don’t even need it anymore. I win. You’ve got nothing. Nothing!”

A moment passed.

“Well, we could just sue you and the Daily Bugle for slander,” said Iron Patriot.

“Sue us-? THEN WHY DID YOU SIC KILLER ROBOTS ON ME IN THE FIRST PLACE?”

“Ooh, the slander’s begun already,” spoke up Smythe Junior. “My father sicced killer robots on you. Remember, the wanted supervillain? He’s quite the madman. Who knows why he does anything-?”

“GAAAAAARGH!” Spider-Man’s retort was ten times louder and a billion times less incoherent than his previous ones. Really, though, he knew why Oscorp had sicced killer robots on him – to prove that they could. To prove that they could make Spider-Man’s life a living hell and get away with it. And giving the Oscorp-brand heroes yet another notch in their belts had been an added bonus.

Spider-Man turned back to Fantastic Four, sulking. “I don’t suppose you guys can deus ex machina me out of this jam?”

“Sorry, don’t think so-” Suddenly, Mister Fantastic pointed above them. “-but he probably can.”

“What-?” Spider-Man had been too busy screaming to notice it, but the setting sun had been blocked out. There were army guys descending from the sky. They looked like a buncha G.I. Joes in suped-up battle armor, each one wearing their own rocket boot thrusters and carrying big old sci-fi guns that each looked like they could blow up a planet.

And at the helm of them all was a grizzled old dude sporting an eyepatch beneath his helmet. “Hi.” He landed before the Oscorp heroes with an audible thud. “Nick Fury, nice to meet you, you’re under arrest.”

“Oh?” Iron Patriot cocked his head. “On what charges?”

“Well, for starters-” Another person descended from the sky right behind all the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents, and judging from the flowing blonde hair and skintight red leotard, she could only be Miss Marvel (a government-employed hero who possessed the standard superpower package of flight
and invulnerability). “-we found your buddy Alistair’s confession tape in his secret lab.”

She landed beside Fury, then held out a gloved hand. Out of her palm erupted one of those fancy hologram videos, and it showed a familiar shot of Spider-Man and Jameson standing together in a gray, barren room while the Smythes taunted them from a video screen on the wall.

“Oh, what a surprise!” came Spider-Man’s voice from the hologram. “You’re in league with your dad after all.”

“Yes,” came Alistair’s voice, “Oscorp’s new heroes are a bunch of lying criminals. I’m sure you’ll feel very clever in the scant few moments before you explode.” The hologram winked out.

The real Alistair, meanwhile, looked quite stunned. Well, alright, his face was hidden under his armor’s helmet, but his posture looked stunned.

“Hey, you were right!” said Spider-Man. “I do feel clever.”

“Idiot!” Iron Patriot’s steel-covered hand smacked itself across the Ultimate Spider-Slayer’s steel-covered face. “So not only did you not kill Spider-Man when you had the chance, but you incriminated yourself, too?”

“If it makes you feel any better, we were looking for excuses to arrest you, anyways,” said Fury, “just because I really don’t like you guys.”

Alistair was left stumbling backwards, holding out his hands in a soothing gesture. “Calm down, little Osborn. Pretending to be good guys was getting boring, anyways.”

“This was supposed to be my whole future!” Harry snapped.

“Don’t get your panties in a twist. You can still be king of the city. It’s just that now we get to do things the fun way.”

“The fun way?” spoke up Fury. “Is that the way that involves you clowns getting your asses kicked?” He nodded to the laser cannon in his hands. “This unit was designed to take down the Hulk. I think we can handle you.”

“Maybe,” said Alistair, “put do you think you can handle us plus all the robots we totally pretended to defeat?”

No sooner had he spoken the words than Spider-Man’s spider-sense blared like mad. Behind all the heroes and villains, the Godzilla-Slayer’s severed arm snapped back to its body, its eyes burned bright red, and it pulled itself to its feet. And to top things off, little hatches opened up in its sides to deploy a fresh swarm of horse-sized Spider-Slayers, plus plenty more Living Brains. The result was that the situation in the streets went from one where the supervillains were held as gunpoint into more of a storm of utter chaos in which laser beams hurled through the air in a downright psychedelic lightshow. And before the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents could land a single hit, Iron Patriot and the Ultimate Spider-Slayer blasted off into the evening sky, guarded by a thick fog of robots.

Now, if you were anything like Spider-Man himself, you were probably totally lost right now at the sheer insanity of the situation at hand. Here’s a quick refresher:

The Godzilla-Slayer piloted by Spencer Smythe was back to rampaging around the streets outside the Daily Bulge building, and it was accompanied by a sleet of smaller Spider-Slayers that’d turned all of Midtown into their playground. And off in the distance, a fleet of Jack O’Lanterns was now erupting from Ryker’s Island like a swarm of winged monkeys, complete with the costumes and
gliders Oscorp was supposed to have confiscated.

Opposing all this madness was Spider-Man, the Fantastic Four, Miss Marvel, and Nick Fury, and a couple dozen other S.H.I.E.L.D. agents decked out in futuristic battle armor. Most of the pedestrians had had the common sense to run for it by now, meaning the heroes could focus on wailing on as many robots and fast-approaching Jack O'Lanterns as possible.

Only problem was, the pumpkin-heads and robots saw no reason to keep the fighting contained to Midtown. If anything, they were spreading out in as wide a radius as possible – the Jack O’Lanterns taking the air and the Spider-Slayers taking the ground.

Actually, no, that wasn’t the only problem. See, right as Spider-Man as in the middle of flipping around from Slayer to Slayer, punching and webbing for all he was worth, he spotted one of the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents flying to Fury’s side.

“We have a situation, sir!”

“Really?” Fury said through gritted teeth as he fired a burst of plasma at a group of robots. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“Objects inbound above the Atlantic, sir.” The agent projected another hologram video- “And they’re evading everything we throw at them.” -of a familiar pair of goblins speeding over the ocean, accompanied by even more Jack O’Lanterns, and every last one of them was on a matching, gargoyle-themed glider.

But those weren’t all that was accompanying the goblins. The Green and Lady Goblins were circling around what appeared to be a big, orange, rocket-powered blimp. The sight of a blimp moving at those speeds would’ve been almost comical, but somehow, comedy wasn’t the feeling inspired in Spider-Man when he got a head-on view of the thing. The front of the blimp had been painted with a scraggly black face… like a gigantic pumpkin bomb.

And if that didn’t make things unambiguous enough, the Green Goblin proceeded to wave into the camera and recite for them:

“Yes, it turns out my team,

Was not all that they seemed.

They were really bad guys.

(Is that such a surprise?)

But it makes little difference,

I insist with vociferance.

You’ll soon see what I mean,

Once this city’s gone green! Bwa ha ha ha ha ha-!”
A woman sat alone in her wheelchair beside the therapy couch, her face hidden by the scarlet cloth wrapped round her eyes.

“It’s worse for us telepaths,” she said softly. “The grief leaps out of their minds and stabs us like a knife.”

Not a single breath passed through the safe house entrance room until the news feed finally, mercifully showed aerial footage of Spider-Man returning to the battle. Then a whole flood of breaths hit the television. Gwen and MJ sat huddled together on the couch while Madame Web remained in the corner of the room in her wheelchair, aloof. But after a moment, Mary Jane was left alone with the woman, and the moment after that, the woman was by herself.

Mary Jane had followed Gwen into the next room. This region of the safe house looked like a guest bedroom ripped straight from a hotel. It was easy to forget they were in an underground bunker until MJ noticed there were no windows anywhere.

She found Gwen flopped over on a particularly elegant bedspread. Gwen’s black headband had been moved to her hands so she could flick it every couple seconds, sending it wobbling.

Before Mary Jane could even open her mouth, Gwen said without inflection, “I’m okay. It’s just hard to watch him sometimes. I’ll be back out there in a minute.”

No words came to mind, and so instead, MJ opted to simply sit down beside Gwen and hold her. Gwen held back (It’d been decided that, in the absence of either Peter or Gwen, merely holding Mary Jane was an acceptable action for the remaining party).

“You know, if my dad had learned about any of this, he’d have never let me see the sun again.” Now Gwen’s dull voice was tinged with sullenness. “I mean, he’d have freaked out at me even getting an apartment with my boyfriend at seventeen, let alone… everything that came after that.”

“Hey, at least the wound would’ve been fresh.” MJ gave about one-sixteenth of a goofy smile. “I don’t think I’m even capable of surprising my dad anymore.”

Gwen’s wasn’t even that big a fraction. “Did you see Eddie’s face the other day? Stupid symbiote told him everything…”

At this, MJ inhaled. “Look, I get that you and Tiger have always been close with Eddie, and I get how bad you wanna fix things with him. You know I’m not gonna screw that up again, but… to be honest, he’s still kind of a jerk. I wouldn’t lose sleep over what he thinks.”

“I know, I know, but it just gets under my skin.” Gwen flopped back down on the mattress, hiding her face. “It’s like he thinks I’m made of tissue paper. Or like there’s no way a gorgeous model could fall for me, too, so I’m obviously just doing this for Peter’s benefit.” It was at this point that she halted herself. Gwen was hiding her face pretty well, but MJ could still feel the heat radiating off it. “A-At least, that’s what I’m worried Eddie’s thinking. Obviously, I don’t really know what’s going through… though his head.” She went back to flicking her headband.
Right as MJ was about to speak, though, Gwen beat her to it again. “Why did you fall in love with me?”

Now Mary Jane was giving a mere one-thirty-sixth. “I don’t know. Maybe I just like being needed.” She leaned over the bed to give the headband a flick of her own.

It was enough to get a full-fledged smile from Gwen. No fractions. In a soft, steady voice, she said, “I’m ready to go back out.”

They walked there together.

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**Tuesday, August 10, 2010, 8:57 P.M.**

The Godzilla-Slayer would’ve been grounds for an epic battle all on its own – The added Spider-Slayers and Jack O’Lanterns were just overkill. At least the Godzilla-Slayer moved slow, so it was more or less confined to one place – making it an easy target for Iron Man once he showed up on the battlefield. The stupid mooks, on the other hand, were running amok all over Manhattan by now. The whole island was under siege.

And the Pumpkin Blimp fast approaching the city was the overkill of overkill. Either its payload was a bomb or, judging from that “going green” comment, Gobbie was planning to gas the whole city with Globulin Green. That must’ve been what the Goblins had been doing all this time – cooking up a fresh batch of the stuff.

What’s more, the weather above Manhattan had gotten appropriately stormy, complete with swirling gray clouds, a constant torrent of rain, and the occasional lightning strike on the Spider-Slayers courtesy of a certain lunatic whose voice somehow managed to carry from off in the distance (“STAND DOWN, STEEL CREATURES, OR THOU SHALT BE VANQUISHED BY THE SON OF ODIN!”). A tornado of lightning was even conjured up to knock the Godzilla-Slayer back a couple blocks.

“Oh, you think making tornadoes is cool?” Spider-Man said to his current opponents, a group of mindless robots who couldn’t understand him. “That’s nothing. I can spray goo from my wrists!”

Eventually, the swarm of baddies in front of the Daily Bugle was cleared out, meaning now all that was left was… the swarms of baddies running around the rest of Manhattan. But with such a stupidly high number of superheroes in one place, no one was really sure what to do or where to start, and so they ended up gathering around Nick Fury. He just looked the most leader-y, Spider-Man supposed. It must’ve been the eyepatch.

“Listen up. I’m only gonna say this once.” Fury had climbed atop a fallen Slayer so he could loom over the crowd. “Standing before me is every last available hero in Manhattan.”

Now, obviously, Spidey had been keeping perfect track of all these heroes and didn’t need a refresher, but for the sake of thoroughness, the full list was (deep breath): Nick Fury, the Thing, Mister Fantastic, a couple dozen Hulkbuster S.H.I.E.L.D. agents, Agent Venom, Iron Man, Human Torch, Invisible Woman, Thor, Miss Marvel, and Spider-Man himself.

…That had, of course, been in order of attractiveness.

“Well, technically, we’ve also got these guys who formed an impromptu team of defenders over in Hell’s Kitchen—” From his gauntlet, Fury projected hologram footage of a brand new hero team fighting off waves of Slayers and Jack-O’s. At the helm was Daredevil, and battling alongside him
were a buncha C-listers Spidey had never met – Power Man, Iron Fist, Jewel, and Doctor Strange. “-but they’re unorganized, undisciplined, and-” Fury’s eyes flitted to footage of Strange, who was busy calling down a swarm of otherworldly alien creatures out of some amber-colored portals he’d conjured up. “-unpredictable, so we ain’t touching them.”

The holo-footage winked out, and in its place appeared countless new projections, each focusing on a different bad guy rampaging through a unique location. “The Jack O’Lanterns aren’t blowing people up willy-nilly like last time – They’re guarding harbors, subway stations, and bridges.” One set of holograms rose above the others, and these ones each displayed the whereabouts of a different big-name baddie. “Oscorp’s forces are trying their darnedest to keep anyone and everyone from escaping the island before that blimp drops its payload. And what is that payload? According to my intel, probably Globulin Green. It was Norman Osborn’s pet project, his own take on the Super-Soldier Formula, but it never got off the ground because it makes you go batshit. Now his wife and kid have huffed a can of it, and gassing the whole city probably seems real poetic in their drugged-up heads.”

Oh, inhaling the Green made you go bananas? Wow, Spider-Man would never have guessed. So now not only did Harry need to be de-brainwashed, he needed to be detoxed.

“Richards.” Fury jabbed a finger at Mister Fantastic. “Some of my agents will accompany you back to your lab in the Baxter Building. They’ve brought some captured Jack O’Lanterns there so you can study them and whip up a cure for the Green.”

“Should be a simple matter,” said Mister Fantastic.

“Hey, wait up pal!” Before the agents could carry the stretchy man out in their helicopter, Spider-Man hopped over to him, perching on the hood of a wrecked, abandoned car. “Once you get that cure, could you take it to Iron Patriot first? He, uh, used to be my friend, and he’s the CEO of Oscorp and stuff. If we could get him on our side, maybe he could call the siege off or something?”

Mister Fantastic gave a characteristically jiggly nod. “I understand, Spider-Man.”

“I’ll have him webbed up and ready to take his medicine by the time you get there, promise.”

Once Mister Fantastic had boarded the copter, Fury continued his speech.

“The supervillains each picked their own major bridge to guard.” His hologram video cycled through them in turn. “Spencer Smythe picked the Manhattan Bridge, his son picked the Queensboro, Iron Patriot the George Washington Bridge, Lady Goblin the Brooklyn Bridge, and Green Goblin stayed behind to guard his blimp.” And judging from the footage, that blimp was well into the East Coast by now. “All flyers are coming with me to shoot that thing down. Fair warning, it’s a floating arsenal, and knocking it out of the sky without getting its gas all over the city will be a trick, but we’ll figure it out as we go. As for the rest of you, divvy yourselves up to go fight a supervillain – don’t care which, pick your poison. My Hulkbuster squad can handle the little guys.”

“Oh, we’re splitting up?” spoke up Iron Man as he hovered above the crowd. “Of course. And here I’d assumed we’d so something stupid like, I dont know, gang up on each of the bad guys one at a time.”

“Our goal is to liberate the city while causing minimal damage,” Fury retorted without skipping a beat, “and do it as fast as possible. A whole army of heroes would just scare them away again to regroup somewhere else. Now if no one else’s got any stupid-ass questions, let’s move out,
people.”

With the speech over, Fury’s rocket boots propelled him into the sky, and Iron Man, Human Torch, Thor, and Miss Marvel followed suit. If you’re deathly curious to know how the rest of the groups shook out, it ended up with Agent Venom going after the Ultimate Spider-Slayer, Invisible Woman going after Lady Goblin, and the Thing going after Spencer Smythe’s Godzilla-Slayer.

Spidey had asked that they leave Iron Patriot to him.

_Tuesday, August 10, 2010, 9:33 P.M._

Web-swinging from Midtown to the Washington Heights was a bit of a journey, and it wasn’t exactly clear skies thanks to the abundance of Jack O’Lanterns, Spider-Slayers, and, uh, literally unclear skies caused by Thor. The upside, though, was that it gave Spider-Man plenty of time to chat with the voice in his head.

_I can’t promise you miracles,_ Madame Web was saying (thinking?). _If your friend doesn’t want to fight Hamilton’s control, I can’t make him. Oh, and all these Oscorp thugs have telepathy-proofed their headgear._

_Then yanking his helmet off’s our first order of business,_ thought (said?) Spider-Man.

Not another word was thought or thought was spoken until the Web-Head had reached his destination. He arrived to find Iron Patriot and some Jack O’Lantern minions circling what had to be the worst traffic jam Spider-Man had ever seen in his life, and he’d grown up in _New York_. Cars were smashed, overturned, and generally not obeying traffic laws. Some people opted to dive out and run for it while others were doing u-turns, and all in all it was utter madness.

And Iron Patriot was at the forefront of it.

“Peter.” He landed across from Spidey on one of the bridge’s pillars nearest to the island. The Hudson swirled below them – The weather had whipped it up into a watery deathtrap. Rain poured. Lightning flashed.

“Is this really what you want, Harry?” Spider-Man had to yell to be heard over the winds. “To turn the whole city into goblins? Why? How does that help you at all? Don’t you get how nuts it is?”


Spidey ducked the opening volley of plasma blasts, then tumbled forward, putting himself close enough to kick Harry’s feet out from under him. It knocked Harry off balance, but he managed to catch himself with the thrusters in his gloves before he could topple, which doubled as a great way to shoot fire in Spider-Man’s face.

Spider-Man dodged again, then webbed Iron Patriot’s helmet so he could yank it into his fist. It made a sound like two coconuts colliding, and Harry was sent stumbling backwards.

“I even wanted to be your friend again! Did you know that?” For all his suit’s fancy weaponry, Harry opted for a sucker-punch. “We could’ve fixed things between us! All you had to do was cooperate with Oscorp—”

“‘Wah, wah, why couldn’t we have been friends?’” Spidey dodged and responded in kind. “‘All you had to do was let me hold a gun to all your loved ones.’ That’s you! That’s what you sound like!”
“Shut. Up.” You could just tell Harry’s eyes were bulging under that helmet. “You don’t get to mock me after what you-” It was all the distraction Spidey needed.

*Crack.* In seconds, he’d knocked Iron Patriot over the edge, and the two of them hurtled towards the bridge below. Spider-Man used every second of airtime to punch Iron Patriot’s chest ad nauseam.

*Wham.* Iron Patriot took the brunt of the impact, with Spidey landing safely on top of him. Harry tried to pull himself out of his newly-formed crater in the road… but one last punch caused the glowing white star on his chest to wink out. “My Arc Reactor!”

“Bingo.” Spider-Man raised his fist yet again. “No more Arc Reactor means no more flying and shooting lasers and what have you… which means you’re now wearing a very expensive hunk of scrap metal.”

This time, he brought his fist not to Iron Patriot’s chest but his head. Once it was nice and dented, Spidey was able to dig his fingers in and rip the whole helmet clean off, revealing Harry’s scarred, snarling face beneath.

“Madame Web! Do your thing!” Spider-Man called out. He could only assume the lady had heard him, judging from the glassy look that overtook Harry’s eyes.

But Spider-Man didn’t have all the time in the world to worry about it. The nearby Jack O’Lanterns had just lost interest in playing in traffic and gained interest in playing with spiders. Like a- a cat or something. Spider-Man wasn’t sure where he’d been going with that.

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**Tuesday, August 10, 2010, 9:38 P.M.**

Where-? When-? What was-? He was floating. Harry was floating.

But then Harry’s eyes shot open, and he realized he wasn’t floating – He was just sitting on a beanbag in his bedroom. Wait, hadn’t he been fighting a second ago? Where was his armor? He was just in plain old shorts and a t-shirt now. What was going on? Everything looked normal in here. Harry even had a controller in his hands. Had he been playing a video game? Had he just had the most intense space out of his life? He brought a hand to his face. It was dry, rough, and painful to the touch – a familiar sensation by now.

Then Harry’s eyes snapped to the beanbag beside his own. A withered old woman was slouched in it, her eyes covered by a scarlet cloth.

“I- I know you,” Harry stammered out. “You’re one of the test subjects of the Winkler experiments. A telepath.”

“Look at that, you’re not a complete idiot.” The woman’s voice was high and sharp, every word enunciated carefully, like she’d gone to an old timey British boarding school but then lost the accent. And as she spoke, the woman leaned forward to retrieve Harry’s CD case off the carpet. “The bedroom’s a visual metaphor for your mind. Telepaths love visual metaphors. For instance-” The woman waved a hand, and Harry found himself pinned to the beanbag as controller cords wrapped around him, trapping his arms at his sides. “*that’s* a metaphor for Dr. Hamilton’s restrictions on your brain. So then… for what might this be a metaphor?” Out of the case at her side, she foraged a plain, silver disc. In black Sharpie, it was labeled, *Harry’s Deepest Darkest Thoughts.*
“Hey!” That got him to struggle. “Stay out of my head!”

But the old woman had already slid the disc in Harry’s PS4. His plasma-screen TV roared to life. Onscreen appeared an image of Gwen lying on a beach towel over the sand, and she was wearing nothing but the bare minimum of what would qualify as a bikini.

The woman whistled. “Ooh la la.”

“I said stay out!”

“Hmm, what else do we have in here?” Next the woman grabbed the remote and changed the channel (which didn’t even make sense with the “video games as memories” metaphor, but whatever).

Onscreen, images flashed of Harry’s home, his school, friends from daycare that he hadn’t even realized he could still remember… but eventually the woman settled on a memory from when Harry was a toddler.

His mom had been in the family study, hunched over a textbook in her armchair. Harry had needed her attention, and so he’d tugged at the edge of her dress. No sooner did the memory unfold in Harry’s mind than the events played out on the TV like a live feed from Harry’s eyeballs.

His mom let out a haughty sigh. “Harry, I told you, I’m studying poetry.”

The sharpness made the toddler-Harry wince, though teenage-Harry failed to mimic the gesture. “But this is poetry.” With trembling hands, toddler Harry handed her a leaf of printer paper, upon which were a series of ink scribbles. “I wrote you a poem.”

His mom spared it a good three seconds of her time, which toddler Harry had considered a win. But then she handed it back. “You can’t rhyme ‘dancing’ with ‘laughing.’”

Toddler-Harry wilted. Teenage-Harry’s fists clenched.

The best reply toddler-Harry could muster was to repeat the words words as slowly and loudly as possible. “But… danc-ING, laugh-ING-”

“Stop that,” his mom cut in, hand on her temple. “You’re stressing the wrong syllables.”

“What’s a syllable?”

“Not now, Harry. Go pester Bernard.”

“Yes, ma’am…”

It was as toddler-Harry trudged away that the woman looked up from the screen. “Wow, your mom was a bitch.”

“She was restless,” Harry said through gritted teeth. “She didn’t have anything to do once she married my dad.”

“And now she’s…” The image onscreen changed again. Now it was a close up of a cackling, female goblin on a gargoyle-themed glider. “…lost her mind.” The woman faltered. “I- I’m sorry.”

“Save it,” Harry spat.

“Well…” The woman turned back to the screen. “…with parents like that, I can only image how
“you turned out.”

“I’m fine.”

The instant the words left Harry’s mouth, though, another memory appeared on TV – a slightly younger teenage-Harry giggling at the mask in his hand. “Maybe I’ve got some anger issues?”

The woman changed the channel yet again. Now it was one of countless memories of Harry walking to school accompanied by Peter and Gwen, both of whom were wearing glasses.

“How, your school friends were a bright spot for you.” The woman clicked the remote a couple more times, skimming through some memories of Peter. “But Peter began to neglect you, which turned out to be because he’s Spider-Man, and then he stole your girl and got your dad blown up. That’s rough, buddy.” She pursed her lips. “Still, at least your school friends aren’t dressing up like goblins and lobbing bombs at people, so…”

“What are you trying to do here?” Harry asked stiffly. “Turn me back into a ‘good guy?’”

That only made the woman laugh. “I don’t believe in ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys,’ I believe in ‘smart people’ and ‘stupid people.’ So which one are you, Harry? Are you like your buddy Alistair here—” Smythe’s smirking face appeared on the screen. “—who’s more than happy to mess up years of Oscorp’s plans because he got bored of pretending to be a superhero and wanted a funny video to watch?”

Harry gave no reply.

“No, Harry, I don’t think you really want to be a supervillain.” A smirk of her own was crossing the woman’s wrinkled lips. “You wouldn’t be dressing like the lovechild of Captain America and Iron Man if you did, now would you?”

Still no reply.

“I suspect what you really want,” the woman continued, slouching back in her beanbag, “is to have Oscorp all to yourself without having to answer to Mommy or—” She paused. “… Daddy. You’re trying to hide something from me.”

Suddenly, the woman’s hands were on her temples, and, though it was almost impossible for Harry to describe, he could feel her hooks in his brain. She was digging deeper.

Thursday, July 1, 2010, 11:58 P.M.

Orders from on high, Bernard had said.

After that, Harry had waited on that hospital bed, mind racing, his bandaged face aching. With every passing minute, the Goblin’s voice had grown fainter in his skull, and Harry’s forehead had been left throbbing the way it always did when he had Green cravings.

After what felt like forever, the infirmary door had opened, and then he had been there. Him. His perfect posture, his crisp suit, his slicked hair… It was him in his prime, like he’d stepped out of the Time magazine cover he’d once featured on.

Harry’s mother had cried out, delighted, and run to his side to stroke his red hair. “Blonde really wasn’t your color,” she’d said, kissing her husband’s clean-shaven lip.
Harry’s own reaction hadn’t been so interesting. He wanted to say this revelation had been a shock, but… when he thought about it, maybe it hadn’t been. Maybe a part of him had been expecting this. Before, Harry had thought it was the part of him that denied reality. But now, well, now the line felt blurred.

Harry’s first demand had been to prove the man’s face wasn’t a latex mask. But even once the Chameleon was ruled out, Harry had only had the man’s word that he wasn’t some other sort of shapeshifter. But as it turned out, it only took a few of those words to assure Harry. His father’s diction, his tone of voice, that look in his eyes that threatened to cut you to ribbons at any moment… Harry doubted an impostor could’ve gotten it all quite so perfect.

But why had Harry’s father waited until now to reveal himself, Harry had wondered. The answer had required something of a monologue, and his father had been all too happy to oblige.

“Ever since I discovered the wonders of the Green, I’ve wanted nothing more than for my family to experience what I experienced. To understand what I understood.” He rubbed a loving thumb over his wife’s palm. That was about the most affectionate he ever got. “Feeding it to your mother was a simple enough task, but you were different, Harry. You had to be more. So much more.”

He paced around the mattress, his voice oscillating between tranquil and enthused. “And so instead of forcing it down your throat, I dangled it in front of your face, and, as expected, you stepped up to the plate.” His lips curled the slightest amount. “Except that you took the Green’s liquid form, which, if you’d actually read any of the notes I’d left out for you, you’d have known causes blackouts. But still, it was a start.”

“What was step two?” Harry asked flatly. “Framing me as the Goblin to save your own skin?”

“Ah, yes. That.” This only made his father chuckle. “Spider-Man had gotten the upper hand for a moment, but my quick thinking turned defeat into victory, and you came out stronger for it. Look at all you’ve done since then, Harry.”

“Do you know what it was like thinking I was the Goblin?” These words were the loudest anyone in the room had yet spoken. “I got diagnosed with clinical depression and- and-”

“Yes, I’ll confess my plan nearly backfired,” his father replied, calm as ever. “Your weakness threatened to swallow you… and you needed to vanish for a while anyhow to keep up appearances, and thus I arranged your trip to Europe to visit the telepath on my payroll.”

At this, Harry was silent.

“Of course, back then I had no idea what ‘mutants’ and ‘X-Genes’ were,” his father continued, “but I’d come across telepaths during my super-mercenary dealings and witnessed their abilities firsthand. The mutant telepaths proved far too dangerous to deal with, but Gerald Winkler and Barton Hamilton were, by contrast, simple, unambitious men all too happy to do my bidding in exchange for a fat paycheck. Winkler’s experiments were able to imbue Hamilton with a simpler, more manageable form of telepathy. Hamilton can only control so many people at once, and so I had him prioritize my family and a few key business associates.”

His father loomed over Harry’s bedside, almost sneering at him. “He removed your weaknesses like a surgeon removes a tumor. The deep remorse that plagued you, the suicidal thoughts you’d humored… One by one, Hamilton excised them until you were fit to resume your normal life and return to that little school of yours. After that, it was business as usual.”

His father had grown excited for a moment, but now he turned away. “But then came another
hiccup. You and Spider-Man learned the truth – *I* was the Green Goblin. And again, I turned defeat into victory.” He raised a hand to his face, examining the palm. “The Globulin Green in my veins allowed me to survive that explosion relatively unscathed, and from there, I found it more convenient to stay dead. It was simple enough. I didn’t have to fake a body, and I even worked in some vacation time. Grand Cayman was lovely, by the way, particularly its hidden facility where I oversaw production of all my beautiful Spider-Slayers.”

His eyes had gone distant a moment, but he soon returned his attention to Harry. “And in my absence, you had the opportunity to prove yourself fit to follow in my footsteps… as well as overcome your Green addiction.” He stepped towards the bed again, arms folded behind his back. “You see, son, the Globulin Green has a powerful influence on the mind. I’m sure you’ve had your own share of ‘Goblin’ hallucinations by now. It’s a wrinkle in the Green’s effectiveness, without a doubt, but a perfectly manageable one. A weak-willed mind can so easily succumb to the Goblin’s desires and cause senseless, wanton destruction, but a strong-willed mind can work in tandem with the Goblin, channeling his bloodlust towards the pursuit of grander goals.”

“Like becoming the Big Man?” offered Harry.

His father nodded. “Or murdering an unfaithful girlfriend, in your case. When your mother saw you resist drinking more liquid Green the Saint Patrick’s Day before last, she knew you were ready to handle its gaseous form.”

Oh. Well, in that case, Harry guessed neither of his parents had been aware of that secret stash he’d destroyed ages ago. Could’ve saved them some time.*

*See Spectacular Spider-Man ep 26, Final Curtain, for details! – Ed

“And yes, you failed to kill Spider-Man and his little girlfriend that day,” his father said with a shrug, “but, again, it was a start.”

“Yeah, and you’re not one to throw stones when it comes to losing to Spider-Man, are you?”

His father ignored him. “And from the wounds of your failure, weakness again threatened to sprout, and so back to Hamilton you went. My plans proceeded as normal after that… until you surprised me by going after Venom all by yourself.” A smile crossed his face. A hand touched Harry’s shoulder. “You’ve no idea how proud you’ve made me.”

Before, those words might have moved Harry to tears. But now he could hardly bring himself to move at all. “Proud? Of what, getting my face blown off?”

“Of following in my footsteps.” His father brought lanky, manicured fingers to his suit, then began to carefully unbutton it. “Like you said… I’m not one to throw stones.”

His suit fell to the floor, followed by his dress shirt. It was his father’s first action this entire conversation to actually stir something in Harry – revulsion, mostly.

The man’s bare torso was more charred, scorched scar tissue than flesh.

Tu esday, August 10, 2010, 10:02 P.M.

Even after the TV screen faded to black, Madame Web continued to gape at it.

“Alright,” she finally said, “what I’m taking away is that Norman Osborn’s still alive. And when he had Hamilton brainwash you all those times, I don’t believe he was merely curing your blues,
Harry. Don’t you see? Norman’s prevented you from rebelling against him, but if you shrug that off, you can take Oscorp for yourself, and then the company can be run by someone who’s not a lunatic, and you’ll prove you’re not the loser you always thought you w—"

She turned to the other beanbag… to find the controller cords all snapped and Harry on his feet.

“Oh,” said Web, “I see you’ve already pieced that together. So, uh, guess my work here is done?”

“You shouldn’t have come in here.” Harry’s voice sounded off, somehow. And… And his face was turning green. As was the very air around them. “I told you to stay out of my head.”

**Tu esday, August 10, 2010, 10:03 P.M.**

Spider-Man was right in the middle of extinguishing a Jack O’Lantern’s flaming mask with his foot when a feminine scream rang through his skull.

“Madame Web?” His head darted around as if he could spot her if he just looked hard enough.

*Harry was… tougher than I thought.* Somehow, Madame Web’s telepathic voice sounded shaky. *I don’t know if Hamilton left psychic safeguards in his head or if that ‘Green’ drug just gave him a willpower boost, but- but he really got me.*

“Well, thanks for trying.”

*He did shrug off the brainwashing, though.* Web’s voice was growing fainter. *Harry’s mind is no one’s but his own now.*


*Thank you. But I believe I need a… nap now…* With that, her presence in his head vanished completely.

Well, that’d gone better than Spider-Man could’ve hoped. Now this bridge’s Jack O’Lanterns were all dealt with and Harry was successfully de-brainwashed. All that was left was to make sure the poor guy was okay.

“Harry?” Spider-Man started to his side, but by the time Spidey got there, Harry was already back on his feet. “H-How are you feeling?”

“Weak,” said Harry. He had a point – Harry was struggling to move his limbs under the weight of his suit. But before Spidey could help him, Harry hopped onto one of the Jack O’Lanterns fallen gliders. It was a bit smaller than the traditional goblin glider, but it had no problems carrying Harry aloft.

“Uh, Hare?” Spider-Man took a tentative step towards him. The sight of Harry on a glider couldn’t help but make Spidey sweat. “Are you still siding with the people trying to gas the city, or…?”

“It’s flammable,” said Harry.

“Come again?”

“The Globulin Green gas is flammable.” Harry spun the glider to face away from him. “Some of your superhero friends can shoot fire, right? Have them pull a Hindenburg on the Goblin’s blimp.
The gas’ll all burn up. It’ll be fine.”

Beneath his mask, Peter blinked. “You’re helping us? Then… you’re not crazy and evil anymore! Dude, that’s great!”

Harry didn’t respond. Instead, with a swift jab, he stomped a steel boot on his glider. It must’ve activated a hidden switch because the next moment, a small hatch unfolded from the glider’s gargoyle head, and out of it emerged a transparent canister filled with swirling, emerald gas.

“Wait, is that more Green?” Spider-Man sprinted towards him, but Harry was already flying off. Spidey had to dash up the bridge railing to stay level with him. “Harry, don’t-!”

Peter’s words failed to halt him.

But Mister Fantastic’s didn’t.

“Medicine time!” His arm and neck had just stretched out from the sidewalk a couple feet away, and in his rubbery hand was a syringe of purple liquid. “Ta da! I call it ‘Panacea Purple.’ See what I did there-?”

Mister Fantastic had probably thought he was catching Harry off guard… which was why Harry’s glider was so easily able to spray him with knockout gas and send the syringe flying into Harry’s waiting hand. Whoa, and that’d been without spider-sense. Spidey couldn’t help but be impressed.

“Doc!” Spider-Man dived to catch the guy’s elongated neck and reel it of the river. He imagined, invulnerable as Reed Richard’s freaky rubber body was, drowning was still an issue.

Meanwhile, up above, Harry was now holding two containers in his hands – in his left, a canister of green gas, and in his right, a syringe of purple liquid. The drug and the cure.

“Harry.” Peter gave him one last, meaningful look. “I know you’re stronger than the Green.”

“You’re right.” Harry held the cure aloft. “I am stronger than it.” Then he clicked a button on his gauntlet, causing a small hatch to open in the hip of his headless Iron Patriot suit. Harry stashed the syringe inside and closed it back. Wait, what? He’d put the cure in his pocket? Why-?

Spider-Man didn’t have longer to ponder. The next instant, Harry had cracked open the canister and inhaled every last drop of gas in one gulp.

“No!” Spidey cried out.

Before his eyes, Harry was changing. The bulging, throbbing veins of his scarred face were turning a sickly shade of apple green. Couple that with his sweaty, messy hair, and he’d have passed for a goblin with or without a mask.

“First I’m going to save my mother,” Harry said.

“And then I’m going to show the world who the real Green Goblin is!” said another voice from Harry’s mouth.

Spider-Man shuddered in spite of himself. He’d never actually heard a “goblin voice” without the built-in voice changer of a proper goblin costume. Some sliver of it was still recognizable as Harry’s.

“Ohh, but I’ll have to do it in something less tacky.” Harry pressed another button on his gauntlet,
causing his armor’s star-spangled color palette to be swapped out for blotches of green and purple in roughly the same places they’d be on a proper Green Goblin costume. Yeah, apparently Oscorp had given the armor a dedicated color-change feature. Somehow, that failed to surprise Spider-Man. “That’s better. And now that I’m properly color-coordinated, it’s time for my old lady to say hello to the Iron Goblin! Bwa ha ha ha!” The Iron Goblin’s glider sped off from the bridge.

The Web-Head would’ve loved to go after Iron Goblin himself, but he couldn’t leave the smartest man on the planet napping in the middle of a war zone.

And so Spider-Man could only watch as a cackling goblin vanished into the night sky.
A man and woman sat side-by-side on the therapy couch, their faces hidden by the room’s dimmed lights. The white-haired woman tried to speak. She failed.

“It’s alright, May. It’s alright…” The balding, gray-haired man held her tighter.

Again, the woman tried to speak, and again it resulted in only constant, overpowering wails. She buried herself in her boyfriend, muffling the sound.

“We don’t have to talk about it if you’re not ready.”

By now, the Pumpkin Blimp had added itself to Manhattan’s skyline right alongside the ant-sized silhouettes of countless heroes and villains duking it out in the clouds. Normally, Spider-Man would’ve felt obligated to join in the chaos, but flight was one of the great powers he lacked, so for once he was exempt from the responsibility part. But that didn’t mean he couldn’t still contribute to the war effort.

“…said the Green is flammable, and at this point, we don’t have much choice but to trust him.”

Spider-Man had called some nearby S.H.I.E.L.D. agents over here, which served the dual purpose of both getting Mister Fantastic some medical attention and providing the other, not-unconscious hero with a comlink straight to Nick Fury. Which meant that Spidey was now standing in the middle of the road on the George Washington Bridge while a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent patiently projected a miniature hologram of Fury floating in place in his Hulkbuster armor and gawking at Peter like he was an idiot.

“You think we didn’t know that already?” he snapped. “We had Reed Richards studying the Green. You think you know literally anything that Reed Richards doesn’t?”

Even though he wasn’t sure Fury could actually see him, Spider-Man avoided meeting his eyes. “N-No, sir.”

“That’s damn right. Now don’t waste my time again, kid.” The hologram winked out, and then the agents returned to their business.

Spider-Man looked away with a sigh. At this point, he’d gotten so used to getting condescended to by the other heroes that he was developing a masochistic pleasure from it.

But really, now, Spider-Man had how many hot girls fawning over him again? And- And he got to be in a serious, committed relationship with one while also having a ménage à trois with a supermodel? But yeah, sure, Nick Fury, Spider-Man was a stupid useless idiot loser. Suuuuuuuure. Now if you’d excuse him, this stupid useless idiot loser had to go swing by the Brooklyn Bridge to take down a major supervillain. He did that kinda thing all the time. No big deal.
So how should we split things once all’s said and done here? asked the Goblin. I get to drive on
Tuesdays and Thursdays, you get to drive on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and on the
weekend we share?

Harry ignored him, silently steering the glider to its destination.

Oh, don’t be like that, Harry. I gave you Friday!

The Iron Goblin almost became the Lightning Rod Goblin a couple times, but he managed to reach
the Brooklyn Bridge uninjured. It was only upon arrival that he suffered a headache.

“Little Osborn!” Now the Ultimate Spider-Slayer was blocking his path, hovering in place with his
jet boots so he could simper at Harry. “What are you doing away from your bridge? And what’s
happened to your armor?”

Ah, of course, the younger Smythe had abandoned his post. Maybe Harry could get the boy’s
father over here to spank him? The elder Spencer’s building-sized spider-mech was still guarding
his own bridge further on down the river from where Lady Goblin was circling hers on her glider.

Harry tried to fly over Alistair, but he merely mimicked the movement to block the path. “Don’t
tell me you got your arse caned by a superhero and now you’re running to Momm-?”

There was a sound between an explosion and hoarse laughter, and then Alistair was spiraling
downwards in a cloud of green smoke.

“You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to do that.” Harry stomped his glider again, causing a
fresh pair of pumpkin bombs to shoot up from their hidden compartments and into his waiting
hands.

“Have you lost your mind?” Alistair managed to catch himself with his jet-boots before he crashed
into a rooftop, but the blast had left him more than a little disoriented.

Goblin’s turn to talk. “And so long as we’re dishing out the hard truths-” Harry had wanted to lob
another bomb, but the Goblin opted to use the glider as a battering ram. “-might I point out how
hilariously early you blew your load with that alias?” Shing, splurch. At the last second before
impact, the glider’s gargoyle head had stuck out its knife-shaped tongue, meaning Alistair now had
a sliver of metal poking through his armor. “Poor Alistair. You can’t be much of an ‘Ultimate’
Spider-Slayer when your daddy’s careening around in one the size of a small country over there,
now can you?” The Goblin let out his umpteenth cackle.

“At least I… haven’t just… betrayed mine!” After a bit of straining, Alistair managed to fire off a
repulsor blast, knocking the Goblin off his ride and into the open air. The glider darted over to
catch him, but it had the side effect of freeing Alistair’s sticky red stomach.

“Ah, yes, good old Alistair.” This time, Iron Goblin went with Harry’s bomb-throwing idea. “A
daddy’s boy to the end.”

But Alistair made a sudden jolt to the left, circumventing the blast, and then barreled towards the
Goblin with the force of a meteor.

“You know what your problem is?” Harry’s turn to talk. “You don’t know how to course correct.”
On those last words, the Iron Goblin sprang upwards while his glider darted downwards, meaning
all Alistair accomplished was to pass safety through the middle. Then the Goblin landed, spun
around, and lobbed another bomb before Alistair had even realized what’d happened.
“Are you joking?” The green fog cleared to reveal Alistair still hovering in place, only now his armor was considerably more dented. “The whole point of today was to course correct. Do you have any idea how sick I was of pretending to be a hero? Why do you think my father and I build killer robots for a living, to serve the public? Ha. Dad realized long ago that we Smythes are better than everyone else. We should be ruling this city with an iron fist, not getting chewed on by- by giant, prehistoric chickens!”

“Tut tut.” The Goblin’s eyes skinned the area.

A couple meters away, Spencer’s mech was stomping around in the water, trying its hardest to laser-beam the Thing to death. Thing, however, was more than happy to retaliate by wailing on the mech’s leg-joints.

“Really now, Al, don’t you know what pride comes before?” In the span of seconds, the glider had sped towards the Manhattan Bridge, then flipped upside down so it could dump dozens of its stored pumpkin bombs onto the mech. The resulting blast was enough to blow off a couple legs, sending the machine toppling over.

“Dad!” And the moment it did, the Ultimate Spider-Slayer sped towards it… putting him right in the path of a waiting Goblin.

One last pumpkin bomb was all it took for Alistair to plummet right into the bridge below.

“Critical system damage,” chirped his armor. “Initiating safe eject.” And now for the icing on the cake – The armor was so banged up and dented that it actually spat Alistair out like a sunflower seed and sent him skidding across the concrete. He landed amid battered cars and unconscious Jack O’Lanterns. And the moment he came to a halt, Alistair tried on pure impulse to pull himself to his feet.

Needless to say, his attempt was unsuccessful. Though it was quite successful at getting the Iron Goblin to laugh like a maniac.

“You killed him.” Alistar had to drag himself across the cement to get a look at where his father’s mech had landed. By now, the thing was lying face-down in the East River like it was trying to drown itself.

The glider hovered beside him. “Yes, that’s kind of what I do.” The Iron Goblin raised one last pumpkin bomb-

“Stop right there.” -only to have his path blocked by one of those pesky superheroes. “This guy’s goin’ to prison,” hissed the Thing.

“Spoil sport!” The Goblin had already started plotting workarounds, but then Harry yanked the reins from him.

“I don’t have time for this,” Harry spat. Without another word, his glider sped off over the river towards this bridge’s neighbor.

And all the while, he could feel Alistair’s eyes boring into the back of his neck.

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Tuesday, August 10, 2010, 10:22 P.M.

One of the luckier cars nearly made it across the Brooklyn Bridge.
“Infirm of purpose!”

Harry said “nearly” because a pumpkin bomb had just reduced it to rubble.

“Give me the daggers. The sleeping and the dead are but as pictures.” Lady Goblin swept across the bridge atop her glider, muttering to herself as she checked for any more escapees. “‘Tis the eye of childhood that fears a painted devil!”

Invisible Girl lay unconscious and pinned to the bridge railing by Gob-webs. It seemed the only things keeping Lady Goblin from finishing her off had been the swerving, honking cars quickly filling the bridge. But with the last one taken care of, that was no longer an issues. Lady Goblin loomed over the woman.

Harry couldn’t watch another second of it. “Mom.”

Gaunt yellow eyes snapped towards him. The Iron Goblin had positioned his glider a couple feet across from the Lady Goblin’s, hovering an equal distance above the concrete as her. The moment she saw him, her latex-covered face twisted to a snarl. “Infirm of purpose!”

“Yes, I know,” said Harry. “I’m not guarding my bridge anymore. In fact, I’m not following any of Dad’s orders.”

“Give me the daggers!” The words were enough to make her bull-rush him, though Harry couldn’t help but notice his mom refrained from grabbing any pumpkin bombs from her hip pouch.

“I’m going to help you, Mom.” With a quick jerk, Harry’s glider sidestepped her own, causing Lady Goblin to nearly smash into a support pillar. “I’ll make you better, I promise you.”

At the last second, Lady Goblin managed to pull away, but the tip of her glider ended up bumping the brick and sending her wobbling. She spun back towards Harry, teeth gritted, fighting to keep her balance, and hesitated. She still wasn’t going for any weapons.

Lady Goblin cocked her head. “I have given suck-”

Thwip. “Too much information, lady!” A glob of webbing had shot from the brick to cover the she-goblin’s mouth. And perched atop that brick was, of course, a guy in goofy red-and-blue spandex. “Sorry I’m late. Some Spider-Slayers tried to, y’know, do their thing with me on the way over.”

“Oh, Pete!” A bit of Goblin leaked through Harry’s greeting. “Glad you could join us.”

“Well, someone’s gotta keep you crazy kids in check-” Spider-Man started to aim a web at Harry, too.

“I don’t want to fight you, Peter.”

“Really?” Spidey’s wrist wilted. “So then, wait, I’m confused, are you hopped up on giggle gas or not? Because that usually makes you want to-”

“I can control it. I just need my mom restrained so I can cure her.”

“Restrained? Ooh, you’ve got the right hero for the job, then.” Spider-Man backflipped off the pillar and fired more webs, but this time Lady Goblin was ready to dodge.

She weaved through the air, cutting her mouth free with her claws so she could smirk at Spidey. “Pronounce it for me, sir, to all our friends, for my heart speaks they are welcome.”
“Are you quoting Shakespeare sarcastically?” The moment Spider-Man’s feet hit the pavement, he lunged at her. “Oh god, it’s eighth grade English all over again!”

But for all of Spider-Man’s good intentions, he ended up complicating the fight. See, that reservation Lady Goblin had felt about hurting Harry… wasn’t quite matched when it came to Peter. In other words, the air was now lousy with pumpkin bombs.

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**Tuesday, August 10, 2010, 10:26 P.M.**

All the non-flying heroes must’ve been scratching their heads right now – They’d just run out of things to do. That’d be because at the Green Goblin’s command, every last Jack O’Lantern and flying Spider-Slayer was converging in the skies above central Manhattan right where the Pumpkin Blimp was currently burning up. The only ones missing were Iron Patriot and those Smythe guys, but even without them, it was more than enough baddies to give the heroes some trouble.

With the newcomers keeping the superheroes busy, the Green Goblin swooped his glider down through the clouds. He took a disdainful glance at his precious blimp. Both it and the Globulin Green within were turning to smoke before his eyes. He could thank the Human Torch for that one. “I’ll trust my minions to win this fight. As for the Goblin? Exit stage right!”

The other heroes were too distracted – Human Torch alone noticed him go. Instantly, he darted after the Goblin through the frigid clouds… only to find a patch of empty air.

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**Tuesday, August 10, 2010, 10:43 P.M.**

A pair of gliders dashed higher and higher over the Brooklyn Bridge. The goblin in first turned back to scowl at the one in last. “Think of this, good peers, but as a thing of custom. ’Tis no other; only it spoils the pleasure of the-”

_Thwap_. It was at this point that the Lady Goblin tried to pass through the gaps in one of the bridge’s forked support pillar… and instead went straight into a waiting web-net.

“Whoo! It worked!” Spider-Man crawled out of hiding on the pillar’s opposite side. “Good going with the ambush, Hare.” He offered a high five, and, after a moment of hesitation, Harry gave his palm a slap.

“Thanks, Pete.” Harry made a facial expression that, through a very lenient definition, might have qualified as a smile.

Lady Goblin, meanwhile, merely shrieked and struggled against her gooey restraints.

Spidey shook his head. “Methinks the lady protests too much.”

“That’s not how it goes,” Lady Goblin hissed. “And it wouldn’t even make sense in this context!”

“Oh, so you’re not just a walking First Folio.” Spidey crawled towards her, squeezing his face muscles until the black outlines on his mask’s eyes outweighed their white insides. “Then why don’t you save us some bubble, bubble, toil and trouble and hold still for us?”

Now Lady Goblin was gaping at him like he’d slapped her. “I will rip your tongue from your-”

“Come on, lady, wherefore art thou manners?”
She actually howled with rage as Spidey tugged her mask off, revealing a pale human face every bit as twisted and hateful as the goblin one. Her short brown hair soon became a wild mess in the storm winds.

“That’s enough, Pete. She’ll pop a blood vessel.” Harry hovered his glider next to the two. “Now allow me.” He held out a familiar syringe of purple liquid.

Spider-Man gave a little bow before crawling farther up the wall. “Lead on, Macduff.”

“I hate you,” said Harry’s mom.

Harry brought the syringe to her exposed neck. But right as it neared, Peter’s spider-sense went nuts. “Harry, look out-!” He didn’t see anything coming, but Spider-Man still opted to shove Harry out of harm’s way.

It was the right call – A second later and the Green Goblin’s glider would’ve smashed right into the guy.

“What the-?” Where had Gobbie come from? Spidey swore he hadn’t seen anyone coming this way. But then, he supposed the ongoing thunderstorm wasn’t exactly helping in the visibility department.

Spider-Man slung a web so he could loop around the pillars with Harry in his arms. And as he did so, Harry’s glider followed their trail, allowing Spidey to drop Harry back onto it while the Web-Head himself landed atop the pillar.

Green Goblin swooped towards his feminine counterpart, reciting:

“I’m a fan of the Green but not the Purple,

So I’m afraid I’ll have to- to- Ah, to hell with it.”

Some blasts of finger-lasers freed Harry’s mom from the webs, allowing her to dash to the Green Goblin’s side atop her glider. Harry had carelessly discarded her mask on the road below, but his mom didn’t bother to retrieve it.

“Great. She must’ve sent him some kinda distress signal.” Spider-Man glanced at Harry, who was hovering beside him. “You handle your mom. I’ve got a score to settle with Gobbie.”

Without another word, Spider-Man pounced off the bridge. With a quickly-fired web, he was able to yank himself towards the Green Goblin’s glider and land a flying punch right to the kisser. “Here, let me show you what happens when you threaten my aunt. My girlfriend.” The glider was sent oscillating.

But the Goblin caught the next punch, trapping Spider-Man’s fist in his palm. He wiped blood off his latex-covered lips so he could grin properly. “Didn’t you forget the ‘s’ at the end-?” Crack. The remark earned him a punch from Spidey’s other fist.

The Goblin retaliated with some razor-sharp throwing-pumpkins. Spider-Man managed to dodge, but not without getting his mask sliced open. “Aw man, this happens every climactic battle.” Now bits of eyes, mouth, and strands of chestnut hair were poking through the gashes.

While those two were occupied, Harry managed to ram his glider into his mom’s. Again, his mom was unwilling to go for a pumpkin bomb, and so Harry was able to tackle her onto the top of the pillar. Then Harry dismounted his own glider, leaving both vehicles to circles them, and pinned his
mom to the stone with his hands. She squirmed with all her might, but he managed to stick the needle in her uncovered neck, allowing the violet fluid to seep in.

At first, his mom’s struggles grew more desperate than ever. But then, all at once, she went still. “H-Harry?”

“Mom.” He tried to help her upright, but that only made her collapse into his arms, strength sapped. “She’s gone. Lady Goblin’s gone.”

She gazed at him with bleary eyes. “What’s…? I-I don’t…” Her voice, so sharp and scathing when her mask had been on, was now softer than snow.

“It’s okay, Mom.” Harry used his free hand to smooth her hair. “I’ve got you. I fixed you. I- I knew I had to.” Laughter broke through his voice. “I’m the one who broke you in the first place. You and Dad were happy together before I… existed.” His eyes shut. “I’m responsible.”

The lion’s share of Peter’s attention was being taken by his battle atop the Green Goblin’s glider, but he still tried to watch the other two from his peripheral. “Harry…”

Peter at least turned his head long enough to see the look in Emily Osborn’s eyes. The creeping horror.

“Harry,” she said. “Your face.” She brought a trembling hand to it, touching the scar tissue. “It’s-” It flooded back through her eyes. Everything. “What did I do?” Suddenly, she was flailing and struggling against Harry’s grip like a thing possessed. “What did I do?” Her heartbeat was practically audible over the wind. “Harry, I’m s-”

“Not another word of that, Emily,” said a voice from Peter’s side. It took him a second to realize it’s come from the Green Goblin. Even with that mask’s built-in voice changer, it sounded so… so alien. The bounciness of the words was gone, and in its place was a sharp, terse enunciation.

Back on the bridge pillar, Emily had gone stiff. Harry tried to carry her to his glider, but the Green Goblin hit him square in the back with a yellow finger-laser. Harry cried out, his mother tumbled to the stone, and then a jet of snot erupted from the Goblin’s own glider. The Gob-webs pinned Harry tight, too thick even for his Green-enhanced strength to break through in a hurry.

Peter, too, tried to spring to Emily’s aid, but the Goblin grabbed his arms.

“Now you get back on that glider and act like the Lady Goblin!” the Green Goblin barked.

Both Peter and Harry fought with all their might, but they could only watch as a shaking, entranced Emily climbed back onto her vehicle and took off once again. Difference was, this time she was trembling so bad, she could hardly fly straight.

Peter, too, tried to spring to Emily’s aid, but the Goblin grabbed his arms.

“Now you get back on that glider and act like the Lady Goblin!” the Green Goblin barked.

Both Peter and Harry fought with all their might, but they could only watch as a shaking, entranced Emily climbed back onto her vehicle and took off once again. Difference was, this time she was trembling so bad, she could hardly fly straight.

“Mom?” Harry’s face was red and sweat-drenched, but still the Gob-webs didn’t budge. “Mom! Stop!”

The Lady Goblin turned her glider to face him, hovering above the churning waters of the East River. “Ha,” she said. “Ha ha… ha…” She reached into her pouch. When her hand returned to her chest, it was clutching something round and orange. Emily held the item out, inspecting it.

The bomb smiled at her.

She smiled back. “Out, damned spot.” With a soft click, she touched a thumb to its top. Then she brought it back to her chest.
“Mom?” Harry’s voice was softer this time.

“No you don’t.” But Peter’s wasn’t. A spandex-covered elbow collided with the Green Goblin’s face. It didn’t free Peter completely, but it was at least enough to let him aim his wrist.

A web-bullet hurtled through the air. Bullseye. The pumpkin bomb was knocked clean from Emily’s fingers. It fell towards the river.

But it never touched the water. In fact, it only made it a couple feet below Emily’s glider.

There was a noise that was equal parts explosion and laughter and screaming. Between the torrent of rain and the pea green smoke that filled the air, it was almost impossible to see anything. But Peter at least made out the feminine figure falling head-first towards the rapids.

“Emmy?” A dazed Goblin let Peter go, and on sheer instinct, Peter sprang forward.

Just as Harry started to scream, Peter landed beside him on the pillar, leaned over the edge, and spun a web. “I got her!” Emily almost hit the water. “Did it.” But at the last second, a web-strand snagged her foot. Swik.

“Mom?” By the time Harry finally broke free of his gunk, Peter had already reeled the woman back up.

“It’s okay, Harry.” Peter turned to him, holding Emily flat in his arms. “I got her.” He offered her out to Harry.

But Harry only stared at her. “What did you do?”

“What? I- I saved her.” Peter’s head darted to the woman in her arms. He stared at her, too.

Her eyes were wide open, but she didn’t stare back.

“No. I saved her. I-"

He was cut off by a shout. The Green Goblin had landed his glider, and now he sprinted across the pillar – right towards Peter. “Let go of her.”

The man’s voice, the way he moved… It was all so unnatural coming from the Green Goblin that, truth be told, Peter was scared. He found himself backing away, letting Emily fall from his arms.

The Goblin caught her. “Emmy? Emmy, it’s me. It’s…” At first he tried to shake her awake. But it didn’t work. Then he simply held her for a second, staying as silent as she was. The Goblin fell to one knee, resting her on his thigh.

Peter’s heartbeat. It- It hurt. Every time it pulsed, it sent a shockwave through his body. He took a ragged breath. What now? Did he run? No. No, he didn’t run. This was his responsibility.

“I’m sorry,” Peter said.

That didn’t make the man’s face any softer. Slowly, gradually, the Green Goblin’s faded yellow eyes moved from the woman in his arms to the boy standing before him.

“Peter.” A pair of black, iris-less pupils froze Peter’s blood. “You killed the woman I love.”
Final Exam

Sunday, August 15, 2010, 12:37 A.M.

A girl sat alone on the therapy couch, her reddened eyes visible against the room’s dimmed lights.

“Why am I visiting him?” she asked, eyes on the rug. “Well, yeah, I won’t pretend I’m not freaked out every second I’m in Ravencroft. I can barely even muster the courage to walk to his room. But….” Liz took a breath. “…somebody has to do it, Leo. Harry doesn’t have anyone else.”

Tuesday, August 10, 2010, 10:54 P.M.

Every couple seconds, a fresh wave of lightning would flash across the Manhattan skyline. It its wake, each revealed four figures sprawled atop the pillar of a charred, rubble-filled bridge, its road dotted with overturned cars and injured civilians.

And who were those four figures? Well, Peter supposed they should’ve looked silly. Maybe, in an objective sense, they were. The boy in tattered, red-and-blue spandex. The other boy in steel-plated, green-and-purple armor. The man in purple armor over green latex complete with a latex goblin mask on his face. What was this? People dressed as goblins and brightly-colored spiders? Maybe the denizens of Manhattan would open their morning Bugles tomorrow and crack up.

At least, they might if not for the fourth figure. The woman dressed in her own costume, matching the Green Goblin’s. The woman who was now motionless and glassy-eyed in the Goblin’s arms. The Goblin was visibly struggling against his latex mask. It hadn’t actually been designed to make any face but a grin.

Peter looked to Harry, but between the rain and fog, his expression was impossible to read. Then Peter looked back to the Goblin.

The mask’s intended face had won out. “Finally, the old ball and chain’s off my foot!” His voice made Peter flinch. It’d gone back to its usual raspy bounce, though it was maybe a note more strained. “I’ve been looking for excuses to whack her.” With a casual toss, the Goblin sent Emily flying over his shoulder. She’d have tumbled off the side of the pillar again if Harry hadn’t cried out in horror and caught her. “You’ve helped me out today, Peter. I appreciate that. I really do. And that kind of charity can’t go unrewarded.” He held out a palm, feigning as if Peter had spoken. “Don’t try and talk me out of it, now. I insist. You’ve been such a pal for me, the least I can do is return the favor.”

Lightning chose that exact moment to flash again. In the next blink, when the sheet of whiteness was gone from Peter’s eyes… so was the Goblin.

“What? Where-?” Instantly, Peter was running around the pillar, getting a three-sixty degree view of his surroundings. But with this stupid storm, it was impossible to see more than a four foot radius. He at least confirmed that the Green Goblin’s glider had vanished alongside its owner. Now only two of the things circled the pillar.

Shoom. And the moment Peter got too close, one of the remaining gliders dashed at him. Emily’s. Through the wonders of spider-sense, though, Peter was able to send a fist through its hull before it could get too close.
The glider crashed to the road below, becoming a fireball, and Peter spun back to the center of the pillar. Harry had set his mother down on the rain-soaked stone.

“He ran? He’s not trying to kill us?” Peter stepped forward. “Then what did he mean, ‘return the favor?’ Harry?”

“I’m not sure,” said Harry, his back to Peter. “Maybe the stress of the situation’s caused him to finally snap?”

Peter’s spider-sense blared again right as something round and orange flew at his face. “Harry-!” He managed to backflip off the pillar before the bomb scattered his pieces everywhere, then yanked himself to its side with a quick web. Peter climbed back to the top only to discover both Harry and his glider had vanished, leaving his mother’s body behind. Spider-sense again.

Like a battering ram, Harry’s glider smashed into Peter’s back, and then the two of them were hurtling through the air together.

“For future reference-” Harry’s bouncy goblin voice had returned. “-if you wanted to fix our friendship, killing my mother wasn’t the best way to-”

“Oh, of course. Of courrrrrrrrrrrrrrse.” Peter struggled to dislodge himself, but the force of the falling kept him pinned tight. “You’re an adherent to supervillain rule one, ‘blame everything on Spider-Man.’ It’s printed in big letters in the handbook-” Smash. Now Peter had a glider in his back and concrete in his front. “Ow.”

“I think once I’m the sole leader of Oscorp, I’ll hang your torn up mask behind my desk.” Harry stomped a foot on his glider, causing a pumpkin bomb to spring into his waiting hand. “So I’ll have something to make me smile each morning.”

“H-Hey, come on-” Despite Peter’s best efforts, the glider wouldn’t budge. “-what’s wrong with cat posters?” Thwip. A sudden web-bullet knocked the bomb from Harry’s hand, causing it to detonate only a few feet away from him. Guess that was a, err, new trick Peter had picked up lately.

“Gah-!” Harry was sent hurtling off his glider and onto the road, and Peter was finally able to shove the aforementioned glider off himself.

“I don’t want to hurt you-” Peter dusted himself off. “-so don’t make me.” Before Harry could even think about pulling himself to his feet, Peter was at his side to weave him a nice, comfy web-blanket. “Listen, I get what you’re going through. A little too well, really. And…” Peter bowed his head. “…I know you’ve been in pain for a while now. I should’ve noticed a lot sooner, and I’m sorry. I let you down, Harry.”

Harry had been struggling against the mixture of web-fluid and Gob-web residue, but now he grew still.

“But I didn’t kill your mother.” Peter faltered. “I just failed to save her. If you want her avenged, I’m not the one to go after.” But after a moment, Peter gathered his resolve and knelt down, meeting Harry’s eyes. “You have to tell me who the guy in the Green Goblin costume is. Hired thug? Your mom’s new boyfriend? Where does he live? What resources does he have? Give me something to work with.”

Harry opened his mouth. “He’s…” His voice barely carried over the weather. Peter had to strain to hear. “He’s-”
“Freeze! Hands in the air!”

“What?” Peter’s head spun to the front of the bridge. There he discovered a small squad of those Hulkbuster S.H.I.E.L.D. agents descending towards him on jetpacks, and every last one had aimed their plasma cannons right at guess-who.

“Hey!” Peter sprang back, hands in the air. “What gives? I’m one of the good guys!”

An agent touched a finger to the earpiece in his helmet. “We’ve found them, Fury.” He paused for instruction. “Understood, sir.” His attention returned to Peter. “You’d better come with us, kid.”

“Tell your boss I don’t need bodyguards!” Peter snapped.

“Yeah, we’re not bodyguards,” spoke up another agent, cocking his weapon. “The major crisis is averted now, and you’re an unregistered vigilante. You’re our new priority.” Oh, that was right, the public still saw Spider-Man as a menace. “Now we’ll ask you again to come with us.”

Well, Peter could do that. “Rrrgh! I don’t have time for this!” Or he could just dive into the East River, ducking gunfire, and swim around them all. Splish.

**Tuesday, August 10, 2010, 11:01 P.M.**

Peter had tried to web-swing all the way up to Midtown, but he ended up having to stop on the side of some building in Little Italy to catch his breath. Let’s tally his injuries again: dinosaur bites, robot zaps – from two different types of robot, no less – and, um, he wanted to say there’d been something involving wheels. Peter couldn’t even remember it all anymore. He only remembered the dinosaur bites because that part kinda stood out. But at this point, everything else that’d happened these last few days was a blur. Peter could barely lift his head, let alone web-swing. And his leg was killing him again.

In the distance, Peter saw some little specks swirling around his head that must’ve been all the flying superheroes getting swarmed by Jack O’Lanterns and aerial Spider-Slayers. Peter supposed he could run over there and ask them for help finding Gobbie… if he was itching to be dismissed and belittled again. The other heroes no doubt had way more important things to do than worry about the loved ones of some random “unregistered vigilante.”

**Loved ones.** That had to be what Green Goblin had meant by “return the favor.” Except all of Peter’s friends and family were safe. Had Peter forgotten anyone? Had Hobie Brown considered himself Peter’s best friend in the whole wide world, and now Goblin was showing up at the poor guy’s bedroom to murder him while cackling about how his revenge was now complete? Or had Goblin not been aware that Peter had gotten all his friends and family to safety? Surely Oscorp had had people monitoring them? Was Gobbie right now making the unpleasant discovery that there was no one left for him to hurt but random people? Did he have some secret master plan way too advanced for someone of Peter’s IQ to grasp?

Or, craziest scenario of all, was he nothing but a gibbering, drugged-up lunatic acting at total random?

Phht. What was Peter so worried about? Whoever was parading around in the costume this time was nothing but another Hobgoblin-esque, Norman Osborn wannabe. But then why was the hair on the back of Peter’s neck standing on end? Why wouldn’t his heartbeat slow? Peter took a steadying breath. Everything was okay. Everything was okay.
…Unless, of course, Oscorp had at some point slipped tracers or miniature Spider-Slayers or something on Peter’s, Gwen’s, or MJ’s clothing. Or what if Oscorp had poisoned their food, and it’d been lying dormant in their blood streams all this time, and now Green Goblin had run off to spring the poison’s trigger, and Gwen and MJ were keeling over dead right this second? What if Oscorp had planted microchips in their heads while they slept, and now their heads were fixing to explode? And sure, the Fantastic Four had scanned them for all that kinda stuff, but what if Oscorp had a way to trick their scanners? Somehow? Anything was possible!

And speaking of “anything was possible,” Peter knew now that magic existed after he’d seen a Doombot cast a spell right in front of him that one time. Oscorp had hired a telepath – What was stopping them from hiring a court magician, too? Using some good old-fashioned “scry and die” tactics to pop into the safe house and kill everyone inside?

Oh god. Peter had to get back there! Before it was too- No, wait, Invisible Girl had said they’d built that safe house specifically to protect loved ones from Doctor Doom, and Doom was a magic-user, so then the Fantastic Four had probably lined the place with Nth metal or something. NO, WAIT, Nth metal wasn’t real! That was just in comic books!

Peter tried to breathe again, but he was less successful this time. What was he doing sitting here, hanging off a wall by his butt? He had to move! So what if his arms were threatening to secede from the rest of his body? Without another thought, Peter slung another web, praying all this rain wouldn’t wash out the adhesion, and then he swung for all he was worth towards the Baxter Building. Stupid safe house blocking phone calls…

Damn it, why did humans have to be so delicate?

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**Tuesday, August 10, 2010, 11:13 P.M.**

Peter glanced over his shoulder again to triple-check, but there were no goblins in sight. Still, Peter didn’t allow himself to exhale until the doors to the Fantastic Four’s HQ whirred shut. This place was basically like the Batcave, only with skylights to let some actual sunshine in (so really, nothing like the Batcave at all). Everything was painted white, black, and sky blue to match the team’s colors, and the chamber was filled with countless, quirky sci-fi devices Peter was scared to touch. There was even a platform for the Fantastкар to park on, though the car itself was out and about at the moment.

But Peter wasn’t here to sightsee. The instant he was inside, he went straight for the elevator in the corner of the room, then pressed the button for the very bottom floor. He knew he was fine now, but Peter couldn’t help but feel a chill as the doors slid shut.

Now all he had to do was wait for the elevator to reach its destination. He stood in place and listened to the faint, bland music playing. Peter tapped his foot. He had to fight the urge to pace in circles. There was plenty of space for it – The whole building had been tailored to accommodate the Thing. This elevator was only slightly smaller than the Spider-Family’s living room.

After approximately forever, the doors slid open, and Peter dashed out the elevator, only to be greeted by yet another door – the first of the reinforced steel ones blocking the gray, barren hall. Peter hurried over to a video screen at its side. Then he took yet another breath, hovered his finger over a button, prayed the person who answered wouldn’t be green, and turned the camera on.

The screen flickered to life, and Peter was happy to report there were zero goblins on it. Instead, it displayed the wonderful, wonderful sight of three lovely ladies seated on a couch in the safe house’s entry room – though poor Madame Web was still unconscious. The girls seemed to have
carried her off her wheelchair and set her down on the cushions.

After a moment, the loveliest of all the ladies turned her head, noticing the camera.

“Peter!” In milliseconds, she was shoving her face onto the screen as MJ peeked over her shoulder. “Oh, thank god. The stupid news was only showing the A-list heroes.” Her soft, songlike voice flooded out the intercom. “What happened? Are you okay?”

One recap later, Gwen was giving him a concerned frown. “He just ran?”

“Yeah.” Peter nodded. “Guess he’ll be back to menace us another day. It’s not like these goblin types have never done that before, but this one knows my secret identity, so…”

“What,” spoke up MJ from over Gwen’s shoulder, “are we supposed to spend the rest of our lives in here?”

At this, Peter sighed. “At least until this guy’s caught. But Oscorp’s been totally exposed at this point. It won’t be too much longer, I promise.”

“But what will you do now?” asked a trembling May. “Are you going to help the other heroes?”

“I guess so.” Peter glanced away. “I mean, the real battle’s going on up higher than I can web-swing, but there could still be people in danger from, like, falling rubble or something. I should probably get back out there.”

“Uh, are you sure, Tiger?” Mary Jane pursed her lips at him, examining what was left of his mask. “No offense, but you look like crap.”

“Thanks.” Peter gave his most sincere smile. “But… actually, y’know what?” Whatever had been passing as his smile, though, soon vanished. “Something feels really off about all this. The Goblin’s gotta have a plan, right? Maybe it’d be better if I stayed in here with you guys. To keep an eye on things.”

Gwen’s relief was palpable. “Oh, I think we’re all a hundred percent in favor of you staying. You could use a rest.”

“Can’t argue with that. See you guys in a sec. Love you, Gwen.”

“Love you, too.”

The two smiled like idiots at each other for longer than Peter would like to admit. Eventually, though, he shut the camera off and said, “Franklin.” On command, the reinforced door folded up into the ceiling, followed by the one behind it and the one behind that one and the one behind that one. At the back of the darkened chamber stood the safe house, illuminated by ceiling lamps. The light at the end of the tunnel.

Peter had thought he’d been about ready to collapse, but when he saw the gorgeous blonde with the black headband and summer jacket, he found himself sprinting her way – as she did his way. Already, Peter was forming plans. This place had a bed, right? Peter was gonna get some serious nap time in, and Gwen would be serving the role of his teddy bear. And best of all, they had the perfect excuse to exclude MJ, seeing as there were other people in this safe house with them.

It wasn’t that Peter had anything against Mary Jane, of course. She was great, too, in her own way, he supposed. It was just that, y’know, these past few days had been a nonstop MJ-fest, and, while Peter was sure she’d give him and Gwen some space if he just asked, the request had thus far
proven hard to articulate.

But already, things were working themselves out. Gwen was sprinting across the entry room’s carpet to meet him, and the safe house doors were slamming shut behind him, and Peter could practically already feel the soft blankets… Gwen’s even softer skin…

They were less than six inches from each other when Peter’s spider-sense went off. “Wait-”

Something hit his side. Something with enough force to knock him off his feet, send him tumbling across the carpet, and then keep him there. What was-? Peter could barely move. His whole body was covered in a cold, sticky, and sickeningly familiar substance. Gob-webs.

“Surprise!”

Screams filled the room. Near the ceiling, a face had appeared, though Peter had to strain to watch it with this stupid gunk on his neck. At first he thought he was seeing things. How else could the Green Goblin’s smug, disembodied grin be hovering before them?

But gradually, the rest of his head appeared, and then came his neck, his torso, his arms, his legs… and finally his glider.

Gwen didn’t wait for him to fully form before sprinting for a door, but a couple blasts of Gob-webs sealed off all the exits. Then the Goblin turned his glider’s barrel towards Peter, firing a couple more globs to keep him nice and pinned.

Peter swore at him, but that only earned his mouth its own splotch of goop. His body must’ve been pumping five times the usual levels of adrenaline, but it still wasn’t enough. This wasn’t happening. He could stop this. He didn’t care how or why. He just needed to stop it.

“Oh, Peter Parker, never stop being an endless well of dramatic irony.” The Goblin circled the room, and each time a woman flinched, his smile widened. “You used invisibility to sneak your girls out here in the first place, didn’t you? Did it really never occur to you that my suit might have a fancy new cloaking device of its own? One that can fool the most cutting-edge of security systems?” He vanished again for a second to demonstrate. “But then I suppose you’re not in your soundest state of mind tonight, are you?”

MJ tried to hit him with a reading lamp, but an offhand blast of finger-laser cleanly bisected it.

“And you know the best part, Petey-O?” The Goblin’s eyes went from one trembling girl to the other. “I couldn’t have done this without you. I had no idea where you’d stashed these chumps, but you loved them so much that you led me straight to them! I almost gave myself away, I wanted to laugh so badly.” He showed that restraint no longer.

Gwen and MJ weren’t the only ones to scream – Peter caught the horrified, confused voices of the Fantastic Four’s friends and family from the other side of the doors. They were trying to break them down from the sound of things, but it was pretty futile in light of the Gob-web coatings.

No other help was coming. Just Peter.

By now, the Goblin’s glider had backed the remaining two girls into a corner. There was little they could do but let the Goblin grab each of them by the wrists and dangle them off the carpet.

“Where to even begin?” He cackled to himself. “Hmm, killing everyone you love all at once seems wasteful, doesn’t it, Pete? It’d be over so quick.” He cocked his chin, frowning for a second, but then his face lit up again. “I’ve got it! I’ll just kill the girl you love more, and then you’ll be stuck
Okay, okay, this was something – Peter had stretched his Gob-web bindings so tight, a couple strands were on the verge of snapping. He just had to… *keep… going…*

“But who was that again?” The Goblin was muttering to himself. “I know this one. I want to say it starts with a ‘g.’ Grace? No, that’s not right… Glory?”

Peter was almost out. Almost…

“Wait, I remember!” the Goblin suddenly cried. “Gwen! But, err, which one was she? Like I said, I’m no good with teen love drama.” His yellow eyes went from one dangling girl to the other. “Hmm, they’re both wearing foundation… Pardon me, ladies, but which of you is Gwen Stacy?”

Peter wanted to snap that the Goblin had no doubt spied on their video chat a second ago, that he knew darn well who Gwen was, but with the gunk over his mouth, Peter could only watch the girls squirm in the monster’s grasp.

The moment after the Goblin finished his question, one of those girls burst into hysterics. “Don’t hurt me. I’ll do anything. Please. Please don’t hurt me.” Her chest convulsed, and her breath came in constant, ragged bursts.

But that only made the Goblin’s smile all the wider. “Well, that settles that.” He dropped the remaining, stunned-looking girl back down, then plopped his target over his shoulder. “Now let’s get going, dear Gwenny.” The glider neared the reinforced doors. “We’ve got some traveling to do.”

“Mary Jane… take care of Peter for me.” The girl in the Goblin’s arms wiped her eyes, then took one last, longing gaze down at the blonde girl standing paralyzed on the carpet.

“Franklin.” The Goblin rubbed his hands together, giddy as he watched all the steel doors whir open.

Peter, meanwhile, stared at the Goblin’s hostage. His stomach churned at the realization, but Peter couldn’t deny… he felt the tiniest bit less tense now.

Until a clear, steady voice called out, “Stop.”

The glider halted its journey.

“She’s tricking you.” The blonde clenched her fists. “I’m Gwen Stacy.”

“Gasp!” The Goblin’s eyes went from the blonde on the carpet to the redhead in his clutches and back again. Then they went to Peter, still struggling against his slime. “Ooh, that look on your face is confirmation enough.” The Goblin wagged a finger at the scowling Mary Jane. “You really had me going there, missy. You should be an actress.” He tossed her back in like an underweight fish, then moved towards his real catch.

Gwen didn’t try to flee. There’d be no point. Instead, she stood straight, fists still clenched, and stared him right in the eye.

The Goblin gave a polite bow before hoisting her over his shoulder. “I knew that was really Mary Jane, of course. I was just testing you.” The glider sped off down the gray hallway.

It was the last adrenaline spike Peter needed. The Gob-webs exploded around him, and he hadn’t
been free for an instant before he was tearing down the hall, ducking under steel doors that threatened to smash shut on his head.

By the time Peter reached the elevator, its doors had already shut back. The next second, those doors were torn free, and Peter was sprinting up the shaft.

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*Tuesday, August 10, 2010, 11:24 P.M.*

Gwen was freaked out. On some level, she knew she was. She had to be. Yet an unnatural calm had washed over her body. It felt like her brain was operating at peak efficiency.

She looked at the man across from her in the elevator. The man dressed in a goofy costume, standing on a glider, and humming along to the faint music. He’d set Gwen down for the duration of the ride, secure in his confidence that there wasn’t a thing she could do to hurt or hinder him. And his assessment would be right. If Gwen tried to fight back in the slightest way, he could always just lose his patience and kill her where she stood.

But there was still an action Gwen could take. “This won’t bring her back, Norman. There’s no point to it.”

The humming came to a stop. The man’s fake yellow eyes fell on her. Had her guess been right?

At first Gwen thought he might hit her or at least make some smart remark. But instead, he spoke in a voice that was utterly alien when placed in the mouth of that mask: “You took an English class in that little school of yours?”

“Yes,” said Gwen, pushing her glasses up her nose.

“Then I’m sure you know… stories, poems, all kinds of literature… They have structure to them. Every element has its place, every piece has its purpose, and in the end, it all comes together to create meaning. Like playing music with human thought.” The man paused. “Real life doesn’t work that way. Real life is nothing but chaos. Meaningless chaos. But then, so is a poem before you write it.”

“Well, I think you could stand to be a better poet, then.”

She earned something of a laugh from him. The man took another look at Gwen, though she had to fight down a shudder. “You’re a lot like my Emmy,” he said. “She’d find that fitting.”

Gwen opened her mouth again.

But her words were drowned out by the screeching of metal. A red fist had just erupted from the elevator floor like a chestburster alien

Peter started to pull himself through the gap he’d made… only for the man in the goblin costume to snatch Gwen up again, blast his way out of the elevator with a pumpkin bomb, and then soar straight up the shaft.

In the remains of the elevator below, Peter screamed his frustration.

Gwen tried to yell something reassuring down to him, but she couldn’t breathe with her captor gripping her this tight. He was robbing her throat of the words.
The amount of variables in Goblin’s favor made Peter’s head spin. If those Doombots hadn’t invaded and smashed all the Fantastic Four’s security drones… If Ben Grimm hadn’t been turned into a giant rock monster by space radiation, thus forcing the Baxter Building to make their stupid elevators large enough to accommodate a goblin glider…

By the time Peter reached the top of the shaft, the elevator entrance had been mysteriously totaled, and with the traces of pea green smoke still wafting through the air, it didn’t take Holmes to crack this case. Peter dived through the gap, landing back in the FF HQ. The sight of glass shards (or whatever sci-fi equivalent the Four deployed) littering the ground sent Peter’s head upwards.

The next instant, he’d pounced out the remains of a skylight and returned to the storm-shaken city outside. At this hour, the only light came from the occasional flash of lightning and whatever streetlights hadn’t been knocked out yet. Manhattan’s main crisis may have been averted, but sirens still filled the air with a constant wail.

Peter didn’t even have to think about where the Goblin might have taken her. The moment he’d shot his web, he swung straight for the place. And all the while, he fought down memories of the last time a Green Goblin had put Gwen in danger because of Spider-Man. Or the time Venom had put Gwen in danger because of Spider-Man. Or the time Doctor Octopus had…

A pair of spandex-covered boots touched down atop the pillar of the Brooklyn Bridge, though they nearly slipped off the rain-drenched stone. The S.H.I.E.L.D. agents must’ve taken Emily’s body and left by now. It was only Peter, Gwen, and the Goblin here.

The Green Goblin hovered across from the pillar, dangling Gwen by her arm. Gwen’s eyes were open. She looked almost serene.

“Well,” said the Goblin, “isn’t this a familiar-? No, wait, actually, I believe my Emmy was dropped from a little more to the right.” He scooted his glider accordingly. “There we go. Now it’s a familiar sight.”

The motion caused Gwen’s glasses to fall from her face. They plunged into the icy depths below.

Peter said nothing, merely readying himself. The fight hadn’t even started, and already his muscles were fixing to give out on him.

“Speaking of ‘familiar,’ I believe Harry tried a similar stunt with Gwenny during his first ride on the big boy glider, didn’t he?” The Goblin shook his head. “And now, as per usual, I have to show him how to be a man.” He let go.

Gwen sped to the waters like they were pulling her. But Peter, of course, was ready. He lurched over the pillar’s edge. He fired his web-shooters.

The line snagged Gwen’s ankle. Swik.

Then another line snagged her other ankle. Swik.

Then another pair got her elbows. Swik, swik.

Then a handful more trailed up her spinal cord all the way to the neck. Swik, swik, swik, sploosh,
Gwen’s body was left spread-eagled, rocking back and forth in the winds like a really screwed up tire swing.

“You okay, Gwen?” Peter ripped the bundle of web-line from his shooters so he could stick them all to the stone beneath him.

“Y-Yeah,” she called back. “Blood’s rushing to my head, but I’m good.”

Peter took the biggest exhale of his life, then pulled himself back to his feet to find a notably displeased-looking Goblin hovering before him.

“Did you honestly think that was going to work?” Peter cracked his knuckles. “Did you think I’d make the same stupid mistake twice in a row?”

He shot through the air so he could introduce his knuckles to Gobbie’s jaw. Crack. And then again. And again and again and again as the Goblin’s glider spiraled downwards. Eventually, though, the Goblin was able to retaliate with his finger-laser. Shoom.

Peter was blasted off, leaving him free-falling head-first towards the water. But that wasn’t all the blast had done. See, it’d hit near Peter’s waist, and the resulting impact had popped some of his utility belt’s pouches right open. Countless knickknacks sped towards the river, passing right in front of Peter’s eyes. Spare spider-tracers and web-fluid cartridges, the camera that’d once been his pride and joy… and then the item that’d stolen that status.

“No you don’t.” Thwip. A dab of webbing collided with the little ring, knocking it through the air… and onto Gwen’s dangling hand. Peter had been, uh, hoping it’d slip right on her finger à la Fellowship of the Ring, not get glued sideways on her palm, but he’d still consider this a bullseye.

Oh, and now that the ring was safe, Peter probably oughta save himself from falling to death. Thwip. With a fresh web-line, he swung himself around the pillar and landed on the side of it where his lady love was dangling.

Peter cleared this throat. “Hey.”

Gwen arched an upside down-eyebrow at him, lips curled, and then pointed with her eyes to the freshly-glued item on her hand. “Peter, what’s this?”

“Um, uh, um…” said Peter.

And after that, they didn’t really have to say anything. There wasn’t time to, anyways – The Green Goblin was swooping in for another pass at them.

“Why must you insist on ruining things for me?” the Goblin called out. “You’re a horrible person, you know that?”

“Oh no, I’m drowning with guilt.” Peter positioned himself in front of Gwen, pinning her to the wall behind him with his limbs. When Gobby got too close for comfort, Peter knocked him away with a kick.

It was an effective strategy for a while, but eventually a lightbulb flashed over Gobbie’s head, and then he clicked a button on his pumpkin-themed belt. In a blink, he went invisible.

But Peter had already devised a counter-plan. He hugged Gwen even tighter to him. She was so
close, she was virtually a part of his body now... meaning that when his spider-sense tingled for one of them, it tingled for both of them.

In this manner, Peter again managed to kick Goblin away — and he even did it with enough force to short out Gobbie’s new cloaking gadget, apparently, meaning the world was no longer deprived of seeing the guy’s pretty face. Hurray.

This time, Gobbie was sent plummeting off his glider and onto the bridge below. Then Peter gummed up the glider’s exhaust ports with a couple web-bullets, causing it, too, to fall from the sky and vanish into the darkness.

The loving couple was alone again. “Okay, time to get you safe—”

“No, wait, look!” Gwen again pointed with her eyes, this time to the bridge below. It seemed Gobbie had peeled himself from his crater, and now he was taking out his frustration on passing cars... via pumpkin bombs.

“But—” The words caught in Peter’s throat. He wasn’t actually sure how he’d planned to finish that sentence.

“Peter.” Gwen gave him a look he’d come to know too well, and the lack of glasses only amplified it. Made her seem older, somehow. “Go. I’ll be here.”

“...You’re right. Love you.” Peter stole a kiss, and Gwen sneezed on him because she was getting rain up her nose, and then Peter smiled and released his grip, leaving Gwen dangling again as he dropped off the pillar.

Peter touched down on the road a bit more gracefully than Gobbie. But when he got there, he found the Goblin waiting for him. All around them, plumes of green smoke hid the remains of cars and their passengers.

Peter readied himself. “No more of this.”

He was the first to move. His fist flew towards the Goblin’s grinning face, but the Goblin caught it, crushed it in his own, and kicked Peter aside. By the time Peter was back on his feet, a pumpkin bomb was headed his way. Peter dodged, but not fast enough to outpace the blast wave. He went skidding across the pavement, which, by the way, tasted like wet, crunchy dirt.

The Goblin charged at him, but this time Peter was ready. His fist turned the Goblin’s face concave, and then his other one did likewise to Gobbie’s chest and stomach.

The Green Goblin hissed and reached for his pouch. Out came a handful of razor-pumpkins. Some of them sailed towards Peter’s face, which was acceptable, but one of them flew all the way to the tip of the pillar above, which wasn’t.

The blade cut a couple of the strands holding Gwen in place, but Peter had given her suspension plenty of redundancies. Only a couple webs got severed. Still, the sudden lack of support might’ve caused the other web-lines to gradually start snapping-

“Nice try.” Ffftt.

-but a quick blotch of web-fluid pinned the severed strands to the stone behind them, securing Gwen in place. She’d only slipped for less than a second.

But while that’d occupied Peter’s attention, the Goblin had lobbed another bomb. There was a
noise that was both explosion and laughter, and when Peter’s ears stopped ringing, he discovered where he’d landed – right inside the tunnel formed by the pillar’s forks. Peter tried to return to his feet again, but he, uh, wasn’t as successful this time.

The Goblin strolled towards him into the shadows. “Misery, misery, misery, that’s what you’ve chosen.” He shook his head. “I offered you friendship, and you spat in my face.”

Peter made it his feet. A fist to the stomach sent him back down. Then a knee to the underside of his chin sent him back up. And finally, some knuckles across the jaw sent him down again. Now Peter was on his back, and the Goblin was climbing on top of him to pile on punch after punch after punch.

The truth was, for as many goblins as Spider-Man had whooped in the past, these last few days had driven him to exhaustion, whereas Gobbie here had spent most of his time lately just chilling on his glider. It was like the supervillain equivalent of a Segway. Heh. That was a pretty good quip, actually. Peter would’ve used that one… if his mouth hadn’t been otherwise occupied by the Goblin’s fists.

Peter tried to pull himself away on a web, but that only got the Goblin’s kick to land even faster. Next he webbed up the Green Goblin directly, but the guy tore through the stuff like it was paper. The kick to Peter’s ribs went uninterrupted.

So yeah, safe to say that by now, Peter was little more than a squishy mound of bones and blood. With the final reserves of his strength, he raised a web-shooter.

And with the plentiful reserves of his own strength, the Green Goblin crushed it under his boot. “You’ve spun your last web, Spider-Man. Had you not been so selfish, your little girlfriend’s death would’ve been quick and painless, but now that you’ve really pissed me off…”

Peter hadn’t realized that mask’s grin could get any wider.

“…I’m gonna finish her nice and slow.”

Tuesday, August 10, 2010, 11:48 P.M.

Another second, and the blast from that flying Spider-Slayer would’ve turned Nick Fury to liquid. As it stood, though, Fury simply ducked the blast, then used the thrusters of his Hulkbuster armor to propel himself through the biting winds until he was near the roofs of some buildings. He had a clean shot at one of the larger Spider-Slayers.

This was going to require perfect concen-

“Fury!” yelped a voice in Fury’s ear.

Despite this being a radio transmission, Fury liked to think the agent could tell he was rolling his eyes. “Yes?”

“The Green Goblin’s been located, sir. He’s on the Brooklyn Bridge with Spider-Man, and- Oh my lord!”

“What?” snapped Fury. “What is it?”

“He’s beating the crap out of him!”
No. If the stupid kid had just cooperated with those agents before… “Well, what are you waiting for? Get the boy some backup!”

“Um, no, sir, I think you misunderstood me.”

**Tuesday, August 10, 2010, 11:51 P.M.**

Peter’s fist collided with the Goblin’s grimy green gut again, and then again and again and again.

*S*pie*r-*strength*, *if I ever needed you, it’s now.*

And again and again.

*Don’t bum out on me. I’ve got to put everything into this next one.*

And again and again.

*You understand, spider-*strength?*

And again.

*Everything I have.*

He didn’t stop until the Goblin ceased trying to counter-attack. Until the Goblin was huddled against the tunnel wall, holding out a hand and whimpering, “Peter! Stop! Stop! It’s me.”

Peter halted the next blow. Not ‘canceled.’ Halted.

With trembling hands, the Goblin peeled off his mask to reveal a bruised, bloodied, yet no less punchable mug. The mug of Norman Osborn. He stared at Peter with wide, wild eyes.

“You.” Peter’s voice scared even himself a little. “How-? Actually, don’t answer that. I don’t even care. I don’t care how you survived, I don’t care how you went from wanting me dead to wanting to mentor me to wanting me dead again, I don’t care how you found out my secret ID-”

“Oh, I’ve known ever since Venom blurted it out on the news. My surveillance through your Osberry then confirmed my suspicions.”

“I KNEW IT!-” Peter caught himself. Whatever. Whatever. “And I care least of all about what your stupid plan I ruined was supposed to be-”

“Ruined?” Norman snapped. Ah, of course, he couldn’t stay too pitiful-looking for long. “Peter, tonight has gone beautifully. Did you see what Harry has done?”

Peter let out a huff. “Get drugged and brainwashed by his crazy dad but then double-cross him?”

“Yes! Yes, exactly! He took charge of his own life, and he made me prouder than I thought possible.” For a moment, Norman’s frenzied, gray-blue eyes grew distant. “Imagine the public’s reaction when it comes out that poor Harry was abused and manipulated at the hand of the most powerful supervillain since Doctor Doom, but through his indomitable willpower and righteousness, the Iron Patriot joined Manhattan’s superheroes in battling the Green Goblin’s invasion, taking the Oscorp empire all for himself and turning the company legitimate.”

“And destroying all that work you did to become the Big Man?” said Peter. “To make Oscorp the very best like no one ever was at creating super-mercenaries?”
Norman only laughed. “You think I care what side of the law Oscorp operates under at the end of
the day? It doesn’t matter if Harry becomes the next Doctor Doom or the next Captain America –
just so long as he’s somebody. So long as he’s powerful. I promised I’d educate you on how the
world works, Peter, and I will. This struggle you’ve thrown yourself into, superheroes versus
supervillains, it will go on forever, Peter, with or without you and me. Shut down Tombstone and
the Kingpin rises to power. Redeem Octavius and some other freak will crop up. Kill me and
Kingsley throws on a goblin costume. It’s not meaningful. But we can make meaning from it.” A
smile crossed Norman’s bloodied lips. “Decades from now, my son’s name is going to be spoken
in the same breaths as Steve Rogers’s and Tony Stark’s!”

Norman had grown quite enthused, but Peter only grew quieter.

“My legacy is secured, Peter, and there can still be a place for you in it. That spider-themed tower
in the skyline? The respect of Manhattan’s other heroes? It can be yours. Those people don’t see
the potential in you, Peter. Not like I do. Give me your hand.” He offered out his own.

Peter’s stayed still.

“Peter.” Norman’s voice grew strained. “Don’t you understand? You’re my son. I love you.” He
sat there a moment, chest heaving, staring at Peter.

Peter’s lips were the only part of him to move. “I think people are better off without your love.”

The way Norman cried out, he almost convinced Peter he was in pain. “It doesn’t have to be like
this, Peter. I love you, and I forgive you for what you did to Emmy. After all…” But it all vanished
like a drawing in the sand. “…accidents happen.”

Peter’s spider-sense told him to jump, and he was never one to question that thing. In midair, Peter
saw something silvery dart past beneath him.

Norman had time to say, “Oh.” It was followed by a chunk, then a whump.

Peter landed on some rubble that was once a car, then stared at the far wall through the remains of
his mask. Across from his, Norman was shrieking. He clawed at the glider connecting his upper
half to his lower half, as if prying it out with his fingers would save him.

After only a second, though, the reality of the situation crossed Norman’s eyes, and he fixed them
on Peter. A face that’d once been sharp and icy was now rounded and soft. “Peter… tell Harry…
I’m sorry.”

“Yeah,” said Peter, “like he’d ever believe me.”

Norman died with horror on his face.

Quiet filled the tunnel. Once he was sure Norman really had gone still, Peter climbed off the
wreckage, staggering a bit, and made for the tunnel’s mouth. Before leaving, he took one last look
at the wall. All he saw was a pathetic, broken nobody pinned to it. Peter couldn’t help but find it
fitting. It was the best death for a proud man – crucifixion on a stake of humble tin.

Poetic.

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Tuesday, August 10, 2010, 11:59 P.M.

At this point, Peter was relying on some stray car headlights to light his way. Seemed the weather
was causing some major power outages.

Though the slightest movement sent his body howling with pain, Peter climbed the bridge’s support pillar. He almost slipped more than once, and he wasn’t sure if it’d been on the rain or on his blood. But either way, once he’d made it halfway up, he called out, “Gwen? It’s over. He’s dead.”

A couple more feet. Just a couple more feet, and he’d be at her side again. “Sorry to leave you like this for so long. Bet you’re ready to go home, huh?”

Made it. Now all that was left was to pull her to him and rip off all those webs.

“And, hey, uh, Gwen? About the, y’know, the ring… Maybe this is a bad time, but will you marry me? Gwen?”

End of Lesson 8
Lesson 9: Real Life 101

“A Serpent!’ echoed he; no sooner said,
Than with a frightful scream she vanished:
And Lycius’ arms were empty of delight,
As were his limbs of life, from that same night.
On the high couch he lay! – his friends came round –
Supported him – no pulse, or breath they found,
And, in its marriage robe, the heavy body wound.
– John Keats’s “Lamia”

Tuesday, August 10, 2010, 11:56 P.M.

A man descended from the sky onto the dark, eerily empty street, lit only by the headlights of a waiting ambulance. In his arms, he clutched a body.

“Here.” He offered it out.

It was taken by a rescue worker. “Th-Thank you.”

The man gave a bow. “This poor civilian was injured during the conflict, Jane. We trust him to your care.”

After that, the paramedics rushed into their vehicle, and Thor marched down the sidewalk to regroup with his fellow superheroes. Mister Fantastic and Invisible Girl had both regained consciousness by now and regrouped with the rest of their team in their Fantasticar.

Iron Man, meanwhile, hung back from the group. He was preoccupied thumbing through his gauntlet’s holographic display, upon which was a jumble of technical info comprehensible only to him.

“So,” spoke up Miss Marvel from Iron Man’s side, “anyone else think we should assemble like this more often?”

“Shush,” Iron Man hissed at her. “I’m trying to figure out… Oh, called it.”

“What?”

“Going through some public records Latveria’s propaganda machine- sorry, news media just posted online. Seems the sudden increase in weapons production was just for a military parade – yeah, sure – and some of the weaponry Doom reported stolen matches the stuff these Spider-Slayers are loaded with.” He pointed a thumb to some scrap metal scattered across the pavement.
“So you’re saying it was Oscorp who sicced the Doombots on the city?” said Miss Marvel.

“Spencer would be one of the few roboticists capable of reprogramming Doom’s handiwork.” Iron Man gave a nod of his helmet. “To wear the old heroes down so that Oscorp’s would look more capable when the Jack O’Lanterns attacked. Oscorp’s been playing us for suckers.”

Miss Marvel’s gaze fell on the ambulance speeding into the distant darkness. “Well, then…” Her head snapped towards Nick Fury, who’d been busy directing his agents through the streets. “…we owe Emily Osborn a visit.” She crackled her knuckles. “Where is she?”

“Dead,” said Fury.

“Good,” said Miss Marvel. “What about her green boyfriend?”

“He’s at the Brooklyn Bridge.” At this, Fury took a breath – though less like he was nervous and more like he was trying to shoo away a fly. “And... while all of us were dealing with this mess… Spider-Man went to face the Goblin alone.”

Wednesday, August 11, 2010, 12:00 A.M.

Oh, thank god, the Fantasticalcar was here. Plus a couple S.H.I.E.L.D. Quinjets and helicopters.

“See?” said Peter. “I told you. Everything’s gonna be fine.”

He hurried the two of them over, torn strands of webbing trailing behind his arms. The vehicles had all landed at the bridge’s mouth, and superheroes and agents alike were already climbing out.

“Dr. Richards!” Peter made a beeline for the hero with white-streaked hair. The words came out all jumbled. “She’s hurt. Please, sir, I think he did something to her. You’ve gotta help her. Hurry!”

Dr. Richards didn’t have much choice but to accept Gwen into his arms. “Oh lord. What happened?”

“She- I mean, I- I saved her,” said Peter. “Don’t just stand there. Inject her with something, or, you know-”

Dr. Richards touched his fingers to the underside of her wrist.

“What are you doing?” The words came out louder this time. Peter didn’t notice. “Call one of your medical drones. Get her to the… I saved her.”

“Peter.” What was going on? The guy’s voice had never sounded like this before. “There’s nothing I can-”

“What are you talking about? You’re the smartest man in the world.” He was no help. Peter yanked her back to his own arms. Stupid… He could do this without them.

What was wrong with these people? Why weren’t they-? The world was going nuts, that was why. World was going nuts. Everyone but Peter.

His eyes went back to the vehicles. More and more “heroes” were climbing out so they could gape uselessly at him in their stupid, bright costumes. Stark, Johnny, Susan… Some of them Peter didn’t even know except by their obnoxious nicknames. And every last one was gasping or staring or just generally being unhelpful.
Why had Peter ever thought—? *Useless.* Every last one of them was useless.

“Okay.” He held Gwen to his chest as if one of them might try and steal her. “Okay, fine. I’ll do this myself. Like usual. I’ll—”

“Son.” Dr. Richards took another step towards him. Someone who made the words stop—in Peter’s throat *and* in his skull. In the headlights of the Quinjets, the man looked almost angelic. “Peter.” He held out a gloved hand. “Let me—”

*Crack.* Reed Richards hit the pavement. A couple other heroes sprang forward at this, but Richards stopped them with a hand. He’d already returned to his feet.

“Where were you?” Each word stung Peter’s mouth. “Where were *any* of you?”

Richards said nothing. Again, he held out his hand.

“Don’t touch her.” *Thwip.*

One of Peter’s web-shooters had been crushed, but the other still worked. Not a ton of webbing left in it, but it was enough to reach the nearest building from the bridge’s entrance. Enough for Peter to dive over the edge and swing away with Gwen before anyone could think to stop him.

Wind rushed past his head. This was good. Web-swinging helped him think. He’d already formulated a plan, in fact. Even if the other heroes refused to help, Peter could get Gwen to the emergency room. There was one not far from here.

It would’ve only taken Peter a minute to get there, except that his hand didn’t seem to want to grip the web too hard. Before Peter had even realized what’d happened, he’d hit the cement, and Gwen had gone tumbling across the pavement.

“No. No no no no no.” Instantly, Peter was at her side. She’d come to rest in a little patch of grass and shrubs planted in front of some parking lot. “I’m sorry, Gwen. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

Overlooking the patch of grass was a street lamp, one of the few that hadn’t been knocked out by the storm or tipped over during all the chaos. Like Richards’s, Gwen’s face now looked angelic.

Except her eyes. They were open.

“*Hrngh.*” Peter’s chest convulsed, and for a second, there was something cold in his throat, but then it was gone. And now Peter was smelling something. Was that the Chinese food he’d had for dinner? Wait, had that been *today*? Earlier today, he’d been eating dinner like everything was normal with—

“I’m sorry.” His knees gave up on him. “I didn’t mean to…” He was in the grass now, too, shoulder to shoulder with her.

She still had a couple dozen web-strands stuck to her. Peter remembered the first time he’d ever made that stuff. It’d gotten all over that ugly brown rug in the basement of his old house. He’d been so proud. And now strand after strand of his creation was running down Gwen’s back. Some of the strands were over five feet long, but a couple of them were shorter. They’d been cut.

Peter touched a finger one of the shorter strands, which had long since lost its adhesion. He followed it backwards. It stopped at her neck.

Oh. Peter had figured it out. Now everything made sense. See, Peter wasn’t lying in the grass in a
puddle of his own vomit, he was lying in that bed in the safe house. And Gwen was acting as his teddy bear. That was why his arms were so tight around her. And that little patter he felt wasn’t rain, it was the rise and fall of her chest. He was so tired, and she was so soft, he could stay like this forever. In fact, that was exactly what he planned to do.

“Whuh?” Until the sound of sirens stirred Peter’s eyes open. A sea of cars had painted the grass red and blue. The Brooklyn Bridge loomed behind them. Guess Peter hadn’t swung as far as he’d thought…

Doors opened, and half a dozen men emerged. Wait. Wait, they’d found Gwen. Police and reporters. People prying her. Touching her.

“Get back.” Peter returned to his feet. Swung a fist. But the action left him lurching, struggling to keep his balance. “Don’t you touch her! Don’t you…” He felt the grass against his cheek again.

Okay, if fighting was off the table, he’d just have to go with plan B. Peter knelt over Gwen, holding her even tighter to him. If they wanted to pry someone, it’d have to be him. “Gwen, Gwen, it’s okay. I won’t let them hurt you.”

But to Peter’s groggy surprise, the man who stepped forward didn’t try to touch or pry a thing. He merely said, “Fella…” He was an older guy. Pleasant face. For a second, in the darkness, Peter thought it was Gwen’s dad. “I hate to do this to you, but the ambulance is here.”

“An… ambulance?” said Peter. “Are you g’onna help her?” He waited for his reply.

“Yeah, kid,” said the officer. “We’re gonna help her.”

“Thank you.” Finally, Peter’s grip loosened, and he felt Gwen slide from his grasp. “But be careful, okay?” No matter how much he told them not to, his lids were shutting again. “I promised to be good to her.”

Wednesday, August 11, 2010, 12:44 A.M.

Peter felt the wind on his face, coupled with the steady jostling of his body. He’d have thought he was web-swinging except he was sitting down.

He opened his eyes enough to see Johnny on the seat beside him, wearing a face Peter had never seen on the guy.

“Bro?” Peter managed. “Where…?”

“You’re in the Fantasticar, buddy.” Johnny rustled Peter’s hair – a dishearteningly uncharacteristic action. “We’re getting you back to the safe house to rest.”

“Okay… Th…” Peter wasn’t halfway through the word when his eyes shut back.

Wednesday, August 11, 2010, 2:03 A.M.

There was a plasma-screen TV in this guest room, plus a queen-sized bed, a minifridge, and a wastepaper basket. The basket was where Peter had tossed the remains of his mask. The rest of his shredded costume, he hadn’t yet bothered to remove. In fact, most of the bandages had been wrapped directly over the soaking, stinky spandex.
He lay atop the covers. Normally, that fact would’ve made it near impossible for sleep to come to Peter. But the way his body ached right now, he didn’t think anything in the universe could keep him from drifting off.

Wednesday, August 11, 2010, 2:33 A.M.

The human brain was weird. When you’d forgotten something, it was darn near impossible to remember again, and when you remembered something, it was darn near impossible to forget. It was like, if you ran up to a someone and blurted out, “Don’t think about pineapples!” then you could guarantee what they were about to think about. Or- Or it was like that game that’d been annoyingly popular in middle school. The one that was just called “The Game.” The rules were… were…

What had Peter been thinking about a second ago? It was gone. He’d lost it.

Hey, you know what was weird about this safe house? The fact that it was, like, a bajillion miles underground. If there’d been a window, Peter might’ve been able to see Mole Man tunneling through the earth or something.

Man, the ceiling tiles in this place had a really intricate pattern. It was kinda relaxing. In fact, the more Peter stared at it, the more tired h-

*Gwen’s dead.*

Wednesday, August 11, 2010, 2:47 A.M.

“Peter?”

“Bro?”

Madame Web and Johnny both gave a start at Peter’s arrival. He had to be careful where he touched the door to the entry room, though – There was still bits of Gob-web on it.

“Couldn’t sleep.” Peter sat himself mechanically on the cushion beside Johnny, right across from the corner where Web remained in her wheelchair.

Peter spared the blank TV a glance. They’d had to turn it off. The news wouldn’t stop talking about it. It’d been so dark and hectic out there, he hadn’t even noticed the stupid copters circling overhead…

Out of the blue, another thought invaded Peter’s mind. “Hey, wait. Where’s MJ?” His eyes darted around like she might be hiding behind an armchair or inside the fireplace.

“She left before you got here.” Johnny shifted in his seat, peering at Peter with his own reddened eyes. “Didn’t say where.”

Peter sprang off the cushion. “And you *let* her?”

“What were we supposed to do, chain her up?” snapped Johnny. “We’re not keeping people prisoner down here.”

“Great. Perfect. Now I have to go get her.” Peter started for the reinforced steel door blocking the exit, but Johnny stopped him with a hand on his arm.
“Dude, you’re exhausted.” His lip was quivering. “And it’s pitch black out. And- And what if some of the robots are still out there, or-?”

“That’s exactly why I’ve gotta go.” Peter met his eyes.

Johnny held his arm even tighter at first, but a minute into the staring contest, he relented.

**Wednesday, August 11, 2010, 3:21 A.M.**

Now that the state of emergency had been declared over, every last one of Manhattan’s subways was up and running. Peter could only assume it’d been some sort of mandatory thing to help families reunite and put an end to all the chaos. He didn’t know. All he did know was that this was the most crowded subway car he’d seen in his life.

“Hey, man,” said the guy in the adjacent seat, “sweet Spidey costu-”

“Go to hell.”

“Ohhh-kay.” The guy’s attention returned to his phone.

**Wednesday, August 11, 2010, 4:14 A.M.**

It was at the exact moment he reached the door to his apartment that Peter remembered his key had fallen out his utility belt. It was at the bottom of the East River by now. He was about to turn back for the staircase when he caught the faint sound of music seeping through the wood. There was a voice, too, but it was tough to make out.

His curiosity piqued, Peter tried the knob. The door creaked right open. He stepped inside.

“Suhhhhhhm-day I'll wish upon a star,
And wake up where the clouds are far behiiiiiiind me…”

Their new widescreen was cranked up high enough to convulse on its stand. Walking towards it was about the equivalent of walking head-on into Shriek or Shocker.

But what really made Peter wince was the couch. Or the girl sprawled across it, at least. She had on the same skimpy summer outfit she’d worn to Peter’s birthday dinner, though it was massively wrinkled by now. The way she’d slouched over on the cushions, her torso protruding above her neck, made her hair look like a starfish as it fell over the armrest. Her entire bust was a smeared mess of mascara, snot, and spilled wine. It was hard to hear her over the speakers, but she was singing along to the words between periodic sips from the bottle in her hand.

“If happy little bluebirds fly,
Beyond the rainbow,
Why, oh why, caaaaaaaan’t-?”

But the moment she caught sight of him, she slouched over, fumbling for the remote, and hit mute. “Heyyyy, Tiger, you just gettin’ here?”

Peter stood in place in the living room, stiffened, between the TV and the still-open front door.
“I DVR’d a buncha dumb old movies! C’mon, we should… should…” Mary Jane took another swig of the bottle, only to discover to her displeasure that it was empty. “Oh, wait. Wait wait wait wait. Don’t worry, I didn’t- I left some for you. Look.” She pointed a finger in the general vicinity of the TV table. “I cocktailed it up and everything.”

Peter could only assume she was referring to the glass of pure red wine sitting next to the overturned orange juice jug dripping down onto the carpet.

“This was my favorite movie when I was a little girl,” said Mary Jane, returning her attention to the screen. “Did I say it was Little Mermaid before? I lied, it was this one.”

“Of course.” Peter’s eyes squeezed shut. “Of course. I don’t know what I’d expected.” He turned away, hand on his brow. “I can’t believe this is what we did with our time.”

“What?” Mary Jane let out a grunt of pure, childlike confusion.

“We barely had any left.” Peter laughed. “And we gave all of it away to some vapid whore.”

The screen collided with the back wall, sending shards of glass through the air.

Mary Jane let out this little shriek like a toddler playing in the sprinklers, and then she did something that really got Peter pissed – She started giggling.

“But I- I-” She could barely talk, she was giggling so hard. Peter could only imagine her face right now. “I loved her, too.”

“You loved her, too.” Peter gave the screen another kick, and then again and again until it sparked. “That’s a good one. You wouldn’t care if your own mom died.” Next his foot went for the PS3 lying on the rug. “Now get out of my home. I’d hate to spoil your fun.” His heel went clean through it.

It wasn’t until Mary Jane was off the couch and marching for the door that it occurred to Peter that maybe she hadn’t been giggling. But before he could open his mouth again, the loudest slam of his life hit his ears.

Fine. It was better this way, anyhow. Peter had been provided plenty of evidence for what happened when people stayed close to him. And maybe now that he was alone, he could take a shower and then see if he could finally get himself to pass out.

Except that when Peter turned back to the doorway, she was still there.

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Monday, August 16, 2010, 6:04 P.M.

“And I’d give up forever to touch you,

’Cause I know that you feel me somehow.”

The music was just about the only sound in the whole church. The visitation room had become a garden, there were so many flowers. That was the penance paid by Reed Richards and… and the other people like him, all of whom had respectfully declined to attend. If any one of them had shown their face, it would’ve caused a scene.

“You’re the closest to heaven that I’ll ever be,
And I don't want to go home right now.”

Of course, if it’d been up to Peter, they’d have been outright barred from attending, but he’d had to fight to get a seat at the table during the funeral planning, let alone any kind of say in the decision-making. And if you thought Mary Jane was allowed anywhere near the discussions, then Peter envied your unsullied optimism. Yeah, that would’ve been an interesting relationship to explain to Gwen’s relatives…

At least now Peter knew why Gwen had rarely ever visited them.

“And all I can taste is this moment,

And all I can breathe is your life.”

Gwen had picked the song out herself. Her lawyer had kept going on about how weird it was for such a young girl to have made all the arrangements already. Months ago, in fact. “Conscientious,” he’d called her.

The inheritance from her dad was going to Peter. Which really meant it was going into a separate account he’d created just for it, where it would never again see the light of day. Though he was thinking of giving it to a library or something if Aunt May kept refusing to take it.

Flash, Sha Shan, and just about all the rest of the Midtown High gang had been here, too, for varying lengths of time. Ones like Glory and Kong who Peter thought he’d never see again… the Warren brothers, Gwen’s bandmates…

Mary Jane’s black dress was the plainest thing Peter had ever seen on her body. She was hovering in a weird, three-foot radius from him. Scared to be too close, scared to be too far. Contrast that with Eddie, who was making sure to stay on opposite sides of the room from Peter at all times.

Peter had needed a dress suit – The one he’d worn to Uncle Ben’s, Norman’s, and Captain Stacy’s funerals had long since been outgrown. Mrs. Muggins hadn’t been thrilled Peter was missing his rent payment, but Peter had conveyed to her the importance of the situation, after which she’d been too terrified of him to argue.

Peter remembered when he’d seen Uncle Ben’s body lying in a church not unlike this one. Back then, Peter’s brain had almost refused to accept it. He’d have sworn Ben was just asleep, that he was playing one of his stupid pranks, that he was fixing to spring up out of the casket and yell, “Gotcha, kiddo!”

Peter’s brain… wasn’t having that problem this time. That wasn’t to say Gwen looked bad, though. They’d done a really good job, actually. She had on her nicest pink dress, and her hair was just the way Peter remembered it – He’d been scared they’d go with the silky-smooth version, but he’d always liked it a bit messier – and they’d even remembered the salmon-colored headband to go with the spare glasses Peter had found for… for…

What was he doing? Why was he thinking any of this? This was wrong. She wasn’t supposed to be in there. She wasn’t supposed to feel this cold. This shouldn’t have been happening.

Aunt May tried her best, but there was little she could do to steady his sobs.

Peter stayed that way until it was time to shut the lid. Until Gwen’s face, headband, glasses, dress, and ring were hidden from view.
Tuesday, August 17, 2010, 6:42 A.M.

Dawn came pale and unpleasant to the Long Island cemetery. The service had ended ages ago, which was also when Peter had stopped making sound. But only because he lacked the strength. It was that same lack of strength that kept him standing on the grass and staring down, unseeing, at the fresh soil.

Hushed voices spoke behind him. Gwen’s therapist was murmuring something to Mary Jane. And on Peter’s opposite side, the Connors were huddled together with Eddie. Mrs. Connors was consoling him in gentle tones.

Eddie hadn’t spoken a word to Peter, but Peter had caught him exchanging some brief ones with MJ. Peter himself hadn’t spoken for hours, though.

Eventually, inevitably, the procession began to politely clear itself out. It dwindled and dwindled until finally even Aunt May was forced to hug Peter goodbye and return to Dr. Bromwell’s car. At that point, the only one left standing before the headstone was Peter himself.

And Miles Warren, standing motionless a couple feet across from him.

Tuesday, August 17, 2010, 5:11 P.M.

“FFFFTT! SWIK! SNAP! It’s the new Spider-Man action figure with real web-slinging power!”

The image cut from a plastic toy to a somber newscaster.

“As you can see,” he said, “Lincoln Enterprises has been forced to recall all of its Spider-Man marketing and merchandising in light of-”

The channel changed.

Now there was slow-panning aerial footage of Manhattan – or what was left of it, at least. As the camera zoomed in on some rescue workers, a voiceover stated, “In these troubled times, our city needs a leader who’s experienced true hardship. A leader who can enact meaningful, lasting change.” The image cut to Mayor Waters seated in a darkened room. “And there is no one I would trust more to succeed me in that role than Wilson Fisk.”

Block text appeared over her face: “VOTE FISK FOR A SAFE TOMORROW.”

The channel changed.

Now it was a buncha talking heads debating something called the “Superhuman Registration Act,” which Washington was apparently fast-tracking.

“Who’s going to hold these quote-unquote ‘superheroes’ accountable?” one of the heads asked. “For god’s sake, Spider-Man killed a-”

The channel changed.

Now onscreen, a hideous politician was bellowing, “These mutants are thugs, every last one of
them, and we’re getting them out of our country!” Cheers erupted from the massive crowd before him.

The channel changed even faster.

“The Night Gwen Stacy Died, a special one-hour report by our own Phil Sheldon. Of the countless atrocities captured by our cameras in the past few days, perhaps none are more striking than the footage – played here at one-tenth speed – of Spider-Man inadvertently-”

The TV shut off.

The doorknob was turning, which meant Peter had to stash the remote under a couch pillow. If Mary Jane caught him again, she’d get all, y’know, fret-y, which was almost has unbearable as how Aunt May had fretted when Peter had announced the cancellation of his college plans.

Peter did his best to look like he hadn’t just been staring at the gigantic, ancient box TV leaned against the back wall. They’d had to get it out of storage. Peter had replaced the HDTV and PS3, actually, and left them on Mary Jane’s bed the other day while she was at work. But when he’d returned from his own work, Peter had found the items’ exact cost in bills lying on the couch where he slept. Then, once MJ had started her hours-long makeup session in her bathroom, Peter had snuck into her room, foraged through her purse, and placed the money in her billfold. He’d found it back on the couch the next day. As of now, the cycle was still ongoing.

“Hey.” Mary Jane shut the front door with a shoulder, then carried forth a pair of paper bags bearing the Wendy’s logo.

“Hey,” said Peter.

“Dinner’s served.” MJ set the bags on the TV table. In a kind of detached, abstract sense, Peter supposed they smelled good.

“Thanks.” The bags went untouched. After a look from MJ, Peter added, “I’ll eat in a minute.”

“If I find it in the trash can again, I’m gonna kick your ass.”

Peter failed to respond.

With a resigned sigh, Mary Jane dug through his bag for him. “Here, at least take the drink – I mixed Coke with grape Fanta. This one’s good. It won’t make you barf this time, promise.” She stuck a straw in a cup, then shoved it in his face.

After a moment’s hesitation, Peter accepted it. A couple sips seemed to satisfy Mary Jane, and thus she allowed herself to plop down in the nearby armchair with a feeble smile.

The apartment had been scoured for bugs, by the way, with the help of Reed Richards. Not that there was really anyone left at Oscorp to spy on them after that string of arrests. And among those arrested had been that Bart Hamilton telepath guy, now safely in S.H.I.E.L.D. custody.

As for the issue of Peter’s secret identity, he wasn’t sure how many Oscorp people knew besides Harry, but the FF had learned it thanks to Madame Web, and Johnny had assured Peter that S.H.I.E.L.D. was sweeping any secret ID leaks under the rug. The slate had been wiped clean.

That was a good descriptor for how Peter felt right now, actually. Like he’d been a slate crammed full of writing, but then someone had come along with a scrub brush and wiped it all off.
Mary Jane’s eyes flitted about the apartment – to Peter’s laundry on the floor, the trash piled up beside the trashcan, and the dent in the wall shaped like Peter’s fist. Then her eyes went to Peter’s lap, upon which rested a pile of shakily-stitched red and blue spandex. She pursed her lips.

“I’ve been talking to Liz,” Peter suddenly said.

“That’s good,” said Mary Jane. “You need as much company as you can get right n-”

“She wants to move out of her dad’s to be closer to college, and she needs a roommate.” Peter’s eyes fell on the mask lying atop the spandex-pile. Its own big, white ones stared back. “Might be a good chance for you two to bury the hatchet.”

“Y-Yeah, maybe.” Ugh, he hated it when MJ frowned at him like that. “But, I mean, this is only a two-bedroom… Did you wanna swap rooms with me?”

Slowly, Peter shook his head. “MJ… I’m looking at single-bedroom places. There are some cheap ones out there – I’ll be okay. I just, y’know, I don’t want to screw you over if you’re really set on staying here. Or- Or you and Liz could find somewhere cheaper. Talk it over with her if you want. Up to you.”

“Oh.” Mary Jane blinked a couple times. “Yeah, I get it. I’ll, uh, I’ll give her a call.”

“Good, good. I think you’d like living with her. She’s got a cat, so… that’s something.”

“I’m allergic to cats,” Mary Jane said immediately. “And dogs.”

“Oh,” said Peter.

The two of them sat there, Peter on the couch, MJ in the armchair, staring at each other like they’d both been lobotomized. The Wendy’s bags sat uselessly on the TV table, their tantalizing aromas wafting in vain.

“Well, I- I think I’ll take another crack at falling asleep.” Peter hopped up to shut the curtains, letting his mask and costume drift to the carpet.

“Good, good.” Mary Jane, in turn, slinked off to the kitchen. “And I’ll work on those dishes in the sink. They need to get done.”

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**Tuesday, August 17, 2010, 6:28 P.M.**

Peter sat up on the couch, tossed the blanket off his shoulders, and rubbed the back of his head. If he put the pillow too close to the armrest, it left a crick in his neck. If he put it too far from the armrest, he had to sleep all squished up in the fetal position. No middle ground.

Life wasn’t fair.

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**Tuesday, August 17, 2010, 6:47 P.M.**

When punching his pillow a couple dozen times failed to solve the problem, Peter finally sucked it up and rose to his feet. He gathered the pillow and blanket in a bundle in his arms, then trudged past the bedroom where MJ had locked herself… and into the other one. The empty one.

Peter found himself stopping at the doorway. *Stupid.* Look at him, acting like this was the lair of
some bloodthirsty creature. There was nothing to freak out over. He’d been in here before to change clothes and stuff. Just never for longer than half a minute.

The door creaked open. The first thing to hit Peter’s eyes was a salmon-colored laptop sitting on the carpet in its charger. Then there were the skinny jeans sprawled across the bed, the novel on the desk with a bookmark stuck two-thirds through, the-

The door slammed shut.

With a soft thud, pillow and blankets returned to the couch. Cricks in the neck were not that bad. Cricks in the neck built character. Peter had suffered ten times worse before. He was used to pain. It was nothing to him.

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**Tuesday, August 17, 2010, 6:49 P.M.**

The door creaked open.

Peter just needed his spot. The one he’d burrowed out through months of snoozing. You could still kinda make out the indent. It wasn’t so bad just so long as he stayed on that side. Just so long as he focused on his indent, it was all fine. It was safe.

He threw himself down. See? Look at that, his eyes were shutting. Already, this was way easier.

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**Tuesday, August 17, 2010, 7:02 P.M.**

There was a blonde hair in the bed.

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**Tuesday, August 17, 2010, 8:04 P.M.**

Sleeping on his other shoulder wasn’t so bad once Peter got used to it. It was good to switch up shoulders every now and then. Kept his arm from going numb in the night.

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**Tuesday, August 17, 2010, 8:07 P.M.**

Sirens blared from outside the window, and Peter sprang upright. Sounded like firetrucks. Firetruck sirens had a subtle distinction from ambulance sirens. Peter sat there, listening as the shrieks grew steadily quieter.

Once they’d died out, his back returned to the mattress.

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**Tuesday, August 17, 2010, 8:18 P.M.**

Peter rocked in place under the covers. He’d gotten real jittery, he guessed. His thumb kept tracing and re-tracing the blonde hair wrapped around his fingers.

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**Tuesday, August 17, 2010, 8:21 P.M.**

Peter had forgot his phone. He groaned, climbed to his feet, and trudged to the door. But on the way there, he almost tripped over some stupid thing left on the-
The charger cord. It was the laptop’s charger cord.

Peter stared at it. Then he set the hair atop the covers, making sure to place it against the dark blue parts of the cloth pattern so it’d be easy to find again, and seated himself cross-legged on the carpet.

The laptop’s lid flipped open, bringing up the lock screen. After a moment of hovering over the glowing blue keyboard, Peter’s fingers punched in the password (amourdesoi31), causing the lock screen to fly away. In its place appeared the main desktop. The wallpaper was a sweeping shot of the East River at sunrise, complete with a red-and-blue figure swinging past the buildings above. One of Peter’s.

He brought a pointer finger to the touchpad, searching aimlessly. Google Chrome, Microsoft Word, Audacity, Photoshop… Peter right-clicked that last one on the taskbar, bringing up a list of the most recent photos, then left-clicked the topmost entry. Into Photoshop loaded a half-drawn human face against a transparent background.

Peter stared it at it a while, but eventually he exited out and pulled up Google Chrome. The mouse trailed down the bookmarks bar. Youtube science playlists, some kind of music forum, Tumblr… Peter clicked through to that one, then skimmed the dashboard. Mostly it was art blogs, not an insignificant number of which were devoted to yaoi, plus a couple posts arguing about some book series Peter had never read. Some of those posts, he realized, were from this account.

*You are willfully missing the point, one of them read. In real life, that would be an abusive relationship. She is MUCH better off with…* The spelling and grammar were perfect. The language was careful and precise.

Peter checked the browsing history. There he found random forums, links to dumb videos, and Google searches for “Was Jesus really a mutant?” and “Is back acne normal?”

He found a discussion thread, too, from r/SpideyWatchers. Peter usually avoided that place – It royally creeped him out – but nonetheless, he risked clicking it. The link brought him to a thread titled “Spider-Man HELPED CROOK ESCAPE COPS???” complete with a gif of Spider-Man in action. Oh yeah, Peter remembered that. One of the half dozen thugs had managed to run for it, and when Peter tried to stop him, he accidentally got web in a cop’s face. Just some stupid thing, y’know?

The account currently logged in had, from the looks of things, contributed half the posts in a hundred-comment chain in which Spider-Man’s innocence was both called into question and vehemently professed. The final post from the logged-in account read, “YOU DONT KNOW ANYTHING AND UR AN IDIOT NOW GOOD NIGHT.”

After that, Peter tired of the internet and moved on to File Explorer. The first thing to jump out was a video folder labeled “Recordings.” Inside, Peter found a couple files dating from over a year ago, most of them titled something vague like “session 5” or “I screw up.” Peter clicked a random one.

A video appeared, and Peter’s chest constricted. He hadn’t realized how… how different she’d looked back then. Not just that her hair had been way shorter or that she’d lacked any sort of makeup, but the way she held herself. She really had been a fidgeting, blushing, stammering mess behind those glasses, and Peter couldn’t imagine someone more perfect if he tried.

“We’re gonna edit out all the mistakes, right?” She squirmed on a mattress. From the shelf behind her, Peter recognized it as the bedroom from her old house. She clutched a saxophone to her trembling chest.
“Nope,” came the voice of a cameraman who sounded suspiciously like Mary Jane, “cuz you’re not gonna make any.”

“Right, right. Duh.”

The girl inhaled, then brought the instrument to her mouth. The sound it produced was soft. Slow. Wistful. Flawless. Peter listened intently for the next three minutes, at which point the take unceremoniously cut off. Immediately, he clicked “replay.”

“We’re gonna edit out all the mistakes, right?”

“Nope, cuz you’re not gonna make any.”

“Right, right. Duh.”

Music. And then it was over again. Peter grunted, then moused through the video player’s settings until he found an option titled “auto replay.” Once the box had been ticked, he turned the laptop’s volume up, set the brightness all the way down, and pulled himself to his feet. From there, Peter ran his sleeve over his eyes, retrieved the hair from off the covers so he could weave it through his fingers once again, and crawled back into bed.

He shut his eyes. Time vanished.

Peter woke to her voice.

“We’re gonna edit out all the mistakes, right?”

He rose from the covers, untwined the hair from his finger so he could get some circulation back, set it down gently on the bedside table, and then turned for the laptop on the carpet.

A girl was sitting in front of it, watching the screen intently. She all but stopped Peter’s heart. With his bleary morning vision, it took him a second to realize she was a redhead.

“MJ?”

“Oh, sorry, sorry!” Mary Jane hopped up like Peter had zapped her. “I was just trying to figure out where you went, and I got… distracted.”

“It’s oka- Whoa.” The moment he was on his feet, Peter was nearly on his butt. In reply to MJ’s concerned look, he said, “Little whoozy, I guess.” Had his legs always been this heavy?

“Hey, Pete?” MJ, too, pulled herself upright. “Look, I was thinking about what you said yesterday, and I decided I’m moving out of here, too.” She glanced away, sheepish. “So, uh, while I’ve still got you, could I ask you to haul my TV to my aunt’s car outside?”

A minute later, Peter was in the living room. He wrapped his arms around the thing and hoisted… only to immediately drop the device back on the rug. The ground shook.

“Ow! Ow!” Peter stumbled backwards, rubbing his arms.

“What?” MJ was at his side in an instant. “It’s not that heavy, is it?”

“Yeah, no, this isn’t right.” Peter tried again to the same result. “It’s not that I can’t lift it. It’s just, I mean, usually I can lift a car above my head like it’s nothing.”
Great. Now MJ was getting fret-y again. “Do you think you’re sick?”

“That’s not how that works. Here, let me try…” Peter hopped to the wall, clinging to it by hands and socks. “Whoa boy-!” Again, he was nearly on his butt. He hadn’t fallen off the wall, exactly. It’d just taken him a hot second to stick properly.

Another couple minutes later, Peter was at his desk and peering at his own palm through a microscope – the one his aunt and uncle had gifted him in his pre-spider-bite days – while Mary Jane hovered behind his chair like a hummingbird or a dragonfly.

“My hair’s falling out,” said Peter.

MJ checked his scalp. “Looks fine to me.”

“No, I mean on my hand. I’ve got these little hairs on my hands and feet that help me stick to walls. It’s the same with actual spiders. The bigger hairs are called scopulae, and each one’s made up of microscopic hairs called setules. A single setule doesn’t have a ton of surface area, but when there’s so many of them, it creates a really powerful grip through the van der Waals forces-”

“You have magic hair,” said MJ. “Oh my god, you’re Rapunzel.”

“…Sure.” Peter took another look through the peephole. “And now it’s just falling out. Like my body’s rejecting it.”

“I… see.”

Peter didn’t have to turn around to know what face MJ was making. “Trust me, it’s not the grossest thing we’d be treated to if we had microscopic vision.” He took one last concerned look through the microscope before returning to his feet. “I don’t get it. It’s not like I drank gene cleanser – I’d be losing my powers all at once, not gradually.” A thought hit him. “Oh, man, you’re right, I bet I am sick. I’d better go see Dr. Richards about-”

He’d started to rise from his chair, but he was stopped by nails on his arm. MJ earned herself a quizzical look.

“I was- I was just thinking.” She shrank under his gaze. “You said your body’s rejecting your spider-powers, right?”

“Yeah, I think so.” The look went from quizzical to worrying.

“Maybe the problem’s up here.” She touched a finger to his forehead. “I mean, you’ve been… you know… stressed out lately.” MJ took a breath. “You haven’t been eating or sleeping much at all. Maybe the reason you can’t climb walls as good anymore is because…”

“…I’m not supposed to?”

At this, Mary Jane could only shrug. “I mean, when you think about it, you got those powers by a total fluke, right? And now they’re- they’re leaving from a total fluke. If you got Reed Richards to give you a shot in the arm, wouldn’t that be, like, seeking out more power than you’ve been given? I don’t think that’s what your uncle meant by…” She trailed off. When Peter said nothing, she held out her hands, adding, “Look, all I’m saying is you have a choice.”

“…perhaps none are more striking than the footage – played here at one-tenth speed…”
Warren shut off the TV on his desk, practically hurling the remote at it. He was more or less hiding out at his ESU office now. He’d done his best to always cover his tracks of course, but Warren had never anticipated Oscorp failing on such a massive level. Any second now, he could find S.H.I.E.L.D. agents knocking on his door.

Warren hugged himself, scrunching his nose at his own stink. He was still wearing his funeral attire.

His hands shook. They wouldn’t still themselves until he’d dug through his desk drawer, retrieved the bag of blonde hair, unzipped it, and inhaled deeply through his nostrils.
If Peter swung any nearer to the ground, his costumed feet would be scraping car hoods. It was kind of appropriate, really. The perfect illustration of the life that’d been drained from him. In truth, though, the low-altitude swinging had less to do with lethargy and more to do with self-preservation. Usually, swinging made Peter feel weightless, but now he was hanging on for dear life. Having the proportional strength of a spider wasn’t essential to web-swinging – as Eddie had proved back when he’d freed the symbiote from the cement – but it certainly made the experience less terrifying.

Mary Jane had just about thrown a fit when Peter had revealed his intentions to patrol the city, but for whatever baggage came with this stupid costume, web-swinging was something Peter had always loved. If his strength was really about to be sapped in the coming days, he wanted to do it one last time. It was the only thing that helped him clear his head anymore.

“Ah ah ah AHHHHHHHHHHHHH AH! Ah ah ah AHHHHHHHHHHH AHHHHH AHHHHHHHHHHH!” An out of tune violin promptly collided with Peter’s ears. It was followed shortly by the “singing” of some lady on a street corner. “SpehhhhhhhtaculAAAAAAAR, sPEHHHHHHHHHctaculaAAAAAAAR Spider-Man! SpEHHHHHHHHHHHHctaculaaaaaar-”

Peter nearly smashed into someone’s windshield like a dead bird.

…Okay, fine, maybe web-swinging wasn’t all it was cracked up to be. Now Peter merely trudged down the sidewalk, fending off stares from passerby. His mask had really been designed to look approachable, but he still managed a good “cross me and see what happens” face.

A newspaper blew into Peter’s chest. SPIDER-MAN IS AND ALWAYS HAS BEEN A HERO, read the headline. Story by J. Jonah Jameson. Peter tossed it in the nearest trashcan, then continued his trudge.

But even once Peter was a safe distance from Busker the Eardrum-Slayer back there, one agonizing sound was merely swapped out for another.

“Freedom at last for the Iron Patriot!” a row of TVs proclaimed from behind a shop window. “New details have come to light about the abuse and even brainwashing Harry Osborn was subject to at the hands of his father, the infamous Green Goblin.”

Against his better judgment, Peter scurried up the shop’s wall so he could eavesdrop from above – though it took a couple tries to get his left hand to stick properly.

“After his involvement in the Goblins’ attack on the city, the younger Osborn was taken into S.H.I.E.L.D. custody, but just this morning we have received word that the Iron Patriot is to be allowed to continue operating as a superhero under S.H.I.E.L.D. supervision.”

Again, Peter almost smashed himself into a windshield like a dead bird, but on purpose this time.

Poor Harry’s father had drugged and brainwashed him, a tearful Harry had told the press. But now that Harry was the sole leader of Oscorp, he had every intention of cleaning up the company. After that, Harry had spent a good chunk of the conference posing in his shiny new Iron Patriot armor for a photo op with Thor and Iron Man. He could’ve passed for their adopted son.
When had this happened? How had Peter not known about it? Well, actually, to be fair, he hadn’t exactly been keeping in touch with Harry. Liz had called Peter a couple days back to ask if he wanted to come visit Harry in Ravencroft with her, but Peter had, err, deleted the voicemail.

“It’s him!”

“Don’t get too close, son—”

“Do you think he really killed her?”

Peter was shaken from his thoughts by the frantic whispers of onlookers. In an instant, he hopped down onto the street. With a single look, the whispers were silenced and the pedestrians scattered like a pack of pigeons.

Peter forced himself to breathe. He was about to duck into an alleyway and change out of his stupid costume, but then he realized one onlooker had remained un-scattered.

“Peter? Peter Parker?”

What-? How-? Peter jolted towards the voice’s owner. It was some homeless guy lurching right towards Peter with his messy red hair, stubble-covered face, tattered, stained business suit, and… gray, unseeing eyes.

“Matt?” From the looks of the guy, his trademark, circular shades weren’t the only thing he’d lost. Peter bet he could hoist the poor guy over his head with or without his waning spider-strength.

“It is you. It’s a miracle.” The Man Without Fear (or Access to a Shower, Apparently) stumbled his way forward. He tried to feel up Peter’s face with his hands, but Peter drew back. “I’ve been searching everywhere.”

“What happened?”

“It was the Kingpin!” Matt said, sending spittle through the air. “He knows who I am. He knows everything about me. But I learned who he is, too.” He made a noise that was maybe supposed to be a laugh. “Fisk. He’s Wilson Fisk, and with Oscorp out of the picture, he’s in charge of everything, Peter. Tombstone’s empire was minuscule next to this. All five boroughs.” He made another grab at Peter’s face. “And Fisk will stop at nothing to see me in a dumpster or- or the bottom of the river. Everyone I love is in danger, a-a-and the other heroes and S.H.I.E.L.D., they turned me away. They think I’m some nut. They’re no help.”

Peter couldn’t help but feel the tiniest shred of empathy at that last part.

“But now I’ve found you. You, who pulled Daredevil from the darkness when it threatened to swallow him. There is a light inside you, Peter Parker, and I need it right n-”

Whoa, okay, the guy had just successfully put his hands on Peter. “Hey, back off!” He sent Matt away with a shove. Ugh, when was the last time Matt had brushed his teeth? “Can’t you get your new ‘Defenders’ team to help out?”

“We were never a team!” Matt snapped. “That’s just something the media came up with.” His lifeless gray eyes bulged. “I don’t trust them. I can’t trust them. I can’t exactly afford Luke and Danny’s rates right now, and Jessica’s a child, Peter. She thinks what we do is fun. She hasn’t experienced loss like you and I have-”

“Aw, I’m flattered,” Peter deadpanned. “So then what about that Doctor Strange guy?”
“Stephen Strange is unholy.” The words made Peter flinch. “He communes with hell and speaks with devils.” Oh. Ohhhhhh, of course. Matt was one of those religious people.

“You believe in hell?” Peter asked, his voice soft and level.

“I’ve seen it. Sensed it. Whatever.” Matt stepped towards him again. “You haven’t met people like Stephen Strange or Johnny Blaze. If you saw what they can-”

“So then anyone who doesn’t think Jesus was really the son of God and all that jazz… you think all those people are there? In hell? Wailing and gnashing their teeth and whatnot?”

The words, paradoxically enough, seemed to calm Matt down. “I don’t believe it’s my place to say.”

“Have you not read your braille Bible?” Peter snapped. “That’s like the most basic tenet of your religion. It’s Christ-ianity. The Christ part’s kind of important.”

Even accounting for his gray eyes, Matt’s face looked blank. “I’m… I’m not the best person to talk to about theology, Peter. But if you need guidance-”

“I’ll pass, thanks.” Peter showed Matt his back, not that the guy could really appreciate the gesture. “Find some other bleeding-heart to fight your war for you, Murdock. Mine’s all bled out.” Not another word was spoken as Peter waltzed away.

*Hmph.* What was he getting so worked up over? Clearly, all along, Daredevil had been a total wacko. After all, it took a special kind of person to throw on a costume and jump off a rooftop. Wilson Fisk, the Kingpin of Crime? Yeah, right. The dude was, like, the nicest guy in the whole city. Matt’s friends and family were all fine. And... And even in the extremely unlikely scenario that they weren’t, then, well, excuse Peter for not tripping over himself to step inside Matt’s shoes.

And on top of everything else, Matt had the nerve to force his screwed up beliefs down Peter’s throat? Stupid idiot fairy tale-loving Christian jerkward...
downer. But, uh… if you ARE real and stuff…

His thoughts trailed off. Ugh, Peter had never been so confused in his life. Even if God was real, he wouldn’t know the first thing to say to Him. Eventually, though, he settled on:

…make it stop. Please. I know it’s fun for you, but just… make it stop. I want off the ride.

Yeah. There we go. Good prayer.

And now Peter was back to staring at the river. This was all just because he’d gone through her browsing history. What was wrong with him? The thought of Peter having his own history poked through after his death was, like, a reoccurring nightmare. Privacy didn’t just evaporate when you died.

But… no, no, it wasn’t just the browsing history. She’d talked with Peter about this stuff before. A little bit, at least. He was pretty sure she was… had been… firmly agnostic. But surely that was, like, a catch-all loophole, right? She hadn’t believed in any particular religion, but she hadn’t not believed in any, either. It was all good.

Then again, she had once said the words, “I’m not really a Christian.” So there was that.

The latest in a long line of sighs escaped Peter’s mouth. Usually, he’d have gone to Eddie for this kind of thing – Eddie had always been a devout Catholic – but somehow, Peter didn’t think the guy would be happy to see him right now.

Geez, though… Two different Christians, two different answers. It was almost enough to make you think this whole thing was just a crapshoot, and nobody actually had any definitive-

“Spider-Man!” A booming voice rained down from above.

“Huh?” Peter’s head snapped upwards. Ohhh no. A figure was descending from the clouds, and he was propelled by his hammer.

“It is I, the mighty Thor, and I wished to share a word with thou regarding our latest time together on the battlefield!” Thor landed beside him on the rooftop, scattering pigeons to the wind.

“Whuh?” Peter stumbled backwards. He was disarmed not only because a gigantic man with luscious blonde hair, Old Norse armor and a battle ax had just dropped down from the clouds, propelled by his massive war-hammer, but also because if you’d given Peter a list of all the people in the world he didn’t want to talk to right this second, Thor would’ve ranked remarkably close to the top.

“Your skills were quite impressive for a Midgardian,” Thor said with a shameless grin. “Take heed, ally, for we shall have many more battles together!” He slapped Peter’s back hard enough to trigger his spider-sense.

“Um, yeah, about that…” Peter tried to scoot away, but a beefy hand locked itself around his waist.

“Aye, worry not, good spider-” A shake of his head sent Thor’s hair flowing out like in shampoo commercial. Peter could swear it was swishing in slow motion. “-for I have seen your Midgardian informational media and know of the fate that has befallen Gwendolyn, daughter of George – a woman whom I am certain was one of the many lovers a warrior of your stature must have partaken in.”

“Okay, nice talking to you-” Despite his best efforts, Peter’s waist remained stuck tight.
“And thus I wished to make it known to you that in my homeland of Asgard, it is believed that death is not the end, but rather the beginning of a great and noble celebration!” Thor slammed a fist against his chest, which proved surprisingly percussive. “Do we believe the dead fadeth shamefully into oblivion? I say thee nay! Your lover died with honor on the battlefield, and she has slipped not into the grasp of Hel but into a seat at Valhalla, where even as we speak, she feasts on a roasted Bilgesnipe that spans the entirety of the table where the fair maiden sits alongside her father and her father’s father and his father before him, and in her hand she grasps a tankard of ale larger than thine own head! HUZZAH! HUZZAH FOR GWEN STACY!”

His hoisted his hammer skyward. Off in the distance, thunder clapped.

When Peter remained silent, though, Thor’s luster faded. “I- I apologize if I have offended. On Asgard, death is not a somber occasion.”

“No, that was…” Peter stuck a finger in his mask so he could wipe his eyes. “Dude, that was awesome.” He gave Thor’s back a slap of its own (though it left Peter’s hand stinging). “She’d have really liked that.”

“Yes. Yes, awesome.” Thor gave that shamless grin again. “I have been known to inspire awe.”

But it also a bit of a relieved grin.

Okay, so now Peter knew which afterlife he hoped was real. But was that seriously all there was to this whole “belief” thing? Picking and choosing what was most comfortable to you? That didn’t sound right. But then, how did you decide? Were you supposed to hope that the “one true religion” just so happened to be the one that originated in your culture? Out of all the cultures on the planet? And all the cultures on different planets? Sure, Peter thought the Valhalla thing sounded silly, but then, Asgardians probably thought the heaven thing sounded silly, too. Who was Peter to tell Thor he was wrong and Aunt May she was right or vice-versa?

Peter had made up his mind. He didn’t want to believe what was comfortable, he wanted to believe what was true. It was just that the truth was a bit, uh, hard to parse sometimes. Which is why he’d just entered the Fantastic Four’s HQ in the Baxter Building.

Dr. Richards was the only one here right now. As per usual, he was dressed in his sky blue uniform and hard at work on some project or other. His fingers wiggled over the keyboards at his personal workstation. His neck, meanwhile, stretched around itself in a spiral, allowing Dr. Richards to better balance the phone by his ear. “That’s excellent news, Stephen! Yes, it’s quite a relief to know that Mephisto has been permanently and irreversibly banished from this reality. No more married couples will ever fall victim to his—Oh, pardon, I have company.”

Once his call ended, Dr. Richards stretched out his neck so he could hover his smiling face a polite distance from Peter’s masked one. “Peter. How can I help you?”

“Oh, h-hey, Doc.” Peter drew back, clutching his spandex-covered arm. A sudden embarrassment had seized him. “Maybe this isn’t worth your time, but I guess I was just wondering, um, with all the crazy stuff your team’s seen on your adventures… you wouldn’t happen to know if there’s an afterlife, would you?”

“Of course I do.” Richards’s shoulders sagged. “I apologize in advance if I come across as callous, but I have a different variant of this conversation every day of my life. To put it concisely, I believe only in the evidence, wherever it leads me.”

“So then you don’t believe in souls or anything?” Peter said softly.
“Oh, no, I believe some type of residue from deceased organic matter persists in forms mere mortals cannot perceive unaided,” said Dr. Richards, “but only because my friend Stephen Strange has shown me evidence of that. However, before I get your hopes up, let me make clear that Strange and his ilk have forbidden me from studying their abilities in any kind of detail out of fear that, were I to have mastery over both science and what they call ‘magic-’” He made stretchy, elongated air quotes. “I would be far too powerful for my own good. And so for all I know, these ‘ghosts’ of theirs could be mere memories or echoes of people, not the people themselves.”

“Oh.” So even the smartest man in the world didn’t know the answer. “And, um, what about hell? Do you know if there’s a hell?”

Dr. Richards shrugged. “Stephen has certainly communicated with otherworldly beings happy to claim to be demons from hell. But again, I can’t study them, and so I can’t prove anything one way or the other. And believe me, having such tantalizing knowledge dangling just out of reach is a special kind of agonizing.”

Well, that’d gotten Peter absolutely nowhere. Still, there was one other question he could ask. The one that made his heart thump faster. After a deep breath, Peter asked, “Can people come back from the dead?”

The tapping of keyboards came to a halt. Gradually, Dr. Richards un-stretched himself until he was back to his normal human shape. Then, head bowed, he turned to walk towards Peter. “By the end of this conversation,” he said, “you’re going to hate me.”

“What are you saying?” And Peter had thought his heart had been thumping before.

“This is another of those questions I get asked every day.” Dr. Richards shut his eyes. “Yes, Peter, there are several ways to revive the dead—”

Completely on its own, a noise burst from Peter’s mouth. “Please, Dr. Richards, I’ll do anything—”

“-and no,” Dr. Richards finished tightly, “I will not do it for you.”

*What?* Peter’s fists quivered. How could he?

“I believe in the pursuit of truth, Peter. To hide this information from you would be intellectually dishonest. Much of the general public isn’t willing to hear it yet – and a good number wouldn’t believe me if they did – but if you’ve come to me with questions, I feel it’s my scientific duty to provide you with the answers.”

A stretched-out finger pressed a button on the workstation, causing the floor behind Peter to unfold. Out of the ground emerged a marble white chair complete with a comfy cushion. Peter graciously accepted the seat, while Dr. Richards did likewise in a chair across from him. Something told Peter he’d want to be sitting down for this conversation.

“D-Doc, listen, I’m a huge sci-fi nerd—” Peter let out a jittery laugh. “—so however you can do it, I promise I can follow along.” Suddenly, he was leaned forward and shaking Dr. Richards’s shoulders, causing the guy to wobble like gelatin. “Just please, please, at least tell me how.”

“Well,” Dr. Richards began, steadying himself, “one can preserve a deceased person by scanning his or her brain and uploading a perfect, cell-for-cell map of it to a supercomputer. From what S.H.I.E.L.D. has thus far discovered, it seems Oscorp had access to such technology, even including an extremely advanced algorithm that can reconstruct cells lost from decay, provided the brain is scanned quickly enough after death.” Whoa, okay, that was new. “We believe the purpose
of this tech was to imbue copies of the subject’s consciousness into their subdermal armor, allowing for precise mental control. This is how Rhino, Molten Man, and Scorpion were able to move the armor encasing them, including even Scorpion’s tail, and it was as a result of this process that the consciousnesses of Flint Marko and Morris Bench were able to persist as Sandman and Hydro-Man even when their organic bodies were destroyed.”

Peter opened his mouth, but he couldn’t for the life of him make any words come out.

“A perfect copy of Gwen’s consciousness could live on in a clone body, either organic or synthetic, and she would even have all her memories up to the point of her death. From the clone’s perspective, it would feel like she’d merely been asleep awhile.” Dr. Richards peered at Peter. “Whether or not that would ‘count’ as ‘your’ Gwen is a rather interesting question, philosophically speaking.”

“But- I mean, uh-” Peter found himself sputtering.

“A similar issue arises when it comes to Gwen Stacys in parallel universes,” Dr. Richards continued.

“Wait, wait, slow down!” Sheesh, Peter was juggling for dear life here, and Richards kept throwing more balls into the mix. “Parallel universes?”

“I’m afraid so.” Richards said with a somewhat jiggly nod. “Our reality is but one drop in an infinite sea of dimensions.”

“But- But if there’s infinite realities out there,” Peter finally managed, “and every choice you could possibly make’s already been made by one of your alternate selves, then doesn’t that disprove free will? Doesn’t that mean nothing matters?”

Dr. Richards gave a wry smile. “Even if every conceivable choice is accounted for in parallel dimensions – which, incidentally, is quite impossible to verify when dealing with infinite dimensions – I’ve certainly seen no evidence that it would have any bearing on the choices that you, the Peter Parker of Earth Two-Six-Four-Nine-Six, are able to make. Yes, there are ‘what if’ worlds where you made different choices, but there’s also a world where you’re a cartoon pig. How does that effect you in any way?”

“But…” Peter shrank. “…that still makes reality sound like nothing but random chaos.”

At this, Dr. Richards grew more somber. “I don’t believe that, Peter. ‘Meaning,’ in my eyes, is not an intrinsic property of reality but rather something that we ascribe to it. A book has meaning because we imbued it into every last squiggly line on the paper.” He paused, then added in a gentler tone, “And what I find meaningful is the notion that life is precious, that our duty as sentient beings is to create the best society, the best quality of life, to always pursue scientific discovery, to-”

“Yeah, I know, I’ve seen Star Trek,” cut in Peter. “I mean, I get it, being an atheist doesn’t make you a nihilist and all that…” After some more thought, he added, “So can I visit these ‘what if’ worlds?”

Dr. Richards shook his head. “Dimensional travel is only to be used in dire emergencies. Great lengths have been taken to protect our dimension from multiverse-spanning threats such as the Inheritors and the incursions-”

“The who and the what nows?”
“Pray you never find out. The point is, dimension-hopping willy-nilly would put our entire universe at risk.”

Peter sighed. “Fine then, what about time travel? Johnny told me all about that time machine gathering dust in Doctor Doom’s basement.”

“Well,” said Dr. Richards, “there are two main types of conceivable time travel. The first would bring you to an alternate timeline, which is merely a specific kind of parallel universe travel. The second type, which would retroactively change the history of this timeline, is impossible as far as I can tell – a rather fortunate fact, might I add, as otherwise I can only imagine we and everything we know would vanish in the blink of an eye the instant some alien light-years away constructed a time machine.”

There was also the “stable time loop” version, sort of like in Prisoner of Azkaban, but that was the dumbest kind. If Peter was ever going to use that type of time travel to change the outcome of his fight with Norman, then he wouldn’t even be sitting here having this conversation with Dr. Richards in the first place. Would he?

“Okay, fine, fine.” For some reason, Peter felt the need to rub his palm on his forehead. “I don’t want a clone or parallel universe or alternate timeline version or whatever.” Beneath his mask, his eyes shut. “I want my Gwen. I want her to get up and walk out of her coffin.”

The two of them sat in their armchairs a moment, silent. Dr. Richards wordlessly offered Peter some tea, but he declined.

“I apologize again if this is callous.” Dr. Richards sighed. “Truth be told, I’m not particularly skilled at… at these types of interactions. But I am sorry, Peter. The Fantastic Four promised to protect your loved ones, and we failed.” He looked like he might hug Peter, but he ended up shying away from it. “While we were dealing with a larger threat elsewhere, Oscorp managed to steal a shipment of our security sensors to study. Norman knew you might turn to us for help, and so he constructed that cloaking device to exploit an oversight in our sensors. He hid himself from all forms of invisibility-detection. Body heat, sound waves… Even hacked into our system so the safe house doors would respond to his voice command.”

“You guys did everything you could.” Peter’s voice was monotone. “Not your fault.” He paused, then said in a somewhat livelier voice, “Look, I don’t want to turn Gwen into a lich or anything – I just want to cast True Resurrection on her.”

Dr. Richards gave a nod. “I know. You want me to bring her back, no strings attached.” He inhaled, then exhaled, then rubbed his eyelids. “Peter… when I was a younger man attending Empire State University, I had a roommate. He was a lot like you, gifted with an incredible mind and potential – maybe not to quite the same extent as me, of course, but even so, he was my dearest friend. We had such an optimism back them, we truly believed the two of us could accomplish anything.” Richards paused. “But when he lost his mother, my friend became desperate to bring her back. He traveled the world, acquiring all the knowledge he could. Like me, he was barred from studying magic, but that was hardly a hindrance to him. He simply stole the information he needed, learning ancient and forbidden magical techniques, and through a mixture of this magic and his advanced science, my friend was able to build a machine. A machine that could go into… into what he believed was ‘hell’ and retrieve the souls of the dead.”

Peter hadn’t blinked once this entire story.

“I helped him at first,” Dr. Richards continued, eyes still shut. “I was young and stupid back then. But as the experiment neared its conclusion, I began to see things differently. I tried to warn him.
that he’d miscalculated, that he would cause a terrible accident, but he insisted that was impossible. The ensuing explosion left his face horribly mangled, and his pride’s prevented him from ever repairing the damage. He… blames me. Thinks I sabotaged it.”

“Did you?” asked Peter.

The question generated a long silence.

“Peter,” Richards finally said, “as scientists, we have a responsibility to the world.”

This generated a shorter silence.

“I can’t believe you.” The next moment, Peter was on his feet. “So what you’re saying is we could have the technology to bring back dead people whenever we wanted, but we don’t because- because- God. That poor guy just wanted to see his mom again—”

“Well, he’s since gone on to become a tyrannical dictator bent on world domination,” Richards said dryly, “so I can’t say I feel an abundance of sympathy for him.”

After that, mysteriously, Peter wasn’t so eager to mouth off anymore.

Richards brought his fingers to his scalp, running them through his white-streaked hair. “Playing God is too much responsibility for any one man to hold. Let’s say I reconstruct Victor’s machine. Let’s say I have the power to ‘bring back dead people whenever I want.’ How do I decide which of them ‘deserve’ to be brought back? People die every second, Peter. I can’t revive all of them – The Earth would overcrowd. I’d have to design countless colonies in space or other dimensions, and that would be a massive, complicated undertaking.”

Now Peter was fighting to keep his jaw from dangling. “C-Couldn’t you just bring back people who died way too young? That can’t be too bad on the planet if- if you crunch the numbers, can it?”

Dr. Richards could only shake his head. “Even if that was the case, it would be met with fear, distrust, and opposition. This kind of technology would reshape our entire society – I can’t just roll it out overnight.”

“But- But-” Peter could feel the patheticness swelling in his voice. “-couldn’t you just bring back Gwen?”

Dr. Richards couldn’t even look at Peter’s face anymore. “Like I said, I have this conversation with a different person every day.” He paused. “Think of it this way – These types of ‘unethical’ scientific experiments have been declared highly illegal by the U.N. Was I to revive even one person from death – especially one whose passing was so highly publicized by the media, I’m sorry to add – S.H.I.E.L.D. would swoop in to arrest me, and that would be highly inconvenient to my work. The work I do for the good of mankind. I’d be trading billions of lives for one.”

“S-She could change her name, have a face lift. No one would have to know-”

“I’m sorry, Peter.” Richards shook his head, eyes shut. “It’s not worth the risk.”

“Then you might as well be the guy who killed her!”

And that was the end of that. Peter stormed out of the headquarters.

Dr. Richards, meanwhile, simply shook his head again and returned to his workstation. He sighed
to himself. “Happens every time…”

Stupid idiot godless unloving atheist jerkwad… Peter bet Reed’s reservations would evaporate away if it was his own wife in the ground.

As much as the sight of the Baxter Building now disgusted Peter, though, he’d only managed to swing about three blocks away before his arms gave out on him. Now Peter was simply lying belly-up on another nondescript rooftop, hands resting behind his neck, gazing up at the stars overhead. Well, okay, he couldn’t actually see them – This was Manhattan, after all – but Peter knew they were there.

He shook his head, smiling to himself. “Hey, Gwen, it’s me. You wanna know something funny, Gwen?” He rolled to his side, pressing all his weight onto one shoulder. “I’ve been thinking a lot lately about the world. All of it. I’m just a clump of cells clinging to a minuscule little rock floating in an endless expanse of space, and that space is full of endless other rocks with endless other clumps of cells all clinging to ’em, and all that is just one in an infinite sea of parallel worlds out there in the multiverse…” His lids clamped down on him. “…and none of it’s as important as you.”

He wasn’t sure how long he stayed up there. Until he again lost the strength to cry, at least. And then a good while after that.

Sometime during all this, a thought wormed its way into his head – There was no God. There were no souls. Gwen Stacy had only existed because that exact order of atoms had just so happened to be arranged in that exact shape. And the thing about atoms was that they weren’t different from each other. One carbon atom was basically indistinguishable from any other, right? Provided the electrons and stuff were the same, anyways. A “clone” was only an idea brought about from the distorted way humans perceived the world.

And here’s the thing about clones – When they first crawled out of their pods, they’d be indistinguishable from the real deal, at least mentally. But then as the clones continued to live their own lives, they’d naturally become more and more different. So much of who you are as a person is shaped by your environment, after all. By that logic, then, a clone wasn’t the same person as the original… in the same way Peter wasn’t the same person he’d been a couple years or, let’s face it, even a couple days ago. People changed.

If Gwen had been cloned while she was still alive, the same logic obviously would’ve applied to her. So then, if she was to be cloned now that she… wasn’t… wouldn’t that logic still apply? Clone-Gwen, when she came out of the pod for the first time, would be exactly like Gwen Stacy. But inevitably, she’d learn she was a clone, she’d stand before the real Gwen’s grave, and that would change her. It had to. And she would no longer be Peter’s Gwen.

But then, the real Gwen’s own natural life experiences would’ve changed her anyways, right? If she’d married Peter, if she’d become a mother someday, she would’ve no longer been the “Gwen Stacy” she’d been at eighteen. And that wouldn’t have mattered at all. No matter how much she changed, Peter’s love for her never would. And if a clone of Gwen was sitting there waiting for Peter the moment he walked in his apartment, he wouldn’t be able to help himself. He’d feel that exact same love for her.

So then the only question remaining was… was there an afterlife? Did people have souls? Did clones have souls? So, for example, if Valhalla was legit, and would both the clone and the original each get their own seat at Valhalla, or did clones share a-?

Okay, time to hit the breaks on that train of thought. Peter’s head was spinning.
...So the smartest man in the world was a creep who refused to help. So what? Peter was smart. He could do this on his own. If S.H.I.E.L.D. was cleaning through Oscorp’s files right now, then all Peter had to do was bust into Oscorp Tower, beat up a couple S.H.I.E.L.D. agents, and steal all of that research for himself. And that lab where Peter had fought the Ultimate Spider-Slayer for the first time? And the one where Peter and Jameson had been brought during that time bomb thing? They couldn’t be the only ones. Peter bet Oscorp had hidden those things all over the city. At least one of those labs had to have the brain scanners with the algorithm to repair the decayed cells and stuff, right? And whatever other tech Peter might need. He could turn Gwen into Hydro-Woman or something. A clone made of living water. That’d be cool. Then she’d have powers and he could defend herself, and- and this madness would never happen again.

Peter had his work cut out for him. Step one, steal Oscorp’s research. Step two, find one of Oscorp’s secret super-mercenary creation labs. Step three, do a little gravedigging-

“Hngh.” A convulsion wrenched Peter from his thoughts. He flopped over, clutching his spandex-covered stomach, and panted, waiting for it to die down.

What was he thinking? This was wrong. Peter couldn’t… couldn’t do this. He shut his eyes, forcing his head to empty itself. The plan wasn’t happening. No one on this earth would ever dare try it.

Unless they were some creepy lunatic.
“Eleka nahmen nahmen,

Ah tum ah tum eleka nahmen…”

This time, it wasn’t just the spotlight painting the singer a sickly shade – It was helped along by the literal paint covering her skin. Today was dress rehearsal.

“Eleka nahmen nahmen,

Ah tum ah tum eleka nahmen…”

Mary Jane craned her neck, watching the musical number from just offstage. She’d ended up being cast as one of the Shiz students, meaning she got to bust out the old schoolgirl uniform.

“Let his flesh not be torn,

Let his blood leave no stain.

Though they beat him,

Let him feel no pain!”

MJ had to admit, though, between the tattered black robes and that fog machine turning the air a thick pea green, that singer creeped her out a bit.

“Professor Warren? I’m here,” Debra announced as crept into the ESU lab, praying her hair wasn’t too frizzy at this hour. Warren had asked her to take a shift in the time of morning when the campus was deserted.

That wasn’t a rare enough occurrence to shock her, but it wasn’t common enough to keep that sick feeling from bubbling in the pit of her stomach.

“Good girl.” Warren stood at one of the tables across from the door, shoulders slouched, fiddling with his glasses. “Now would you kindly take a seat and look at this folder?” He gestured to the thin plastic folder resting above a folding chair. “I think you’ll find yourself greatly rewarded for doing what you’re told.”

Debra obeyed. Her eyes were already squeezing shut as she sat. But what she wasn’t expecting was to feel something piercing her neck.

“Let his bones never break,

And however they try,

To destroy him,

Let him never die.

Let him never die!”
“What the hell-?” An overturned folding chair went skidding across the floor tiles. Elsewhere on the floor, Debra spun to discover Warren looming over her with that manic look in his eyes, and in his hand was a syringe nearly as big as Debra’s fist. Its fluid contents, it seemed, were almost completely empty.

On impulse, Debra touched her neck, feeling the droplet of blood pooling. “What did you do to me?”

“One question haunts and hurts,
Too much, too much to mention.
Was I really seeking good…
Or just seeking attention?”

“There’s nothing to be upset about, little lady,” Warren said quietly, arms folded behind his back. “I told you you’d be greatly rewarded, and what greater reward could there be than to have your very existence reshape our society?”

“Is that all good deeds are,
When looked at with an ice-cold eye?
If that's all good deeds are,
Maybe that's the reason why…”

“What are you talking abou-?” Mid-sentence, Debra found herself wretching violently enough to knock the glasses off her face.

“Let all Oz be agreed,
I'm wicked through and through.”

As she writhed on the floor, drool trailing down her mouth, something in Debra’s peripheral vision shifted. Her eyes jerked to her fingertips. The skin, usually a warm brown, had gone pale white.

“Since I can not succeed,
Fiyero, saving you-”

The color traveled down her skin like an infection. First her hand, then her arm… and no amount of screaming and scratching made it stop.

“There’s no need to look so distraught, Miss Whitman.” The world was growing fuzzier, and it sounded as if she was hearing his voice from underwater. “Though I suppose fainting is a reasonable response to such a drastic shakeup to your anatomy. This type of DNA-augmentation
has been around for quite some time, you know. It turned Peter Parker into Spider-Man, it turned Curt Connors into the Lizard… but you have me to thank for bridging the gap to mammalian DNA.” There came a faint sound that might have been a chuckle. “It’s quite silly, really. Would you believe I’ve only just now remembered that humans are mammals, too?”

“I promise no good deed,
Will I attempt to do again.
Ever again!
No good deed,
Will I dooooooo… agaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaain!”

The music had reached a crescendo, but just as quickly, it faded out.

In the front row, the director made enough applause to fill the whole auditorium. “That was wonderful, simply wonderful, darling! I feel as if it’s really happening!”

As hopeless as Peter felt right now, there was still one avenue he hadn’t explored yet. And so it was that he found himself headed towards the address of a magical wizard mansion (You’d be shocked what you can find in the phone book). He strolled down the sidewalk, totally alone. At this time of night, his costume didn’t earn him nearly as many stares – He was in Greenwich Village, after all.

Peter found his gaze wandering to the middle of the road. This place couldn’t help but make him think of last Halloween’s carnival. Back then, MJ had still been with Mark – She’d gone as a sexy nurse to go with his sexy doctor. Peter, meanwhile, had gone as Daredevil, mostly because he’d thought it’d be really funny if the media ever accused him of that, one, too. And then there’d been Gwen. She’d gone as Captain America. The costume was probably still in a box somewhere in their back closet, but Peter hadn’t touched any of her stuff since he’d poked through her laptop. He just couldn’t bring himself to, he guessed.

That Halloween had gone a tad more smoothly than the previous one, to say the least. No goblins had pulled Peter away from the carnival – but Gwen had. She and Peter had ended up finding a secluded alleyway and…

Peter forced his thoughts back to the present. The farther he let them slip into the past, the harder it got to pull them back out. He needed to keep himself planted firmly in reality.

Peter stepped onto the Sanctum Sanctorum’s welcome mat.

The place was an ancient, brown-bricked building, and a big, circular window with a squiggly-patterned emblem rested in the side of its green rooftop. The buildings surrounding it, meanwhile, were of the dull, featureless, rectangular variety. The sight of them caused the “One of These Things is Not Like the Others” song to play in Peter’s head. Seriously, if 221B Baker Street had a baby with Hogwarts Castle, the Sanctum Sanctorum would be that baby’s inbred cousin. In short, Strange’s house struck Peter was very… uh… what’s the word… abnormal.

The door opened before he’d even had a chance to knock.

“Can we help you?” Out of the frame poked some bald, middle-aged guy in a grass green robe.
“H-Hey.” Peter gave a little wave. His voice had gone a pitch higher than he’d have liked. “I was wondering if you guys did, uh, séances, I guess.” Sheesh, Peter had fallen far. Next he’d be paying ten bucks to have his palm read.

“Not unless it’s urgent. The Doctor’s talents are meant for a great deal more than parlor tricks.” The door started to close back. “Now if that was all, I’m afraid the Doctor is busy.” Just before he shut it completely, though, the guy added, “But I am sorry for your loss.”

Peter remained there long after the door had clicked back into place. Parlor tricks? Parlor tricks? He thought Peter was just asking for some stupid parlor trick? This so much more than- He just wanted to- God, even the weird magic hero that the other heroes avoided eye contact with was a jerkwad.

At first, Peter stormed off like he’d done with all the other superheroes he’d talked to today (except Thor. Thor was still cool). But then Peter caught himself, thought a moment, and doubled back around the building’s side. Once he was sure no one was watching, he hopped onto the Sanctorum’s wall. As per usual, it took a couple tries to get his hands and feet to stick, but with persistence, he was able to reach the dark green shingles of the rooftop.

The moment he was up there, Peter crawled towards that big, circular window. If Doctor Strange was too good to help him, then Peter would just sneak in, grab some spellbooks or a magic wand or whatever, and do the séance himself. He’d played DnD. He had this.

Yes, said Peter’s brain. This is a very good idea. Had Peter mentioned it was, like, three in the morning?

God, was it three in the morning? Mary Jane shook her head as she returned her phone to her purse. That’s what she got for being a career girl, she supposed.

She’d almost made it to the backstage exit when a voice cried out, “Egad! What ill fortune!”

“Huh? What’s wrong?” MJ scrambled to the director’s side, but so did every other actor and stagehand in the general vicinity. She got totally drowned out.

“I’ve just received terrible news!” the director said with a flourish of his hand. Yeah, MJ was starting to see why this guy and Devereaux were friends. “Those accursed Oscorp heroes overlooked a dinosaur. Miss Cooper was just mauled by a Velociraptor on her way out the lot.”

“Not Carlie!” gasped a stagehand.

“Yes, it is quite a tragedy…” The director bowed his head. “…because now we have no one to be our Galinda! And opening night is but a scant few weeks away!” He clutched at his gray hair, horrified.

“And there’s a dinosaur on the loose!” added one of the actors.

“Eh, not the worst thing in New York,” said another.

“Who could possibly replace our Galinda on such short notice?” the director cried.

“Well,” said the aide standing beside him, “we’ll have to phone the company and request a fill-in actress.”

“Wait, I’ve got it!” The director snapped his fingers. “That background extra.”
The aide rubbed her ears – just to check that they were unobstructed. “The… background extra, sir? Which one?”

“The hot one, of course!”

…Was it Mary Jane’s imagination, or was everyone staring at her?

Well, Peter didn’t know what he’d expected, but it turned out the Sanctorum’s interior was a total labyrinth. A lavishly-furnished labyrinth, sure, but a labyrinth nonetheless. Peter had been using the scientifically-proven trick of taking every left turn, but now he was worried he was going in circles. He was pretty sure he’d seen that floating scale model of the solar system hovering in the pitch black orb before… except that every time he passed it, the planets within grew colder and grayer. By now, some of them were crumbling off into dust.

That, uh, probably meant nothing.

Maybe this was the pending insanity talking, but Peter couldn’t shake the feeling that the dark red carpet running over the rich maple wood floor was actually the tongue of some creature threatening to swallow him up. Like Monster House but slightly less stupid.

Peter shook himself out of it. What was wrong with him? Since when did he buy into this garbage? Doctor Strange was obviously, like, the superhero equivalent of Mysterio, and this whole house was all just a- Wait, did that skull in the jar have three eye sockets?

Somehow, Peter ended up backing away… until he bumped into something from behind. “Gah!” He spun in place.

A demon stared back at him.

“What-?”

But a second later, Peter realized this demon was of the inanimate object variety. Specifically, it was a disembodied, fist-sized head made of solid gold, and it seemed to belong to a mix between a pig, an ox, and roadkill. The head was attached to a slender, equally golden rod standing vertically in a marble pedestal.

“Oh. Heh.” Peter stepped towards it. “C’mon, don’t you know jump scares are the cheapest kind of-? Hey!” The instant he touched a hand to the rod, though, he sprang back again. It’d burned like dry ice, straight through his glove. Hmm, interesting. “I don’t suppose you’re a magic wand that’ll let me talk to ghosts, are you?”

He wrapped his fingers around it again, but this time he was ready for the burning. With a quick tug, Peter freed the thing from its pedestal. Turned out that demon head design was on the rod’s bottom, too, making it perfectly symmetrical.

After a second in Peter’s grip, the burning faded away, leaving the rod cool to the couch. Nifty. Peter turned to an empty patch of hallway, then gave the wand a wave. “By the Hairy Whores of Hoggoth!” he bellowed. Nothing. “Eh, worth a-”

Down the hall, a doorknob rattled. Not like it was being turned – more like it was being shaken from its hinges.

“No way.” The wand clattered to the rug, and a second later, Peter stood before an ornate, gold-trimmed wooden door. The knob gave another, even more frantic rattle, but it wouldn’t budge.
Peter knew what was behind that door. In fact, he’d never been so sure of anything in his life – It was her. She was trying desperately to reach him, but she couldn’t. Not without his help. His hand hovered over the knob.

“No!” But a frantic voice wrenched his attention away. On the far side of the hall was that bald guy again, and a look of utmost horror was plastered on his face. “He’s taken the Wand of Watoomb!”

The wand had, indeed, been snatched up from off the rug. It was now clutched in the sweaty hands of Walter Hardy, and the bald guy was chasing him right towards Peter.

Peter’s hand lowered. He started to step towards Walter, but the moment he did, the doorknob grew still.

No. His window was closing. He didn’t have time for this. Peter returned his attention to the knob before him, stepping out of Walter’s path. Out the corner of his eye, he noticed that Walter had reached the elevator. Just before the doors closed, the man gave an appreciative nod, his pistol held high.

Peter would double back for him later. Just as soon as he got this stupid door open. He tried the knob, but it wouldn’t budge from this side, either. In that case, let’s hope the last reserves of his spider-strength hadn’t dried up yet. Peter gave the door a nice, strong kick.

It swung open. And she was, indeed, standing in the doorway.

“Gwen? Gwen. Oh my god. I can’t believe-” Already, his arms were around her. But something was wrong. She was cold. Way too cold. “Gwen?”

Her skin was the color of milk. Her pretty blonde hair was caked with mud, as was her mint-colored summer jacket and- and even her black headband. Her glasses were missing, too, but… what really stopped Peter’s heart was her head. It’d lolled back at an impossible angle. She was struggling to lift it.

“Hey, I’ve got you. I’ve got you.” Absolutely none of that stopped him from holding her tight.

“Peter?” Her voice, too, was wrong. Yes, it was supposed to sound soft and delicate, but not like a rotted log. “How-? You shouldn’t be here. Not like this.” Wide, glassy eyes bulged in their sockets. “Peter, go back. She can see y- Hrrk.”

She grasped at her neck, revealing the overgrown fingernails and grimy, dust-encrusted ring on her hand. And around her neck was a different ring – a thick, gray, silky one. The harder she tugged at it, the tighter it constricted.

“Hold still. I can save you, Gwen. Just let me-” No matter how Peter tried, the web wouldn’t tear.

Gwen’s mouth was open, revealing yellow teeth above a black tongue. She was trying desperately to speak, but the words wouldn’t come. All that emerged from her throat was a faint gagging noise… followed by a trickle of dirt.

“What-?” Peter stumbled back in spite of himself. The soil had splattered across the rug by his foot. There were little white things writhing in it. “No. No, Gwen, listen, you’re going to be okay-”

He stepped towards her again. But the instant his foot hit the rug, the floor vanished. Peter screamed. So did Gwen. Peter fell to the river below, the water’s surface impacting like concrete.
Above him, Gwen came to a sudden stop.

With a gasp, Peter broke the water’s surface. Ice. It was like ice. His head went skyward, but it was pitch black out now. He couldn’t see a thing.

Until lightning hit the bridge.

She was floating in the air with her limbs sprawled out. Webs trailed from each one, connecting back to the pillar above. She was dangling there like a marionette, staring at him with motionless eyes. A gentle breeze rocked her back and forth. The image was visible only a moment, yet Peter saw it long after the world grew dark again.

The water was getting heavier. Peter let himself drift. Deeper and deeper he sank. He thought it’d be pitch black down here, too, but there was actually a murky glow to everything. A glow that revealed that Peter wasn’t the only one floating down here.

Captain Stacy was here, too, with wispy red clouds flowing out his uniform. His eyes were open, and his face was not unlike the ones of those demon-heads on the wand.

“I’m sorry.” Peter opened his mouth, but that only let muddy water rush in. “I tried. I swear I did-” He gasped. More and more liquid was entering his lungs, weighing him down. On sheer impulse, he thrashed and flailed.

A car horn pierced his eardrums.

And as soon as it did, Peter’s elbow hit something solid – It was a dull yellow Oldsmobile floating in the depths, covered in rust and seaweed. The murky glow, evidently, had come from its headlights. The moment Peter spotted it, its door opened, and Peter swam inside.

He thought he’d be gasping and sputtering soon as his butt hit the seat, but Peter actually felt dry as a bone now. With a jolt, he realized his mask had vanished, and his spandex had been swapped out for his familiar blue t-shirt.

Wait. The library. Peter’s head went to the window, but the library was not waiting for him. Instead, all he saw was a white, featureless void. There was nothing here but the car and its occupant.

Or rather occupants, plural.

“Peter.” He looked just as Peter remembered him. His skin was a bit wrinkled, sure, but full of color, and his arms were as warm and as tight as ever.

“U-U-Uncle Ben…” Peter stayed like this a while, letting Ben hold him the way he always used to. Peter was small again.

“I’ve got you, kiddo. I’m here.”

Peter wasn’t sure how much time passed. He wasn’t even sure there was time in this place.

Eventually, though, Peter steadied his voice enough to say, “Uncle Ben… make it stop. Please.” The voice wasn’t his own. It sounded broken. Empty.

Ben held him tighter. “Peter… all the times we’ve talked about honesty, fairness, justice…” His stern gaze locked with Peter’s wavering one. “All of those times, I counted on you to have the courage to take those dreams out into the world.”
“You didn’t tell me it’d be like this.” Peter wrenched himself free – both of Ben’s gaze and of his hands. “It was supposed to stop, but it didn’t. It only got worse. You’re asking me to give and give and give until I’m just another husk floating in the river-”

“The dreams don’t change, Peter.” That only made Ben’s voice all the sterner. “Not ever.”

“Uncle Ben, please, I can’t do it. Don’t make me.” And Peter had thought his voice sounded alien before. Now it was contorting to pitches he hadn’t thought possible. “It hurts. Just make it stop. Please.”

“Take my hand, son.” Ben offered his out.

“You can’t do this to me. Please don’t do this to me.” Peter’s voice had gone from a scream to a whimper. All he could do was rest his head on Ben’s lap and shut his eyes tight. “No more.” It started as a plea, but it became a chant. “No more. No m-”

The windshield shattered. Before Peter could so much as scream, a hand was on his windpipe, and he was dragged off his seat, and then-

-he was standing in the hallway of the Sanctum Sanctorum, chest heaving. His costume was back on his body, and on the ground before him rested that- that demon-wand.

The moment he realized that, Peter backed away from it. But that only made him bump into something behind him – a tall, lithe man. His hair was dark and white-streaked, and around his deep blue robes was a crimson, gold-trimmed, high-collared cape that trailed the floor. The man’s eyes made Peter feel like he’d just been dunked in ice water.

To be clear, it didn’t feel like Peter had just awoken from a dream. No, that’d all been one smooth take. The events remained crystal clear in Peter’s head. Every last detail.

“If you value your existence-” Doctor Strange spoke through gritted teeth. His voice was steady and sharp, and every syllable made Peter flinch. “-you will not touch anything in this building ever again. She let you through the Sanctum’s wards. She can feel the temptation within you, boy, and she is desperate to have you. She finds you as captivating as a cat does its prey. You have enticed her. If you wish to leave this place, now is your sole opportunity.”

“I- I-” Peter tried to quip, but it came out all strangled.

He’d seen it so many times, but it’d always felt so detached. Creatures would rear their heads, things that had no right to exist, and the civilians of Manhattan would scream and run for their lives. Peter had always taken that for granted. He never thought he’d get to experience it himself.

“Buzz Lightyear, planet Earth needs your help!”

“On the way!”

“Buzz! Lightyear! The world’s greatest superhero now the world’s greatest toy!”

Mary Jane slouched back on the couch, chewing her popcorn as noisily as she pleased. It was the good kind with all the grease and butter. Her diet could go screw itself. For one night, at least.

Just as she was reaching for her decidedly non-diet Coke, the front door swung open, and Peter slinked his way into the apartment.
“Oh, Tiger. Hey.” MJ fought to keep the relief from bleeding too heavily through her words. He hadn’t broken his neck web-swinging, at least. “You wouldn’t believe how crazy my day’s been. Oh, and—” She hit pause on the remote. “—you never got around to moving my TV, and I couldn’t sleep, so I, uh, dusted off my VHS’s and started my annual Pixar marath—” But the moment she caught his face, she gave a start. “Peter? What happened?” Mary Jane sprang to her feet, sending crumbs off the nice dress she’d worn to work and onto the carpet.

He all but collapsed into her arms. His mask was off, but the rest of his costume wasn’t. It was tight and sweat-stained. MJ didn’t think she’d ever seen him risk going through the front door with it on before, even at this time of morning. And she hadn’t seen his face this pale since…

She sat him down on the couch with trembling hands. He told her everything, though he struggled through each sentence. Iron Patriot going free, crazy homeless Daredevil, a visit from the god of thunder, Reed Richards’s mad science, and the trippiest sleepover ever at Doctor Strange’s house.

When he reached the end of the story, Peter said, “She was trying to warn me about something.”

Mary Jane smoothed his hair, which had been warped beyond recognition by the sweat. Sometime during Peter’s story, his head had ended up resting against her shoulder. “Peter… you said you were expecting to see her when you opened the door.”

“It was her.” Peter’s voice grew firm. “I know her. It was her. This has happened before. When the symbiote had me trapped at that church, I saw Uncle Ben. He talked to me—”

“The symbiote was digging through your brain,” cut in MJ. “Maybe this wand thing was, too? How do you know these aren’t just your memories and—your thoughts? Maybe you’re seeing these people how you think of them? Like Dr. Richards said—”

“No, you don’t get it. It was real—” Peter started to struggle again, but her hands made him still.

“Peter… your real uncle wouldn’t have wanted you to hurt so much. It’s like this one, out-of-context talk got burned in your brain, and now it’s all you can remember about him.” Mary Jane brought a hand to his arm, stroking it. “He didn’t even know you had spider-powers, and they’re fading away anyways, right?” Softly, she added, “He’d have wanted a normal life for you.”

But right when Peter seemed calm again, the struggle resumed. “But what if you’re wrong? What if Gwen’s stuck as a ghost, and she’s trapped in this guy’s crazy magic house in pain or—?”

“Peter, listen to me.” MJ hated to do it, but she made both her voice and grip a bit harsher. “It was a mind-trick like Madame Web’s. It. Wasn’t. Real.”

“But—”

“I want you to say it, Peter. Please, just say it to me.”

There was a moment’s hesitation. “It… wasn’t real.”

“Thank you.”

The sentence did seem to bring some relief to Peter’s face. Hopefully he hadn’t gotten as skilled at faking that as yours truly. But even once the tension died down, Peter remained slumped against MJ’s shoulder, facing her on the couch cushions. A fresh batch of tears were fleeing down his cheeks.

Mary Jane didn’t think she’d ever get used to seeing Peter like this. He felt like he was made of
porcelain, like if MJ held him just a bit too hard, she could accomplish what countless supervillains had failed to do. Mary Jane had only ever met Peter in his post-spider-bite days. To be honest, deep down, she’d kind of thought, y’know… he’d always been like that.

In a mousy voice, Peter asked, “Do you think Gwen’s in hell?”

For a moment, the only sound in the living room came from the old, out-of-synch clock Aunt Anna had given them.

“No idea.” Mary Jane didn’t even try to smile. “But, I mean, if I could pick and choose which afterlife’s real… I think I’d have her be reincarnated as a house cat. And she’d be owned by some sweet old lady who loves her to death and takes great care of her. I’ve… I’ve always thought that sounded nice, anyways.”

She checked his face again. There was what could be the start of a smile on there. “Yeah.” Peter wiped his face on his mask. “It does.”

“Look…” Mary Jane smoothed his hair one last time. “I don’t want you going to this Doctor Strange guy anymore.”

He came agonizingly close to laughing. “Yeah, I wouldn’t lose sleep over that.”

“And Peter?” Her gaze went to his hand, which was still clutching that mask. She touched her fingers to it. “Don’t put this on again. Please.”

This one didn’t even earn an almost-laugh. Peter went quiet, and after a couple more minutes of silence, MJ resumed the movie.

It’d just reached the part where Buzz was belly-up on the hardwood floor, staring at his severed arm.

“Clearly, I... will go sail-ing…”

This secluded alleyway wasn’t quite identical to the one back on Bleeker Street, though Gwen had technically pulled Peter to this one, too, when you thought about it. Instead of the fervent hum of carnival-goers in the distance, the only noise here came from the gentle trickle of rain. But it wasn’t nearly enough to extinguish the bonfire.

The spandex had ended up flopped over the side of the grimy, gray, cylindrical garbage can. The mask’s big, white eyes gaped up at Peter, pleading with him.

Peter met them. Then he tossed in the crumpled remains of his web-shooters. He watched the smoke for a while, the stench of burning cloth and plastic in his nostrils.

But eventually, he got bored of that, and so Peter trudged off back towards the street. His head proved too heavy to lift.

“Eleka nahmen nahmen,

Ah tum ah tum eleka nahmen.”

Miles forced himself to take a seat in his office and concentrate on slowing his short, ragged breaths. What was he going to do now? He’d managed to keep his pet hidden away these past few
days, but if the authorities were ever to discover… Miles couldn’t simply fly off to some tropical island like that accursed Osborn. Now that the full extent of Oscorp’s crimes had been exposed, Miles was totally and utterly financially dependent on his job as an ESU professor, and with every passing day, he could only pray that no one ever connected the dots regarding his involvement…

Miles was wrenched from his thoughts by his phone. He composed himself, then brought it to his ear. “Hello?”

“Miles.” It was his brother’s voice – no mistaking that accent he’d acquired – but it sounded strained, somehow. “We need to talk.”

Miles fought to stay casual. “What’s the matter, Aaron? Is Mother alright?”

“Miles…” On the other end, there was a sharp intake of breath. “An ESU student, Debra Whitman… The news says she’s gone missing.”

Miles fought to keep his voice solemn. “Ah, yes. I’d heard. Truly unfortunate-”

“She’s your intern, Miles. And she’s in the right age range, too.” Aaron, meanwhile, wasn’t exactly fighting that battle. “We both know I can’t just write this off as a coincidence. Not again.”

No response from Miles.

“You’re a predator, Miles. You lurk, waiting till the time is right to move in and scavenge like a jackal.” Aaron paused. “I don’t want to ruin your life, little brother. I promise you, I don’t. I’ve borne your burden for years, but only because I believed you were deeply, truly regretful for what you did, and you’d never make the mistake again.”

Still, Miles said nothing.

“I’m telling the police everything I know. I’m not sure how Mother will take the news, but… I cannot let you hurt another girl. I’m sorry.”

The call ended.

For a moment, Miles sat there in silence. This couldn’t happen. Miles’s career! His life! The beautiful, wonderful girl sedated and hidden in his apartment, her features growing ever more stunning, ever more true to the original, with every passing day.

This couldn’t happen. It couldn’t.

Miles stood from his seat, stepping backwards. The whole lab was spinning around him… until his back hit a shelf. Miles turned to discover a row of chemicals. Mutagens, to be specific.

“Eleka nahmen nahmen,
Ah tum ah tum eleka… eleka…”

Miles had always thought Aaron had a lovely house. It was unfortunate that his wife had left him, of course, but on the upside, now Aaron had a nice, big place all to himself. Plenty of room to accommodate an eight foot tall monster.

Miles whistled to himself as he rinsed off his claws in the kitchen sink.
“Ugh. What good is this chanting?

I don’t even know what I’m reading!”

A circle of tall, broad-shouldered men stood around a massive, metal pod in the center of the barren gray chamber. All they wore only plain business attire. No Hulkbuster armor. Why would they be wearing it? The threat had long since passed.

“Alright, boys.” The head agent touched his palm to the pod’s dome. “Looks like we’ve found ourselves another of Oscorp’s little super-mercenary-making hidey holes. Now all that’s left is to message Fury.”

“You’re welcome to try,” said a growling voice from behind, “but I can’t promise you won’t lose your connection.”

“I don’t even know what trick I ought to try.”

One of the men cried, “Open f-!”

But before he could finish, he found his throat punctured by claws the size of steak knives.

“Fiyero, where are you?

Already dead or bleeding?”

Gwendolyn Maxine Stacy, the stone proclaimed.

August 1, 1992 – August 11, 2010

Learning to face the shadows outside helps us fight the shadows inside.

The words were marred only by a light drizzle of rain. The stone looked almost proper, sitting beside its father headstone and mother headstone like that. It was nearly enough to still his hand.

“One more disaster I can add to my,

Generous supply.”

But then he remembered her smile and the way she’d clutched her bookbag to her chest whenever she walked out the lab and all the times she’d discussed at length her plans to become a scientist someday and the flighty, ethereal sound of her laughter.

“It’s okay,” he said, his voice barely audible over the drizzle. “I’m here. You’re safe.” The words wrenched themselves from his fang-filled mouth. Evolution hadn’t designed this jaw for human speech.

But it had designed these claws for digging.
“We couldn't be happier,
Right, dear?
Couldn't be happier,
Right here.”
A woman in the poofy blonde wig and even poofier white wedding dress smiled across the stage. Standing there was her rugged, lithe-yet-muscular groom.

“Look what we've got,
A fairy-tale plot.
Our very own... happy ending.”
The woman danced towards him. With the spotlight following her, she looked downright luminescent.

“Where we couldn't be happier.
True, dear?
Couldn't be happier,
And we're happy to share,
Our ending vicar-
-iously with all of you”
Her eyes went straight to her audience.

“He couldn't look handsomer.
I couldn't feel hum-ble-er.
We couldn't be happier...”
The music swelled.

“Because happy is what happens,
When all your dreeeeeaams come truuuuuuuuuuuuue!”

Then the music came to a stop, and the woman bowed as applause filled the theater. Again, every last drop of it came from the director, the front row’s single occupant. He had a knack for making noise.

“Amazing! Sensational! Superior! Spectacular!” He sprang to his feet, his ponytail swishing behind him. “You, my dear, have given the ultimate performance. With unflinching perfection, you convey the image of one who carries the outward appearance of happiness whilst harboring a
dark and powerful angst deep within you… whilst in reality harboring a genuine inward happiness, for you know that by taking the role of Galinda, you have single-handedly saved this production—"

“Oh, well, I don’t know about that,” said Mary Jane, adjusting her wig.

“-a ton of money! All the recent attacks on the city have led to major budget cuts.” The director had sobered up for a second, but his usual pizzazz returned with a vengeance. “Yes, Miss Watson, I see now that every word Devereaux spoke of you rings true. You can act! You can sing! You can dance! You can wear green and orange in the same outfit without it totally clashing. You, my dear, are a savant.” He gave a sage nod. “It’s safe to say, Miss Watson, that my humble little play will act as the cornerstone of your long and successful career.”

“Really?” MJ blinked, dazed. For a minute, she merely stood in place upon the stage, imagining every last seat being packed. It was almost enough to make her wish she hadn’t blocked her dad’s number so she could call him up and gloat.

Peter’s vision was fuzzy. It must’ve gone sometime during the night. This was a discovery he’d made upon being shaken awake, then springing out of the covers and to smack his head on the ceiling. When he was finally done rubbing his noggin, he reopened his eyes to find a bleary, out-of-focus world waiting for him.

Not that there was much to see here, anyways. This room was about the size of his childhood house’s bathroom. Heck, it even came with a sink. And a thick layer of grime. Home sweet home.

Peter reached for the cord to turn on the overhead lamp. The loose wires didn’t trigger his spider-sense this time, so- Bzap. “Agh! Dammit!” Note to self, spider-sense was going, too.

As Peter sat there on his mattress, rubbing his thumb, the whole room started shaking once again. It lasted a whole two minutes this time. That’d be the subway station directly beneath Peter’s feet.

Once the room grew sufficiently still, Peter knelt over the mattress to reach for his box of expired granola bars, but instead he earned himself a mouthful of rubber erasers. It was only after a couple seconds of chewing that he realized his mistake. Oh, right, his eyesight.

After even more fumbling and cursing, Peter managed to fish out a pair of dusty, black, thick-rimmed Harry Potter glasses from one of the room’s countless cardboard boxes. The moment the glasses were on his face, the world snapped into focus, and the words “GWEN’S STUFF” smacked into him.

He darted back. Ugh, that’d been even worse than hitting his head.

Anyways, now that he wasn’t half-blind, the hunt for granola bars resumed. It was a pretty difficult task, though. For one thing, there was barely an inch of negative space in here thanks to all these stupid boxes. For another thing, only about half of them had “PETER’S STUFF” jotted on them in Sharpie. Hmm, maybe he could make more space if he pawned off some of his photography equipment? Wasn’t like he’d be using it anymore.

After his breakfast of a granola bar and bottled water, Peter gathered up his toothbrush, toothpaste, towel, and change of clothes, then made his way down the hall, stepping over damp, creaky floorboards on his way to the communal bathroom. A sigh of relief escaped his lips as the door shut behind him. Good, good, he was alone at this hour. Safe in that knowledge, he removed his shirt, then wiped off a mirror with a paper towel so he could inspect himself in it.

He found himself frowning. If he didn’t watch it, his eyesight and spider-sense wouldn’t be the
only things fading. *Phht.* Wasn’t his fault McDonalds offered so much for just a dollar.

Next, Peter held his toothpaste tube over his brush. Stupid thing. If he could just squeeze this last little bit out…

Right behind his reflection, a shower curtain burst open. “*Rent?*”

Toothpaste squirted every which way. “*Jesus, Mr. Ditkovich!*” Luckily, the paste ended up landing in just the right spot on the glass to spare Peter from the worst of it.

One of the stairs was missing a floorboard. Peter nearly broke his neck in his hurry down them. *Hmph.* Wouldn’t *that* have been fitting? But no, all he ended up doing was scattering his textbooks out his backpack and across the apartment complex’s moist floor.

“Oh my-! Are you okay?” The books hadn’t even hit the ground before a blonde, pigtail-wearing girl was scrambling to retrieve them. That’s be *Miss* Ditkovich, the landlord’s daughter. She was about Peter’s age. And that was the full extent to which Peter had thought of her. “Here, let me-*Ow!*” Naturally, she ended up clonking heads with him.

“I’m good, thanks.” Peter tried not to scowl as he returned to his feet with books in hand. “I’ve gotta go. I’ll be late for class.”

“Right. Right.” The girl stood in place, watching him leave. As he trudged out the door, she added, “Have fun at class” in a dazed voice.

Was *everyone* in this place a weirdo? Well… that’d explain what Peter was doing here.

Peter didn’t speak another word that day until class was over and he was seated at a table in the Connors’ lab.

Dr. Connors had been gently instructing him on the correct measurements to pour into a vial when he suddenly said, “I don’t know if we’ve expressed this to you yet, Peter, but Martha and I are relieved and delighted that you’ve decided to attend this semester after all. We can’t understate how proud we are of you, and we want you to know you have our full support. We’re here if you ever need us.” He rested his prosthetic hand on Peter’s shoulder.

“Thanks.” Peter’s eyes hadn’t left the vial.

With Professor Warren MIA, the Connors had finally been able to return from Florida and get their old lives back. Any other time, it would’ve been cause for celebration, but between the news that Debra was missing and Aaron Warren was… murdered… Well, let’s just say Peter had a suspicion as to who’d been helping Oscorp with their super-mercenary making. Creep must’ve fled the city by now…

“We support *all* the choices you’ve made lately,” added Martha from the table’s opposite side.

“Y-Yeah, well…” Peter hadn’t really told them anything, but he supposed the lack of spandex-wearing weirdos in the paper had helped them put two and two together. But the Connors *definitely* hadn’t been told about the mysterious loss of Peter’s powers – mostly because he was scared they’d know how to cure it. “…there are plenty of other ways to do good in the world. You don’t *have* to go around punching crooks. I mean, scientists help tons of people, right?”

“Right.” Husband and wife gave mutual nods, then smiles.
“Too bad you couldn’t have had that insight a bit earlier,” said a voice from the doorway.

Peter found himself wincing. He didn’t need to look to know the voice’s owner. After that, Martha offered a hushed apology – She’d tried to keep their schedules apart, but Peter had stayed too late and Eddie had arrived too early today – and then Peter gathered up his stuff and hurried out the lab.

Peter ended up trudging down the deserted campus sidewalk. His shoulders were weighed down by more than just his backpack. Halfway to the bus stop, he had to halt and catch his breath. Felt like he’d just wrestled the Sinister Six.

Peter leaned against the wall of a building, panting. His palm hit paper. “Huh?” There was a poster plastered here. And an identical one beside it, and an identical one beside that. In fact, the whole wall was tiled with the things. And every last one displayed the same image of a familiar redhead showing off her perfect white teeth. Looked like she had a new magazine cover to advertise. Peter stood there, staring at the collage long after the sound of an arriving and departing bus hit his ears from behind.

After one last moment of hesitation, he retrieved his phone from his pocket. Peter thumbed through the lock screen, then stared at the wallpaper of the smiling blonde for a second before pulling up the “recents” list. He had five missed calls, one for each day of the week thus far, all from the same caller.

Peter tapped over to his latest voicemail, then held the speaker to his ear.

“H-Hey, Tiger,” came a soft, somewhat raspy voice, “I know you’re probably busy. Sorry to keep bugging you – I just want to make sure you’re doing okay. Call me back if you ever… ever… Ugh, get a clue, Watson. He’s deleting these things on sight.” The message cut off.

Immediately, Peter tapped the “call back” icon. It didn’t ring for half a second before a somewhat raspy, somewhat frantic voice said, “Peter?”

“Hey, Red. Sorry I didn’t call back sooner.” Peter surprised himself with the tiniest of laughs. “I, uh, actually wasn’t deleting them on sight. Just needed some alone time, I guess.” He paused. “So… you wanna go get something to eat?”

It became a weekly ritual for them – Fridays were the days when they hung out. The two didn’t formally organize it or anything. It just kinda happened. At first they’d only hung out around the city, but eventually that’d morphed into watching TV at MJ’s condo, a change that stemmed primarily from laziness. Well, they didn’t only watch TV. Sometimes they’d play a video game or read a book together or something. Whatever.

Okay, yes, fine, Peter was mooching off MJ’s wi-fi and HDTV (which, by the way, was exponentially bigger than the one he’d smashed). But Mary Jane didn’t seem to mind, and, hey, it beat sitting in his own place and watching yet another rerun of The Moldy Wall Show. Though Peter had gotten kind of invested in the fate of this one really long, green mold strand.

Of course, the first time Peter had set foot in MJ’s new place, he’d had to hold his jaw shut. His impressed gasp had created an echo. The living room alone was huge. MJ could breed horses in here. Pretty gratuitous considering she was rooming alone. Peter would’ve voiced his worry about that, except then MJ probably would’ve accused him of being a hypocrite, and Peter didn’t have the energy to explain why she’d be wrong… to himself.

The first time she’d noticed his jaw problems, Mary Jane had simply shrugged her shoulders and
said, “Eh, money’s overrated.”

“Oh, yeah, totally.” Peter had nodded. “I hate having money. Hey, unrelated question, would you like to join the Church of Scientology?”

“Don’t even joke. I legit had a guy try to recruit me the other day.”

“Well, uh, guess that’s a sign your career’s taking off.” Peter had laughed. “You know you’ve got an IMDB page now?”

Mary Jane had shrugged again, then tossed her jacket wherever it happened to land on the carpet. The maid would take care of it later. “Oh, that? Nothing but bit parts. And, I mean, I’ve got income from plenty of other places, too.” She’d counted off on her fingers. “The modeling, streaming video games, donating blood plasma, the hardcore porn… Just kidding, I’d never donate blood. Gross.”

“Ha ha.”

Back in the present day, Peter and MJ were now watching TV together on her couch, making sure to keep the customary three cushions of space between each other at all times.

“So what is this show, again?”

“I dunno, I just found it on Netflix.” MJ knelt over to retrieve something off a TV tray. “Hey, you thirsty?”

“Sure, thanks.” Peter accepted a glass of peach tea and took a swig. That was another benefit of hanging out here – the variety of beverages. If Peter had to drink one more bottled water, he’d drown himself.

Once Peter’s whistle had been sufficiently whetted, MJ seemed satisfied and returned her attention to the remote. “So are you guys still talking about that equalizer thingy in Connors’s class?”

“Equilibrium,” said Peter. “Yeah, we’ve been going over Le Chatelier’s Principle. Henry Louis Le Chatelier was this French chemist guy, and his discoveries had a really big impact on how we think of chemical equilibrium.”

“Right, right, I’m with you.” MJ’s eyes had glazed over.

“So what the principle means is, basically, if there’s a disturbance, the equilibrium always moves in the direction that reduces that disturbance. Or- Or that’s the Cliff Notes version, anyways.” Peter found himself pushing his glasses up his nose.

MJ was busy fiddling with the volume control.

“Actually, speaking of disturbances…” Peter sat up on the couch, clearing his throat. “…I, um, ran into a mugger the other day.”

The volume control came to a sudden halt. “Were you hurt?”

“No, he was mugging another guy.” Peter waved his hands, reassuring. “But I saw it happening, and you can guess what was going through my head, and…”

“What’d you do?” Unblinking emerald eyes were planted on him.

“Ducked into an alleyway,” said Peter, “and called the cops.” The relief on MJ’s face was
palpable. “And you know what? They caught the guy. And I felt… satisfied.”

There was silence. Mary Jane tried to go for a hug, but it ended up as a shoulder pat. “I’m happy for you, Peter. I mean that.”

Peter nodded. “I freaked out about it at first, but the more I think about it… losing my powers out of the blue?” He leaned forward- “Best thing that could’ve happened to me.” -and gave MJ’s shoulder a pat of its own.

She stared at him. After a moment, though, she wiped her eyes and said, “So are they totally gone now?”

“Pretty much. Still had a couple scopulae around my toes last I checked, though.”

“Oh. Neat.” That seemed to draw the talk to a close. After another moment, Mary Jane rose from the couch and grabbed Peter’s empty glass. “Here, let me get you a refill.”

An hour and a half later, an alarmingly small amount of TV had been watched

“…and his daughter’s just as weird. She’s so jumpy with me, like, literally every time I get near her.” Peter slouched against the cushions, head bowed. “You don’t think she…” With a clack, he set his empty glass back on the TV tray. “…she can tell I’m in mourning, do you?” His eyes flitted to his t-shirt, which happened to be black today. Peter had been wearing other colors, too, but today had just felt like a black t-shirt day, y’know?

Three cushions across from him, Mary Jane’s face softened. “Oh, Tiger, no… she probably just thinks you’re hot.”

It got another surprise laugh from him. She had a talent for drawing those out. “Not all of us have to deal with that on a daily basis, MJ-”

“Ohhh-kay,” MJ said, admiring her fingernails, “but if you ever wonder why every chick you’ve ever met is into you-”

“Oh, I clearly need to introduce you to Sally Avril sometime.”

“Sally doesn’t count! She had this slavish devotion to, like, the eighties teen comedy ‘nerds versus cool kids’ thing. You only noticed her cuz it was impossible not to, but there were so many other girls like Jessica you’d walk right past.” MJ’s words were gaining traction. “Listen, Tiger, you would not believe me if I told you how many girls were pining after-” She caught herself.

A mutual wave of discomfort had crossed their faces.

“Sorry.” Mary Jane turned away, hiding her face behind a curtain of red. “Shouldn’t have brought that up.”

“It’s alright,” Peter said softly.

“Thanks. But I just…” If there’d been a fourth couch cushion, Peter got the impression MJ would’ve put that one between them, too. She inhaled. “Peter, I swear I’m being a hundred percent serious… If you’re strapped for cash, I could get you set up as a male model.”

Oop, there was one of those surprise laughs again. “I’m not sure I’m fabulous enough.”

“I mean it. Just swap your glasses for contacts and you’ll do great.” A flighty smile was offered.
“And- And then we’d work under the same roof. We’d probably see each other every day.” Mary Jane faltered. “Wouldn’t that be cool?”

This time, that discomfort-wave only crossed one face. “That’s great of you to offer, but I’m way too busy with coll-” Mid-word, Peter jolted off the couch. “Oh no, Dr. Connors’s class. I got so caught up in what I was doing, I forgot all about it! He’s gonna kill me.”

The next second, Peter was scrambling for the door, and Mary Jane was chasing after him. “Tiger, wait up-”

“I’ve really gotta go, MJ. Sorry.” By force of habit, Peter had assumed he could get from Midtown to Noho in minutes. Ugh, why did travel on foot have to be so stupid and slow? “See you next week-”

MJ caught his arm millimeters from the door. “Actually, Peter, I was gonna ask if we could meet up again tomorrow. I was kinda hoping-” She brushed a red strand behind her ear. “-you could dust off your photography skills and get some pics of me for my portfolio…”

Peter looked back at her, frowning. “What happened to your usual guy?”

“Sick,” MJ said immediately. “He’s sick. Can’t be there.”

“Oh. I’ll- I’ll think about it, then. Bye.” The door shut.

And with that, Mary Jane turned, defeated, and slinked back towards the couch. “Bye,” she said. The word echoed off the walls.

As it turned out, Doc Connors did a mercifully small amount of killing Peter. Mostly he just counted Peter absent for the day. Thus, Peter was alive and well as he trudged back home… though he wasn’t sure how much longer he could keep that up in this dump – He hadn’t had his tetanus booster.

Peter was about to march up the stairs as usual, but a voice halted his journey. Dilbert Trilby’s voice, to be exact, coming from the ancient, miniature TV in the building’s lounge. Mr. Ditkovich could often be found slouched over in there, staring slack-jawed at the screen as he made one of his many attempts to fuse himself to his armchair.

Normally, Peter would’ve passed the TV right by, except that the news anchor had just spoken a certain, alliterative name:

“-att Murdock, the blind lawyer once seen as an inspiration to so many in Clinton, ended his life homeless and alone Thursday evening. The NYPD has already ruled his death as a drug overdose. Murdock’s loss marks the latest in a string of misfortunes for Nelson and Murdock following the death of Murdock’s partner, Franklin ‘Foggy’ Nelson, in an unrelated auto accident, as well as the murder of his secretary Karen Page – better remembered for her career as an adult film star – at the hands of the assassin known only as ‘Bullseye,’ who remains at large…”

Peter was frozen in place, staring at the screen through the doorway.

“…Matt Murdock was last seen in the public eye only a handful of days ago, when he rather infamously disrupted Wilson Fisk’s mayoral inauguration.”

The image cut from Trilby’s face to shaky footage of a messy-hair, stubble-covered Matt in torn, rain-soaked clothing. Security guards were dragging him away from the crowd outside Fisk Tower,
and all the while Matt kicked and flailed. “You have to listen to me. He’s the Kingpin! He’s the-”

The footage cut off.

The news went on about Matt for a while after that. Peter didn’t stay to watch.

His bedroom door slammed shut behind him. The fact that it didn’t cause the whole building to cave in was a testament to just how much of Peter’s strength had been sapped. His foot hit a box. His eyes snapped to it. “PETER’S STUFF,” it was labeled. One second later, Peter’s stuff was smashing into the wall and exploding through the air like shrapnel.

He forced himself to breathe. Look at him. What a piece of work. One second, he was fine, the next, the walls were closing in. Gently, Peter walked himself to his apartment’s window, then wiped off some grime so he could see out it. The city was bathed orange in the sunset.

“Am I not supposed to have what I want?” Peter said aloud. “What I need?” Yeah. Yeah, that was clearly it. He was supposed to sacrifice every scrap of his life to the cause or else he was a monster.

But… no, he was overreacting. Murdock had gone nuts, that was all. It was the Catholic guilt that’d gotten to him, not some crazy conspiracy with a “Kingpin of Crime.” There was no Kingpin. Sort of like how everyone had thought there’d been no Big Man, except this time the crime lord wouldn’t turn out to actually be real. Definitely not.

A creak hit Peter’s ears. He spun in place, almost raising his fists, to discover a blonde girl standing in the doorway.

“Oh, I should’ve have without knocking…” Though she was visibly struggling to keep from keeling over out of overpowering shame, Mr. Ditkovich’s daughter exited the room, re-shutting the door behind her. This time, there came a proper knock.

“…Come in?” said Peter.

The door creaked open, revealing blonde pigtails and red cheeks. “Hi.”

“Hi,” said Peter.

The girl swallowed. “Um, w-would you like a piece of chocolate cake?”

A moment passed. For a second, Peter’s eyes went to his box of granola bars. “Okay.”

The girl fought in vain to hide her delighted smile. “And- And a glass of milk?”

“Oh, what’s the expiration date? Because the last time your dad offered me some, it crawled away from me.”

Oh, now Peter was the one dishing out the surprise laughs. “It’s not- This is good milk. I promise.”

“Okay, then.”

Ten minutes later, the two of them were seated at the lopsided table in the building’s miniature kitchen downstairs. There was no sound save for clanking forks and soft chewing. The cake hadn’t been half bad. Peter was pretty sure it’d just come from one of those storebought mixes where all you had to do was add eggs, but still, cake was cake. And hey, the girl wasn’t staring at him or breathing heavily, so this interaction hadn’t gone the worst it could’ve gone.
Peter still felt a constant, horrible, crushing guilt, though. That hadn’t changed.

“Thanks.” Peter wiped icing off his face and onto his sleeve.

The girl nodded, then moved to collect the dishes and cups. She was so skinny and jittery that the addition of the sliding dishes made her look as awkward as she acted. “Oh, um-” Just before she left, the girl seemed to remember something. “I’ve got a letter for you.” She fished that something out her pocket. “Not that I was snooping through your stuff or anything!”

Concern crossed Peter’s face. “You’d better not have been trying to make off with my granola bars like that hobo last week. Those things cost four whole dollars – That’d set me back a month. Ended up having to beat the guy with a shoe.”

The girl laughed. “Wow, you’ve got such a good sense of humor!”

“...That wasn’t a joke.”

“Oh.” After that, the girl handed him the letter and fled the room.

Alright, now that Peter was alone, let’s see what he had here. He sat back in the hard wooden chair, examining the envelope in his fingers. Hmm, no address. All it had were the words “For Peter Parker” scrawled across it in tidy black ink. And when he opened it, Peter discovered a fancy leaf of paper sporting the same tidy ink:

My Dear Peter,

If you’re reading this, it can only mean that I have failed in my latest endeavor, and so I wish to offer my most heartfelt congratulations. Obviously, this is one of several letters I had prepared, and you have my word that the assistant delivering this to you has no idea about the rather remarkable secret we both share. I want to thank you for what I assume was both a fair and exciting battle and assure you that I have initiated no over-complicated revenge schemes from beyond the grave or other such ridiculousness. I leave my legacy to Harry, as I have always intended to, and whatever relationship he chooses to have with you is entirely his own prerogative.

Furthermore, as a gesture of goodwill, I have set into place a mechanism by which every last one of my extensive surveillance records of you and your loved ones have been permanently deleted, and here again, I give my word to you, Peter, that not I nor any of those working for me ever intruded upon your most intimate of moments.

It must be stressed that our many wonderful battles were by no means a sign of any real enmity. On the contrary, I hold you in enormous regard and am always grateful for your attentions. Your intelligence and resourcefulness have given my life both structure and meaning, and I apologize for any doubts I have placed in your mind as a result of our latest and final encounter. Whether you choose to accept the fact or not, Peter, you are every bit my son as Harry. Whatever actions I chose to take against you during our final confrontation, even ones that seem to you now to have caused you great harm, were done due to the powerful love I feel for you, your ideals, and all that you represent. Take care and sleep well. At the very least, I trust that I will live on in your thoughts.

Forever,

N-

Peter stopped reading there.
“Mr. Ditkovich?” After some timid knocking on it, the landlord’s door finally swung open.

The crazy-haired, bathrobe-wearing, pudgy old man discovered Peter standing there.

The boy was giving a look of utmost apology and trailing sewage from his sneakers. “The- The toilet overflowed, sir.”

“Did you flush copy paper down toilet?” Mr. Ditkovich demanded in a thick Ukrainian accent.

“N-No!”

“It always floods if you flush copy paper down toilet.” Mr. D vanished into his room for a second, then returned with a plunger, which he happily shoved into Peter’s hands. “Here. You plunge. You mop.”

“Yes, Mr. Ditkovich…”

“And this will, you know, add to your utility bill.”

“I know, Mr. Ditkovich…”

Peter walked off, the plunger dragging the ground behind him.

_Squelch._

Stupid letter.

_Squelch._

Stupid Kingpin.

_Squelch._

Stupid genetically-altered spider.

After the latest round of plunging, Peter gave the toilet a tentative flush. It immediately overflowed again.

But just as Peter was fixing to plunge his own head off his body, his phone went off. “Raindrops keep fallin’ on my—” Beep.

“Hello?” Yeah, he’d changed his ringtone.

“Mr. Parker?” Wait, Peter knew that voice – It was the organizer guy from the funeral home.

Peter’s heart wasted no time skipping a beat. What could possibly…?

“I’m afraid we have some troubling news regarding Gwendolyn’s gravesite.”

“But I couldn’t be happier.

Simply couldn’t be happier.

Well... not ‘simply.’
Cuz getting your dreams,
It's strange, but it seems,
A little, well... complicated.
There's a kind of a sort of... cost.
There's a couple of things get...”
This time, when Mary Jane held her, Gwen held back.

“Hey,” MJ murmured, “I’m not going anywhere.”

Gwen gave the faintest of nods. “I know, but what I’m saying is… I need you. We need you.”

They sat there awhile, huddled beneath the mattress in the bathtub, holding each other and shivering.

‘You mean ‘need’ as in…?’

“Mary Jane…” Gwen’s eyes went out the bathroom window. They lingered a while on the ever-shrinking building below. Smoke and dust was still wafting out from the robot-shaped hole in its side. “…the truth is, Peter and I want to open up our relationship and let you in. Sometimes it’s all we can even think about when- when we’re alone together.” She looked tempted to hide her face in her hands, but she ended up letting MJ see every last drop of red in her cheeks. “But we were scared we were just letting our stupid teenage hormones override our brains, y’know? And there were a million little nagging questions like ‘What if Peter ends up liking you more than me?’ or- or ‘What if he doesn’t like you more, what if neither of us do, and you get the short end of the stick long-term?’”

Mary Jane stayed silent.

“But then Doctor Doom popped up on our TV, and now I’m not sure there’s going to be a long-term.” Gwen hugged MJ even tighter, her nice new summer jacket constricting MJ’s neck.

“H-Hey, c’mon, don’t talk like that,” Mary Jane managed.

“I know I shouldn’t. But… for a minute there, right before Iron Man saved us…” Gwen’s eyes squeezed themselves shut. “…those millions of nagging questions? Not one of them mattered anymore.”

Sometime during Gwen’s words, the hug drew to a close.

“You think Peter feels the same?” MJ asked. “You think he wants me now?”

“Do I think he wants you?” Gwen gave a wry smile. “Peter Parker? The guy who once fell head over heels for Jameson’s secretary?”

“You mean ‘secretary’ as in, like, a high schooler interning there, right?” MJ’s earnestness drew a laugh. “Uh, never mind, I don’t wanna know. But in all seriousness, Gwen…” The hug didn’t resume, but Mary Jane at least squeezed Gwen’s hand. “…don’t undersell what you two have together. No one could ever compete with it.”

“I’m not ‘selling’ anything,” Gwen said with a disarming sternness. “I’m sick of worrying and measuring and competing. It feels so petty now. The three of us love each other, and that’s all that matters anymore.”

Mary Jane went silent again.
“And, I mean, this isn’t something Peter and I could do with just anyone.” Gently, Gwen took MJ’s hands in her own. “How many other people out there feel the way you feel? Think the way you think?” She had to tilt her head back to meet Mary Jane’s gaze. The girl was a good half a head taller than Gwen. “I’ve felt it, myself – loving two people at once. There were so many times like with the Kraven thing…” Her voice had gained some vigor, but now it was sobering up. “…where I was so tempted to run away with you, leave all this behind. Not because I ever stopped loving Peter… but because I was scared of what’d happen if I stayed.” She took a steadying breath. “But, you know, even from day one… I never thought I had all the time in the world with Peter.”

The next instant, Gwen’s eyes were open and locked with MJ’s. “And you’re in the same boat as me – I can see it in you.” A palm touched MJ’s chest. “You’re valuable to us, Mary Jane Watson, like no one else on this planet could ever be. When you’re here, everything feels right. When you’re with Peter and me…” She was forced to wipe her face on her undershirt before she dribbled snot all over her jacket. “…I don’t feel so scared that… one of us might end up alone.”

Mary Jane and Peter stood six feet above Gwen. She was still down there, the funeral director had assured them. All that’d been disturbed, as far as he could tell, was the soil and the grass and the headstone. Those three things have been ripped apart, blended into a fine mix, and then scattered all across the cemetery.

“Wish I could say this kinda thing was rare,” the director, a pudgy guy hiding his bald spot under a baseball cap, was saying. “Well, it is weird that someone would dig that deep without actually stealin’ nothin’. Maybe they got cold feet halfway through?”

“But why, though?” Peter asked in a trembling voice.

The guy could only shrug. “Some people are just sick, and this crap’s how they get their kicks. ’Fraid all the media fuss ’round her made this place a target. But I promise you, we’re puttin’ guards here now, and if we find the punks who did this, we’ll give ’em hell.”

That seemed to satisfy Paul – Gwen’s rugged, broad-shoulder, twenty-something cousin – and so after another couple minutes, he went back to his car. The rest of the Stacy clan had already crossed the pond by now, meaning only Peter and MJ remained. And that was fine by Mary Jane, frankly. Those guys were still being salty because Gwen had left a bunch of her dad’s personal family photos with Peter, and he’d refused to give them anything more than copies.

Mary Jane envied Paul’s strength of will, though. Aunt Anna wasn’t here to drag MJ away this time, meaning she was seriously worried she’d spend the rest of her life standing at this spot like a zombie.

This didn’t matter in the slightest. It was just rocks and grass and dirt. Most trivial stuff in the world. And besides, opening night was a mere two hours from now. Mary Jane had to be back in Manhattan for her humble little career-starting musical, and it was an hour and a half drive back there. She needed to gun it.

So then why couldn’t she make her legs work? Why couldn’t she get her eyes to leave the fractured, misshapen remains of the headstone? Christ, what could’ve done something like that? Did juvenile delinquents carry sledgehammers now? MJ had fallen out of the current trends.

She probably would’ve stayed here another couple hours if the sound of sharp, shaky sobs hadn’t hit her ears. “Peter?”

He’d removed his glasses so he could dry them on his shirt. His face had scrunched up, and his
efforts to loosen it only made it tighter. “Sorry, MJ. Not trying to worry you. I just… I hate this.” A bubble popped in his nostril. “The news still won’t shut up about it. Like they actually care.” After a moment’s hesitation, he accepted a hug. “Why can’t they leave her alone?”

“Because the world’s garbage and people are jerks.” That was about all Mary Jane knew to say, and so instead she focused on trailing her hand down his back in a vain attempt to steady his shakes.

The sun was threatening to set any minute now. MJ racked her brain for ways to gracefully bow out of this situation, but she drew blanks. The best she managed was, “Will you be okay getting home?”

“I think so.” Peter’s vocal cords sounded like they’d been run through a cheese grater. “I just wish…” He’d almost had it for a second, but now he was back to crying.

“Shh, shh, shh... I know, Tiger. I know.”

“I wish I could t-teleport to Aunt May,” Peter finally said. “But, well, you know I hate her getting too close to ‘supervillain central.’” The words were interspersed with a sniffle. “Haven’t seen her in forever, and phone calls aren’t the same.”

It was at this point that Mary Jane made the mistake of meeting Peter’s eyes. Sure, they were tinged with red, but they were so, so big and brown. Two drops of boiling water in a sea of ice.

“I’ve got a car,” Mary Jane found herself saying.

“What?” Peter blinked, giving her merciful seconds of relief from the big, brown whirlpools dragging her under. “Oh, I- I didn’t mean… I wasn’t…”

“You wanna go right now?”

“To Pennsylvania? MJ, it’s, like, a four hour drive just to get there. Don’t you work today?”

Silence. Mary Jane’s eyes went to the headstone. *Geny Mxy*, the stone proclaimed.

“Nope,” said Mary Jane. “I’m off all weekend.”

“Really?” Gradually, a smile formed on Peter’s face. MJ had gotten up early to watch the sunrise once, and it hadn’t been nearly as worthwhile an experience. “Wow, me too. That’s perfect.”

“W-Well, I’ve been looking for excuses to show you my sick new ride, anyhow.” MJ gave his shoulder a punch. “Actually, how’d you get all the way to Long Island without me in the first place?”

Peter shrank. “Borrowed money for fare…”

“What? Oh, we totally need to carpool more.” Mary Jane nearly dragged him to the parking lot, she was gripping his arm so tight. “Whoo! Spontaneous road trip!”

When was the last time Peter had ridden in a car? He’d forgotten how nice it was. He could just lean back in the passenger seat, head against the headrest, and watch rain patter against the window as foggy gray buildings zoomed by.

“Remind me why we’re pit stopping at your condo again?”
“So we don’t starve to death on the road,” said Mary Jane, eyes fixed forward.

Not a bad point. Aunt May had offered to have a hot meal ready once they arrived, but a little something for the journey there and back wouldn’t hurt. “Can’t we just get drive through, though?”

“Not if I wanna fit into those jeans for my next shoot…”

Peter felt like he could’ve pressed the issue, but he let his attention return to the rain outside.

“So what do you think of the wheels?” MJ suddenly said.

“Oh, yeah, the- the car’s great,” Peter got out. “It’s blue, so… that’s cool.”

MJ laughed. “Yeah, I guess being a blue Mercedes-Benz does it make it pretty cool.”

Peter’s head bowed. “I don’t know cars.”

“Ah, don’t sweat it. You’re a New Yorker.”

The two spent a while listening to the patter of rain and swish of windshield wipers.

“I’m gonna be honest,” said Peter, “I never thought I’d ride in a fancy car again after things went south with Harry.”

“Oh, yeah, him.” As she spoke, MJ flipped on her turn signal. “Liz says Ravencroft declared him good to go, so, uh… you planning on seeing him?”

The lack of an answer was all the answer she needed.

“I’m sorry, Tiger.” MJ sighed. “I know you’re not exactly close with Eddie anymore, either, so… it just sucks, is all. You’re fresh outta best friends.”

A sound made her jolt – his laughter.

“What?”

“Come on.” Peter punched her shoulder. “I’ve still got a best friend.”

For a split-second, Mary Jane looked disarmed, but then a warmer expression overtook her face. She wasn’t faking – Peter was getting pretty good at telling the difference. The genuine smiles were more relaxed and not quite as photogenic.

Once they reached the condo, Peter waited in the car while MJ ran inside. She emerged a minute later with an orange cooler bag, and then the journey resumed. Peter was glad to have the car in motion again. Somehow, the gentle shaking made it easier to close his eyes…

Gwen wasn’t feeling good today. Peter could tell because of the way she was slouched over in her desk. On impulse, he tried to think up a quip, something that’d make her laugh – or at least get her to swat his head and call him a goofball. But he couldn’t think of anything funny. The problem was… he wasn’t feeling good, either.

Honnnnnnnnk, honnnnnnnk.

“Hey, watch it!”
“Huh? Whuh?” Upon opening his eyes, Peter was greeted by something red and blurry. “MJ?” He retrieved his glasses from the glove compartment, then slipped them back on to discover MJ scowling at a neighboring vehicle.

“Sorry to wake you, Tiger. Some jerk just cut in front of me.”

“It’s alr-” Peter touched his eye. For a second, he thought rain had seeped through the window and landed there. But all at once, the truth hit him.

“Peter?” Mary Jane risked a peek at his face. The look on it made her own face soften. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m good.” Peter shifted in his seat. “I was just having, y’know, a ‘Memento’ moment. That second when you wake up, and… for just that second… you forget she’s gone.”

“Oh. I…” A shaky breath escaped MJ’s mouth. “I know what you’re talking about.” Then came an even shakier one. “Ahh, look what you did.” She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Sorry.” Peter’s voice was hoarse.

“Don’t be. It’s… It’s good to talk about her, y’know? Maybe we haven’t been doing that enough.” Silence. “I miss her.”

“Yeah.”

After another couple sniffles from the both of them, MJ said, “There’s tissues in my purse.”

“Thanks.” Peter set to work drying himself off. “I bet-” He made an attempt to laugh. “I bet she wouldn’t have known about cars, either. Then I wouldn’t have felt as stupid.”

“Uh, no, then you’d both have felt stupid. Cars are awesome.”

The remark aided his attempt. “Hey, MJ? I really did mean it – You’re my best friend.” Peter let his tissue fall to the floorboard. It’d gotten heavy. “Mostly cuz you’re the only one who’s never said it’s my fault she’s dead. I mean, it is, but-” Halfway through the sentence, his voice gave out on him. “–Eddie doesn’t have to rub my face in it.”

Before he even had time to start sobbing again, the car gave a violent swerve.

“What-?” Peter’s seatbelt had gone tight. But not as tight as the arms around him. Mary Jane had, evidently, swung into a random parking lot so she could take her hands off the wheels.

“Is that what you think?” Oh, she wasn’t planning on letting him breathe anytime soon, was she? “Is that what you’ve been thinking all this time?” MJ let out a little gasping noise, halfway between a huff and a sniffle. “Guess I shouldn’t be surprised. But Peter, Gwen knew the r-”

“I know what you’re gonna say.” Peter squeezed her back. “Trust me, I’ve had the debate with myself a million times by now. And sometimes, to- to keep myself from going crazy, I’ll think stuff like ‘Oh, the wound’s still fresh, I’ll stop beating myself up over it once I’m u-used to it.’ And maybe that’s true.” The words sounded so nice and articulate in his head, but they got all distorted on the way out his mouth. “But then… I just wish the world would fade to black already. And then a big title card would show up.” Peter released MJ so he could mime a TV screen. “Twenty-five years later. And it’d show a normal day in my life… and everything would be fine.”

The two spent a couple minutes purely on steadying their breathing.
Once she’d wrangled hers towards something approaching manageable, Mary Jane said, “That’s how they get you, you know.” In response to the blank look on Peter’s face, she added, “Creeps like- like Norman Osborn. They use you and hurt you and make you feel helpless… and then for their greatest trick… they say they love you… and this is all your fault. You’re the mistake.” She was forced to stop and wrangle her breathing again.

“Mary Jane…”

“Peter, I’m sorry, I should’ve specified… when I said the world’s garbage and people are jerks, I meant everyone except you.” She found the strength to grip him again. “Don’t ever tell yourself different.”

They stayed like that a while, listening to the patter of rain and swoosh of windshield wipers, Peter letting MJ hold him.

“Hey, MJ?” he said softly. “Your feelings for me and Gwen… Could you… explain that to me again?”

Mary Jane gave a patient nod. “I love you. Both of you. And I always will, and it’s not a contest, and I don’t feel guilty about it anymore.”

It was back to rain patters and windshield-wiper wooshes for a bit.

“I’m sorry for what I said,” Peter began, “on that night. All the time I’ve known you, you’ve never been anything but kind and gentle and supportive and…” His eyes shut. “I don’t deserve you, MJ.”

MJ let out a shaky laugh. “That’s funny. I don’t deserve you, either.” Back to patters and wooshes. “My, uh, my mom actually did die a while back. Just so you know.” She paused. “So now Gayle gets to be raised exclusively by ‘award-winning author’ Phillip Watson.”

Peter eyes stretched so wide so fast, it was actually painful. “Oh my god-”

“And I didn’t even visit Mom in the hospital.”

“Hey, hey, shh, it’s okay… It’s gonna be okay… I’ve got you…”

He tried to talk, but Peter had to focus the brunt of his efforts of smoothing red hair and murmuring assurances. Eventually, though, he shut his eyes. Maybe this was bad of him to think, but Peter did feel kind of better knowing that at least he wasn’t the only one who’d…

There is a light inside you, Peter Parker, and I need it right n-

Nope. Nope nope nope, that thought was going back in the box where it belonged. Peter didn’t have superpowers. That wasn’t what his life was about anymore. It was about the girl in his arms. And other similar things of that nature. Down-to-earth personal drama, Peter meant. As opposed to crime lords and supervillains. He hadn’t meant Mary Jane specifically, of course. That was just an example.

Yeah. Just an…

“Mary Jane?” Peter said aloud.

After one last sniffle, she managed to raise her bright pink eyes towards his matching ones.

“I’m sorry for before when I… said I loved Gwen more than you.”
“Gugh?” Mary Jane had responded with a confused grunting noise. It was hard to capture in letters.

“I mean, that just wasn’t the right way to look at things. Yeah, what I had with Gwen isn’t… wasn’t… like anything else I’ll ever have again with- with anyone, but… I don’t know, saying I love her more than you… that doesn’t seem right. It’s like asking if I love Uncle Ben more than Aunt May. How cold a-and miserly would I have to be to take all these blessings in my life and pit ’em against each other?” He took a steadying breath. “All it did was cut you down, and I’m sorry.”

Mary Jane blinked. “When was this?”

“Um, a-after the Doombot thing when we all got drunk, and I’d just come back from fighting Big Wheel-”

“Oh yeah.” MJ rubbed her forehead. “God, I can’t believe I remember anything from that night. Peter, look…” Her attention returned to his eyes. “You know I don’t begrudge you what you had with Gwen, and I never will. I swear to you.”

“Oh.” Peter gave a gentle nod. “Thank you. And…” Deep breath. Hoo boy, so long as they were laying their cards on the table, he supposed he’d better lay all of them. “…I know we’ve been scared to talk about this lately, but, err… we were kind of doing all that… threesome stuff… right before…”

“Yes.” Mary Jane nodded in turn. “We were.”

Hey, wait, they were on opposite sides of the car now. When had that happened? Huh.

“I mean, it wasn’t bad or anything-”

“No, no, of course not,” said MJ, re-buckling her seat belt. “In fact… I thought it was pretty good.”

“Heh. Yeah. But, uh, let’s just stick to being best friends right now, okay?”

“Yeah. Of course.” MJ gave a somewhat more vigorous nod than was needed. “Keeps things simpler.” The rain had stopped by now and the wipers were off, so now the two best friends got treated to dead, dead silence. “But, uh, look, I get you wanna live on your own, but, Peter… you know I worry about you being alone so much.”

“Same to you,” Peter said softly.

“And I know your place is a little crowded, so, uh…” MJ shifted the car to reverse, then looked over her shoulder. She was, uh, being a tad more cautious getting out than she’d been getting in. “…if you ever wanna leave some of your stuff at my place… crash in the guest bedroom sometime…”

“Yeah. Yeah, thanks. That’s… nice of you.” The silence threatened to creep back up, but Peter broke it by saying, “But, MJ, look… we were never trying to take advantage of you. When me and Gwen let you into the relationship, it wasn’t just… I mean, we were making a promise that we’d support you like we did each other, but…” He faltered. “I don’t know. Sometimes it’s hard to tell if I was really trying to support you or if I was just doing it because it was, like, the hottest thing ever.”

At this, MJ pursed her lips. “Well, hey, I’ve been asking myself the same thing. Really, all three of us were… very attractive people.” She paused, eyes fixed firmly on the road. “You know I was serious before – You could be a model if you want.”
Just like last time, Peter laughed. “Maybe I could’ve before. Heck, in hindsight, probably wouldn’a
gone better than the journalistic ethics nightmare that was my Bugle job. But, c’mon-” He gestured
to the thick black glasses on his face. “I’ve kinda returned to factory settings here. I mean…” He
glanced away. “…I’m not exactly in your league anymore. If that spider hadn’t bit me-”

“I wouldn’t have known what I was missing out on,” cut in MJ. “I was a floozy back then. But
we’re not in high school anymore – thank Jeebus. ‘Nerds’ and ‘cool kids’ don’t exist.”

“Yeah,” said Peter, “but income brackets do.”

“What? Phht, come on, my blood’s as far from blue as it can get. I mean, I don’t even know what
to do with half the money people hand me nowadays. Sometimes I eat ramen just for nostalgia!”
MJ’s hands left the wheel for a second to aid in her exclamation. “What am I spending this stuff on,
cars? Cars are dumb. I just buy junk cuz I’m bored.”

“I don’t know…” Peter bowed his head. “Maybe it’s all shallow to some degree. Maybe I’d never
have glanced Gwen’s way if she’d been the size of Wilson Fisk.” And from what Dr. Richards had
told him, there was probably an alternate dimension out there where that was precisely what’d
happened. But also a dimension where Peter and Gwen had gotten together regardless. And also a
dimension where Spider-Man had gotten his powers from space and owned a giant robot. “Maybe
life’s just random meaninglessness. Meaningless randomness. Whatever.”

“Hey, total seriousness?” MJ cocked an eyebrow. “I don’t see things like that. Way I see it, the
world’s cruel and scary and dangerous and full of terrible people, so if you happen to find someone
who really, genuinely cares about you, and you love them back… then that just means you got
really, really lucky.”

Despite his best efforts, a gigantic, goofy grin stretched itself onto Peter’s face.

It left his driver disarmed. “What?”

“Nothing,” said Peter. “It’s just… ‘really lucky,’ huh? So I guess you could say I h-?”

“Finish that sentence and I will throw you out this moving car.”

They laughed. They laughed until Peter’s throat hurt (though it’d been a bit sore to begin with,
truth be told). Eventually, though, things quieted down, and Peter found his eyes traveling to the
windshield. The evening sun was coming out from behind the clouds. Peter’s eyes shut.

Hey, God? If you’re real and stuff... thank you for her.

“This is nice,” Peter said, eyes still shut. “I’d forgot what it was like to be normal. I mean, this is
not how my days went back when I had to chase purse snatchers around. Now I’m just scared I’m
gonna wake up one day and my powers will be back.” He opened his lids to discover a frown
marring MJ’s face.

“W-Well, hey,” she said, “who knows how wacky, genetically-whatevered spider venom works?
Maybe it was only ever, like, a temporary thing, and it’s run its course through your system? Yeah,
that’s probably it. It’s gone for good.”

Peter took this in silently. “You know what, MJ? I bet you’re right.”

“Uh, yeah, of course I am.” MJ managed another smile.

After that, the two listened to the radio for a while. MJ was into weird old reggae songs, apparently
After a couple minutes, though, MJ shielded her eyes from the rising sun and said, “Ugh, it’s getting hot out.” Once they reached a red light, MJ unbuckled herself so she could slip off her thin black jacket, freeing the plain pink t-shirt beneath. Oh, she hadn’t dressed up, either. That kinda made Peter feel less awkward about his own blue t-shirt.

“I’ll get the AC.”

“Thanks. And here.” Mary Jane knelt over to unzip her orange cooler bag. “This one’s yours.” She tossed him a bottled water, its contents stained red with powdered drink mix, and then took a Diet Coke for herself.

“Oh, good foresight, there.” Peter unscrewed the bottle cap and took a nice, long gulp.

That seemed to satisfy Mary Jane, and so her eyes returned to the road.
Post-Commencement Stress Disorder

Eyeballing it, the buildings of Harrisburg seemed to be in the two hundred to three hundred foot range. Not as much vertical space as Peter would’ve liked, but the city was so small, he could patrol the whole place in five minutes. Not that he was actually planning on web-swinging here – One look at the skyline and his brain had just fired off calculations of its own accord.

Pennsylvania wasn’t quite the alien world that Florida had been, but Peter couldn’t help but feel claustrophobic in this dinky little city, and that was to say nothing of the neighborhood containing Aunt May’s house. This region of Harrisburg was its miniature equivalent of Queens, Peter supposed, meaning it’d swapped its towers for quaint little houses surrounded by plenty of grass and trees. It was more or less an animal sanctuary but for old people.

Even May’s new house was tiny. Heck, it was barely bigger than Peter’s new apartment. Was she really alright in this place, living off retirement checks, cookbooks, and piano lessons? Of course, May had insisted there was no need to worry about her. Nick paid her regular visits, and his sister’s family lived just down the street. And what did an old fogey like May need with an upstairs, anyways?

And if the house wasn’t tiny enough to begin with, Peter could swear it’d become a Crash Bandicoot level, there were so many boxes strewn about (not that he was one to throw stones, of course). He felt terrible about dropping by on such short notice, but May insisted it was perfectly fine, especially once he and MJ explained the catalyst of their spontaneous road trip. As promised, a hot meal was waiting for the two, though Peter spent less time eating than he did hugging his aunt tight.

It turned out things were getting serious with Nick – Peter could only imagine May had been pushed deeper into the man’s arms lately. In fact, May revealed with a shy smile, Nick had asked her to marry him, and May had said yes.

After a moment’s silence, Peter said he was happy for them.

That was why the house was in such a state, May added. She was already packing her things for the move. Peter was relieved to hear it, really. He’d always hated the thought of Aunt May living on her own.

May, conversely, said she hated the thought of Peter living on his own, which was why she was delighted to know that he was spending so much time with Mary Jane. The remark was followed by the longest silence yet, during which time Peter and MJ focused the brunt of their efforts on poking their microwave lasagnas with their plastic forks.

Once dinner ended, it came time to divvy up the sleeping quarters. Peter insisted Mary Jane take the guest bedroom, seeing as she was the one who’d driven him all the way out here on her own time. At first he thought she’d refuse just like she’d refused his gas money, but MJ was quick to accept, actually. Huh.

Peter shrugged his shoulders, climbed onto May’s lumpy, crusty sofa, and made a valiant effort to drift off. It was only after a good half hour that it hit him – He’d totally forgot to brush his teeth. Peter hadn’t been able to prove this, exactly, but he’d long suspected his superhuman durability had extended all the way to his gums, and now that it was gone, his mouth was a den of cavities waiting to happen. Thus, Peter climbed to his feet and lurched his way down the hall. There was a bathroom the size of a broom closet at the hall’s far end, and all he had to do to reach it was make
his way past the guest room…

But halfway through his journey, Peter froze. The guest room’s door was open a crack, and a soft, somewhat raspy, and increasingly frantic voice was carrying from within:

“…know that, sir, but the thing is, my- my friend passed away, and-” The voice paused. “No, sir, it was a couple weeks back. But, see, the funeral home just called, and it turns out some assholes vandalized her gr-” Another pause. “That’s right, sir. It was really horrible. The headstone was smashed up, and all the fl-flowers were trashed, and they’d dug up the grass around it…” The voice had to stop another moment to steady itself. “So I was all shook up, and-”

“Ohhh-” A second voice grew loud enough to carry from a cell phone speaker. “-well, so long as you had an emotionally fulfilling reason to ABANDON OUR ENTIRE PRODUCTION WITHOUT WARNING. WE HAD TO REFUND EVERY LAST TICKET SALE, YOU LITTLE TROLLOP. I HAVE HALF A MIND TO BLACKLIST YOU UNTIL TIME HIMSELF WITHERS HIS WAY INTO SWEET OBLIVION-”

“But sir-!”

The sound of footsteps sent Peter scurrying down the hall. Luckily, he managed to get out of eavesdropping-range right before the guest room’s door shut from inside.

Then Peter brushed his teeth, crept down the hall, crawled back onto the sofa, and stared at the ceiling until sunrise.

Peter was broken from his staring by a heavenly aroma. As it turned out, Aunt May had prepared the customary breakfast of wheatcakes. She gave the smell plenty of time to waft into Peter’s and MJ’s respective sleeping quarters before revealing the meal’s cost – Some boxes needed to be brought out from the garage before the moving trucks got here in a couple days. Yeah, like Peter had once said, May was an evil mastermind.

So that was how Peter found himself carrying a massive cardboard box down the front porch, fighting to keep his knees from buckling. He, uh, might’ve bitten off more than he could chew here. Wasn’t his fault his sense of “light” and “heavy” had gotten thrown out of wack…

Anyways, Mary Jane had just returned to the garage for the next load, so Peter should’ve had plenty of space to maneuver.

“Whoops-!” Naturally, he nearly tripped over someone and crushed them to death.

“Watch it, Mr. Magoo!” That shrill, high voice belonged a girl who absolutely should not have known who Mr. Magoo was. She was dressed in the tiniest little white hoodie Peter had ever seen. Poor thing’s head barely even went past his belly button.

“Sorry.” Peter set his box down to prevent any further, crushing-related accidents. “So, err, do you know my aunt? Or are you just making off with those antique watches?” His eyes flitted to the girl’s own, considerably smaller cardboard box.

“Sorry.” Peter set his box down to prevent any further, crushing-related accidents. “So, err, do you know my aunt? Or are you just making off with those antique watches?” His eyes flitted to the girl’s own, considerably smaller cardboard box.

“This is Heather Jackson from across the street,” spoke up May, poking her head out from the driveway’s new box jungle. “She’s giving me a hand, and I’m giving her five dollars.”

Peter’s eyes went to the girl and back. “That’s your friend Heather?”

“Yes,” said May, “why?”
“Oh, y’know, I just thought she’d be as young and spry as you…”

“I’m seven and a half!” Wiry, dirty blonde bangs flopped over Heather’s scowling brow.

“Seven and a half?” Peter shot May a simper. “Aww, they grow up so fast. Next thing you know, she’ll be seven and five-eighths.”

May simpered back. “Heather and I became friends when we realized we’d both come here from New York.”

“My mom got scared of all the robots and dinosaurs,” chimed in Heather. “Can you believe her?”

Aunt May strolled over to give her head a pat. “I’m afraid not everyone’s as brave as you, dear.”

While those two were busy with that, Peter’s attention turned to some of the opened boxes by his feet. “Hey, where all my DVDs of Greg Weisman cartoons?”

“Oh, those dreadful things?” May batted a hand at him. “I gave those away.”

Slowly, Peter’s head sank as a distant look overtook his eyes.

“I put the pans in the box, Mrs. Parker.” But Heather’s voice snapped him from his funk.

“Thank you, Heather. Now why don’t you put those cookbooks in with the mixer?”

“Okay…” But on Heather’s way to the kitchenware, she stopped to give Peter a look (though Peter had to tilt his head a couple degrees for her to even show up in his peripheral vision). “You take Spider-Man’s pictures, right?”

The box in his arms nearly crushed Peter’s foot. “I used to.” His eyes went to May, who was pretending not to listen.

Heather peered up at him with those round, innocent eyes only a kid could get away with making.

“Where is he?”

“Heather and I agree,” said an idle May, her back to them. “We don’t see his picture in the paper anymore.”

Next, Peter’s gaze went to the garage. Mary Jane was still in there. In fact, now that Peter thought about it, she’d been in there quite a while, lingering at the entryway. Her green, catlike eyes almost glowed against the shadows.

“He, uh, quit,” said Peter.

“Why?” Heather’s own eyes were unchanged.

A hand went to Peter’s temple. “You don’t watch the news much, do you?”

“My mom won’t let me,” said Heather. “They show people getting killed on there.”

“…Right.”

“So why’d he quit?”

“He… It…” After a bit more sputtering, Peter got out, “It was just too much for him.”
Heather’s brow creased. “He’ll be back, right?”

“I don’t know.” Peter’s head titled back up. “I mean, wouldn’t you get tired of fighting bad guys over and over and o-?”

“No.” A little round fist collided with Peter’s torso. It left him flinching – Geez, you wouldn’t think it’d sting like that. “I wouldn’t just give up and let the bad guys win, ya idiot!”

“Heather.” May’s voice drifted towards her.

“Sorry, ma’am…”

Aunt May chuckled, turning back to Peter. “You’ll never guess who she wants to be… Spider-Man.” She embellished the hyphenated word with a waggle of her fingers.

“Phht.” Peter looked back to Heather, shoulders slouched. “Sure you wouldn’t rather be someone who’s not a quitter? How ’bout Captain America? He seemed like a paragon of virtue… Why can’t we let Mr. Spider-Man enjoy his retirem-?

“Ow!”

“That’s his dad!” Heather raised her fist for another blow. “You’re s’posed to call him ‘Spidey,’ and he’s the best. I was gonna get hit by a car because I didn’t look both ways, and he saved me. The other heroes don’t do that. They only ever fight aliens and stuff.”

Peter rubbed his arm. Even after another look over her, he couldn’t say this girl was familiar. He’d had to yank so many kids away from traffic…

“Heather knows a hero when she sees one, Peter.” May drew near him, stepping over crunchy leaves and stray eggbeaters. “Too few of those characters in our neighborhoods, helping us common folk like that…” A hand touched Peter’s arm, right where Heather’s fist had resided a moment ago. “It’s easy to love them when a hero does big things like saving the world. People line up for them, cheer them, scream their names… but that makes it all too easy to turn on them when they fail.” She tried to meet his eyes, though Peter put up a fight. “And they will fail eventually, just as we all do.”

“Okay, cool.” said Peter. “Lemme go get another box-” Whoa, Aunt May had quite the grip for a lady her age.

“But being a hero isn’t about ‘never failing,’” she continued. “No, the heroes that last… the ones people will cherish the rest of their lives…”

Silver Sable rested her chin against the rooftop’s pavement. Through the sniper scope, she saw a window, and through the window, she saw a man seated at an armchair.

On his lap was a little boy. “Dad, Dad, tell the story again! Y’know, the story-”

“Alright, if you’re not sick of it yet.” The father shook his head before reciting, “So I was in Manhattan on a business trip, and while I was caught in traffic, this gigantic wheel rolled down the street-”

“With big old guns on the sides!”

“Right, with big old guns on the sides. And just when I thought I was a goner, there was this ‘thwip’ sound, and then-”
“-are the ones who taught them to hold on-”

“…sorry to report…” The doctor peered up at them from behind his clipboard. “…Joan will be making a full recovery.” A devilish grin snapped across his face.

“Ha ha!”

Father and son embraced.

“It’ll take more than an army of killer robots to bring down my mom.” John knelt over the bedside to hug his mother with his wonderful, regular-sized and non-furry hands.

John’s father, meanwhile, opted merely to wipe his eyes.

“-a second longer.”

As soon as she was sure her parents weren’t watching, the little girl sprinted into her room and slammed the door behind her with a shoulder. In her left hand was a bucket of water, and in her right was a bucket of sand.

“Lunch time,” she said in a joyous whisper.

On command, a pair of hands crawled their way out from under her bed – both of them left ones. The one made of sand was even starting to develop a wrist.

The girl watched them soak up their buckets with a growing smile. “Oh, you guys kept so much more of it this time. You’re getting big.”

The sand-hand gave a thumbs up.

“I believe there’s a hero in all of us… that keeps us honest…”

“Time present and time past,

Are both perhaps present in time future,

And time future contained in time past.”

Otto trailed a finger across the page, reading in soft tones to the man across from him at the table.

Max scratched his head, which was covered in a thin layer of dark brown hair. “I think I get it. So it’s saying, like, the past and present are both parts of the future. Or… wait… no…”

The two shared a laugh.

And behind them, at the entrance to the lounge area, Doctors Kafka smiled.

“…gives us strength…”

“Explain it again,” the symbiote said.
“Gladly,” Mister Fantastic had said, his neck stretching towards the pane of glass between the two. “Essentially, a social contract is an agreement between people to compromise and suppress their base desires for the sake of creating a better society.”

The symbiote sat up in its terrarium, rubbing itself against the rust red dirt. The resemblance to his home planet’s soil truly was uncanny. After a moment, the symbiote spoke again into the Universal Translator in the side of the glass: “Like a symbiotic relationship?”

Mister Fantastic had chuckled. “You could think of it that way, yes.”

“…makes us noble…”

“We’re not taking the hit.”

“But Sable-”

“We’re not taking the hit. The Wild Pack doesn’t do that. Not anymore.”

“…and finally… allows us to die with pride…”

The front lawn of Midtown High was lit aglow. Not with street lamps – Those had all been shut off – but with candles. Countless candles, each held in the hand of a different student.

Or former student, in the cases of Liz, Mark, Sally, Rand, Glory, Kong, Flash, Hobie, and Eddie. The group was gathered towards the front of the procession… alongside a couple of Gwen’s former bandmates, as well as Sha Shan.

All raised their candles towards the night sky.

“…even though sometimes we have to be steady and…” Aunt May chose this moment to retrieve another box off the ground. It served the additional purpose of hiding her face for the briefest of instants. “…let go of what we want the most.”

Peter’s eyes went to May’s finger. The one with the sparkling new ring on it.

“Spider-Man did that for Heather, and now…” Even once she stood upright again, May bowed her head, as if embarrassment had crept up on her. “…she wonders where he’s gone. She needs him.”

The words hung in the air.

“Do you think you could lift that desk and put it into the garage for me? But don’t strain yourself.”

“Okay,” said Peter.
Mary Jane was still lingering down in the garage, apparently, meaning Peter had the guest room all to himself for now. Aunt May had asked him to keep one of the boxes. According to her, it contained a few things he’d forgotten and left behind during his move to the old apartment (It was still short a few DVDs, though…). And so Peter sat on the bed and peeled back the cardboard flaps, revealing the contents within.

Spider-Man stared at him. Or one of his spare costumes, at least, neatly folded inside.

Peter stared back. He wasn’t sure for how long. But whenever he stopped, Peter pulled himself to his feet, slipped off his t-shirt, long-sleeved undershirt, and sweat pants, and set to work tugging the red and blue spandex over his limbs. When that was finished, he inspected himself in a desk mirror.

This time, Spider-Man really did stare at him. A, uh, version of Spider-Man with a bit more tummy than usual, but that was fixable.

You’d think Peter would be used to hiding his suit under his clothes, but nevertheless, he couldn’t help but feel jumpy during return trip, as if Mary Jane might rip open his shirt any second now and demand an explanation.

She deserved to know. Peter knew that she did, but… she seemed in such high spirits, singing along to the radio, sunglasses gleaming above her curled, cherry lips. He wasn’t sure he had the heart.

But sometimes we have to be steady. “Mary Jane?”

“Tiger?” MJ took a hand off the wheel so she could reach for the bag of chips in the cup holder.

“How much of Aunt May’s… little speech… did you hear?”

The hand never made it to its destination. “You mean the one where she tried to guilt-trip you with some Mister Rogers bullshit?”

Already, Peter was wincing. “Yeah. That one.”

“What about it?”

“She’s right, MJ.”

Instead of the chips, Mary Jane’s hand ended up going for the radio. Her long, sharp fingernail pressed against the knob, murdering the song mid-chorus. In the music’s place, silence flooded the car.

“Mary Jane, I’m sorry, but…” Peter slouched beneath his seatbelt. “…someone’s gotta stop Fisk.”

The moment the light went green, their ride shot to seventy MPH. “Peter, you were told he’s Kingpin by a homeless guy who died in a gutter.”

“Matt was my friend,” Peter snapped, “and I turned my back on him.”

MJ grasped for words. Her fingers had gone white, they were gripping the wheel so hard. “Fine. Fine, okay, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. If… If this is really important to you, we can go to the Fantastic Four about it.”

At this, Peter bowed his head. “I already called Johnny before we left. Told him everything. He
says this is a job for the feds, not the hero teams. He’ll pass the info on, but… it’s not a lot for them to go off of.”

“Well, then…” MJ released one set of fingers so she could place them over his hand. “…you did everything you could.”

Against his will, Peter found himself inhaling. “MJ, the feds can’t stop him. They haven’t been able to stop him, and they’re not gonna believe a kid who heard it from a homeless guy who used to dress as the Devil and jump off rooftops. It’s just not… I mean, Eddie told me Captain DeWolff’s on Kingpin’s take, and she’s the one who helped me and Daredevil take down Tombstone in the first place.”

“Well, that’s the thing, though, you took down one big cheese crime boss and another popped up to replace him.” MJ gave the back of his hand one last stroke before returning her own to the wheel. “You think it’ll be different this time? Y-You’re doing it again, Peter. I’m sure you could find tons of evil mega-corporations to piss off if you went looking for them.” They almost got caught at a red light, but MJ sped through it right as it was changing from yellow. “I told you, the world’s garbage, but trying to fix it all yourself isn’t gonna do any good. These fights have nothing to do with you.”

The words erupted all on their own: “My uncle died because of organized crime like this.”

MJ’s erupted back: “His death was an accident.”

After that… Peter’s words weren’t quite so eager to form themselves. “No, it wasn’t.”

He could only imagine Mary Jane’s face behind those shades right now. “But… that’s not… Wh-What about your responsibilities to your aunt? To…?”

“To you?” finished Peter. MJ gave the feeblest of nods, and so Peter took a breath and said, “I can put Aunt May in the Fantastic Four’s safe house before Kingpin even knows I’m after him, and- and with all the holes in the security system patched out. I won’t make the same mistakes.”

“Peter, I’ll stay in that safe house again if you ask me to, but-”

“I can’t ask you, Mary Jane.” Sternness took Peter’s voice. “You have a career ahead of you, and you can’t keep torpedoeing it for my sake. But…” And just like that, the sternness was gone. “…Kingpin won’t go after you if he doesn’t think… I mean, you’d just seem like a random roommate I once had. No one else really knows about… We could have S.H.I.E.L.D. or someone keep an eye on you, but-”

“But no more weekly Netflix binge-watching sessions with you?”

“…Yeah. Guess not.”

There came a sniffle. “Well… okay.” Mary Jane stuck a finger up behind her sunglasses, wiping. “None of that’s gonna matter, though. Your powers are gone.”

“I know, but…” Peter brushed his overgrown hair out of his face. “…if they could ever come back-” He got cut off mid-sentence, partly by his own surprise.

A relieved laugh had just fluttered out MJ’s mouth. “Well, y-yeah.” But then she caught his expression, and so she turned away, hiding her own. “I guess if they ever decide to return one day. Just don’t go around, y’know, jumping off rooftops trying to make it happen.”
Peter shook his head. “I was gonna have the Connors take a look at me, actually. Been putting that off way too long.”

They screeched to a halt with enough force to make his seatbelt go tight. The car was halfway past a stop sign.

After a disquieting moment, Peter continued, “I mean, they’re the ones who gave me my powers in the first place. By total accident, granted, but still, maybe they can tell me if I really am just sick or if some trace of my powers are, I don’t know, dormant in me or something?”

“Yes. Guess that’s always an option.” Another, more jittery laugh left MJ’s mouth. “So then we’ll have to put this argument on ice till they can give you a checkup, right?”

“Right…” Peter said slowly.

With that, Mary Jane turned the radio back on, though it took her finger a couple tries to hit the button. For the next couple minutes, the only sound in the car was synthy, ear-bleeding pop music.

As expected, Mary Jane was the first to speak. “Ugh, forgot to turn the AC on again.” She wiped a layer of sweat off her brow, smearing makeup on her fingers. “I swear, summer gets longer every year…”

At the next red light, she unzipped her orange cooler bag, revealing more bottled, flavored waters within. Immediately, Peter reached for the one nearest to MJ.

And just as immediately, his hand was smacked away. “Oh, that one’s mine.” MJ snatched it out of his reach. But when she spotted the look on his face, she faltered. “-Sorry, the fruit punch is my fave. Here, you can have the kiwi one.” She all but shoved it into his hands.

Peter stared at it.

“What?” said MJ. The word ended up higher-pitched than it’d started.

“Actually-” Peter’s own voice, by contrast, was tightening. “-now that I think about it… back when I ruled out gene cleanser, I wasn’t accounting for the dosage.”

Mary Jane said nothing. Her focus was kept squarely on the road.

“I guess it’s possible... intuitive, even… that drinking smaller doses might kill my spider DNA in a way that’s less quick.” Peter set the kiwi water in the cup holder, crushing the bag of chips beneath it. “Less obvious.” A rush of air escaped his mouth. “And I’ve been so out of it lately, I mean, it wasn’t like I was keeping careful track of all my supplies. I just kinda threw everything into boxes. Bet I wouldn’t even have noticed if a vial or two went missing.”

Mary Jane’s breathing had grown audible over the music.

“MJ,” said Peter, “if there’s something you need to tell me-”

“Yes. Yes, you’re right, Peter.” The words burst out her mouth, one after another. “I didn’t think- You didn’t have to- Why can’t you just-?” The words slowed down. Mary Jane switched off the radio, then forced herself to inhale. “Yes, there’s gene cleanser in your drink. Happy?”

It was Peter’s turn to keep quiet.

“And in that gallon of milk I gave you, all the sodas I bought you- Everything. It’s been in
everything.” It turned out, when MJ’s words had slowed down, it’d been more of a momentary lull. “Everything since… that night.” She spun towards him, her sunglasses dangling off her face to reveal a pair of puffy red things. “Are you mad at me don’t be mad at me.”

Peter’s postured had gone stiff. “So when you said I had a choice, you were lying to me.”

“You think I’d give you a choice? In the state you were in? No. No, no, no, you’d throw yourself off a building or pick a fight with the Rhino or something.” It was a shock she managed to flip on the turn signal, Mary Jane was trembling so hard. “-and then I’d be alone, and you can’t do that to me, Peter. Not again-”

“MJ, don’t change lanes. There’s a-!”

His cries were silenced by an airbag to the chest.

As it turned out, Mary Jane’s blue Mercedes- whatever had rear-ended the massive, muddy truck of some baseball-cap-wearing guy who was, err, probably not the most pure-blooded New Yorker ever. The guy was twice MJ’s size… which did not at all impede the rate of curses hurled his way.

Eventually, though, Peter managed to calm things down – relatively speaking. Insurance information was swapped, tow trucks were called, and long story short, it was about eight at night by the time a cab finally pulled up in front of the Ditkovich family’s five-star hotel suite.

The moment Peter was free, he pushed his way inside and marched up the stairs. A pair of footsteps marched behind him.

“You don’t have to walk me to my door.”

“Okay…” came a trembling voice.

It was taking every last muscle in Peter’s body to keep himself facing forward.

“Well… bye.” The voice had gone from trembling to cracking.

Every last muscle wasn’t nearly enough. Peter spun in place.

Mary Jane looked even more pitiful than he’d imagined. Her sunglasses hung crooked on her nose, her makeup was a mushy mess, and her hair had gone all frizzy from a nice, long day of screaming at insurance agents beneath the hot sun.

She offered a hug.

Peter showed her his shoulder.

“Please don’t hate me.” Her voice made him wince – He’d never heard it so mousy before.

“I don’t hate you, MJ,” Peter said, hand in his scalp. “I just need time to process what… what you… Hmph. You’ve really been putting your acting skills to use lately, haven’t you?” No reply. “Whatever. It’s fine. Just tell me you’re sorry. And from now on, don’t lie to me.”

Mary Jane’s eyes met her designer boots. “I… can’t do both of those.”

“Oh.” Peter let out another, louder huff. “So if I went to the Connors and they scienced my powers back somehow… you’d do this all again? If you thought you could get away with it?” He walked up a couple steps higher just so he could loom over her.
She met his unwavering brown eyes with her swollen, mascara-dripping ones. “If I did my job right, you won’t be getting them back. *I hope they’re gone. I hope there’s not a drop of spider blood left for them to drag up out of you.*”

“*Keep it down. The neighbors—*”

Mary Jane’s hand hit his chest. Well, not ‘hit,’ exactly. It was more like she thought if she pressed down hard enough, she could physically keep the spiderness from seeping back in. “You don’t have superpowers,” she said in a harsh whisper. “You have gross little hairs on your hands and feet, and you said you grew extra arms and turned into a—Man-Spider once. You’re like the Lizard but not transformed all the way. Infected. You’re infected, and I *saved you.*” The laugh she let out was… not her sanest ever.

“*MJ, MJ…*” Peter ended up holding her by the shoulders, steadying her. He took a deep, deep breath. “I understand why you did what you did. But you need to understand that… if my powers are really gone for good… then *every single person* Spider-Man could have saved… all those deaths are on *your* shoulders.” He clamped them tighter. “You’re responsible.”

At this, Mary Jane let out a little gasping noise. It made Peter’s chest ache. “You don’t get it. You’re so good that you don’t get how horrible the rest of us are.” MJ pressed a hand to her mouth in a futile effort to hide her face. “I can’t do it. You need someone waiting for you after every mission to kiss your cheek and be like—’Oh, hello, Spider-Man, dear, supper’s on the table. How’s your day been? Any near-death experiences? Here, let me sew up your costume and wash all the blood out,’ and *I can’t do that,* Peter. I can’t be that for you.”

“But—” Peter tried to reply, but his mouth was disarmingly dry.

“I don’t give a shit about those other people, but the thought of you getting hurt makes me sick to my stomach, *and if your aunt actually cared about you, she’d feel the same way.*”

Following *that* remark, Peter didn’t *need* to tell her to keep her voice down. The look in his eyes did that more than well enough.

MJ shrank beneath it.

“I’m going to forgive you for saying that,” Peter said, his voice perfectly even, “because I know I’ve upset you, and I know you’re not thinking straight. Go home, Mary Jane. Give yourself some time to calm d—”

“No, shut up, it must be so easy for you to be like that when you got raised by the greatest, sweetest, nicest aunt and uncle on the face of the earth. Probably helps that you didn’t have to watch your dad punch your mom—” Mary Jane touched her knuckles to her own jaw, miming the impact. “—right in front of you when you were *six years old.* So just *save it.*”

It was at this point that Mary Jane finally turned and began her way down the stairs. She was no doubt going home to give herself time to calm down.

Peter grabbed her wrist. “Mary Jane, wait.”

On command, she paused, then fixed her damp, quizzical eyes on him.

“We… We need to have a talk.”

“I know.” Mary Jane’s voice was *achey* to listen to, if that made any sense. “I’m trying, but I don’t know what to… Th-The words aren’t coming out right.” Her eyes locked, then unlocked with his.
“Gwen would’ve known what to say.”

“Yeah.” Peter’s voice shook, both from laughter and from its polar opposite. “Well… we’ll have to figure it out on our own. C’mon.” Gently, he took her hand in his. “Let’s finish this inside. Less people in there.”

Mary Jane nodded, and so Peter led her towards his apartment – if you could even call it that. To be honest, he hadn’t been overeager to show her his bachelor pad (It had more in common with a well-used Brillo pad), but Peter didn’t have anything approaching enough energy to go elsewhere today. His back ached from hauling boxes, his butt ached from sitting in sports cars and tow trucks for hours on end, and his throat ached from, well, y’know.

And all that was before he opened the door to his room.

“Oh, there you are, Peter!”

Before either of them could scream, Peter and Mary Jane found themselves pinned to the floorboards by a pair of shaggy green paws that spanned each of their torsos. On impulse, Peter struggled against the weight, but that only dug the claws deeper into him.

“Relax, pretty lady.” The claws’ owner raised his growling voice, making it heard over his victims’ shrieks. “I’m sure the big strong superhero here would never let any harm befall you.” With a hind leg, the creature politely shut the door behind them. “Ooooh, wait, actually, this is Spider-Man we’re talking about, so I give it fifty-fifty.”
This was another one of Peter’s crazy nightmares. It had to be. That was the only explanation that… that didn’t end with Mary Jane getting hacked into little pieces.

No, he couldn’t think that. He had to focus. There had to be some escape. Sure, Peter was currently being suspended in the air by the claws of an eight-foot-tall green canine. And sure, he’d just learned the loss of his spider-strength was in no way psychological, meaning it hadn’t the slightest chance of returning. But… But… Yeah, okay, there was no “but.”

What was this thing? Vermin’s brightly-colored cousin? It’d terrify Peter less if he at least recognized the supervillain. But whatever the thing was, its head scraped the ceiling, even when it was almost on all fours (though some of those scrapes had been there to begin with). Its fur was the deep green of cedar trees, and its fangs looked every bit as sharp as its claws.

But there was something else about it. Its face… It wasn’t completely doglike. No, the eyes were too white. Too human.

“I’ve been waiting for you, Mr. Parker,” the Grinch’s less sociable cousin suddenly said. “I see you’ve grown no less tardy since I terminated your internship – again.”

Something about that voice, distorted and animalistic as it was, made Peter’s own eyes go wide. “Warren?” Peter could swear he could hear his heart thumping in his ears. The harder he fought, the tighter these stupid black claws clamped down on his waist.

“How’d you know?” the beast asked, its smile stretching even wider.

“Well, my second guess was that you’re what happens when Clifford eats too much grass, but then I figured- Rrck.” Peter was silenced by the tightening of the claw closest to his neck.

The beast’s breath made him recoil. “Well, for future reference, what I am is what happens when you mix the Man-Wolf serum with a pinch of Globulin Green. For self-defense, you understand.” Warren chuckled to himself. “Though I took the time to swap out the wolf DNA for jackal. Inside joke.”

“Ha ha,” said Mary Jane through gritted teeth. The remark, though, served only to draw Jackal’s attention towards her. With a careless toss, he sent her lying into the apartment’s far wall… causing her to bounce off and crumple to the floor, head-first.

Peter’s screams would’ve burst out if he’d had a hundred claws on his neck.

“It’s great to see you again, by the way.” Jackal added. “Would’ve dropped by sooner, but I’ve been busy with a, err, pet project of mine. Maybe I’ll show her off to you. Or maybe I’ll just torture you to death – I’m winging it.”

There was a crssh of glass, and the next thing Peter knew, he felt the open air on his back. Jackal had carried him out the apartment’s nice, big window.

Peter would’ve at least given Jackal the most intense death glare he could muster, but right as Jackie Boy was starting to leap to the next rooftop over, Peter’s head happened to hit the windowsill, and the world went black for a while.
When the world finally got less fuzzy, Peter was treated to a view of the sunrise over the East River. It painted the entire, cloudless sky crimson.

With a pang, Peter realized he’d been freed. He tried to pull himself to his feet, but the searing pain beneath his skin had other plans. It was as Peter was stumbling to the rock beneath him that he realized his civilian clothes had been sliced off, leaving only the red and blue spandex.

With another, harder pang, Peter felt the biting wind on his back and realized where Jackal had taken him.

“I know, I know, it’s the obvious pick.” Jackal stood across from him, hunched over on all fours, peering over the edge of the pillar to the bridge below. Some of the cars down there seemed to have spotted him, causing them to erupt into fits of honking and swerving. “I actually put a lot – and I mean a lot – of thought into where to kill you at, but end of the day…” In his clawed hand, Jackal clutched a Spider-Man mask. He must’ve swiped it from Peter’s utility belt. “…it just had to be here.” He let go, allowing the mask to drift to the road below like a feather. It was a long way down.

Peter had ended up sprawled across the top of the bridge pillar, and he was pretty sure the impact had dislodged something. It was all he could do to lift his head, let alone speak. And Jackal had barely done a thing to him yet. Peter’s bleary eyes traveled to the brick beneath his chin, where the remains of his glasses had landed. He’d forgotten how frail he was without powers. He didn’t even have his webshooters, and his head felt eerily empty without the constant buzzing of his spider-sense. It was impossible to think.

“Aww, what’s the matter, hero?” Claws tore into Peter’s shoulder, ripping a scream from his lungs. “Not even gonna try to fight back?” And now the other shoulder. “Well, can’t say I blame you.”

Peter wanted to beg, but all that came out were sobs and whimpers.

“We both know you deserve this.” Jackal raised the claws on the opposite paw for the next blow. “You were tasked with guarding the purest… the most precious creature on this earth, and you failed her.”

Wha-? As if Peter’s mind hadn’t been bleary enough before.

But he scarcely had time to connect the puzzle pieces before the claws fell on his leg.

He screamed. Peter hadn’t even realized he had the energy to scream again, but he managed it. This wasn’t the sharp ache of those paper cut wounds – It was a volcanic eruption of pure, unbridled agony, white hot and all-encompassing, and trying to analyze it like that was the only thing keeping Peter from losing his mind right now. His leg hadn’t been completely severed. No, it’d only been sliced from the back of the thigh to the heel, but that was a small consolation. Peter could see muscle tendon. He could see bone. Faint. He was going to faint.

“St-Sto-ohhh-op. God, please, stop.” Peter surprised himself with words, but they were short-lived.

“Oh, don’t worry, little boy.” Jackal’s breath on the wound was warm and moist, adding a constant stinging on top of all the other sensations coursing through Peter’s body right now. “I’m not gonna let you bleed out on me. Not before the grand finale, at least.”

Peter hadn’t exactly taken the time to notice all the little details before, but it turned out Jackal had hidden a belt beneath that fur of his. Out of it, he retrieved some plain cloth bandages to wrap around what was left of Peter’s leg. This time, Peter didn’t even try to struggle.
“Do you think this is how she felt?” Claws dug into his shoulder again, and then he found himself hoisted above Jackal’s head. “I bet it is. You’re still alive a couple more seconds once your neck snaps, you know.”

At this altitude, the winds cut into Peter almost as much as Jackal’s words.

“How’d you even bring her into this superhero life of yours in the first place?” Jackal scratched his own chin with a claw. “Don’t tell me it was just because you were lonely?” When Peter said nothing, Jackal merely shrugged his shoulders and hissed, “Alright, I’ve had as much of you as I can stomach. Seeya!”

The wind grew even sharper. Peter was sailing through the air. Right towards the pavement below. He shut his eyes. This was how she’d felt. The panic. The rush. And then the strange, eerie sense of calm.

Peter remembered one summer when he was twelve – right at the age where he was way too old to act like this – Uncle Ben had tried to get him go off the high dive, and Peter had utterly freaked about it. Yeah, he’d been scared of heights. Funny how that turned out. He never had gone off that high dive, but, well… every single primal, reptilian instinct in Peter’s brain that’d kept him from diving? Every nagging fear he’d had about what could go wrong?

None of them had come even close to this.

His shoulder took the brunt of the concrete. That much, Peter felt clearly. He rolled over a while – traveling quite a distance, he imaged – before finally coming to a stop. His eyes shot open, and for one second of clarity, Peter realized that human shoulders were not supposed to jut out like this. But then the second was over, and there wasn’t a drop of clarity left in his skull.

The Jackal’s presence had left the Brooklyn Bridge full of screams and wails, but Peter’s drowned out every last opposing one. His vision was going white. A couple fingernails were torn and bloodied and embedded in the pavement.

“Still alive, are we?” said a voice from above. “Good.”

Peter tried to crane his neck, but it put up a fight with him. In the end, he at least managed to point his eyes high enough to make out the sight above. Jackal was now perched on the side of the pillar, and he was holding some kind of little device in his hand.

It was only once Jackal pressed the button that Peter realized it was a detonator.

Eardrums burst. Smoke and dust filled up nostrils. Civilians shrieked. Where once a smooth road had run, cars and rubble now plummeted to the river. The bridge looked like it’d been karate chopped by a giant.

But that was an observation Peter could only make for the briefest of moments. His own region of the bridge hadn’t yet collapsed, but the pillar above him sure had.

“Timber!” Jackal bellowed.

Rubble and shrapnel grew larger overhead. Then larger… larger… Peter tried to run for it, but the best he could do was roll onto his stomach. And the moment he did, something crashed into him. That karate-chopping giant must’ve been trying to squish Peter under his boot. Heh. That was kind of a fitting mental image. Because, you know… spiders. Oh god he was in pain.

Peter pushed. The rubble pushed back. Lord, this had to be, what, a whole third of the bridge pillar?
And Peter had no powers? How was he not a pancake yet? With a bit of straining, Peter found the answer – Some remnants of the steel support cables had landed in exactly the right way to prop up the pillar-chunk, *juuust* keeping it from completing its journey to the ground. Lucky Peter.

Across from him, he caught the sound of shrill, incessant, cackling howls that could only belong to a giant green dog-man. “Damn, that felt good.” The laughter grew fainter as a green figure leaped first to the street, and then up from one building to the next towards the horizon. “I needed that.” After a moment, the laughter faded entirely. The monster had left.

Stupid Jackal just *assuming* Peter was done for. What an… What an idiot.

Again, Peter pushed against the rubble on his shoulders. Again, it pushed back. What a sorry sight Peter must’ve been. This wasn’t a *fraction* of the weight from the Master Planner’s lair. This was nothing. This was… was…

Peter’s breath felt hot. He wanted to say civilians were still screaming all around him, but maybe that was just the ringing in his ears. Dust and smoke went up his nose, and it didn’t even make him cough. He didn’t have the energy for it.

Water was dripping off his torso, making this constant little *plink, plink, plink*. Where’d that come from, the river? How’d it gotten all the way up here? That didn’t make any- Oh. It wasn’t water.

But the ringing and the *plink, plink, plink* weren’t the only things in Peter’s ears. There was also this gasping sound. High and deep and scratchy and constant. Sometimes it’d stop for a couple seconds, but always, it started back up again. “H-Hngh- Hello?” Stupid gasping sound made it hard to talk. “Hello? Please… anyone… I can’t move. I can’t…” The words barely carried a foot from his mouth.

No one was coming. He had to try again. This was nothing, really. Even a fraction of a spider’s strength would get him out of this, let alone the *proportional* strength of one. This was easy. This was like the Master Planner’s lair on easy mode. Training wheel stuff. He could do this. He just had to try again.

But then, back at the Master Planner’s lair… Peter’d had a motivation lying right in front of him.

He strained. He strained and strained until finally, his vision looked marginally less blurry. It gave him a good enough view of the patch of bridge lying before him. It was empty. His eyes shut back. He could do this. He could do this if- if it would just stop hurting. It’d be so much easier then. He just wished it would stop. All of it.

No more. No… m…

It stopped.

Good. That was good. Now Peter could pull himself to his feet. He did. Then he blinked. Hadn’t it just been sunrise a second ago? Why was it so dark now?

No sooner had the question formed in his head than a light burned over Peter’s face. “What the-?” His hand went for his eyes, but, after a disarming second, he realized they didn’t hurt. In fact, nothing did. He flexed his arms. They felt like a million bucks. Never better.

Hmm, in the orange light, he could see that he still had his costume on, though his mask remained missing. Peter felt his face. Even his sweat had vanished. His skin felt like a baby’s butt. Next, he checked out his surroundings. Stone walls, a thick, woolen rug, plenty of fiery torches, a bear head
mounted on the wall… Was this some kind of castle?

“Well fought, lad!” A booming voice made him flinch.

“Huh? Whuh?” Peter snapped towards the front of the room. Standing there was a massive, muscular guy covered from head to toe in a mixture of battle armor and body hair. His flowing red beard was even bigger than his biceps. Who was this supposed to be, Thor’s cousin twice removed? Had he saved Peter with magic?

Peter was about to voice that guess, but before he could, a meaty hand slapped his back.

“There is no contest. Hel hath not a claim to you!” Suddenly, the guy dragged Peter by the shoulder to the front of the dim, torch-lit room. An oaken door was waiting there. The red-bearded dude was twice Peter’s size, but the door towered over even him.

“What’s going-?”

“Go, boy! Go and find thine kinsmen!” The door swung open with a reverberating echo, and Peter was sent inside with a shove.

After a bit of stumbling, he managed to remain on his feet and inspect his new surroundings. At first he thought he was looking at a room full of mirrors, but no… it was just a banquet hall that stretched on forever. Obviously. Torches spanned the damp stone walls like stars in the sky, the ceiling was lined with an endless array of spears hanging over everyone’s heads, and every couple of feet on the ever-stretching fur rug, there sat a different table.

Groups were gathered at them, some tables holding hundreds of people, some holding only two. The ones in Peter’s immediate vicinity were all New Yorkers – You could tell by all the dropped R’s and overabundance of “aw” sounds – but the fawtha- sorry, farther back the humble wooden tables got, the more eccentric their inhabitants became. Some of them were clearly Asgardians, judging from their chain mail armor and general beefiness, and some of them weren’t even human. A couple blue-skinned dudes were dead ringers for the Kree aliens Johnny had once described to Peter.

And every last person in the hall was cheering and feasting and generally making Peter’s eardrums pop. The main course of the day seemed to be freaky alien boar cooked to a golden brown. A different one rested at each and every table, and every time meat was torn off any of them, more grew back in its place.

Peter turned back, only to discover that those ornate, oaken doors were nowhere to be found. Okay, so, uh, he had a couple working theories on what was going on right now. The most plausible one was that he’d somehow been teleported to Asgard. Except that wouldn’t explain what all these other New Yorkers were doing h-

Peter’s brain froze mid-thought. Right as he’d been skimming the banquet hall again, something forced his eyes to halt. Or some-one, rather.

“Peter?” The voice was perfect. It was soft and delicate, but confident and purposeful and… and everything he’d remembered and more.

Peter ran, shoving passerby out of his path. Her skin was creamy and peachy and flawless, and her shiny blonde hair had been braided up around her head. When coupled with the elegant white dress trailing down her lithe body, it kept her from looking too out of place in the medieval fantasy world.
Peter just about tackled her out her chair, he hugged her so tight. She was warm. Her arms were warm and her neck was warm and her lips were the warmest of all.

Whoops, applause, and cries of “Huzzah!” rang out from the crowd. Off to the side of the table, an Asgardian band started playing a jaunty tune on their weird alien instruments. Someone even wolf-whistled. There were literally infinite eyes on them, and Peter didn’t care about a single one of them.

She was so, so warm. How had he never appreciated that before? Peter would stay here forever if he could, basking in it. In fact… that was exactly what he planned to do.

A tankard the size of a human head fell from the girl’s hand, spilling perfectly good ale all over the Fenris-skin rug.
The roast Bilgesnipe his plate gave off the single most delectable scent Peter had ever smelled in his life (uh, figuratively speaking). But he hadn’t touched it once, and he’d been here for… for… Well, he wasn’t sure the whole “time” thing really existed here, but the point was he and the blonde in his arms had been nonstop making out from the moment they’d laid eyes on each other.

Peter was in heaven (*not* figuratively speaking).

“*Peter, stop it.*” It was when his lips started exploring her neck that the giggling blonde finally shoved him off her. “You’re embarrassing me.”

“I don’t care.” They hadn’t been separated for a second before Peter’s body was glued to hers again. “I missed you. I need you. I love you. I-I thought—”

“I know. It’s okay, Peter. I know.” Gently, the girl guided him to the adjacent chair – which Peter was pretty sure hadn’t been there a second ago – sat him down, and climbed onto his lap. “I missed you, too.” She gave a somewhat smaller smile than before. “I didn’t think I’d have you so *soon.* I was scared you’d live to your eighties.”

Peter found himself laughing. It came so much more easily now. “Gotta say, you’re looking *way* better than the last time we, uh, met.”

“Oh, right. The Wand of Watoomb thing.” The girl brushed a strand of hair from her eyes. Lord, Peter had missed that. He wondered where her glasses had gone, though judging by his own, newly-restored twenty-twenty vision, he guessed they weren’t needed here. “I really didn’t mind that. I got to see you early for a bit.” She showed off her pearly, maggot-free teeth.

“I was so scared, Gwen.” Peter made an effort to grab a bite of Bilgesnipe, but he couldn’t even go that long without hugging this darn girl again. “I thought you were in hell or- or that there was nothing after…” Another laugh sprang from his throat. “Geez, though, all the religions in the world and outer space and other dimensions, and *Norse mythology*’s the real one? Well, I guess it’s not the worst—*Wait.*” A thought hit hard enough to knock him straight off cloud nine. “But can’t you only get to Valhalla from, like, dying in battle? What’s gonna happen to Aunt M-?”

“*Peter,* you really think it works like that?” Luckily, the feel of soft, dainty hands of his arms sent Peter right back up. “You think there’s no cosmic justice? Everything’s *fine,* I promise you. You don’t have to worry anymore about… about *anything.*” The girl’s lips were drawing nearer, and Peter’s brain was growing fuzzier. “That’s just a mortal habit you haven’t grown out of yet.”

“*Heh.* Yeah. Guess not.” Peter gave a relieved smile. But then another thought struck him, and he began skimming the hall. “So where’s everyone else? Uncle Ben? My mom and dad? *Your* mom and-? *Oh.*” He nearly tumbled right off his seat. “You’ve never met my parents, a-and I’ve never met your mom. C’mon, let’s go find them! Ah, man, this is gonna be—”

He was stopped by nails in his arm.

“What’s the rush?” The girl on his lap put yet another alluring smile on her face. “That’s another mortal habit, you know.”
For the first time since he’s spotted this girl, Peter frowned. “But I want to see my mom.”

“Well, yeah, but, I mean…” The girl shifted in her seat. “There are some thing we don’t wanna do in front of your parents, aren’t there?”

“Oh. *Oh*, yeah, um-” It was a little hard to formulate a counterpoint when those lips were trailing down the underside of Peter’s chin. “-there’s not exactly a ton of privacy here to start with, remember?” He pointed with his eyes to the adjacent, New Yorker-occupied tables.

Unfortunately, his point was undercut by the fact that a good number of those tables contained their own happy couples, and a good number of those couples weren’t exactly exercising restraint, themselves. It was a wonder this whole place hadn’t devolved into an infinite, eternal orgy yet.

…Actually, now that Peter thought about it, some of the couples there weren’t even “couples.” More like “trios.” And even a couple “quartets.”

“Wow.” Peter at least had enough shame left to look away after a second. “I didn’t realize there were that many, uh, poly people in Manhattan…”

“Oh, those are just widows and widowers who remarried in life,” said the girl on his lap, sparing the aforementioned groups a glance. “Funny thing about polyamory, it’s *way* more socially acceptable when one or more parties are dead.”

Peter blinked. “That does kinda make sense.” In fact, some of those groups were making their three-way make-out sessions look downright natural. Peter was impressed – He, Gwen, and MJ had never quite reduced the risk of clonking their foreheads into each other. “Wait, so when Aunt May and Dr. Bromwell die, will, err…?” Mid-sentence, he clutched his temples. “*Okay*, that’s going into the ‘never again’ part of my brain.” And on that lovely note, Peter’s attention went back to his girl. It turned out he’d been stroking her hair for the past couple minutes without even realizing. “But I’m serious, I wanna see the rest of our family.”

“And *I’m* serious, I want to be alone with you right now.” Before Peter could protest again, the girl’s face was hovering towards his.

“But-”

“Peter, please… shut your eyes.” Her hands sent a shudder down his back. “Relax.”

Peter started to do as he was told, but right before his lids could close, he caught someone coming towards them. “Oh, there he is!”

Uncle Ben was pushing his way through the crowd, and he was in quite a hurry from the looks of him. Unlike the girl, he was dressed in his favorite sweater and sweatpants, and his face was… heavy with worry.

“Uncle Ben?” On sheer impulse, Peter started to push the girl off him. “What’s wrong-?”

But before Ben could even get close, the world changed. Everything grew fuzzy like an out-of-focus camera shot, and then the scenery swirlled around Peter and the girl like a twister. “Whuh-? Gwen? What’s happening?”

She merely laughed. “You didn’t think we were really stuck in a dingy dining hall for eternity, did you?”

In an instant, the spinning stopped, and now Peter was standing on an endless blanket of fluffy
white clouds beneath a pure blue sky. Across from him were a pair of enormous, sparkling gold
gates.

“Is this better?” And before him was the girl. Angel wings and a halo had been added to her outfit.
“Or would you prefer another one?”

“Gwen—”

The world changed again. Now the two were in a tidy, musty house that, judging from its smell,
could only belong to a sweet old lady. And now the girl’s wings and halo had been swapped out
for a swishing tail and fuzzy, triangle-shaped ears.

“This isn’t funny, Gwen.” Peter’s voice was sharper this time. “Why don’t you want me to see
Uncle B-?”

“Too much? We can do something more normal if you’d like.” The world changed yet again. This
time, Peter was now seated on a mattress while the girl was sprawled out beside him. Instantly,
Peter knew this place. The unique blend of textbooks, sourcebooks, and comic books on the shelf
gave it away – This was Peter’s bedroom from his old Forest Hills home. “We can be anywhere,
any-thing you can imagine, Peter.” She crawled on top of him, still in that white gown. The kitty
features were gone, though truth be told, those wouldn’t have have made Peter blush any less (Yes,
fine, he admitted it, he had a thing for chicks dressed as cats). “Just shut your eyes.” Soon enough,
Peter found himself pinned. “Relax. Please. For me.”

Peter admitted he was tempted, but… instead of shutting, his eyes merely narrowed. “Why would
you want me to…?”

Just like that, his eyes shot open. The expanse before him now was barren and colorless, and
strewn about it were overturned cars and chunks of rubble. The bridge.

No sooner had the thought clicked than a wave of searing hot agony shot through Peter’s body.

On sheer reflex, his eyes shut back, and now he was once again sitting above the covers in his
childhood bedroom, sweating buckets and panting like a thing possessed. The girl, however, no
longer looked quite so alluring. She’d sprung backwards, apprehension in her eyes.

Peter brought a trembling hand to his forehead. “I’m not dead.”

“Please,” said the girl, her voice growing higher, “all you have to do is shut your-”

“None of this is real.” Except maybe the heart hammering against Peter’s chest. “None of this is-”

“Where would you rather be right now, Peter?”

The world changed again. Into burning. To screaming. To Peter’s teeth gnashing together until he
was sure they’d cracked.

“Or maybe you’re more of a Hitchens fan?”

The world changed again, this time int
When reality returned, Peter found himself keeled over on his bed, gasping and panting and coughing as if he’d been drowning. “What was that?”

“Oh, nothing,” said the girl, admiring her nails. “But it wasn’t so bad, was it? It at least made the pain stop, didn’t it?”

She was right. It had. The pain had been so… overwhelming, but… if he could just shut his eyes…

The girl’s hand trailed down his thigh. “Shh… It’s no different than how you felt before you were born, is it? Wouldn’t that be nice in a way?” Her hand trailed higher. “You don’t have to hurt anymore, Peter. All you need to do is close your eyes. Relax.”

His lids were halfway there already, and this pillow felt so wonderful against his neck, and all Peter wanted was to let his every muscle grow still. He wouldn’t have to worry about the pain, the supervillains… Aunt May.

“No.” In a blink, Peter jolted upright, knocking the girl’s hand away. “What about the people who’re still alive? The people who care about me? Haven’t they lost enough lately?”

The girl had no reply. She merely say up on the mattress, staring at him with a distant look in her eyes.

“What about-?” The name almost choked him to death, it was so big in his throat. “What about Mary Jane?”

It was the darnest thing. Peter’s bedroom had never been the slightest bit percussive, and yet an echo had formed. “Mary Jane… Mary Jane… Mary Jane…?”
Peter thought the girl would stay quiet again, but she surprised him by speaking in a soft, monotone voice: “I told you to stop thinking like a mortal, Peter. This place is eternal. Whatever your loved ones could possibly suffer, it’s a blink of an eye-” She snapped her fingers. “-and then they’re here. With us.” A hand reached for Peter’s cheek.

He smacked it away. “I don’t want Mary Jane to suffer. Not even for a little bit. And neither would the real Gwen!”

The girl said nothing. Her head titled downwards, hiding her eyes in her bangs.

“How are y-?” Peter’s question was cut off by the sound of an incoming Skype call. “Whuh?” His head snapped towards the edge of the bedspread, where a salmon-colored laptop was sitting.

It looked identical to the real Gwen’s, except that the laptop’s wallpaper had been changed – Rather than Spidey, it showed off a guy in a similar skintight red costume. The difference was, this guy’s costume was red and black instead of the good old red and blue, and in lieu of web-shooters, he sported a pair of katanas on his back, guns on his hips, and a frankly ridiculous number of pouches on his belt. And despite the full-body costume, the guy was sprawled before a fireplace in a seductive pose. It was kind of cartoony.

“Um…”

But before Peter had time to ponder that, the girl scrambled for the touch pad to click “decline” on the call. “Sorry about that. Ugh, thought I blocked this guy…”

Right before she closed it out, Peter caught a glimpse of the most recent Skype chat. A user by the handle of “madtitan55” had demanded, Why, my love? How could you choose that deformed, obnoxious BUFFOON over ME?

To which the user “dirtnap26” had simply replied, He makes me laugh.

The lid slammed shut. “There,” said the girl. “Now where were we?”

Peter stumbled backwards. He tried to hop up off the bed, but his legs felt strangely heavy all of a sudden. “You pretended to be her. How dare y-?”

This earned a chuckle from the girl. “Did I ever say I was Gwen Stacy? I didn’t choose this appearance, Peter.” She gestured to her silky blonde hair and sea green eyes. “You did.”

The words hit him like a blast from Electro. “I saw… what I was expecting to see.” Peter’s fists clenched. “Who are you really, then? The Grim Reaper?”

The girl gave a nod. “That’s one name I’ve been given.”

“Oh my god.” Peter hadn’t thought his heart could go any faster, but then he guessed the whole “incorporeal” thing had overclocked it. “You’re Death. Like, Terry Pratchett-style.”

IF THAT IS HOW YOU WISH TO PERCEIVE ME, said Death.

In the span of Peter’s heartbeat, the girl’s flesh rotted away, followed by her blood and muscle and clothing until all that remained was a skeleton wrapped in a tattered black cloak. She grinned at him from beneath her hood.

“Fine, then,” Peter said through gritted teeth, “don’t you have better places to be? Why don’t you go bug someone’s who’s actually dead?” He tried to feel his ongoing heartbeat to confirm that
assertion, but his arms felt considerably heavier all of a sudden.

BECAUSE I KNOW WHEN A MORTAL LONGS FOR ME, PETER. A bony hand placed itself on the side of Peter’s torso. She was climbing onto him again. Weird, Peter had thought she’d feel ice cold, but she was actually nice and warm. ALL THESE YEARS YOU’VE BEEN FIGHTING… DON’T YOU THINK IT’S TIME YOU FINALLY LOST? Her voice was high and scratchy like you’d except, only in a good way. Like when you dig your fingernails in your wrist and it feels kind of nice. I’LL ADMIT WHAT HAPPENS NEXT IS AS MUCH A MYSTERY TO ME AS IT IS TO YOU – I AM ONLY AN INTERMEDIARY, AFTER ALL. Even when she was talking, her teeth stayed clamped together. And the lack of tongue didn’t seem to be impeding her speech, either. BUT WHATEVER IT MIGHT BE, WILL IT BE WORSE THAN REMAINING UNDER THAT RUBBLE?

“But… But I…”

YOU DID EVERYTHING THAT COULD BE EXPECTED OF YOU AND MORE, PETER. The skull was drawing nearer. YOUR UNCLE COULD NOT BE PROUDER.

“You’re right. He couldn’t.” Peter’s eyes shut tight. “But that’s not why I do what I do.”

Crack. A fist sailed smack into Death’s teeth, sending her flying into the bookshelf. He’d done it. Peter had gotten his hand to move. So that was a start.

Death was disarmed a moment, but soon enough she’d pulled herself back to her white, fleshless feet. I SWEAR, PETER PARKER, EVERY TIME WE HAVE THIS CONVERSATION-! FINE. IF YOU LOVE FIGHTING SO MUCH, THEN BY ALL MEANS, CONTINUE. She drew back, dusting herself off. I SUPPOSE IT DOESN’T MATTER, REALLY. YOU WILL ACCEPT MY EMBRACE EVENTUALLY. Actually, though, the particles Death was brushing off herself weren’t of dust. AFTER ALL… EVERYONE DOES.

They were of dirt. And within seconds, more and more of them poured out from Death’s robes until a whole wave of the stuff crashed onto Peter. Before he could even react, he found himself face-down, pinned the earth, not a drop of light touching him. God, it was heavy. Too heavy.

He couldn’t do this. Maybe Death was right. It was bound to happen sometime, wasn’t it? All Peter needed to do was shut his eyes.

Except that when he did that, he saw nothing but beautiful redheads. Those talks they’d have, lasting hours into the night until Peter finally spotted the clock and excused himself from her condo. The- The effort it took him to walk out her door. That first night at the Fall Formal when she’d exploded into his life, vibrant and happy and… and never letting on how much he really meant to her. When she’d realized how Gwen felt about Peter, she’d helped Gwen out. And she’d been truly, deeply happy for them. Never resented them, not even a little bit. And that smile of hers… the sincere one… Only Peter could differentiate it. Who else could do that for her? She needed him. She needed him, and he…

A groan sprang from Peter’s lips. Geez Louise, this stuff really was heavy. But that didn’t matter. It couldn’t matter. Only one thing mattered, and that thing… she was in danger right now. But not for too much longer… just so long as he kept on pushing… kept on…

Light was seeping through the dirt overhead. And right as it was getting to be too much, right when Peter was reaching his breaking point, when he was sure his bones were going to snap and he’d collapse right back to where he started… a hand burst through the soil. It wrapped itself around his own, clamping down tight, and then yanked.
Dirt exploded around him, and Peter was left panting and shivering in the open air. It was dreary here. Between the pitch black sky, the sheet of rain coming down, and the rows upon rows of headstones lining the grass, this place could only be a cemetery.

And Peter couldn’t be happier to be here. After all, there was a cute blonde kneeling over him. And this time, there was no doubt in Peter’s mind who she was. She was panting, her face covered in sweat, her hair smeared with brown, her glasses smudged with grime and fingerprints. She gripped a thin, salmon-colored jacket to herself in her fight to keep warm under her coating of mud.

She couldn’t look more perfect. With an energy that hadn’t existed a second ago, Peter held her tight. Held her until he was sure he’d crushed her to death in his arms, and all the while, she held him back with equal intensity.

It took some struggling, but Peter eventually managed to wrench his eyes away from her. Behind him in the plot of earth he’d just burst out of, a gravestone read, HERE LIES SPIDER-MAN, SLAIN BY THE JACKAL.

And before him, there stood a whole group of people. Peter’s parents – pulled straight from memories he’d forgotten he’d had. Gwen’s mother – looking exactly like all the pictures Peter had seen. Gwen’s father – dressed in his police uniform, holding his wife tight and giving Peter a content, forgiving smile. And at the head of them all…

“Uncle Ben.” The hug between Peter and Gwen transitioned into more of a group hug.

Ben held the kids tight, a big old grin on his face. “Hey, I told you I’m always here, didn’t I?”

“Y-You don’t know how great it is to see you all.” With a great deal of reluctance, Peter released a hand from Gwen so he could rub his eyes. “I just wish we had more time.”

They weren’t in a cemetery anymore – They were all standing in a dimly-lit hallway, and the Jackal was sprinting down it.


Jackal was getting nearer to the elevator. Nearer… Nearer…

On sheer impulse, Peter started towards it, but he was stopped by a vice grip on his arm. He turned to find a blushing Gwen. She failed to meet his eyes.

Peter gave a patient smile, then brought his hand to her own, squeezing. She was wearing her ring. One of those subtle details to help you know she was the real deal, Peter guessed. “I will always love you, Gwen. But I can’t be with you. Not right now.”

She nodded, then sniffled. “Peter.” Her palm touched his chest, pressing right against the spider-logo. Peter’s heart beat against it. “Go. I’ll be here.”

For the briefest of moments, they kissed. Her lips were clammy, and they tasted like mud and sweat, and Peter would’ve kissed them forever if he could.

But he couldn’t – He had an elevator to dash towards. Peter managed to shove it back open right before the doors closed, but when he stepped inside, Jackal was gone.

Somehow, though, Peter knew exactly what to do. He simply turned for the row of buttons on the wall and pushed the one for the top floor. And just like that, he was going…
Peter was on his feet, and he felt light. Not light like he was actually strong enough to lift himself, mind you, but light the way Swiss cheese is light.

“Ugh…?” Had something just happened? Hadn’t he been somewhere else a second ago? Peter wracked his memories, but the dream was already fading like water down a drain. The only thing he could really remember was that he’d felt clammy and muddy and sweaty, but… still good, somehow.

Peter blinked, briefly shielding his eyes from the almost-set sun. He was still on the bridge – That much was obvious from the concrete around his feet. So had he lifted the pillar, then? Without a single drop of spider-strength?

Right as Peter was starting to wonder about that, a fresh wave of pain rocked his muscles and he nearly toppled over… but a wave of hands readily caught him. Oh. He hadn’t lifted the rubble – It’d been a team of firefighters… random passerby… Dozens of them had pitched in to help. Some were men, some were women, some were old, some were young, some looked relieved, some looked terrified… but no matter who they were, every last one of them had planted their eyes firmly on Peter.

He looked to his chest. On it was a tattered, bloodied spider-logo.

Whispers passed through the crowd:

“Is it really him?”

“Didn’t see him use any powers…”

“It’s him.”

“Is he alive?”

“He’s… just a kid. No older than my son.”

Wait! Peter felt his face. His gloved hand touched skin. At this, he jolted forward, almost face-planting on the concrete. The, err, ground was a bit unstable here, seeing as the entire middle portion of the Brooklyn Bridge had collapsed into the river a couple feet away.

“It’s alright…” One of the firefighters helped him regain his balance.

Peter stared at the crowd. The crowd stared back. At first, Peter thought they were gawking at him like he was an animal at the zoo or the freak show the circus, but the longer he looked… the more he realized how wrong he was. These people looked more like, well, the way they might have looked if Santa Clause had crashed his sleigh in the middle of Times Square. Despite the unending burn of his every muscle, Peter’s lips curled.

Then, from the center of the crowd, a pair of timid, scruffy boys emerged. Couldn’t be more than ten.

“We found something.” One of them held that something out – a Spider-Man mask.

“We won’t tell nobody,” said the other.

Peter hesitated, but soon enough, he gave an appreciative nod, then slipped the spandex back over
his forehead. To be honest, it just about took up the last reserves of his strength. Luckily, though, he had a group of firefighters here to keep him from face-planting.

Or at least, he did until something swooped down from overhead, shaking the ground as it sent the crowd shrieking and fleeing.

“You’re still **going**?” The Jackal hunched over, walking on all fours in a true dog-like posture, drool oozing down his jaws. “You’re the Energizer Bunny – Has anyone ever told you that?”

The Jackal’s little stroll down the bridge had sent plenty of New Yorkers fleeing, but a surprising number stayed in place, blocking his path.

“You wanna get to him?” said a portly, deep-voiced man near the front. “You gotta go through me.”

“And me,” said another man behind him.

“Me, too.”

Waves of voices trickled through the crowd.

Jackal cocked his head at them. His fang-filled grin hadn’t gotten any smaller. “If you insist.”

Peter screamed – a quick, frantic noise of genuine horror. A second ago, a whole crowd of civilians had been standing there, but then Jackal’s claws had swooped through, and now the path to Peter was cleared. Moses had just parted the Red Sea… emphasis on the red. Some of the civilians had managed to dive out of harm’s way in time, but there were plenty of others now lying on the pavement, wailing and nursing themselves.

But even after all that, a handful of firefighters continued to grip Peter tight. He gestured for them to back off, and, with a not insignificant amount of reluctance, they complied.

Shaking feet stepped nearer to the Jackal.

**Thwak.** The instant he got into range, Peter was hoisted into the air by a paw. Beneath his mask, Peter’s eyes shut.

But right as Jackal was raising his claws for the finishing blow, there came a little beeping noise from his hidden belt. “The motion detector.” Whatever that was, it made him drop everything in favor of retrieving a miniature metal device out from a pouch hidden beneath the fur. “She’s awake.”

In an instant, Jackal turned for the city, and Peter was brought along for the ride. He barely had time to think, *She?* before he was hurtling through the air.

Chapter End Notes

Next Ish: THE FINAL SHOWDOWN! If you only read one issue in your life, true believers, make sure it’s this one!
Locus of Control

Mary Jane had screwed up. On every conceivable level of her life, she had screwed up. She’d almost certainly been fired from her dream job, Peter almost certainly hated her guts now, and, oh yeah, he’d just been dragged off by a giant monster who was almost certainly gonna chop him into little bits, and for some reason, Peter almost certainly lacked the power to fight back.

And to top it all off, Mary Jane’s lungs were almost certainly fixing to collapse if she couldn’t slow her breathing.

“Goddamn it!” Her designer boot, fueled by sheer frustration, sailed into one of the apartment’s heavier boxes. But whatever was in there was heavy enough to keep the contents from spilling. Mary Jane rubbed her foot, then knelt to scowl at the cardboard.

GWEN’S STUFF, read the box.

Mary Jane’s knees hit hardwood. Her lungs were at it again. High, frenzied gasps escaped her lips as she fought to wrestle them back down. “I can’t do this.” She wiped her eyes on the back of her hand, hiding her face. As if there was anyone here to see it. “You had to know that. Why couldn’t you have just let me-?” Her nails dug into her forehead. The fight with her lungs wasn’t going in Mary Jane’s favor. “It should’ve been me. It should’ve been…” The words were overtaken by sobs. And the sobs, in turn, became tinged with bitter, bitter laughter. “I want to be you.”

GWEN’S STUFF, the box still read.

Mary Jane shoved the words out of sight. Thwack. The next instant, the cardboard was on its side, and its contents were spilling out onto the ground. Great. What’d she done that for-? Wait.

Her eyes went to the freshly-spilled pile of junk on the floor. What was this?

As far as he could tell, the Jackal had forgot he existed, so Peter was really just along for the ride at this point. He was even smashing into walls every couple seconds, which wasn’t doing his popped ribs any fav- Ow.

Eventually, Jackal made his final leap and touched down in front of what appeared to be an abandoned, dilapidated Christian bookstore. He prowled inside, dragging Peter along on the carpet. Judging from the sheer amount of dust coating the walls, this place must’ve been another front for a secret Oscorp lab.

And sure enough, as soon as Jackal pressed a panel in the wall, a bookshelf slid aside to reveal a hidden elevator. Can’t beat the classics. Jackie didn’t seem to have the patience for the elevator, though, and so he merely leaped down the shaft (The doors had already been ripped open. Peter could only imagine how that had happened). Naturally, Peter’s head hit the shaft a couple dozen times as they fell. By the time Jackal landed, he was seeing stars. In fact, at first, Peter thought the sight at the front of the lab was one of them.

This place was even worse than all the other secret labs. Not only were wires and grime strewn about beneath the dim overhead lights, but so were a good half dozen S.H.I.E.L.D. agents – though they would’ve been totally unrecognizable beneath the dim overhead lights if not for the scraps of uniform bearing fractions of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s iconic eagle logo on them.

It was a wonder that microwave lasagna had stayed in Peter’s stomach this long.
But he could barely make himself look at the poor bastards. No, the brunt of his attention was being commanded by a big, round, metallic pod resting against the back wall. He couldn’t tear his eyes away from its contents. It was the silhouette of a girl painted pitch black against the pod’s murky green liquid. She floated in place, arms sprawled out, hair creeping off her head like snakes.

Before Peter could even cry out, he found himself tossed aside. Wait, seriously? Jackal was gonna let Peter go free without even bothering to finish him off? Ha, there Jackal went being an idiot again. Obviously, Peter’s spider-powers would return any second now, and then he’d fight his way out of… out of…

“Agh.” Peter had tried to pull himself to his feet, but soon enough, he’d returned to the lab’s cold, slick floor. His left leg was killing him, and his right leg was in even worse shape – It’d gone totally numb. He clutched his thigh, teeth gritted. At this point, Peter was starting to wonder if the girl in the pod was a mere hallucination from the pain. No matter how hard Peter squinted, he couldn’t get her to look any less blurry.

But right now, the only thing keeping Peter going was a mixture of insatiable curiosity and the creeping feeling that he already knew exactly who that was: “You’re the one who dug up her grave. You took her.”

“All I took,” said Jackal, his voice growing even more gravelly, “was a cluster of dead, rotting cells, which I happily returned to their resting place as soon as I was done with them.” He chuckled to himself. “No, Peter, Gwen is right here—” A pointer finger tapped the pod’s glass. “—and here.” Then it tapped the glass of the massive monitor looming over them. Onscreen was a photorealistic, three-dimensional model of a human brain revolving on its axis. “Formaldehyde and an airtight coffin aren’t the best means of preservation, but that fancy algorithm of mine did wonders at reconstructing the decayed parts.” Jackal shrugged. “Sure, her memories might turn out a bit fuzzy, but her sense of humor, her first kiss, even her saxophone skills… everything that made Gwen Gwen… It’s all in there.”

With his computer inputs apparently done, Jackal strolled towards the pod, grinning that fang-filled grin of his. “Like she never left.”

Mary Jane sprinted down the apartment complex’s stairwell. She couldn’t believe her luck. Who’d have thought Gwen had something so sweet tucked away? Mary Jane had to get this to Peter. There was time. She could save him.

As she ran, Mary Jane powered on the little device in her hands. This was a different, equally sweet doohickey she’d found in another box – the trusty spider-compass! Well, okay, it was basically just a modified GPS painted red and blue, but the important thing was that it could show her where Peter was. MJ could swear she’d caught a glimpse of spandex beneath his clothes when Jackal had hoisted them into the air, and if Peter had on a spare costume, that meant there was a special blue spider-tracer in the belt. Gwen had made sure to always include one after it’d saved Peter’s skin during the Kraven ordeal.

Once the spider-compass finally powered on, Mary Jane did indeed spot a little, circular icon of Spider-Man’s mask design. It seemed to be on the move from the Brooklyn Bridge to the heart of the city. Good, good, that meant Peter was still alive. Well, that or Jackal was dragging his corpse around, but Mary Jane was operating under the assumption that if she willed it hard enough, that option would remove itself from reality.

So all Mary Jane had to do was sprint for the parking lot, hop in her car, and hit the gas. And while one hand was on the wheel, the other would be on her phone. She’d call the cops, the Fantastic
Four, S.H.I.E.L.D.… anyone and everyone who could help. Just as soon as Mary Jane got in her-MJ froze halfway through the parking lot. Dang it, that was right, her blue Mercedes-Benz was in the shop now.

…She’d have to take the red one.

Fine, so maybe Peter’s legs weren’t legging so good right now. So what? He could still take Jackal. He’d just, uh, drag himself over there with his arms and then… Oh god, Peter was turning into a Monty Python sketch.

“Now I know what you’re thinking.” Jackal kept his back to Peter as he monologued. He seemed to be examining the glass, and whatever he was seeing in there left a note of content in his voice. Peter could guess why – Even without his glasses, he could tell the girl in the pod was starting to twitch. “She won’t be the real Gwen, will she? The real Gwen will still be buried on Long Island.” As he spoke, his hairy green arms folded behind his even hairier green back. “But then, when you think about it, isn’t everyone in the world always dying and getting replaced by a clone? When someone wakes up after a long night of dreamless sleep, couldn’t they be said to be a clone of the person from the previous day? Will this really be any different?”

“I don’t know.” A growl was building in Peter’s throat. “Maybe you are bringing her back, maybe you’re not. But what I do know is that Gwen wouldn’t have wanted it. Not like this.” His eyes went to the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents smeared across the walls.

At this, Jackal was quiet a moment. “Well, then,” he said softly, “it’s a good thing I’ve already made the choice for her.”

His body might not have been moving at its fastest right now, but Peter’s brain was going at breakneck speed. Even if Jackal had gone to horrible lengths to make it happen, he was bringing Gwen back. And no matter how horrified Gwen would be at that, it wasn’t Peter’s fault. So if he could just stop Jackal somehow, then… then…

Peter could feel himself drifting off. Not yet. He forced his eyes open, sitting up. Though by “sitting up,” he mostly meant “raising his head off the floor while he rested on his belly.”

Alright, so at this point, it was pretty clear Peter wasn’t about to get a second wind and mop the floor with Jackal. But if he couldn’t solve this problem with his fists, maybe his words would do the trick? “Miles-”

“That’s not my name anymore.” For the first time, Jackal spun to face him. “Miles Warren was a wretched little nobody, but I’m free of him now.” High, shaky laughter echoed off the walls.

“O-Okay,” Peter said in the gentlest tone he could manage. “What’d you rather be called?”

“I was thinking…” Jackal gave yet another toothy smile. “…Peter Parker.”

Peter blinked. “Uh, that’s kinda taken.”

That only made Jackal’s smirk wider. “Not for too much longer.”

“What?”

“Oh, that’s right, I haven’t even told you the sweetest part!” From off a nearby table, Jackal suddenly retrieved what appeared to be a syringe big enough to pass as a really skinny knife. It was
filled with an amber-colored liquid that made Peter’s stomach churn – He was getting flashbacks to his time as Man-Spider. “This here?” Jackal held the syringe high. “It’s another one of your friend Dr. Connors’s little serums, only – thanks in large part to that Skrull biology research Chameleon so generously sold to Oscorp – I’ve been able to modify it. Now, instead of a giant lizard, it turns people into… you.”

“Me?” A scowl broke out over Peter’s face.

“You’re right, Peter, Gwen probably won’t be happy with everything I’ve done here.” Jackal tossed the serum back onto the table. “But if there’s one thing we know about Gwen Stacy, it’s that she loves Peter Parker. After all–” More laughs echoed off the walls. “–she was willing to die before her twenties just for a taste of her dream beau.”

A second ago, Peter had been fighting to keep his head off the ground. Now… he didn’t bother.

“I already scanned your head before taking you to the bridge.” Jackal took a lumbering step forward. “Just as dear Debra here is receiving a perfect, cell-for-cell copy of Gwen’s brain, so too will I give myself a perfect copy of yours. By the time I awaken from my own gestation pod, you’ll be dead and buried, and naturally, I’ll assume I’m the one and only Peter Parker. I’ll even have your cute little spider powers.”

Jackal’s words were gaining speed. “I, now believing myself to be Peter Parker, will naturally be concerned for my girlfriend and will free her from her own pod, and since all evidence of this little cloning scheme here will be erased, Gwen and I will return to our normal lives none the wiser. And then, Peter, well… Gwen will be mine.” Jackal’s voice had grown downright frantic. It was almost enough to make Peter pity him. “I will be you.”

“You really think this is gonna work, don’t you?” Peter cocked an eyebrow. “Buddy, you murdered S.H.I.E.L.D. agents. How much longer before that catches up to you? I hate to tell you this, but you’ve lost it.”

“Ah, I knew we’d get to the ‘you’re insane’ part eventually.” Jackal merely laughed again. “Alright, we’re done here. I’d have killed you already, but I had to drop everything to make sure Gwen was healthy. And, well…” He pulled himself to his full stature, front paws held high. “…I guess I just wanted you to understand. That’s the icing on the cake, y’know.” His claws raised towards the ceiling. “After all this… you won’t even get to see her one last time.”

Peter made a last-ditch attempt to rise to his feet, but his legs didn’t even come close to supporting his weight. His eyes shut. The world went dark.

“Hey, asshole!” But the darkness only lasted a moment before a voice broke through it. A high, soft, somewhat raspy one.

“Whuh-?” Jackal spun towards the voice’s owner right as Peter’s eyes reopened.

Standing in the entryway to the elevator shaft, her chest heaving, her jacket and t-shirt drenched with sweat, was Mary Jane Watson.

“How did you-? No, wait, just realized I don’t care.” A set of claws sprang for her torso.

But before it could get near, Mary Jane jabbed out her wrists… and slammed her ring and middle fingers into them. Th-Thwip.

Webs shot forth. But they weren’t like normal ones – Instead of gray, they were bright orange. And, uh, bigger difference, the moment they came into contact with the green fur, there was a
crackle, and then everything spontaneously combusted.

A piercing shriek reverberated through the lab as Jackal stumbled backwards, flailing blindly. The webbing, as webbing was ought to do, had stuck tight to him, meaning there was no escape from the flames eating up Jackal’s shaggy green body. In his blind panic, Jackie Boy even smashed into the computer terminal, causing the model of Gwen’s brain to flicker out. Peter couldn’t help but wince at that.

“MJ…?” With help from a pair of well-toned arms, Peter’s torso was lifted off the ground. “Z’at really you?”

“Yeah, and I got the cable burns to prove it.” Mary Jane held out her palms a moment, letting him glimpse the nasty red marks covering them. “Least now I can check ‘sliding down an elevator shaft’ off my bucket list.” She gave half a smile. “Sorry I didn’t spring into action sooner – I was waiting for the bad guy’s monologue to fini- Hey, hey!” Peter’s head had started to return to the tile floor, but MJ quickly righted it. “It’s okay, Tiger. Everything’s gonna be okay. I got you.”

Peter grunted as her hand dug into his armpit. “Cool web-shooters.” He simpered. “You gotta tell me where you do your shopping.”

“Did you know about these?” As she spoke, Mary Jane hurriedly unfastened her left wrist’s shooter (which she’d been wearing outside her jacket sleeve, presumably to be hip and edgy). “They were with Gwen’s stuff. She said she was gonna make something to help you fight Carnage back during the thing with Shriek, but I totally forgot about it… Gwen must’ve been saving ’em for your birthday. She added, like, a chemical to your webs. It’s fire-webbing.” This time, MJ managed a full smile. “Even came with a note in perfect handwriting saying how to mix the fluid without burning the apartment down.” With a click, the shooter snapped onto Peter’s own wrist. “Here, I don’t need both. Now let’s ditch this dump. Maybe spray that dog-guy one more time for the road.”

“MJ…” The words came out a bit more ragged and pitiful-sounding than Peter would’ve liked. “I can’t feel my toes.”

For the briefest of seconds, horror crossed her face, but even faster, Mary Jane’s swagger returned. “No prob, I’ll carry you. I got you into this mess, I can get you… out of… nngh.” Her attempt at lifting ended with her joining him on the nice, hard ground. “Okay, no big deal, I can do this. Just gotta let the adrenaline rush kick in.”

Peter couldn’t help but notice her eyes kept flitting back to his right leg. Peter wasn’t brave enough to look for himself.

But what he did look at was the Jackal, who was still flailing around in a vain attempt to extinguish himself. Guess Oscorp hadn’t bothered equipping their secret evil labs with sprinkler systems.

And during that flailing, one of Jackal’s forearms just so happened to smash into a capsule. The pod holding the- the woman was almost as tall as the Jackal himself, but this other capsule barely reached three feet in height. Before Peter had time to wonder what the capsule was doing shoved into the corner of the lab like that, something crawled out of the newly-made cracks in it. Something slimy and crimson.

“You’re kidding me.” Peter made a noise between a scream and a groan as MJ hoisted him upright. “What’s *that* thing doing here?”

The Jackal was, unfortunately, too busy burning to death to provide any explanations. The only thing he *was* able to give Peter was the smell of burnt hair and flesh in his nostrils.
“What thing? What thing?” Mary Jane’s eyes searched the lab.

Midway through their search, though, they eyes froze, and Peter couldn’t help but follow them. The path of the pupils led him all the way back to... the gestation pod. The glass had been splattered with red. Red that was currently seeping its way through the pod’s airtight seal and into the amniotic fluid within.

“No.” Peter fired his web-shooter, and MJ followed suit, but they were too late. The symbiote was already inside.

Mary Jane’s eyes were bulging almost as much as Jackal’s always did. “What do w-?”

She was drowned out by a boom. And then another. And another. Boom, boom, boom.

Peter wet his throat. On sheer impulse, his mind raced for a quip. None came to mind. This situation wasn’t particularly funny. Except in a cosmic sort of way.

With one last boom, the pod exploded, sending out a wave of shrapnel and amber liquid. A scream echoed through the laboratory, long and deafening. It was not unlike the roars Jackal had been making a minute ago, only even higher.

A lumbering form stepped beneath the overhead light, banishing the shadows. The creature looked almost identical to when Cletus Kasady had been its host, right down to the gooey white eyes and rows upon rows of fangs. Only now, Carnage was less “lanky” and more “lithe.” Where a thin, bony body had once been, the creature now had almost an hourglass figure.

Carnage’s fang-filled maw unhinged. She roared.

It was a sound that shook the whole chamber, and it left Mary Jane white as a sheet. Peter could only imagine how his own face looked. That sound. Like nothing any creature from this earth could make. Something high and painful that passed clean through his flesh and bone, straight into the marrow.

“S-S-Stay calm.” Mary Jane aimed a trembling web-shooter at the thing’s face. “I got this-”

“Wait, no.” Peter grabbed her wrist. “We could hurt... the person inside.”

“But- But then what do we do?” MJ stammered. “Try and reason with her?”

Carnage lurched forward, prowling on all fours. She stared at the two for a minute, as if she was curious. A low hiss built in her throat.

“Be my guest,” said Peter.

Mary Jane didn’t give them much time to chat, though – The next second, that adrenaline spike finally kicked in, and she managed to haul Peter over her shoulder and run for it. The sudden movement caused Carnage to roar one last time, then give chase. And since Mary Jane was holding him butt-first, Peter was treated to a lovely view of the monster sprinting after them on all fours.

“Get back!” The creature moved so fast, Mary Jane barely had time to spray a protective wall of fire-webbing across the floor. It was enough to make Carnage hesitate even before the stuff combusted.

But right as MJ reached the elevator shaft, Carnage seemed to gather herself, then leaped right
through the flames. She was left with fire tickling her shoulders, but that didn’t stop her from resuming her chase, shrieking in pain all the while.

Peter’s jaw dropped. *What?* But Carnage *hated* fire! How desperate to kill them must that thing have been?

His eyes turned to the shaft above, Jackal’s inhuman screams still echoing down the hall.

“How do we get back up?” Mary Jane asked, frantic.

“Well-” Peter aimed his web-shooter straight up. “-I was thinking it’d be a gentlemen about it and let *my* hands catch fire.”

“What-?” Before MJ had time to question the effectualness of this plan, an orange web-line had already shot up from Peter’s wrist, and the next thing either of them knew, they were sailing skyward. Thankfully, the orange webbing, while covered in chemical fire, was no less elastic than the usual stuff.

Within seconds, they were almost at the top of the elevator shaft. It was pitch black in here, save for the white rectangle up top where the doors had been torn off. The light at the end of the tunnel – or top of the chasm, in this case. But reassuring as that light was, Peter’s head couldn’t help but drift downwards. Carnage was sprinting after them on the opposite wall, still on all fours. By now, she was a mere meter beneath them. Close enough to smell the copper in her breath. Heaven above, hell below.

Peter and MJ landed through the elevator’s entrance right before a red tendril could snag them. Peter’s shoulder hit carpet, and then he rolled until he hit a bookshelf, the contents of which happily spilled themselves onto his head. Good, good, he was back in the Christian bookstore.

Bad, bad, there was blood everywhere. Oh, perfect, the thin coat of webbing on Peter’s leg had burst from the impact. Also his hands were on fire.

As soon as he’d finished shrieking and stamping out his burning palms on a patch of tile floor, Peter spun back around. He had to check on Mary J- Oh, turned out Mary Jane had thought the same thing about him. She’d barely touched the carpet before she was on her feet and at his side, once again heaving him over her shoulder.

*Shoom.* The ground shook as Carnage climbed her way out the shaft. The moment her gooey white eyes spotted the other two, she roared again, even louder this time.

“C-C-Can you understand me?” Mary Jane’s voice barely worked, it was shaking so bad. “It’s us.”

The creature paused, hunched over, blinking at the sunlight through the windows. She took a cautious step forward.

*Thwip.* Tendrils collided with Peter and MJ. But not red ones.

“What-?” Before they could give the slightest protest, they were yanked through a shattered window and sent zipping through the brisk Manhattan air above. Peter had enough time to hear Carnage roar in displeasure before his butt landed on something solid.

It was a helicopter, the kind that had a side hanging open so that any S.H.I.E.L.D. agents within could pose all dramatically in the winds.

“Oh thank god, you got my call,” said a dazed, breathless Mary Jane. “But- But you have to help
her!“ She nearly fell out the copter in her hurry to point out the howling red creature below.
“Carnage brain-jacked her, a-a-and-”

She couldn’t even finish before the helicopter gave a sudden, gut-churning lurch. A set of red tendrils had snagged the vehicle, dragging it towards the beast below.

The copter’s pilot shrieked for only a moment before barking into his radio: “All units converge fire on the Kylntarian.”

“Wait, stop, what are you doing?” Mary Jane’s screams grew even more frantic, and hers weren’t the only ones.

Down below, Carnage seemed to have spotted the half dozen S.H.I.E.L.D. copters hovering above the streets, and it also hadn’t escaped her notice that every last one had aimed its turrets square at her face.

But before a single one could fire…

Thwap.

…something snagged Peter’s foot.

“Pete!”

Peter had already been dragged halfway towards the creature before a cluster of S.H.I.E.L.D. managed to grab him. Now he had red tendrils dragging him downwards and human hands dragging him upwards. He’d become the center of a tug of war.

The big, white eyes of Peter’s mask snapped to the creature below. Carnage was staring right up at him, and her shrieks were only getting louder. Again and again, she made those sounds. Those… sounds…

Hold up. Usually, Carnage’s slime was sharp to the touch, right? But all these tendrils tugging on Peter’s right leg… They didn’t hurt at all. She wasn’t…

“Wait, wait!” Peter’s voice had never gone so loud in his life. He actually made himself heard over the roar of symbiotes and helicopters. “She’s not trying to hurt anyone!”

“What?” Mary Jane screamed back. The shape of her hair in the chopper’s winds was a good reflection of Peter’s mental state right now. “Peter, we can’t-” She fired her shooter at the red tendrils, but all it did was click. Empty.

Carnage made that bone-rattling sound again, but this time, now that Peter was paying more attention… it sounded less like a roar and more like a wail. And when she made that noise, Carnage’s mouth opened nice and wide, and, w-well, Peter knew he wasn’t wearing his glasses, so his vision wasn’t the best, especially when looking at something a couple feet below, but… there were tufts of blonde hair poking out from within Carnage’s maw. And a wide, trembling, sea green eye. Peter had never been so sure of anything in his life.

“It’s her.” This time, his words were drowned by noise. “It’s really her.”

Carnage was winning the tug of war.

“It’s too late, Peter!” Mary Jane cried out, even shriller this time. “Please… you have to let go.”
In midair, Peter twisted his shoulders until he was looking at the helicopter. Mary Jane was knelt over inside it, helping reel Peter in. Then, slowly, Peter’s attention moved from the girl in front of him to the one behind him.

By this point, Peter was mere feet away from the roaring, frantic Carnage. Now that he was close enough, the creature’s face wasn’t quite so blurry. There was indeed a human eye poking out of the slime where its throat ought to be. It wasn’t wide or trembling, though – It looked serene.

Next, Peter’s eyes went to the surrounding helicopters above. Already, missiles were flying in unison.

Peter’s own eyes took one last look over the sea green one before shutting. “I’m sorry.” Then he did something that, at this point, was second nature to him – He smashed his ring and middle fingers into his wrist. Instantly, there came the familiar sound of web-fluid squirting out. Followed by the sound of crackling and wailing.

Peter felt himself whoosh through the air, and when he finally reopened his eyes, an agent was setting him down back inside the copter. Almost the moment Peter’s sneaker touched the floor, the whole helicopter was rocked by a blast wave. Where the Christian bookstore had once stood in a sea of deserted shops and warehouses, there was now a fireball, a perfect mixture of smoke and heatwaves ballooning out like a kernel of molten popcorn. Peter’s ears were left ringing.

Soon enough, though, the fireball dissipated and the ringing of Peter’s eardrums was replaced by the scream of sirens. By then, everything in a ten-foot radius of the store was one big, black, lifeless crater. Peter hadn’t looked for very long, though. He’d nearly blinded and deafened himself, his face was so tight against Mary Jane’s shoulder.

Peter didn’t remember much after that. Well, S.H.I.E.L.D. interrogated them, and, boy, had this been a fun story to try and explain. And it turned out S.H.I.E.L.D. had already been well aware of Spider-Man’s secret identity for a while, which was… unspeakably creepy. Oh, and Mary Jane’s red Mercedez-Benz had been caught in the bookstore’s explosion, too, so she got treated to yet another sessions of screaming at insurance agents.

Whatever remained of Warren’s cloning research had been confiscated by S.H.I.E.L.D., meaning nothing like this would ever happen again. Jackal had actually still been alive and on fire by the time a team of S.H.I.E.L.D. agents burst into his lab, but he’d attacked them on sight and received a faceful of plasma-bullets for his trouble. So that death was on S.H.I.E.L.D.’s shoulders, Peter had patiently explained to Mary Jane, not on hers.

Mary Jane, for her part, hadn’t expressed an abundance of sympathy for Miles Warren either way. Thanks to him, Debra Whitman and- and even Miles’s own brother, the cool snarky teacher Peter had had a class with almost every year at Midtown Magnet… They were…

Peter tried to roll over on his Baxter Building infirmary mattress, but the strain proved too great. The sedatives were wearing off, but truth be told, Peter hadn’t been super lucid even before he’d been fed those.

Gradually, Peter came to realize that Dr. Richards was looming over him, flanked by Curt and Martha. Connors. The couple was in their usual lab coats while Richards wore his Mister Fantastic costume, which Peter could only describe as, uh, juxtaposing. Come to think of it, this was the first time he’d seen the country’s top biogeneticist in the same room together as the country’s top… everything else, so that was pretty cool. Peter could’ve done without the trio of scientists giving him such piteous looks, though.
“…did everything we could, Peter.” It took Peter a second to realize Dr. Richards was talking to him. “But the damage Warren inflicted on you is centered largely on your…” He glanced away. “…nervous system.”

“We believe, with physical therapy-” In spite of herself, Martha’s voice broke. “-you’ll walk again.”

Peter had no reaction to the news. But the girl at his bedside sure did.

“Oh, g-god…” Mary Jane’s arms threatened to suffocate him. “I did this.”

“Hey, shh, that’s not true.” Peter’s own hug wasn’t quite as strong, but not for lack of trying.

“But, err…” Curt cleared his throat. “…on the subject of walking, there is the matter of your right crus.” When Peter looked blank, he clarified, “Your lower leg.”

Peter’s lower leg? It did still feel numb, now that he thought about it, but he’d just figured that was from lying in bed so long. But naturally, the moment Doc Connors said that, Peter flung back his blanket to check on it.

But at that task, he failed – There wasn’t anything there to check on. Peter blinked, then looked again. Yep. Still gone. His left leg was perfectly fine, poking out his hospital gown like normal. He could still wiggle his left toes. But the right leg… That one ended at the knee with a patch of scar tissue.

Was Peter certain his sedatives had worn off? Because this sure didn’t feel like reality.

“We’re so sorry, Peter.” Martha brushed a hand through his bangs. “We tried to save it, but…”

“If there was any way to restore your limb, we would,” spoke up Curt, “but I can, err, tell you with authority that it simply isn’t… viable.” His eyes flitted to the sleek, plastic fingers of his right hand.

“But the good news is-” Dr. Richards’ neck stretched until his head was blocking Curt’s. “-I’ve made some calls, and Iron Man was kind enough to donate a StarkTech prosthesis. It’s the sophisticated one on the market, replicating the limb’s full articulation down to the toes.”

“And the imitation flesh is extremely convincing,” said Martha. “No one would even realize unless you chose to tell them.”

“And I can even mod the foot to adhere to walls,” Dr. Richards added enticingly.

Peter surprised himself with a full-on smile. “Is this the birth of Cyborg Spider-Man?” He laughed. That would be a good sign, except that usually, his laughs didn’t leave his throat so shaky. Or his eyes so damp.

At his words, Peter felt MJ’s arms shift over his torso.

“That brings us to our next point…” Curt swapped glances with his wife. “Spider-Man.” He took a breath. “Peter, the truth is, our gene cleanser is unable to destroy all non-human DNA.”

Martha gave a slow nod. “The way hand sanitizer only kills ninety-nine percent of germs.”

“Some of it will always remain dormant in you.” Wistfulness overtook Curt’s eyes. “A permanent scar. I believe this is how you survived on that bridge – Somehow, the extreme stress of the situation allowed you to will forth a hidden reserve of spider-strength.”
“Whoa.” Mary Jane whistled. “Metal.”

“And as you’ve… experienced, Morbius’s mutagenic venom had the ability to draw out this dormant DNA.” With his good hand, Curt reached into his coat. “I’ve created a serum that works on the same principal.” From within, he retrieved a familiar device – the injector he’d used to give himself the Lizard formula in the first place. A vial of bubbling blue liquid poked out of its holding slot. “Don’t worry, you wouldn’t become Man-Spider again. The dosage is much too small for that.”

Peter found himself sitting up on the mattress to stare at the device, though the layers of bandages around his torso left him a bit stiff. “And with my powers back… I’d heal way faster.”

“But there is a catch.” Curt held the injector away like Peter might try and snatch it. “If you continue your superhero career, there is a very real possibility that, over time, the strain on your body, your nervous system, will be too much to bear.” He faltered. “You might feel like your old self at first, but the more of these types of injuries you sustain, the more pain you’ll be facing down the road.”

Martha stepped forward. “This isn’t a healthy lifestyle, Peter, from a physical standpoint if nothing else. You could be crippled by your forties-” She caught herself, forcing a deep breath. “We’re only reminding you that having these powers doesn’t mean you have to use them or keep them. And to be perfectly honest, we’re really not supposed to be dishing out mutagens to random people in the first place.”

“Which means it’s a good thing S.H.I.E.L.D. isn’t actually aware you’ve lost your powers.” With the slightest of smirks, Curt set the injector down on Peter’s bedside stand. “We’re just going to leave this here, and whatever ends up happening with it is out of our hands. You didn’t get it from us.”

It wasn’t long afterwards that the trio of scientists excused themselves out the infirmary. Now it was just the teens, Peter sitting up in his bed, Mary Jane hunched over his side.

Slowly, she removed his arms from his neck. MJ needed them free so she could snatch up the injector from the bedside stand. For a wild second, Peter thought she was about to yank out the mutagen vial and go flush it down the washroom toilet – or even crazier, use it on herself.

But instead, Mary Jane set the device in Peter’s palm. One by one, his fingers closed around it.
Renaissance Man

A twenty-pound sack of liquid cement slammed onto the counter.

“I’d like to make a purchase,” said the boy, pulling his hoodie tighter over his face.

On the counter’s opposite side, Bruce smiled at him. “Good to have you back, kid.”

Once the money had traded hands, the boy took his shopping bags and his sack and hauled it all towards the emporium’s exit. Mysteriously, he didn’t seem to struggle even the slightest bit with the weight.

“Because, y’know,” Bruce called after him, “when you stopped showing up, I was really worried you’d overdosed-”

“I’m leaving now.”

Peter’s apartment here was smaller than the entirety of Aunt May’s old basement, but he’d have to make do. He set his newly-bought supplies down, then shook his head at the fine layer of green fur now coating his sneaker. Ugh. he’d vacuumed, like, five times already.

“Here’s a dish! Just for you! Try a bite of his web-fondue. To hiiiiiiiiiiim, life is a great big cuisine. Wherever there’s a crime scene, you’ll find the Spider-Chehhhhhhhhhh-f!”

Peter was almost done with the next batch when the sound of the Itsy-Bitsy Spider hit his ears. He nearly dropped his eggbeater into the mixing bowl in the scramble to retrieve the phone from his pocket. As it turned out, the call was from Aunt May. There weren’t many other people who’d call specifically to make sure Peter was wearing enough layers. It was getting colder out, she said, and she doubted that rickety old apartment of his was properly insulated.

“Yes, ma’am, I said sorry to Dr. Richards. He understood. I was just, y’know, upset at everything that’d- that’d happened, and I was acting like a little sh- err, ingrate.” Peter paced the maze of boxes on the floor as he continued to stir his bowl. He’d actually gotten himself an apron to keep from getting web-fluid on his only good pants.

“Peter?” May’s voice yanked him back to reality. “Listen, dear, Mary Jane told me everything that happened w-when you losing your powers.”

“Oh.” Peter couldn’t help but flinch. Even after the long, heartfelt talk they’d had about it, he didn’t think he’d ever get used to her knowing the truth.

“I never meant to prey on your guilt, to place all that burden on your shoulders. You’re not the only hero capable of inspiring people, Peter, and… you don’t have to do this forever.”

Without really thinking about it, Peter set the mixing bowl on his bed, then touched his hand to his right calf. The imitation flesh really was convincing. Peter wouldn’t have been able to tell the difference if it hadn’t felt so numb. “I know, Aunt May.”

“You’re a good man with or without the costume.”

Eventually, the two said their goodbyes, and Peter hung up. With a sigh, he plopped down on the mattress, then forced himself to resume mixing.
Spidey perched himself on the side of a building, where, on the street below, he caught a glimpse of Mary Jane walking to work.

...NO, he was NOT creeping on her. Spidey was simply on the lookout for that stray Velociraptor (whose existence had already become deeply ingrained in New Yorker folklore). He was only watching MJ’s back.

She’d managed to beg her way out of being fired and blacklisted, but Mary Jane had at least been demoted back to the part of a Shiz student... meaning she was currently wearing a schoolgirl uniform. A schoolgirl uniform that happened to be a couple sizes too sm-

Nope, no dinosaurs in that alleyway. Spider-Man had better check another one now.

Spider-Man sprang off the wall with a disarming amount of force. The robo-leg beneath his spandex would take some getting used to. The weight was all different, and when your whole gimmick was about acrobatics, that could really throw you off. Spidey was still breaking it in.

“I need something to kick,” he said aloud.

“MWA HA HA HA HA! FLEE! FLEE, EARTHLINGS, FROM THE COSMIC CHAOS OF THE GREAT MYSTERIO!”

“That’ll do.”

One second, it’d been business as usual on the street below. The next, a cloud of pea green smoke had burst out of nowhere right in the middle of the sidewalk, and poking out of it was a shiny round fish bowl that was just begging a cyborg-foot to smash into it.

“Gah!” Before the crowd even had time to look mildly disoriented at his presence, Mysterio was sent hurtling into a street lamp. It left a nasty crack in his dome as he collapsed to the pavement.

“Ooh, that was a nice one.” Spider-Man did a backflip as he landed before the gathering civilians. “So on a scale of one to ten, how much did that hurt next to all the other times I’ve smacked your fat head around? It’s for science.”

“Fool!” But Mysterio was back on his feet with surprising speed, his cape swishing in the fog. The new cracks on his dome actually made him a tad scarier. “No mere human can prevent Mysterio’s spores from infesting every last Earthling in the vicinity!” He held out his palms with a swoosh of his arms. “But these spores won’t merely sent you to your knees. Oh, no, these will send every last one of you spiraling for the rest of eternity into a world of nightmares. Horrible, maddening nightmares that your primitive Earthling brains can scarcely even begin to comprehend.”

Bang. A sudden, ear-cracking noise left the crowd jolting and screaming – Spider-Man included. In fact, that sound got them screaming far louder than Mysterio ever had.

Speaking of old Bubblehead, he was now keeled over on the cement, clutching his kneecap as he shrieked and sobbed: “AAAAAAGH! SHE SHOT ME! THAT CRAZY BITCH SHOT ME!”

Spider-Man’s head snapped to the front of the crowd. Standing there, a smoking Glock in her hand, was Mary Jane.

“What?” She failed to meet his eyes. “He said he was gonna cast us into a nightmare world for eternity. It was self-defense.” With a click, she turned the safety back on and returned the weapon
to its holster – which, as it turned out, was strapped to a legging beneath her short skirt. When Spidey continued to stare, she added, “I’ve got a concealed carry permit. There’s dinosaurs and junk running around here now. You think they’re not handing out concealed carry permits?”

Spider-Man sputtered for a while before finally getting out, “Jesus Christ, it was just Mysterio.”

“I resent that,” came a feeble voice from the pavement. “Ow, ow, ow…”

After that, of course, had come the flood of police officers to calm down the crowd, followed by the flood of news reporters to stir up the crowd. As it turned out, Mysterio’s fellow fugitive, Tinkerer, had already been rounded up, too. Apparently, he’d been orchestrating a robbery of some sort while Mysterio provided the distraction.

“I told you to wear the Kevlar suit,” Tinkerer growled as the gang was led to a police van.

“And restrict Mysterio’s full range of motion?” Beck waved his handcuffed arms around to demonstrate the necessity.

Tinkerer, meanwhile, showed off the full range of motion of his pupils.

“Keep doing this as many times as you want, Beck,” said the somewhat grouchy-looking cop leading them away. “You’re only helping improve our robot-detectors…”

On the wall of the shop across from the scene, Spider-Man’s big, white eyes went wide. “Wait, but last time, didn’t you guys say you’d probe his-? Ohhhhh, you’re sick, Beck.”

And on that lovely note, Spidey’s attention returned to the redhead camped out directly beneath him.

From the sidewalk, her head cocked upwards. “You okay, Tiger? You’re not jelly I stole your glory, are you?”

“No, I just…” Beneath the mask, Peter let out a private sigh. “…hadn’t pegged you for the gunslinging type.”

Mary Jane folded her arms. “Yeah, well, this city does things to you.”

“That won’t always be enough to save you, you know. What if it’d been Rhino or Scorpion?”

“I could try aiming for their faces…”

“That’s not the point,” said Peter, his voice tightening. “What I’m saying is, if having a gun was all it took to handle things in this city, I wouldn’t be needed in the first place.”

“So what?” MJ shot back. “I’ll take every advantage I can get. Heck, why don’t you use guns?”

“You serious?” Peter scoffed. “With how much I jump around in my fights? Might as well wear a black t-shirt with a skull, I’d be killing so many goons by accident.”

“Fine, whatever, you do you.” With that, Mary Jane seemed to give up slinked off towards the police cars. “I gotta go call my attorney. Pretty sure they passed a law saying it’s okay to shoot supervillains…”

Peter watched her go until she’d vanished into the crowd. And for a good few minutes after that.
The raptor hunt was never-ending! The thing could be around literally any corner. Or even up here on this rooftop. Underneath this gargoyle. Where Spider-Man’s favorite sulking spot happened to be.

Well, he’d crept on Mary Jane on her way to work, so the Web-Head guessed it was only fitting he crepted on her on her way back home. Look at her down there. With his newly-restored twenty-twenty vision, Peter could see her face crystal clear. There was a big smile on it as she carried on chatting and laughing with one of her theater buddies.

She was miserable. And the saddest part was, Peter was the only one who knew how to tell. How to spot the ever-so-slight twitch of her eyes, how to listen for the far-too-perfect streams of giggles that spilled from her mouth. Her real laughter was more of a snort.

What if Peter came up with a new alter ego specifically for hanging out with MJ? That way, even if Kingpin found out Peter was Spider-Man, he wouldn’t know about Peter’s other secret identity? No, no, that was dumb. Clinging onto her last flimsy tie with Peter wouldn’t do Mary Jane any good. Really, she’d put up with more than enough costumed weirdos for one lifet-

“Spider.”

“Gah!” Spider-Man would’ve slipped right off his sulking spot if his hands, foot, and robot foot hadn’t all been so sticky. “Felicia?”

Perched beneath the gargoyle parallel to his on this building’s ledge was, indeed, the Black Cat. “Good to see you out and about again.”

“Yeah? Wish I could say the same for you-” Spidey readied his web-shooters, but Cat hurriedly held something out for him.

“Don’t get your tights in a twist, boyscout.” In her claws was what appeared to be some sort of ID card sporting an eagle logo. “I’m only doing community service for S.H.I.E.L.D. They’ve got body cams all over me. I can’t steal a thing. It’s horrible.”

“Hmm…” Spider-Man gave the card a skeptical scowl. “Could be faked.”

“Would I lie to you?” Cat fluttered her eyelashes at him. “Don’t answer that.”

“What are you doing here, Felicia?”

At this, Black Cat took a breath. “I’ve been following the news. I know everything that happened on that… that bridge.”

Peter couldn’t help but flinch. He wished she’d given him a warning before dropping the b-word like that.

“All those people saw you unmasked, and not a single one ratted you out.” Black Cat shook her head. “Wish I had such a loyal fanbase.”

Peter didn’t particularly feel like voicing this detail, but not all those people had exactly been left in a position to rat him out. Sure, the other superheroes had arrived to help shortly after Jackal had hauled Peter off, but even superheroes can’t save everyone. Actually, that reminded Peter, he had another session with Leo in a couple hours.

“Point is, I know you’ve been through a lot, and I thought you could use a present. As a peace offering.” Without warning, Black Cat dug into the satchel on her hip, retrieved something, and
tossed it at the Web-Head’s webbed head.

He caught it with one hand, then gave the thing an inspection. It was a box covered in gaudy wrapping paper, complete with a bow on top. His spider-sense failed to tingle, and so the Wall-Crawler set to work unwrapping his gift, even being careful not to lose the paper. He was no litterer.

Within the box was something that made him jolt. At first, he’d thought it was the symbiote, but upon closer inspection it turned out Spidey was just an idiot. This was merely a plain cloth recreation of the black Spider-Man suit – the version with the big, white spider-logo and no web-pattern.

“Haven’t seen you wear it in a while,” said Cat. “Figured you might need it replaced. Don’t worry, it’s one-size-fits-all.”

“Wow,” said Spider-Man. “Thanks.” He’d, um, have to explain the whole “alien symbiote” thing to her someday.

“It’s nice to have black as an option, isn’t it?” Black Cat’s eyes went to the street below. The one Spider-Man had been watching so intently right before she’d announced her presence. “In case you ever get tired of red.”

“In case you ever get tired of Red?” Mary Jane repeated.

Peter glanced away, scratching his scalp. “I’m, uh, pretty sure she said ‘red’ with a lowercase R.”

“So did I.”

“Right, right.” Somehow, Peter and MJ had ended up together on her couch, staring at her TV. As always, they made sure to keep the customary two cushions of space between each other at all times. “Anyways, I was thinking I could wear the red and blue during the day and the black at night. Or just whenever I’m trying to be stealthy-”

A scoff escaped MJ’s mouth. “You’re not actually gonna trust anything that hussy gives you, are you?”

“W-Well, Johnny had Dr. Richards check the suit for me, and he says it’s bug-free.” Peter shrugged. “And it’s not like I’m in a position to turn down free swag, financially speaking…”

“Can’t believe S.H.I.E.L.D.’s letting that klepto run loose.” Mary Jane didn’t seem to have heard him. “I’d better invest in a home security system.” After a second, though, her eyes went to Peter’s. “What? What’s with that look?”

“Nothing.” Peter glanced away. “I get it. You’re not a Black Cat fan.” God, his face could be so weird. Why was he having to fight down a smirk all of a sudden?

Anyways, with that particular topic expended, the two returned to staring at the TV a while.

“Sorry for missing your play tonight,” Peter finally said. “Punctuality, uh, hasn’t been my strong suit lately.” His college professors could attest to that.

“No big deal.” MJ slouched on the cushions, batting a hand at him. “You’re busy. The world doesn’t revolve around my head.”
Speaking of heads, a big fat one had just appeared onscreen. Apparently, even after he’d won the election, Fisk had continued to subject the poor, helpless populace to his ads about cleaning up the city or whatever.

Mary Jane’s eyes were glued to it. “I hear Spider-Man helped bust Kingpin’s drug ring the other day,” she said dully. “It was targeting little kids and everything, and the cops weren’t doing a damn thing about it, so… so that was pretty awesome.”

For just a second, Peter could swear he caught her eyes flitting to his right leg.

He forced himself to inhale. “Look.” Then he forced himself to his feet. “I honestly only swung by to say sorry for missing the play. I shouldn’t stay too long-”

Before either of them had even realized what was happening, nails dug into his arm. Peter found his gaze traveling to the redhead on the couch.

There she went looking like Gossamer again.

“MJ…” Peter wrenched his eyes away. “I don’t want to go, either. I don’t want to do any of this. It’d be so easy to just step aside and say, ‘Not my problem.’” Slowly, they shut. “But if even one kid was saved because of me… because of the things only I could do…”

Peter couldn’t vouch for the state of her face right now, but verbally, Mary Jane gave no response.

But the television did. “Gwen wouldn’t want this.”

Instantly, both heads snapped to it. At this point, the heartache surging through their chests was a Pavlovian response to that name.

Onscreen was a pretty-looking teenage girl Peter had never seen before in his life, least of all in Gwen’s vicinity. “Gwen-doo-leen was, like, the greatest friend I ever had.” The girl buried her eyes in her hand. “And she’s gone now because this city’s overrun with freaks.” Over the girl’s shoulder, the camera panned towards the Brooklyn Bridge in the distance. “And I know in my heart that what Gwen would want more than anything in the world is for all of us to give as much as we can to the Fisk Foundation so it can fix this city.”

Right as the ad’s sappy stock music reached a crescendo, a title card appeared over the footage: DONATE TO THE FISK FOUNDATION. FOR GWENDOLYN.

Not a single muscle moved in Mary Jane’s living room until the sound of violins finally died down and was replaced with a commercial for Big Macs.

This time, it wasn’t Peter’s arm that Mary Jane’s nails dug into. “Peter… so long as you’re going after Fisk… so long as you and me won’t… hang out anymore…” She met his eyes. Hers were narrow and quivering. “…promise me that you will kick. His. Ass.”

The smirk couldn’t be restrained any longer. “Fisk’s ass?” Peter gestured to the tip of his prosthesis. “I’m gonna need a bigger foot.”

The door to the private office swung open, and a bald bounce castle in a white suit waddled its way inside. The glob of body fat with a man trapped inside seated itself at its desk, opened up a box of chow mein, and then made a bold attempt to operate chopsticks with its banana-sized fingers.

Without turning his head, the Kingpin said, “Can I help you?” His voice was soft, deep, and
terrifyingly gentle.

Spider-Man took that as his cue to descend from the ceiling on a web-line. “Yes, I was looking for the food court. Figured you’d know the way by heart.”

At the desk chair below, Kingpin’s eyes went to one of the many cocoons dangling off the light fixtures. Most of them contained wriggling security guards.

Kingpin frowned at them, then raised an eyebrow to the Web-Head’s nice new duds. “Back in black?”

Spidey halted himself about a foot from the desk, hanging upside down off his web in his classic frog-leg pose. “I’m mourning my partnership with DeWolff.” He pointed a thumb at one of the cocoons. Instead of a measly little security guard, this one contained a full-fledged police captain. “Turns out she’s crooked. Can you believe it?”

The black costume was pretty snazzy, actually. Not only did it sport the bigger white spider-logo, but Cat had even thought to add the white squares on the back of the hands like on Venom’s updated look. And luckily, now that the symbiote had turned over a new leaf, Spider-Man didn’t have to feel quite as skeevy about stealing its look. In fact, it made for a nice contrast with Kingpin’s pearly white business suit. Really, though, the fact that that suit wasn’t covered in grease and sauce stains was a small miracle. Spidey pitied Kingpin’s tailor.

After the Web-Head’s last remark, though, Kingpin ignored him and returned to his chopsticks. “Hey, I’m talking to you,” Spidey snapped. “What’s the matter, Willie? Got cake in your ears?”

“What are you trying to accomplish here, exactly?” Kingpin’s eyes stayed fixed on his meal. “I assume Mr. Lincoln taught you how this works during his fleeting moment on the throne? Take down one crime lord and another pops up to replace him. There are hundreds of people in this borough alone waiting in line to be the ‘Big Man.’”

“So enough to fill your refrigerator?”

At this, Kingpin sighed, then set his takeout on his desk. “Young man, do you know why I do what I do?”

“Well, my working theory’s that someone confused you for the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man one too many times, and you finally snapped.”

“Do you know why Tombstone was so easily able to replace Silvermane? Why I was so easily able to replace him?” Kingpin folded his fingers together, which was an impressive feat all things considered. “People want the world to be this way.”

“You sure you don’t have a better way to serve the public? How ’bout entertainment? You could hold down, like, ten seasons of The Biggest Loser single-handed.”

“The system our government established, the way our world is supposed to be, is irreparably flawed. What people need is a hierarchy.” The Kingpin’s eyes went narrow. “A means to know their place.”

A man stood before a penthouse window, his posture immaculate, overlooking the bustling city below. This place was every bit as ugly as before he’d left.
“Roderick, Roderick, Roderick, will you never change?” The man brought a bottle his nose, wafting in the scene of perfume. “Always designing the killer outfits… only to make twin brother Danny try them on.”

“What people truly desire is for men like me to direct their lives. They want rewards for doing as little as possible, and only I can provide that to them.” The Kingpin leaned back in his chair (which Spider-Man could only assume was made of adamantium). “Haven’t you wondered why the other superheroes are so content to do nothing about me? To allow the feds, the FBI, handle things?” A chuckle swelled in his throat. It made him look like a frog. “And I have my fingers in those organizations as well, I assure you. You could record this entire, incriminating conversation as you did my predecessor’s, and it would amount to nothing.” A shameless, shameless smile crossed his face. “And that’s not mentioning the hand I’ll be having in Washington’s upcoming Superhuman Registration Act. Soon your hero friends won’t be able to act against me whether they want to or not.” That smile wasn’t getting any smaller. “But to your fellow superheroes, this is an acceptable status quo. Yes, there might be a couple robberies, a handful of children becoming addicts—”

“Mass famine every time your tummy rumbles?”

“To them,” Kingpin continued, his voice growing a note sharper, “it’s better than the alternative. At least the super-mercenaries are given some direction as opposed to random supervillains running amok – Order is always preferable to chaos. And you’re welcome to play this game with me if you wish.” Kingpin cocked his head at his masked buddy dangling before him. “In fact, I rather suspect your sense of purpose comes from fighting those you perceive as ‘evil.’ Deep down, you’re unsure if you’re a good person, but if you spend every moment of your life battling evil, that nagging voice goes away. So you see…” Here came his loudest chuckle yet. “…you want the world to be this way, too.”

Spider-Man almost laughed. “Dude, are you trying to psychoanalyze me? Yeah, sorry, that’s gonna be a bit tougher since I think about things other than cheeseburgers.” But in a blink, the laughter vanished, and his mask’s white eyes went narrow. “Has it occurred to you that maybe I’ve got something else ready and waiting to give my life meaning—?” He held out an upside-down hand, gesturing at Kingpin’s… vastness. “—and the reason I want to beat you so bad’s because you’re in the way?”

“Mind, body, and soul…”

Cletus leaned against the nice, fluffy white walls of his room. After agonizing months of good behavior, the doctors had finally allowed him to take off that rotten, awful straightjacket.

“Mind, body, and soul…”

Which meant he was now free to pick at the veins of his wrist with his jagged fingernails. Pick, pick, pick. Pick, pick, pick, until finally…

“Mind, body, and soul. Mind, body, and soul—!”

…the redness oozed down. Creeping out from inside him.

Cletus gave a content smile.

The Kingpin didn’t seem particularly moved by Spider-Man’s words.
“In that case-” He lumbered to his feet. “-if you continue to pester me and my operations, do you know what I’m going to do to you?”

Horror crossed Spidey’s masked face. “Eat me?”

“I’m going to find out who you are under that mask-” As he spoke, Kingpin paced towards the back wall, arms folded behind his back. “-and I’m going to find out what… or who… gives your life meaning, and then I will see to it that this meaning is stripped away from you. And then, once you’ve become a broken, empty husk, I’ll have your body tossed into the gutter right next to Mr. Murdock’s. Now what, pray tell, are you going to do about that?”

Spider-Man was silent a moment. “I’m gonna teach you and that endless stream of wannabe Big Men that every last one of you should be very, very afraid of Spider-Man.”

Kingpin had reached his destination – a humble walking stick resting against the wall. A guy like Fisk needed it, Spidey supposed. And to be clear, Spider-Man meant “humble” in the sense that there was a big old diamond stud on the handle.

“Is that so?” said the Kingpin, reaching for his cane. “And why should any of us be afraid of you? Why should I fear a mere boy, spider-powers or not, when I have an army of super-mercenaries at my beck and all?” He straightened his pearly white suit. “Your luck against them won’t last forever, now will it? So how do you intend to stop me?” He cocked his head towards Spidey, expectant.

“Well,” said Spider-Man, “I could just wait and let the morbid obesity take care of it.”

A panting, sweaty Spider-Man collapsed onto a random rooftop, then turned, hand on his knees, to determine exactly how small Fisk Tower had become on the horizon. He- He was pretty sure he was a safe distance away now.

Kingpin’s cane shot laser beams. Spider-Man had not known that. He had not known that Kingpin’s cane shot laser beams. But it did. It shot laser beams. Real, actual laser beams. From the cane. It shot them.

Geez, though, what’d that guy been so ticked over? Had some kid woken him from his nap with a Pokéflute? He really needed some thicker skin (Okay, no, that was a lie, Fisk’s skin was more than thick enough already).

“That took guts, kid,” said a voice.

“What?” On impulse, Spider-Man spun around. On the patch of rooftop behind him, there was a sight that’d frankly become an integral part of Hell’s Kitchen here. “Matt!”

As it turned out, Daredevil wasn’t much of a hugger. “Keep it down.” He at least flashed a grin, though. “Faking deaths isn’t as easy as you’d think.”

“I- I thought-” But Daredevil’s lack of participation didn’t even remotely hinder Spidey’s own hugging involvement. “I am so, so sorry, Matt. God, I was such a tool to you. I never should’ve-”

“It’s alright, Peter.” Daredevil gave a respectful nod before slipping free of Spidey’s grasp. “I knew you weren’t really turning your back on me. After all…” A grappling hook / billy club thingamajig fired towards another building in the distance. “…I always know when someone’s lying.”
As soon as he was sure his little visitor wasn’t coming back anytime soon, the Kingpin returned the cane to its resting place against the back wall. Then he sat back down at his desk and, with a meaty finger turned on his a monitor.

Onscreen was the limp form of Spencer Smythe, lying belly-up within a frost-covered cylinder. Ah, excellent, the cryostasis was complete.

By the time the younger Smythe rolled his way into the office, the screen was off again. Young Alistair’s eyes skimmed the room, lingering a particularly long while on the various scorch marks now littering the office. His lips curled, but he said nothing. The guards flanking his wheelchair had a way of stifling sarcasm.

“You rang?” Alistair leaned back in his seat. “Oh, and before you get your hopes up, no, I don’t know Spider-Man’s secret identity. The Osborns never saw fit to share that with me, apparently. Said something about me being too ‘rash and obnoxious.’ What a bunch of lunatics they were."

“That’s quite alright, Mr. Smythe.” Kingpin nodded to him. “There are other ways you can help me. I hear, for instance, you have a gift for building Spider-Slayers?”

At these words, a smile crept over Alistair’s lips. “Fisk? I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

The door exploded open, allowing a red-faced, sweaty, panting Peter into the lecture hall. It was a display that elicited giggles from his fellow students… but also a less amused reaction from the wrinkly, problem glasses-wearing, tenure-having monstrosity at the front of the room.

“Mr. Parker,” she said, “how nice of you to join us. Now get out.”

“B-Buh- But-”

“Our syllabus states that any student arriving more than fifteen minutes late is disrupting class time.” The professor nodded to the clock on the far wall. Peter was fifteen minutes and six seconds late, to be precise. “Disrupt my class again and I’m failing you.”

“Yes, ma’am…”

Peter trudged out the room, his forehead dragging the floor. Losing his leg to a murderous alien symbiote, he could bounce back from, but that teacher’s tongue-lashing had left him limping.

Sheesh. Maybe Peter would’ve been able to defend himself if he’d actually spoken to another human being in the past week. His vocal cords had rusted shut from disuse. He hadn’t even quipped at those crooks he webbed on the way here. Just hadn’t had it in him.

What Peter ought to do was return to his five-star apartment and use his newly-acquired free time to study. At least then he wouldn’t fall too far behind.

What Peter was actually gonna do was return to his five-star apartment and use his newly-acquired free time to stare at all the mold on his walls. Definitely a suitable replacement for social interaction.

“Pete?”

Just as Peter was almost to the bus stop, a voice turned his head. Hurrying towards him on the sidewalk was Eddie. The guy’s hair was a bit shaggier, but other than that he was the same as ever.
Same white jacket with the black t-shirt and everything.

“I saw the news.” As Eddie neared Peter, he hesitated. “I just- I needed to tell you it’s my fault Carnage was born, and I’m sorry.” He glanced away, hands in his pockets. “I know I should’ve seen you in the hospital, but it was just… too hard.”

Peter bowed his head. His body was doing that thing where it became painfully aware of how cold and numb his right leg felt.

“And… I never should’ve acted… how I did… about…” Eddie’s next word took a concerted effort to form. “…Gwen.” He inhaled. “She wasn’t an idiot. She was capable of making her own choices, and even if I didn’t agree with all of them…” At this next part, he couldn’t even look Peter in the face. “…whatever happiness it brought you guys, I’d never want to take away from you.”

The speech ended in a pause. It took Peter a second to realize why.

“H-Hey, it’s cool. We’re even.” His voice worked better than expected. “Come on, let’s not beat ourselves up anymore. We’ve done enough of that to last a couple dozen lifetimes.”

Eddie gave the faintest of smiles. “You, uh, remember I’m Catholic, right?”

Peter responded in kind. “Oh yeah, never mind then, bring on the self-flagellation. Here, I’ll even hold the whip.”

“Aww, thanks. I always could count on you.”

A hand patted Eddie’s shoulder. “That’s what brothers are for.”

This stupid doorbell never had been fixed, meaning Mary Jane had to hold all the shopping bags with one hand as she knocked.

Just as her fingers were threatening to fall off, the door swung open, and a big, hairy man in a sweaty white undershirt stared at her. Mary Jane almost flinched – He’d lost so much weight, she’d thought he was a different person at first.

“Dad.” MJ was impressed her voice even worked. “I- I, uh-” Okay, maybe she’d spoken too soon. “I got you some stuff.” She held out the bags. “Diapers and baby food, mostly. Not for you. F-For Gayle, I mean.”

He stared at them.

“Well.” MJ let them fall to the welcome mat. “I’d better get going. Places to be-” She turned back for her newly-repaired blue Benz in the Forest Hills roundabout.

“Mary.” A voice froze her solid. “This is- You’re-” Of all the ways this talk could’ve gone, Mary Jane wouldn’t have put money on the man breaking down at the sight of her. “This is better than I deserve,” he managed, shoulders heaving. “Thank you.” The snot trickled down unimpeded. “You’re a good woman, Mary.”

“Well, I don't know if I believe that’s true.”

The singer’s arm stretched across the stage-

“But I know I’m who I am today-”
-to reach for the girl across from her.

“-because I knew you.

Like a comet pulled from orbit,

As it passes a sun.”

Backstage, Mary Jane lurked alongside her fellow background extras, squirming to make out the scene through the curtains.

“Like a stream that meets a boulder,

Halfway through the wood.

Who can say if I’ve been changed for the better?”

In her struggle, Mary Jane’s hand ended up brushing the holster on her hip. It sent a shudder through her back.

“But… because I knew you…

I have been changed…”

“Hey. I, uh, had some free time. Thought I’d swing by. Heh. Get it? Swing? See what I did there…?” Silence. “I don’t know what to do. I thought I was doing the right thing, but now it doesn’t… feel like the right thing. But you used to have a normal life, and then I dragged you into my wacky world, and… I can’t let that happen again, right? Should be so easy. But… I can’t stop thinking about what you would want for me. For her. And I guess if I had to pick between what I think’s best and what you’d think’s best… I mean… you always did know your stuff.” A shaky laugh. Then another pause. “Speaking of what you’d want, I gave all your clothes and whatnot to charity. Probably should’ve done that sooner.”

Time passed. A lot of it.

“I gotta go. I’m getting grass on my butt. Oh yeah, guess they replaced all the grass and flowers. It looks good. The headstone’s even nicer than the last one…” There came one final, lingering silence. “W-Well, anyways, bye. I unironically love you.”

Jesus, this mattress was lumpy. Did Peter really sleep on this every night? Mary Jane was gonna have to lend him some new cushions, at least. Peter’s spine had had a bridge dropped on it – It needed all the help it could get.

Mary Jane didn’t know how long she sat there, waiting. If there was a clock in here, it was drowned out in the sea of junk. Eventually, though, the door opened, Peter entered the apartment, and then he got that deer-in-headlights look that any teenage boy would get upon discovering a supermodel sitting on his bed.

“Sorry to sneak up on you,” Mary Jane said. “You weren’t answering your phone, and you gave me those spare keys, remember?”

“Only for emergencies.” After a moment’s hesitation, Peter shut the door behind them. Privacy was a valuable resource in Ditkovich’s lair. “Uh… Is this an emergency?”
Mary Jane’s eyes stayed fixed on the mattress. “Just an emotional one.”

She didn’t have to look up to know those sad brown eyes were boring into her.

“I never said sorry for the gene cleanser bullcrap.” Mary Jane took a breath, but it did little to steady the shaking. “You know I never meant for… for…” Despite her best efforts, she glanced at his right leg. “I just wanted you to feel some relief.” A kind of sneezing laugh escaped her lips. “I’ve got a funny way of being really sweet and really selfish all at the same time. My therapist says I gotta work on that.” She paused for a reply.

And then she flinched – Peter had just taken a slow step forward. “MJ… I know you didn’t think it all through, and it wasn’t fair of me to put my morals on your shoulders, but slipping me those drinks was one of the nicest things anyone’s ever done for me. You have no idea how much I wish I hadn’t caught on. But…” He faltered. “…take it from me, keeping secrets can drive you crazy. I wouldn’t have wanted you to live with that.”

The best response Mary Jane could manage was a nod.

“Truth is, I’ve thought about ditching my powers, too, since, like, superhero day one.” Peter didn’t continue until she’d met his eyes. “But Spidey’s not a disease that needs a cure, and he’s more than just a random bug bite. No matter what happens.” But they didn’t stay met for long. “I know that doesn’t make me the best guy to be around.”

It was his turn to flinch – at the sound of snorting laughter.

“You think I don’t want to be around you? Peter, you’re the greatest human being on the planet. When I’m with you-” Actually, on second thought, it wasn’t quite laughter. “I’m a different person, and for the first time in my life, I actually like myself.” The words surprised Mary Jane. Not just the fact that they were coming out her mouth, but how easily they did. “And I don’t want to stop being that person. Ever.”

For a while, the only sound in the apartment was the gentle sniffling from the mattress.

“Mary Jane,” spoke a soft, steady voice, “I will always be your friend. I promise you that. But-”

The rest of the sentence was drowned by sirens. The longer the two teens remained in place, the louder the wails grew in the distance.

No words needed speaking. Mary Jane simply nodded, then watched as Peter tugged off his jacket and sweatpants, freeing the red and blue spandex beneath. Then, not without some amount of reluctance, Peter retrieved the mask from his belt and slipped it over his face.

Spider-Man turned for the apartment’s big, wide-open window. Mary Jane could’ve pointed out the gigantic grass stain on his butt, but she didn’t want to kill the moment.

“I’ve gotta go,” said Spider-Man. “It’s probably another of Kingpin’s gangs. He’ll be beyond ticked at me for sticking my nose in again. But…” He glanced back. It was hard to judge his mood behind those round, white eyes, but Mary Jane liked to think he was happy, bordering on smarmy. How she liked him. “…from now on, let’s not make each other’s decisions, okay?”

“Okay,” said Mary Jane.

“Whether or not you’re here when I get back… That’s up to you.” Without another word, Spider-Man slipped outside.
*Thwip.* Then, on the opposite building, a red and blue figure sprinted up the wall, flipped over the rooftop, and yanked itself to the other side on a line of webbing. The momentum sent him flying into the setting sun until, at the top of his arc, he released the line, tumbling through midair for a gut-wrenching second before firing a fresh one to begin the process anew. This went on for a while until, eventually, the figure slipped through the empty space of a fire escape, then landed on the roof of a cop car for a second before bouncing off, firing another web, and finally rounding a corner and vanishing from sight.

Mary Jane could only smile and shake her head. Typical.

“Go get ’em, Tiger.”

**Spider-Man was created by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko.**

**The Spectacular Spider-Man cartoon was developed by Greg Weisman and Victor Cook.**

This story also draws heavy inspiration from the works of Sam Raimi, Brian Michael Bendis, J. Michael Straczynski, Gerry Conway, and countless other creators who have contributed to the Spider-Man mythos.

Thank you to all the people who have provided feedback and helped me to improve the quality of my writing. Constructive criticism is always welcome and encouraged.

Thanks for reading! Now goodbye forever!
…WAIT, where are you going, Marvelite? You can’t leave this smashin’ story before you’ve read the excellent, epitomous, excelsiorific EPILOGUE, can you?
A car rolled into the Midtown High parking lot, then gradually came to a halt. If you were have to really, really examined it, squinting at all the white scratches and chipped, faded blue paint, you just might have been able to picture the sports car in its prime.

The same general idea applied to its driver. He undid his seat belt with trembling, wrinkled fingers, and he was about to hobble his way out, but his passenger stopped him with a hand on his knee.

“Can- Can you wait here a minute, Dad?” Beneath the girl’s short, scraggly hair and reddened cheeks was a not-completely unabashed smile. “Just lemme go in by myself…”

Her dad arched a gray-streaked eyebrow at her. “What? I walk too fast for ya?” He knelt to retrieve something from the floorboard – a humble wooden cane.

“No, it’s just… Come on.” The girl leaned in, then said in a horrified whisper, “I can’t be seen walking in with a teacher. It’s weiiiiiirrrrrd.”

“Hey!” Her dad held up his hands, innocent. “I’m just coming here to do criminology lectures. That doesn’t make me one of them.” The remark left a goofy grin on his face.

His daughter failed to match the expression, though. “Oh yeah, and Dad?” She brought her hands together in prayer. “Please don’t tell any of your awful jokes in class.”

“Oh, honey-” The man’s face grew solemn. “-of course not… I’ll only tell the good ones.”

“Daaaaaad.” The girl was fixing to continue protesting, but she was cut short by a figure crossing the pavement towards them. “Wait, Cassie’s here.” The next instant, the girl’s seat belt was off her, and she was slamming the door behind her as she rushed to greet the approaching blonde.

Her dad was tempted to climb out himself and say hi, but his daughter looked like she was in enough agony already. It was tough to make out the conversation from inside the car, but her dad got the impression she was scrambling to impress this girl.

Geez, of all the people she could pick as her best friend… Cassie was clearly the short skirts and knee-high boots type, whereas his daughter thought mauve-colored t-shirts were too girly. Seriously, did those two have anything in common?

…Anything his daughter was actually supposed to be aware of, he meant?

Her dad found himself frowning. Right before the two girls could hurry off to join their fellow juniors, his car window rolled down. “Have a good day at school.” His voice froze the girl in her tracks. “Love you, May.”

Okay, he was seriously worried she’d burst into flames on the spot. “Y-You, too, Dad.” She and Cassie hurried off before he could further humiliate her.

But even once she’d left, her dad kept the window down. No matter many years had been piled on him, his hearing was sharp as ever. Yep. It hadn’t started to go, not even a little bit. It was just as good as it’d been in his prime. Definitely. Well… more or less, anyways. It was at least good
enough to catch snatches of a hushed conversation:

“Mayday? Did you get the-?”

“Shh! Yeah, they’re in my backpack.”

“Nice.”

The rest of the talk was indecipherable – The girls had gotten too far away.

Back inside the car, the man gave his goatee a scratch.

The plink, plink, plink of a cane echoed through the Forest Hills roundabout. It only grew more frequent as it traveled to the welcome mat of a well-loved (i.e. somewhat shabby) house. The plinks reached a crescendo as they entered the house’s kitchen, stopping only when a bottle of painkillers was cracked open and half its contents were swallowed.

With that done, the man was able to set his cane down and take some unaided, albeit wobbly, steps into his living room. A woman was waiting in there, slouched over on the armchair. All these years later, and the sight of her still left the man’s heart beating faster. And he wasn’t being biased, either – May’s mom had dropped by her school once when she’d forgot her lunch, and to this day, boys still kept asking to come over to her house.

At first, the woman’s eyes had been fixed on the TV (or monitor, as May was so fond of correcting her dad with a roll of her eyes. He sounded like an old person, apparently). Onscreen was a livestream of Oscorp Tower. Looked like that historic press conference held by the Iron Patriot had already begun.

The camera panned towards a podium at the building’s front entrance. Harry stood there with an arm around his wife’s waist, his suit’s helmet rolled back. “…since the time of my father,” Harry was saying. “No, since before that… since the forties, even… this company has been run by criminals. It has abused its powers and put the American people in danger, all in the name of profit. Of control.” To be honest, the reparative surgery had left his face just as shudder-inducing as before. Back in high school, it’d been rounded like his mom’s. Now it was sharp as a dagger. “And as much as I’ve tried to repair that damage, I’ve finally realized that some scars can’t be fixed. And so I’ve decided that my family’s name is not one worth honoring.” Harry bowed his head. “From this day on, this company will instead take after the maiden name of my wonderful wife: Allan.”

He held her tighter. “We are here today to christen a new company, one committed to serving the public good. We are here to christen Alchemax Industries.”

The crowd’s applause was silenced – The woman in the armchair had hit mute on the remote. At her husband’s approach, she looked up. “Oh, hey. I wasn’t slacking off. I was just, uh, mustering my strength. Gotta pick Annie and Benjy up from daycare in, like, ten minutes. The other kids there are little monsters, every last one of ’em.” She waved an arm at him, groaning.

The man couldn’t help but smile. She always had a flair for the dramatic.

But the smile was short-lived. The man stayed silent as he strolled towards the bookshelf. Resting on it were rows upon rows of photos. The man skimmed them, left to right. First the ones with the brown-haired boy. To the left were pics of him as a grinning dork with Harry Potter glasses and a godawful haircut, clutching a microscope in his hands as his aunt and uncle loomed proudly behind him. Then there were the pictures where he was a lithe, muscular, rugged guy with a stubbly chin and a DreamWorks face. To the extreme far right, meanwhile, were pics of an older, scar-covered
guy hobbled over a cane, posing alongside his fellow forensic scientists in the office. He wasn’t older as in “elderly,” mind you. In fact, in some of those pictures with his cane, he was barely even middle-aged.

The pictures of his wife, meanwhile, underwent a considerably more graceful transformation. She went from looking “hot” to possessing more of a weighty, poignant beauty, like a landscape. The kind of beauty you could gaze at for hours and always discover more details to appreciate. Her final pic was that family photo they’d taken last Christmas alongside Gayle’s half of the family. It’d been the fruit of hours of labor. Well, Annie’s eyes were off-camera and her tongue was visible through her smile, but that was about as good as it got with her.

Next, the man’s eyes lingered on the pictures of a white-haired woman. With every photograph, she grew thinner and frailer. In her final one, she was sitting up in a hospital bed, holding baby May in her arms. On the woman’s face was the biggest grin ever captured on camera.

Finally, the man looked to the pictures of the blonde girl in the glasses. She looked the same in every one.

“You okay?” A hand touched his arm from behind.

“Yeah,” said the man. “Just spacing out.”

“Where’s May?”

“She asked to stay at the Langs’.”

“Again? I swear to God, if it turns out she and Cassie are lesbians-”

“Not all roads lead to romance, you know.” Her husband glanced back to smirk at her.

“Yeah, well, I’m not putting anything past ’em.” His wife folded her arms. “I mean, just look at half the crap we got up to as teens…”

“That’s not exactly what I’m worried about.” The man looked away again. “It’s just…” He sighed. “…I wish we hadn’t had to make her quit basketball. That was basically her life.”

His wife sighed in turn. “Yeah, I know, but we both saw it. She was just… too good.” She paused. “We could talk to her about those all-mutant teams-”

“I know, I know, but it’d be weird now.” Stupid X-Men. You get one little, newfangled procedure to keep your son from getting powers, and suddenly they’re all judgy with you. “But, I mean, don’t you think it’s odd that she’s suddenly BFFs with Lang’s daughter? What if the guy’s, y’know…”

The man couldn’t help but wince. “…influencing her?”

At this, his wife’s arms wrapped around him. “She’s sixteen. I know it’s scary, but she is capable of thinking for herself now. We can’t trap her in our echo chamber.” She paused. “I mean, we can, but then she’ll just rebel twice as hard. Trust me.” Her lips were drawing nearer. They hadn’t gotten even the slightest bit less enticing. “She’s gotta leave the nest sometime.”

Toughened, chapped lips moved to meet the soft, firm ones. For a couple seconds, they went at it like they were still teens – Tongue was even brought into the equation – but right as things were getting really teenagery, the man pulled away.

“What’s the matter, Tiger?” asked a breathy voice. “Don’t tell me you’re not… up to the occasion?”
“Don’t you have some cubs to get, Cougar?” The word earned the man’s head a swat.

“Ooh, convenient excuse.” His wife gave one last playful jeer before waltzing out the living room, her waist-length hair trailing behind.

“Hey, it’s my leg that’s missing,” the man called after her, holding out his prosthesis. “The rest of me works just fine.”

“I’m gonna need some more evidence of that…”

“Oh, I’ll get you empirical evidence.”

As soon as the woman was gone, the man turned back to the shelf, laughing. It died down, though, as his eyes returned to one of the many framed pictures of the blonde girl. The man touched its glass.

Then, slowly, he fished a wallet from his dress pants. Out of it, he received a tiny silver key. With key in hand, the man hobbled over to his personal desk in the corner of the room. Into the bottom drawer, the key was inserted. It popped open to reveal… nothing. Absolutely nothing.

“Oh… MJ?” Suddenly, the man was scrambling to catch her on her way out the door. “You didn’t happen to move my web-shooters, did you?”

“Mwah ha ha ha ha ha… ah ha ha ha ha ha haaaa…” Laughter echoed down the bustling Manhattan street corner. “For too long, you have been a thorn in my side, but now, at long last, you are right where I want you, Spider-Girl, trapped in the clutches of CRAZY EIGHT!”

Out of the shadows stepped a scrawny, cackling dude in skintight black spandex… with a gigantic eight-ball for a head.

On the road’s opposite side, girl sat perched perched on a flag pole. She swapped glances with the Barbie-sized girl hovering beside her. As much snark-bait as the master supervillain here was, though, the girl wearing skintight red and blue spandex with a spider-logo smack on her chest wasn’t quite one to throw stones.

“Ooh, I love these things!” Throwing punches was fine, though. “Tell me, tell me, will I ever hook up with Brad?” Crack. The eight-ball was sent bouncing across the pavement, taking its wearer with it.

“Gah-!”

“Is that a ‘Yes, definitely?’” Spider-Girl was just raising her fist for another blow when the tune of Little Miss Muffet sounded from her hip. “Oop, one sec.” She yanked her phone from her utility belt, checking the caller ID. “Sorry, I gotta take this.” With a beep, she held it to her spandex-covered ear.

She was met with a deep, calm, bone-chilling voice: “May Gwendolyn Parker.”

“Hoo boy.” Instantly, Spider-Girl held the phone away so she could whisper, “Middle name.”

Above her shoulder, Stinger winced (Stinger being the Barbie-sized girl in the purple Ant-Man suit fitted with Wasp wings).

Spidey returned to her phone. “Daddy, hi! Me and Cassie were just studying-”
"When I said my old costume went missing, you promised me you had no idea what I was talking about."

"Costume?" Spider-Girl said in her most sugary voice. "Is that what it was? Why would you need a costume? Did you used to cosplay or someth-?"

"Don’t you play dumb with me. I never should’ve let you spend so much time with Lang-"

"For the millionth time, Cassie’s dad is not teaching me to steal.” Only how to pick locks. “Daddy, please, you’re being paran-"

**Thwip.** Mid-conversation, Crazy Eight had gotten back on his feet and tried to lob one of his exploding pool balls at them, so Spider-Girl had been forced to web his hand to the far wall.

"**WAS THAT A THWIP, YOUNG LADY?**"

"Uhhhh, did you say something, Dad? Sorry, I’m losing you. Must’ve forgot to charge my phone."

"Charge your-? IT’S THE TWENTY-THIRTIES. PHONE BATTERIES LAST LONGER THAN HUMAN LIFESPANS."

"Y-Yeah, but I just use it so much, y’know?" Spider-Girl gave a not-at-all jittery chuckle.

"How could you do this to your mother, May? Hasn’t she been through enough already?"

No reply.

"Answer me!"

"Um, um, uhhhh...” Spidey scrambled for words. “With great power comes great responsibility?”

"Responsibility?! We can’t even get you to take out the trash half the time!"

"Hey, actually, I think my phone’s dying right this second. I gotta go, Daddy. Love you, bye-"

"Don’t you dare hang up on-" **Boop.**

"Sorry ’bout that. Now where were we?” The Web-Head’s attention returned to the battlefield, only to discover Stinger frowning at her. “What?"

“I don’t know.” Stinger fluttered away, back turned. “I didn’t mean to get you grounded or anything. It’s just… my dad stole a super-suit, and it worked out pretty well for him…”

"Yeah, now he’s, like, the only Ant-Man anyone even remembers.” As she spoke, Spider-Girl strolled towards Crazy Eight, spraying him with more webbing to prevent further shenanigans.

“But, I mean, c’mon…” Judging from that sound in the distance, the cops were on their way. “… this is worth all the groundings in the world.” She aimed towards a faroff building with a web-shooter (which, by the way, looked way cooler on the outside of her sleeves. Her dad had totally missed out all those years).

“Heh. Yeah.” Stinger’s smile returned. “And it’s not even the best part.”

Even with the mask hiding her face, Spider-Girl looked radiant. “There’s something better?”

**Spider-Girl was created by Tom DeFalco and Ron Frenz.**
Chapter End Notes

Next Up: The complete story timeline!
Timeline

SPOILER WARNING: This timeline spoils basically everything. Don’t read it until you’ve finished the entire story.

The Multiverse:

According to The Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe A to Z Volume 4, the Spectacular Spider-Man cartoon takes place in the canonical Marvel Multiverse on Earth-26496 (No, I haven’t actually read the handbook. I just checked Marvel Wiki like a sane person). However, as of right now, the show exists in a legal limbo because Sony and Disney/Marvel don’t want to play nice with each other, and so Earth-26496 isn’t actually allowed to appear ever again, which is why that version of Spider-Man didn’t show up in the Spider-Verse comics (which… might be a blessing in disguise).

So to explain this, in chapter 84, I had Mister Fantastic specify that Dimension-26496 has been “closed off” from the rest of the Multiverse somehow, meaning it’s unaffected by multiverse-spanning threats such as the Inheritors (from the Spider-Verse comics) and the incursions (from the 2015 Secret Wars comics). That way I don’t have to worry about Dan Slott barging in and killing all my favorite characters…

Canon:

There’s always the ever-so-slight chance that Disney will buy Sony and allow the show’s creators to make an official Spec Spidey sequel comic or something, but I’m not holding my breath, hence the, y’know, 430,000 word sequel fanfic I just spent the last three years working on. Greg Weisman’s basically said that an official sequel’s never gonna happen and the fans are welcome to fill in the blanks however they like, so I can go crazy writing a fanfic where Peter, Gwen, and MJ have hot threesomes and whatever else my black little heart desires, and no official canon’s ever gonna contradict me on it.

But I have still tried to keep faithful to the show’s continuity due to the great love and respect I have for it and its creators. On the other hand, though, I don’t consider this fic a hundred percent beholden to whatever the show’s creators actually had planned for season 3 and onward.

Another thing to keep in mind is that while at first I was trying to keep this story’s tone at least mostly in line with the show’s more lighthearted and cartoony atmosphere, at some point I said screw it and just told the story I wanted to tell without worrying about how dark it got. This fic gets way more morbid, brooding, violent, and sexual than the show ever did, but I feel like that’s fine since it’s still grounded heavily in the Spider-Man mythos and I don’t just throw in edgy stuff for shock value or anything.

…Okay, except for Mysterio getting shot in the kneecap. That was totally for shock value.

But despite all that, my intention for writing this story was that (assuming you like it, hopefully!) it can function as a suitable ending for a wonderful series that got cut down in its prime. If this silly little story gives you some sense of closure, then my job here is done.

Of course, if I had infinite money, I’d commission a professional artist to draw this whole fanfic as a webcomic or something, but alas…

Anywho, enjoy the timeline. I frickin’ love these things. I’d map out every day of Peter Parker’s
life from birth to death if I could.

Oh, one other minor note: I’ve decided to treat Greg Weisman’s Spectacular Spider-Man / Gargoyles crossover screenplay, “A Handful of Thorns,” as semi-canonical. I consider certain elements of it to be canon, but obviously not the parts involving Gargoyles characters.

1900s

-Vertros Ravencroft, the founder of Ravencroft (and one of the show’s few original characters, as far as I can tell) was a friend of Sigmund Freud and Arthur Conan Doyle. He believed in psychotherapy and spiritualism. He collected certain items and buried them beneath Ravencroft, such as (supposedly) the spear that pierced Jesus on the cross. *(A Handful of Thorns)*

1939:

September 1: World War II begins.

1940-1944:

-Steve Rogers becomes Captain America with Bucky as his sidekick. Cap, the android Human Torch, the Whizzer, and Namor the Sub-Mariner become the first ever big-name superheroes, but Namor’s connection to Atlantis is unknown by the general public.

-Rogers is under the government’s thumb, but almost immediately, private American corporations begin attempting to recreate the Super-Soldier Formula, not to create government soldiers, but private ones. Thus begins the Super-Mercenary business.

-Namor claims the Lifeline Tablet has a biochemical formula that grants the secret of immortality.

-The Howling Commandos liberate Auschwitz. Captain America rescues a roughly five-year-old Magneto from there, which is witnessed by Silver Sable’s grandfather (18 years old) and his Wild Pack.

1945:

-Towards the end of the war, Bucky dies, and the public believes Cap dies, too, but it turns out Captain America was actually preserved via cryogenics. By the modern day, Cap is “a memory” (according to AskGreg).

Sept 2: World War II ends.

-Namor the Sub-Mariner gets amnesia at some point and spends a long time as a bum.

-The android Human Torch eventually breaks beyond repair, and the Whizzer eventually retires from heroics due to old age.
Mon, Jan 1, 1962

-George Stacy is born.

1964

-Norman Osborn is born. Try saying that five times fast.

1980s:

-L. Thompson Lincoln and Robbie Robertson attend the same high school in Harlem. Lincoln joins a gang and gets the nickname Tombstone.

-Captain Stacy says Walter Hardy tried unsuccessfully to steal the Lifeline Tablet “over 30 years ago” from 2009.

1988:

-Silver Sable is born (Hammerhead makes a comment implying she is young in the show).

Sat, July 8, 1989:

-Norman Osborn (age 25) is dating Emily (age 19). Norman’s still a human being back then, and the two really hit it off.

1991:

-Tombstone, currently a hitman for Wilson Fisk, assassinates 12 year old Matt Murdock’s father, Jack Murdock, which will eventually lead to Matt becoming Daredevil.

-Janice is born, causing Tombstone to decide to stop being a common thug and become the Big Man so he can give her a better life.

1992

-August 10: Peter Parker is born.

-For simplicity, let’s assume Harry was born the same year as Peter.

-April 22: Emily says she wants to go back to college but Norman scorns the idea. Their relationship is deteriorating. Emily is an absent mother for Harry, making their butler take care of him.
1994

-There is a war in Symkaria. 6-year old Sable promises her 72-year-old grandfather that she will hunt Nazis like he did. Her grandfather dies, and Sable is soon afterwards adopted by Silvermane and brought to New York.

Aug 1996:

-As toddlers, Peter and Flash are actually friends. Flash gets his nickname from streaking.

-Peter and Eddie’s parents die in a plane crash, and Eddie is forced to live in an orphanage because the Parkers are too poor to take him in.

1997:

-Silvermane’s criminal empire is exposed by Foswell, and Tombstone takes over as the Big Man (Jameson specifically says this was 12 years ago). This knocks the Manfredi family out of the power it’s had for decades up until now.

2001:

-Peter is 8 when 9/11 happens. Superheroes stopped operating after WWII, so a lot of historical events between then and the present day are basically the same.

2004:

-Peter says Gwen’s always been there for him since the seventh grade, which seems to imply that’s when they met.

-In seventh grade, Gwen realizes she has a crush on Peter.

2006:

August 10: Peter’s 14th birthday.

September 4: Peter begins his freshman year at Midtown.

2007:

June 26: Last day of freshman year.

August 10: Peter’s 15th birthday.

September 4: Peter begins his sophomore year at Midtown.
-From AskGreg: “They (the Fantastic Four) probably made their debut in November of Pete’s sophomore year.” While in space, the Fantastic Four get hit with cosmic rays that give them superpowers, and they become celebrity superheroes operating in Manhattan. They are the first major superheroes since the end of WW2.

-The debut of the Fantastic Four sparks a “superhuman renaissance,” during which time technology advances and the super-mercenary industry booms as private companies such as Oscorp and TriCorp try to recreate Captain America’s Super-Soldier Formula and such to make super-mercenaries.

-Doctor Doom starts operating a major supervillain with a grudge against Mister Fantastic, and he becomes the leader of the nation of Latveria, a major threat to the world.

-Illegal experiments are conducted in Harlem that give impenetrable skin to people such as Luke Cage and Tombstone.

-Note that Fantastic Four deal only with large-scale and cosmic threats, not the low-level threats that Spider-Man will be facing, which is why they’re not really seen or mentioned in the show except for vague allusions to other superheroes existing in the Colonel Jupiter episode (Of course, the real reason is because Sony didn’t wanna play nice with Marvel, though Greg Weisman’s said he WOULD have used other Marvel heroes if they’d let him).

April 2008:

-In early April, Mary Jane is still in her “Brainey Janey” persona, but at some point after this, she becomes “Wild Party Girl MJ.” Her reckless behavior and repeated thefts of her dad’s booze eventually land her a month in Coral Moon Women’s Correctional Facility.

May 2008

-In early May, Norman meets with Toomes about Tech Flight. He will rip it off four months later.

June 2008

-Because Curt Connors is the country’s top biogeneticist, Norman feels he could be extremely useful to his Super-Mercenary production. Thus, he helps give the Connors funding to set up their lab at ESU and conduct their experiments. Thanks to Oscorp’s guiding hand, though, the Connors are sent in way over the heads dealing with complex and dangerous things that they don’t understand the scope of, which is what leads to so many accidents.

-Long-term, Oscorp plans to let the Connors do all the groundwork for them, then find some excuse to kick them out of their lab and have Warren run the show using all their research and such.

-At some point towards the end of the school year, Peter is bit by the spider.

-AsGreg: “Spidey first appeared in public (at the Venue) in May or June of Peter’s sophomore year.” (I went with June for my own timeline.)
-Peter loses Uncle Ben and starts acting as an illegal vigilante.

-June 26: Last day of sophomore year.

**July 2008**

-Mary Jane stays with her Aunt Anna over the summer right next door to Peter, and on Spider-Man’s first night out, she sees him climb out Peter’s window and realizes his secret. Spider-Man becomes intriguing to her, which is the real reason she later agrees to go to the Fall Formal with him. *(Ch 55 Anthropogenic Impact)*

-Peter spends the summer fighting crime as Spider-Man. His existence is somewhat of an urban legend and not 100% confirmed to the public at this point. He catches Marko and O’Hirn at least twice.

**Sun, Aug 10, 2008:**

- Peter’s 16th birthday.

**Wed, Sep 3, 2008:**

From Greg: “I haven’t put together any parallel timeline for a Spectacularverse Fantastic Four, so I don’t know when various FF events happened relative to stuff in Spidey’s life, beyond the mere fact that the FF exists and has gone public before the start of Season One. I don’t even know if the public knows about Skrulls yet. I don’t even know if the FF knows about Skrulls yet.”

-At some point, the FF battle the Skrulls. The government and SHIELD become aware of the existence of aliens, but they keep this info from the public so as not to cause a mass panic. Mister Fantastic’s credibility and reputation are strained because he maintains that aliens are real.

-From Greg: “Moon Knight was probably not Moon Knight yet. Hawkeye was probably still a circus performer; Black Widow, a Russian spy. Dr. Strange was probably still in Tibet. Over time - and given enough episodes AND PERMISSION - I’d have used anyone and everyone.”

-Spidey catches Marko and O’Hirn again. Tombstone confirms Spider-Man’s existence and dispatches the Enforcers.

**Thurs, Sep 4, 2008:**

-At Oscorp, Toomes blames Norman for stealing his Tech Flight designs.

-On his first day of junior year, Peter learns things have NOT changed and he’s still unpopular at school. Peter and Gwen are chosen to intern at the ESU lab, where the Connors work with Eddie as their lab assistant.

-Vulture attacks Norman, and Spidey beats both him and the Enforcers. Vulture is arrested and sent to Ryker’s while the Enforcers get away.
-Peter comes home late and Aunt May gets mad, imposing a 10 PM curfew. (*S1E1 Survival of the Fittest*)

**Sept 5-7, 2008, 3 days:**

-It’s around this time that Norman decides to become the Green Goblin, as his kidnapping by the Vulture made him feel powerless. (*Word of God*)

-Norman records contingency videos to show to Harry and Peter in case he dies. (*Ch 3 Unreliable Narrator*)

**Mon, Sept 8, 2008:**

-Max becomes Electro.

**Tues, Sept 9, 2008:**

-Max flees the hospital, where he bumps into Spider-Man, who attacks him. Max runs away. Peter had been tutoring Liz but ditched her, causing her to notice him more.

**Wed, Sept 10, 2008:**

-Peter shows Liz the ESU lab and Liz starts to fall for Peter, making Gwen jelly.

-Electro shows up demanding a cure from Curt (and accidentally electrifying the Lizard serum), and Spider-Man defeats him. Max is sent to Ravencroft.

-This was Gwen’s first encounter with a real live supervillain and is traumatic for her.

**Thurs, Sept 11, 2008:**

-Liz caves to peer pressure and is snobby to Peter again. (*S1E2 Interactions*)

-That night, Connors injects himself with Lizard serum and his arm regrows.

-Oh, wow, I just realized this is happening on the anniversary of 9/11. That’s awkward.

**Fri, Sept 12, 2008:**

-The ESU lab group celebrates Curt’s arm regrowing, but then he turns into the Lizard. Spider-Man helps create the gene cleanser and cures Curt.
Sat, Sept 13, 2008:

-Peter sells the Lizard photos to the Bugle, ticking everyone off and getting him fired from the internship. Peter considers taking gene cleanser himself but decides against it. (*S1E3 Natural Selection*)

Sun, Sept 14, 2008:

-The Enforcers steal the Shocker suit from TriCorp. Shocker attacks Spidey (and ruins his paycheck!).

Mon, Sept 15, 2008:

-Peter asks Betty to the Fall Formal. He will never live down the shame.

-Spidey beats Shocker and sends him to Ryker’s.

-Peter starts giving a portion of his Bugle money to Aunt May to help out.

-Peter blew Harry off when he needed help studying, but Harry’s dad tells him to cowboy up.

-Harry partly overhears a meeting between his dad and Hammerhead. Since Norman tipped them off to the Shocker suit shipment, Tombstone wants Oscorp to create supervillains to distract Spidey from the smaller operations in exchange for money and human test subjects. (*S1E4 Market Forces*)

Sept 16-27, 2 weeks and 3 days:

-Norman intentionally shows the Globulin Green to his family and leaves it out for Harry to steal, but if Harry had actually read all the notes, he’d have known to inhale it as gas, not drink it.

Sun, Sept 28, 2008:

-At night, Spidey stumbles across Marko and O’Hirn burglarizing again.

Mon, Sept 29, 2008:

-Hammerhead posts their bail and takes them to Oscorp’s secret lab beneath an abandoned car body shop to turn them into supervillains. Otto helps out with his tentacle arms.

-First up, they try to give Marko subdermal armor (like Rhino and Molten Man) but they screw up and he becomes Sandman.

-My fanfic elaborates on how this works, exactly. Using the brain-scanning technology Warren will later use to create his clones, they copied Marko’s mind and dispersed it into all the silicone particles, which have been bonded with nanomachines using stolen Pym Particles. This is supposed to help the superdermal armor move like a part of the user’s body (like Scorpion’s tail), but the
process goes horribly wrong and Marko is unable to retain his shape, turning into Sandman. Technically, this means Marko died and was replaced with a hive mind of Marko clones (Remember that sand is inorganic, so in all versions of the character, Marko becoming Sandman isn’t philosophically different from being replaced with a robot double or something).

-Hammerhead tries to get Sandman to kill Spider-Man, but Sandman only cares about his “big score.”

-Harry tries out for football and Peter goes, too, to protect Harry from Flash and Kong. Peter and Harry do surprisingly well (because Harry has already started stealing the Globulin Green by now).

**Tues, Sept 30, 2008:**

-Gwen tries to ask Peter to the Fall Formal but he says he doesn’t wanna go, thus shattering her poor fragile little heart into a million pieces oh my god I just want to give her a hug.

-Spider-Man attacks Sandman, provoking Sandman to try and kill him. Spider-Man traps him in fast-drying cement that Sandman apparently can’t break out of I guess. Sandman’s sent to Ryker’s in a cell specially-designed by Norman (the start of the Vault’s creation), who’s profiting off both sides here.

**Wed, Oct 1, 2008:**

-Peter throws the drills to give Harry the football glory, and he’s rewarded with ice cream from Gwen. *(S1E5 Competition)*

**Oct 2-21, 2008, 2 weeks and 6 days:**

-Oscorp works on fixing the subdermal armor process.

**Wed, Oct 22, 2008:**

-O’Hirn is made into Rhino.

-Aunt May convinces Betty not to go to the Fall Formal with Peter since she’s trying to set him up with MJ.

-Rhino attacks the Daily Bugle, deducing that Peter takes all of Spider-Man’s pictures and thus must know where to find him. The Bugle gets smashed up. This is the start of Jameson’s vendetta with the Web-Head (Note that before he was only going after Spidey to sell papers, but now Jameson sincerely thinks he’s a menace).

-I’d assume that from this point on, Peter starts having his pictures published *anonymously*.

-Spidey beats the Rhino, who tells him the Big Man is Mr. Lincoln. Spidey confronts Tombstone, who beats the snot out of him. Tombstone offers to pay Spider-Man to look the other way on occasion, but Spidey refuses and Tombstone calls the police on him (further cementing Spidey’s
status as a menace). This means war.

-Oscorp’s also being payed to make Rhino’s cell in Ryker’s. Norman wants to stop making mercenaries for now because people will start asking questions, but Hammerhead threatens to tell the public about Oscorp, with Octavius being the weak link (giving Norman a motive to murder Otto).

**Thurs, Oct 23, 2008:**

-Peter takes a day to rest from his battles. He’s bummed Betty won’t go with him to the Formal.

**Fri, Oct 24, 2008:**

-Mary Jane shows up on Peter’s doorstep as his Fall Formal date. *(S1E6 The Invisible Hand)*

-John Jameson is piloting his first space shuttle mission next week.

-Norman becomes the Green Goblin for the first time and steals an Oscorp Tech Flight glider, then threatens some of Tombstone’s thugs into joining his side. They attack Tombstone’s gala to try and make Green Goblin the new Big Man, allowing Norman to cut out the middle man with his illegal dealings.

-Peter has to ditch MJ to take pictures. Spider-Man battles the Green Goblin, but Gobbie gets away. *(S1E7 Catalysts)*

-MJ’s interest is Peter is starting to bubble into attraction, but while Peter is gone, MJ notices how jealous Gwen is of her. She talks to Gwen and quickly pieces together Gwen’s own crush. Since Gwen is Peter’s childhood friend and MJ is a random stranger to him, MJ’s deep-seated emotional issues rise to the surface, and, as usual, she decides to avoid commitment and instead begins trying to hook Peter up with Gwen. But despite this, she can’t help but share one last dance with Peter when he returns. *(Ch 55 Anthropogenic Impact)*

**Oct 25-26, 2008:**

-Spidey searches the city in vain for the Green Goblin.

**Mon, Oct 27, 2008:**

-MJ officially friendzones Peter.

-Harry wins the big football game thanks to the Green, and Liz invites Peter to Coney Island to celebrate with them.

-Gwen finds Harry passed out from the Green and is worried about him, but everyone else brushes her off.

-At Oscorp, Green Goblin tries to kill Otto, but he ends up only fusing his tentacle harness to Otto’s
spine. Spidey sees the explosion and arrives to try and help, but Otto goes crazy and blames Spidey for the attack, thinking Spidey wanted revenge for the creation of Sandman and Rhino. Doc Ock escapes for now.

-Later at Coney Island, Peter has a good time hanging out with Liz, but then they bump into Flash and MJ, which is awkward because Liz and Flash are dating.

-But then they spot Doc Ock in the distance and Peter runs off to fight him. Doc Ock chases him back to Coney Island.

-While everyone’s fleeing, Gwen trips and Mary Jane attempts to save her life, and then Spider-Man saves both of their lives.

-Gwen has a breakdown due to all the supervillain attacks and her self-esteem issues, and Mary Jane consoles her. This, plus the fact that MJ actually listens to Gwen’s concerns about Harry, causes the two to really like each other and plants the seeds of their friendship. (*Ch 57 Competitive Exclusion*)

-Spider-Man saves Liz’s life from Doc Ock, too.

-At this point, supervillain attacks are considered mundane enough by society that the Midtown kids mostly don’t even care about it and are more concerned that Flash and Liz are breaking up.

-Meanwhile, John’s shuttle takes off.

-At the Osborn penthouse, Hammerhead accuses the Goblin of working for Norman since he has Oscorp tech, but Norman claims the Goblin stole that tech from him and uses the fact that the Goblin drove Otto, his top scientist, crazy to strengthen his alibi. (*S1E8 Reaction*)

**Oct 28-30, 3 days:**

-Around this time, the Kree-Skrull War is taking place, and the fighting results in the Venom symbiote getting trapped on a meteor and hurled at Earth. (*Ch 63 Carnivore*)

**Fri, Oct 31, 2008:**

-John’s shuttle is hit by a meteor but he successfully lands it.

-Green Goblin kidnaps Hammerhead, then lies to both Tombstone and Spider-Man that Hammerhead had a jump drive with incriminating evidence and arranges a rendezvous.

-Spider-Man sees Norman exit a secret room in his penthouse (actually the wine cellar) and assumes he’s the Green Goblin.

-Chameleon, disguised as Norman, enters the Oscorp lab, where he bumps into Green Goblin stealing the Gobwebs shooter. Norman is thrilled because this strengthens his alibi, and he later hires Chameleon to keep impersonating him.

-At school, Gwen learns Harry’s been taking the Globulin Green.

-Tombstone and Spider-Man are led into a trap but manage to fight Goblin off.
Sat, Nov 1, 2008:

- Jameson is furious that the Globe’s Spider-Man story outsold the John shuttle story, and Peter is given an exclusive deal so he won’t keep selling to the Globe.

Sun, Nov 2, 2008:

- Peter spends the weekend resting.

Mon, Nov 3, 2008:

- MJ transfers to Midtown for its better theater magnet (and secretly to be closer to Peter), and Harry goes to Europe to get help. Only Peter and Gwen know about his drug problem.

- The symbiote is discovered on John’s shuttle, the first exposure the general public has had to real, indisputable evidence of alien life. (*S1E9 The Uncertainty Principle*)

- Peter hears the news and learns the symbiote was taken to the Connors’ lab for analysis, as Curt is the country’s leading biogeneticist. (The Fantastic Four are fighting Mole Man at the center of the Earth right now.)

- At night, Spidey visits the lab for a peek at the alien, where he meets Black Cat trying to steal it. The symbiote secretly latches onto Peter. Chameleon, disguised as Connors, calls the police on them.

Tues, Nov 4, 2008:

- Spidey’s blamed for the alien theft, and Eddie is mad at Peter for taking pictures instead of calling the police.

- The Bugle claims Spider-Man and Black Cat were working together. Chameleon tells his cohorts Tinkerer and Quentin Beck that this gives him an idea, and he starts robbing banks disguised as Spider-Man.

- Spidey realizes he’s bonded with the symbiote, which he thinks is awesome because it makes him way more powerful. He decides to keep it.
Wed, Nov 5, 2008:

-Flash says Halloween was “last week.”

-Spidey hunts for Chameleon, and Black Cat offers to help because she liiiiiikes him. They catch Chameleon, and Peter almost confesses to stealing the alien, but the symbiote sways him against it.

-Black Cat gives Peter his first kiss, not realizing she’s 19 (according to Greg Weisman) while Peter’s a mere 16, a little young for her. Luckily she never throws up on him like in the Ultimate Comics, though. (What is WITH this show pairing Peter with older women…?). But Black Cat also stole the mayor’s tiger-shaped gem necklace under Spidey’s nose, and then she vanishes, meaning Peter STILL has no girlfriend. (*S1E10 Persona*)

Nov 6-23, 2008, 2 weeks and 2 days:

-Time passes as the symbiote gradually strengthens its grip on Peter’s mind.

-Otto takes interest in Electro and is there for him while Electro’s in Ravencroft, causing Electro to develop a deep affection for Otto.

-Now that Gwen’s “misplaced her clique,” Mary Jane becomes her new best friend.

Mon, Nov 24, 2008:

-Electro is released from Ravencroft, having been declared sane (and I guess they take it on the honor system that he won’t use his powers again). Electro promptly short-circuits the Ryker’s cell locks, letting Ock, the Enforcers, Sandman, Rhino, and Vulture escape with the help of Hammerhead, as Doc Ock and Tombstone have formed a temporary alliance to kill Spider-Man. Hammerhead returns everyone’s equipment to them.

Tues, Nov 25, 2008:

-Spider-Man is ambushed by the Sinister Six and narrowly escapes.

-Aunt May happens to be nearby and has a heart attack, but Peter goes to bed without realizing it.

-MJ goes on a date with Eddie but freaks out when he speeds his motorcycle through traffic while rambling about Peter. MJ realizes Eddie only went on this date to slight Peter, as Eddie now hates him.

-While Peter sleeps, the symbiote hears the radio announce that the Sinister Six have taken hostages at a bank, and it hijacks Peter’s body to go fight them. Symby seems to have the best intentions, single-handedly beating the Six, but it goes too far in trying to kill Doc Ock right in front of the NYPD, and it’s an incredible strain on Peter’s body.

-The Sinister Six are returned to Ryker’s and Ravencroft.
Wed, Nov 26, 2008:

-Peter finds photos of last night’s fight and realizes the symbiote hijacked his body but Symby persuades him to keep it anyways.

-MJ shows up to tell him May’s in the hospital. *(S1E11 Group Therapy)*

-Peter runs to the hospital, where Eddie butts heads with him.

-As he leaves, Peter’s handed a steep hospital bill, causing him to lash out at his harem of Gwen, MJ, and Liz when they try to comfort him later at school.

-Spidey cuts class to go to Tombstone’s tower to accept his offer for money. Tombstone forbids Spidey from fighting petty crime for one week to prove his loyalty.

-Eddie learns that with the alien stolen, he’s lost his job and must drop out of college.

-MJ comforts Gwen and urges her to confess her feelings to Peter.

-At the hospital, Eddie blames Peter for losing him his job and they start to fight.

-Flash of all people calls Peter out on his behavior.

-Peter realizes the symbiote is messing with his head and goes to a church, where he tries to rip it off himself. He happens to hit the church bell and realizes the symbiote hates vibrations. The symbiote traps Peter in a cocoon, but a dream-visions of Uncle Ben helps Peter fight his way out.

-Spidey returns the symbiote to the lab and tries to freeze it to death right in front of a horrified Eddie. Spidey leaves, but the symbiote survives the freezing (Who’d have thought an alien that came to Earth on an asteroid would be an extremophile?). The symbiote bonds with Eddie, showing him all Peter’s thoughts and memories and turning them into Venom. *(S1E12 Intervention)*

-Spidey backs out of Tombstone’s deal, but then Venom pops up to take the offer instead. Tombstone accepts if Venom can bring him Spider-Man’s head.

Thurs, Nov 27, 2008:

-Thanksgiving Break, no school.

-Venom attacks Peter, who realizes the symbiote bonded with Eddie and told him everything. Venom kidnaps Gwen because she’s who Peter “loves the most.” Peter saves Gwen, but now the poor girl’s more traumatized than ever.

-Peter offers to take the symbiote back, tricking it into leaving Eddie so he can capture it. Eddie runs away while Spidey drops the symbiote in cement, which he wrongly assumes will kill it.

-The Stacys come over for Thanksgiving dinner. Gwen kisses Peter. *(S1E13 Nature vs. Nurture)*

Fri, Nov 28, 2008:

-Spidey has a nightmare about Venom and checks Eddie’s dorm at ESU, but Eddie’s already moved out. Peter probably should’ve checked before going to sleep, but I guess he was tired from
yesterday’s battle.

**Nov 29-30, 2 days:**

-This’d be the time Gwen starts seeing a therapist if she hadn’t started already.

**Mon, Dec 1, 2008:**

-At school, Peter tries to talk to Gwen, but Liz begs Peter to tutor her to try and steal him away.

-Mysterio attacks an armored car. Spidey tries to stop him but Mysterio gets away.

**Tues, Dec 2, 2008:**

-The Connors, Norman, and Aaron Warren welcome Aaron’s brother Miles to the ESU lab. Martha laments Eddie’s disappearance. Norman convinces her to let Peter be an intern again.

-Spider-Man tracks Mysterio to his lair and defeats him, unmasking him as Quinten Beck, but it’s actually an android double (which still looks like Beck because he doesn’t want anyone else taking credit for the role of Mysterio). Tinkerer calls the Master Planner (Doc Ock) to say everything’s going according to plan.

-Peter gets an exclusive freelance contract and payment from the Bugle. Then Norman calls and offers to mentor him. (*S2E1 Blueprints*)

**Wed, Dec 3, 2008:**

-Doc Ock asks Kraven and Calypso to come to America so Kraven can hunt Spider-Man, so they hop on a plane.

-Peter thanks the Connors for taking him back and is introduced to Debra Whitman, who acts cold and aloof. Gwen worries Eddie was attacked by Venom.

-Warren enters, gushing about the Lizard research jiving with his own mammal research, but Connors shuts him down.

-Spidey is attacked by Kraven but easily beats him.

-Kraven uses a piece of Spidey’s torn costume to have his lion Gulyadkin track Peter’s smell to the ESU lab, where he confronts Miles Warren, who was secretly continuing the Lizard research to let it work on mammals, too. Warren, wanting to test it, claims to have given Spidey his powers, and Kraven demands his own powers. Warren makes him pay lots of money, pointing out it’s in Kraven’s best interest to give him an incentive not to screw up the procedure.

**Thurs, Dec 4, 2008:**
-It presumably takes some time for Warren to create Kraven’s feline serum.

Fri, Dec 5, 2008:

-Flash breaks his leg in a football match. Severe fractures can take anywhere from 3-6 months to heal.

-Warren turns Kraven into a lion/leopard/cheetah hybird who, unlike the Lizard, retains his human mind.

-Spidey’s attacked by Kraven. He beats him, but then Kraven is teleported away by Calypso’s magic. This is Spider-Man’s first encounter with real magic, though he doesn’t realize it yet.

-Kraven awakens in Calypso’s limo, where Ock asks him to join the Sinister Six.

-Peter arrives at the hospital, where Liz ignores him to comfort Flash. (S2E2 Destructive Testing)

Dec 6-22, 2008:

-Spider-Man spends his time trying to track down intel on Mysterio’s stolen equipment, which I guess is his excuse for putting off the whole Gwen-or-Liz conflict for so long (Get your shit together, Peter).

-The Connors spend the next few weeks trying to cure John Jameson of alien spores brought from the symbiote. (Word of God)

Tues, Dec 23, 2008:

-Spidey interrogates Blackie Gaxton at the Big Sky billiard hall, leaning Mysterio is working for a new crime lord (Doc Ock). Spidey corners Patch (Foswell in disguise), who tells him this crime lord is the “Master Planner,” and Tinkerer, spying from a hidden camera, tells Ock Spidey’s closing in. Ock orders him to round up the Sinister Six.

-At Ryker’s, Vulture turns out to be a hologram and Mysterio an android, and Sandman and Rhino have also escaped. At Ravencroft, Ock and Electro are in group therapy when Kraven breaks them free. But Otto pretends to have returned to his old meek personality. Electro is disgusted with him and leaves him behind.

Wed, Dec 24, 2008:

-Ock announces his plans to the Sinister Six and Tinkerer to start a new age of supervillainy by killing Spider-Man.

-Liz flirts with Peter but then pays more attention to Flash, causing Peter to go to Gwen, but Gwen snaps that she won’t be his second choice.

-The Sinister Six arrives and Spidey beats them by luring them away from each other and picking
them off one-by-one in clever ways. But the Sinister Six all escape (with Mysterio leaving another robot double).

-At Ravencroft, Otto’s dragged away by his tentacle arms, staging a kidnapping.

**Thurs, Dec 25, 2008:**

- Peter and Aunt May unwrap a picture of Uncle Ben. *(S2E3 Reinforcements)*

**Dec 26-30, 2008, 5 days:**

- Peter continues to drag his heels on the whole Gwen-Liz conflict.

**Wed, Dec 31, 2008:**

- At his lair, Otto reveals himself to the others and explains he didn’t escape with Electro and Kraven to throw Spidey off the trail.

- Peter meets with Norman, who introduces him to Morris Bench (who will later become Hydro-Man), who’s installing a bomb to destroy an old tenement, but Ock’s new invention sets it off early and Spidey has to save everyone.

- Ock now has control of most of NYC’s wireless devices via the neck-chip that controls his tentacles and wants to expand his control to the whole world. He uses his new powers to send police on a wild goose chase and cause massive traffic accidents.

- Electro abducts Gwen, and Ock uses her to blackmail Captain Stacy into giving him the global access codes to Homeland Security.

- Spidey interrogates Tinkerer and goes to Ock’s underwater lair, where he goads Electro into attacking until the base collapses. He also tricks Ock into destroying his own machine thingy. Ock has his base self-destruct, leaving Electro to die as he flees in an escape pod.

- Spidey is pinned beneath rubble but manages to lift it to save Gwen (and Electro!). They escape in the nick of time.

- At one minute to midnight, Peter tries to call Gwen, but then that little hussy harlot temptress Liz shows up, saying she broke up with Flash just to be with Peter, and then kisses Peter THOTS GET OUT REEEEEEEEEEEE. *(S2E4 Shear Strength)*

**Jan 1-4, 2009, 4 days:**

The dark times.

**Mon, Jan 5, 2009:**
-Spidey glimpses Eddie (in his homemade Venom costume) but then he’s gone.

-Sandman tussles with Spidey and has improved control of his powers.

-Winter break is over. Liz is happy because Mark’s back from juvenile detention.

-Flash, angry at Liz for leaving him, randomly spots Sha Shan, and asks her to his birthday party.

-Harry’s back from Europe and has a crush on Gwen because she’s the only one who noticed or cared when he was on the Green. He asks her out to Flash’s birthday and Gwen accepts to spite Peter.

-St. John Devereaux is the new drama teacher and Captain Stacy is the new criminology teacher.

-Hammerhead offers Sandman his “big score,” while Spidey tries in vain to get Sandman to use his powers for good and not evil.

**Tues, Jan 6, 2009:**

-Peter sees Eddie again at Flash’s birthday party, but then he has to go fight Sandman.

-Hammerhead gets Sandman to rob an oil tankard, but Marko puts the crew in danger, and he drops everything to save them. Then the oil tankard explodes and Sandman’s turned into glass, which Spidey and Hammerhead wrongly assume has killed him. But actually, Sandman merely decides to stop being a criminal and leaves Manhattan for now.

-Because he keeps seeing Eddie everywhere, Spidey goes to check on where he left the symbiote buried. Once he leaves, Eddie, having tricked Spidey by wearing a replica Venom suit complete with his own web-shooters, frees the symbiote with a sledgehammer. (*S2E5 Small Steps*)

-My fic elaborates on this since I find this plot point a little bit silly and contrived. Remember that the symbiote showed him Peter’s memories. Once the symbiote left Eddie, those memories started to fade, but Eddie held onto them enough to know how to build Peter’s web-shooters and to remember how Peter trapped Sandman in cement once. Web-swinging without super-strength nearly ripped Eddie’s arms out his sockets, but he’s a pretty strong guy so he managed okay enough. (*Ch 60 Energy Pyramid*)

-Venom attacks some police officers disguised as Black Suit Spidey

**Wed, Jan 7, 2009:**

-Flash learns Sha Shan didn’t come to his party because she thinks he’s a meathead.

-John Jameson turns into Captain Jupiter. In an oddity for this show, this was never foreshadowed or setup in advance, but it turns out there were alien spores on the symbiote, which injected John.

-On Peter’s suggestion, Jameson has his son become a superhero to take down Spidey.

-Venom frames Spidey for more crimes and Spidey refuses to prove his innocence by revealing his secret ID, annoying Jupiter.
**Thurs, Jan 8, 2009:**

-Gwen becomes Harry’s girlfriend to make Peter jealous.

-Flash demands Peter help him win over Sha Shan, and Peter suggests joining her drama club.

-Jupiter’s attacked by Venom, and the spores screw up his brain and he tries to kill Spidey, but Spidey beats him and John’s taken to Ravencroft, leaving Jameson heartbroken.

**Fri, Jan 9, 2009:**

-Everyone got a part in the play but Flash.

-Jameson blames Spider-Man for John’s condition, and then Venom jumps in and announces Peter Parker is Spider-Man. *(S2E6 Growing Pains)*

-At this point, by all reasonable measures, Spidey’s secret ID should be caput. Venom could go around telling the media Spidey’s origin story with great detail and accuracy. He starts his “Peter Parker is Spider-Man” internet forum for this very purpose. However, I suppose since Venom was stupid enough to commit a bunch of crimes to try and frame Spidey, the people of Manhattan aren’t colorblind and might realize he’s a criminal, so I guess Venom doesn’t have the luxury of sitting down for a tell-all interview. Spidey’s secret ID is more or less just something passed around on the backwoods internet forums and such. Peter gets doxed and has people harassing his house and whatnot on top of the media now hounding him.

**Sat, Jan 10, 2009:**

-The Connors laugh it off at first but realize it’d explain a lot. Eddie returns and they give him his old job back. Eddie complains to Peter that the Bugle hasn’t run his big scoop yet.

-Peter and Gwen get swarmed with reporters and paparazzi, but Gwen laughs off the idea that Peter is Spider-Man. The two start to realize they’re unhappy with their dates and want each other more.

-Spidey confronts Venom and says he’s putting all Peter’s loved ones in danger, but Venom sneers that he can’t wait for Peter’s loved ones to turn against him. They fight in front of the paparazzi.

**Sun, Jan 11, 2009:**

-The media continues making Peter’s life miserable.

**Mon, Jan 12, 2009:**

-Venom steals gene cleanser from ESU and tries to depower Peter after publicly unmasking him, but Peter instead gets Venom to drink the gene cleanser. This causes the symbiote to get poisoned and run away from Eddie down a sewer. Because the cleanser destroys all non-human DNA and the symbiote is nothing BUT non-human DNA, Spidey assumes it’s dead now. What he doesn’t realize is that this trigger’s a “pregnancy reflex” that purges the symbiote of the poison by making
it give birth to the Carnage symbiote. The Venom symbiote wanders the sewers, heavily pregnant.

-Eddie was bonded so tight, he’s gone crazy now and is carted off to Ravencroft.

-Since Flash helped save Spidey during the fight, Devereaux gives him a part in the play.

-Warren announces that due to the gene cleanser theft and the screwups with Electro and Colonel Jupiter, he’s taking full control of the lab.

-The Bugle declares Peter innocent because they think Venom is just confused because Peter dressed as Spidey for Halloween, and who would be stupid enough to do that if they were really Spider-Man?

-Cap Stacy heavily implies to Peter that he knows his secret ID but understands he needs it to keep his loved ones safe. (S2E7 Identity Crisis)

Jan 13-20, 2009, 1 week and 1 day:

-Peter deals with the aftermath of his secret ID kerfuffle, and eventually things more or less settle down again.

-Eddie is in a sorry state and Ravencroft isn’t admitting visitors quite yet. However, Gwen knows that Eddie is claiming to be Venom, and she knows Venom is the black monster who grabbed her last Thanksgiving. But as far as Gwen knows, Eddie is crazy, so she thinks that since Eddie hates both Peter and Spider-Man, his mind conflated those two things. She doesn’t yet believe Peter is Spidey.

Wed, Jan 21, 2009:

-In a Manhattan high-rise, Donald Menken leads the bidding for Rhino suit specs. Hammerhead, Doc Ock, Vulture, Patch, Silver Sable, and Kingsley all participate. Black Cat tries to steal the specs but is scared away. Kingsley bids higher than he’s deposited in his bidding account, so the auction is postponed.

-After the Venom ordeal, Norman now suspects Peter is Spider-Man, so he gives him the Osberry phone to spy on him, with the added benefit of making Harry even more jealous of Peter.

-Peter’s and Liz’s relationship is a bit strained because Peter is always running off to be Spider-Man and stuff.

-Peter offers to take pictures of the Rhino suit auction for Foswell, and he learns Foswell is Patch. Foswell thinks Silvermane’s release from jail will spark a huge gang war, and whoever has the Rhino suit specs will have an army of super-mercenaries to help out.

-Kingsley wins the bidding, and Peter is suspicious he’s more than a mere perfume manufacturer.

-Hammerhead and Silver Sable fight each other to steal the specs from Kingsley, and Spidey learns they used to date. Doc Ock sics Rhino on Kingsley. Rhino doesn’t want the specs out so that he can remain unique and valuable, so he and Spidey team up to take out the others, and Rhino crushes the specs.
-The police use knockout gas on Rhino and take him to Ryker’s.

-Menken refuses to give Kingsley a refund, and it turns out Norman gave them a fake chup in the first place. This was simply a way for Oscorp to cash in on the looming gang war. (S2E8 Accomplices)

**Wed, Feb 4, 2009:**

-Tinkerer gives super-suits to Montana (now Ricochet) and Ox.

-Tombstone is mad at Hammerhead for his failures with the oil rig and Rhino suit auction.

-The Midtown kids do an afterschool police ride-along.

-Norman meets with Hammerhead again, as Tombstone wants more supervillains and enough time has passed since the creation of Sandman and Rhino that the heat is off Oscorp again. Norman agrees and brings in Warren as Otto’s replacement.

-MJ and Mark start flirting (but not flirting flirting) with each other.

-Flash blames Harry for his broken knee because Harry left the team before the championship, and Harry admits to his Globulin Green addiction, which angers Flash because it means all the games Harry plays should be disqualified.

-Spidey beats the Enforcers and they’re sent to Ryker’s.

-Principle Davis removes the championship trophy. Flash admits to ratting Harry out, which makes Flash’s friends all hate him but now Sha Shan likes him.

-After school, in his bedroom, Harry opens his secret stash of Globulin Green... only to destroy it all. (S2E9 Probable Cause)

**Feb 5-13, 2009, 9 days:**

-Peter continues to date THE UNDESERVING LITTLE TWERP RAAAAAARGH.

**Sat, Feb 14, 2009:**

-Harry finally introduces his dad to Gwen. Norman makes a comment about Gwen’s appearance, prompting Gwen to cry and run off to MJ to swallow her pride and beg for a makeover. (Ch 68 Alma Mater)

-During this chapter, I mention Malekith the Accursed, a Thor villain, even though Thor hasn’t started operating on Earth yet. Let’s assume Malekitch once battled the Fantastic Four, so that’s how they know about him. The general public assumes he’s just a regular old supervillain.

-Tombstone and Silvermane are having their mob war. They meet with Doc Ock. But it turns out this was all arranged by Hammerhead. He knocks out Sable to keep her safe then throws Tombstone a gun to make it look like his plan. A fight breaks out while Hammerhead goes and hides, hoping the three villains will kill each other and he can be the Big Man.
-Gwen’s makeover is complete in time for the Valentine’s Day dinner the Midtown High kids have at Jazzy Gianni’s. Peter runs off to take pics of the gang war, and he pays more attention to Gwen than to Liz. Meanwhile Mark suddenly has a lot of money (from gambling). Flash and Sha Shan dance, their relationship blossoming.

-Spider-Man takes out Silvermane and Doc Ock. Tombstone attacks him in private to protect his image, but Spidey still gets him arrested, too.

**Sun, Feb 15, 2009:**

- Spidey is furious to learn Tombstone made bail, but Cap Stacy says Tombstone’s now under federal surveillance, throwing a wrench in his criminal activities. But now there’s a power vacuum soon to be filled by the Green Goblin. *(S2E10 Gangland)*

- Otto is returned to Ravencroft, where he continues to act like he’s a normal, sane person who just had an “unfortunate breakdown.” *(A Handful of Thorns)*

- Around this time, Fisk is forming a partnership with Oscorp, and Fisk is smart enough to sit back and allow lesser people to squabble over the Big Man title for now.

**Feb 16-17, 2009, 2 says:**

- Mark goes missing for days.

**Wed, Feb 18, 2009:**

- At the Big Sky Lounge, Mark has a gambling debt to Blackie Gaxton. The Green Goblin flies in to announce himself the new Big Man and has Blackie give him Mark as a human guinea pig.

- Mark is taken to a secret lab beneath an abandoned police station. Warren claims to have perfected the sub-dermal armor process with nanotech. Mark is turned into Molten Man, and they lie and say he can turn it on and off at will when in reality, Gobbie has the switch, and he’ll only turn the armor off if Mark kills Spider-Man.

- Mark battles Spider-Man, but Liz and MJ are put in danger. Spidey wins the fight, the Big Sky burns down, and Liz and MJ get all upset as Mark is taken to the Vault. Gobbie shuts Mark’s armor off before flying away.

- Curt discovers Warren’s notes on subdermal armor and is appalled, but Warren blackmails him into silence with the knowledge of the Lizard ordeal. *(S2E11 Subtext)*

**Feb 19-22, 2009, 4 days:**

- Peter’s relationship with Liz continues to deteriorate (GOOD) as deep down, he truly wants to be with Gwen.
Mon, Feb 23, 2009:

-Norman invites Cap Stacy, Jameson, and Spidey to Ryker’s new wing, the Vault, where supervillains are held. Spidey tests it, but Green Goblin hacks the system and releases all the supervillains. Beck is revealed as (drumroll) another robot! And Gobbie switches Mark’s armor back on.

-Black Cat arrives to free her dad. Spidey realizes her dad is the man who killed Uncle Ben and he’s pissed. Due to his guilt, Walter manually activates the Vault’s knockout gas, knocking himself out in the process, allowing himself to remain imprisoned.

-Black Cat blames Spider-Man for infecting her dad with a conscience and runs off.

-Spidey sees Green Goblin and assumes it’s Harry again.

-Harry missed the play because the Green Goblin kidnapped him, and Hobie Brown takes over his role. (S2E12 Opening Night)

Tues, Feb 24, 2009:

-Gobbie’s pumpkin-head minions are running amok.

-Harry escapes Goblin and explains to Peter and Gwen about his Green addiction and how he thought he was the Goblin… up until the real Gobbie kidnapped him. Gwen tells Harry to go to Norman for help (Great idea, Gwen!).

-Once Harry leaves, Peter and Gwen finally confess their feelings for each other, but Harry eavesdrops on them and gets butthurt.

-Spidey arrives at the Osborn penthouse and accuses Norman (actually Chameleon) of being the Goblin. Turns out that secret passage from last Halloween was just the wine cellar, though.

-Then the balcony is blown up by the Green Goblin. Chameleon-Norman suggests Donald Menken might be the Goblin.

Wed, Feb 25, 2009:

-Peter breaks up with Liz. They’d been together for 56 days by my count, almost two months. TWO MONTHS TOO LONG.

-The Connors move to Florida and Warren takes over the lab, and Martha warns Peter and Gwen not to trust him.

-Norman-Chameleon gives Spidey Menken’s location, but turns out it’s a trap. Spidey and Green Goblin have a huge battle, with water towers converted into pumpkin-bomb cannons and armed Pumpkin-Head minions on the rooftop and in aircrafts.

-Spidey unmasks Goblin as Norman. Harry unmarks Chameleon, who escapes. Norman explains that he used the Green’s gas form, which (according to him) doesn’t make you crazy. He claims he framed Harry to protect him and make him into man.
-Spidey crams a pumpkin bomb in the glider’s tailpipe, making Norman crash into a pumpkin-bomb water tower. Norman is presumed dead in the explosion, but he actually survives and runs away, though the blast left him badly burned and scarred.

**Thurs, Feb 26, 2009:**

-The funeral is organized.

-I guess everyone saw Norman unmasked or it got out to the media somehow, so today’s Daily Bugle is all about how Norman was the Green Goblin. Everyone knows now.

-The Globulin drug’s inconclusive effects could have possibly created a “more sympathetic public image” for Norman in the wake of his outing as the Green Goblin

-Emily takes control of Oscorp for now, but Harry will get it once he turns 18.

**Fri, Feb 27, 2009:**

-At Norman’s funeral, Harry blames Spider-Man for his death, saying Norman was sick and needed help. Harry guilt-trips Gwen into continuing to date him, implying he’ll relapse on the Green if she doesn’t.

-The Connors head to Florida while a disguised Norman flies to Grand Cayman. *(S2E13 Final Curtain)*

-From AskGreg: “I can confirm that the Fantastic Four, the Hulk and Ant-Man are all active at this stage, and that Professor X is just beginning to set up his school with his first couple of students (Cyclops and Beast).”

-“In my mind in the Spec Spidey universe, no one knows anything mutany about Charles Xavier. He's simply the headmaster of a private school. The Fantastic Four are indeed celebrity superheroes, the kind that fight COSMIC menaces, like the Skrull. Ant-Man, I'd think is pretty much operating under the radar (pun intended). Hulk is like a myth. Captain America is a memory.”

- “The Hulk was jumping around the American Southwest, more legend than anything.”

- “Thor didn't have his hammer back yet. Tony Stark had not yet been injured. Namor was still a bum. Captain America was still frozen. (I felt that Uncle Ben had a big collection of World War II Captain America memorabilia in the attic, which in part inspired Peter to put on a costume in the first place.)”

- “Donald Blake had not gone to Norway yet”

- “Moon Knight was probably not Moon Knight yet. Hawkeye was probably still a circus performer; Black Widow, a Russian spy. Dr. Strange was probably still in Tibet. Over time - and given enough episodes AND PERMISSION - I’d have used anyone and everyone.”

-“If you're asking me if Matt Murdock exists, than of course the answer is yes. But he hasn't put on a costume yet.”

“So in OUR continuity, Spidey first appeared in public (at the Venue) in May or June of Peter's
sophomore year. Our two seasons take place between September and March of his Junior Year. So the FF are around already, fighting COSMIC BIG BADS. (They probably made their debut in November of Pete's sophomore year.) But guys like Iron Man, Thor and Daredevil have yet to debut.”

-Greg also says Frank Castle’s family has not yet been killed.

Feb 28-Mar 3, 4 days:

- Spidey hunts down the remaining Pumpkin-Heads and things quiet back down.
- Fisk waits to fill the power vacuum until Tombstone and the Manfredis are out of the picture permanently.

Wed, Mar 4, 2009:

- Let’s say that there are eyewitness accounts and blurry cellphone pictures and video claiming Norman Osborn himself is the Green Goblin. The Daily Bugle did a big expose on it, and obviously Peter was all for it, but it took a couple days to get the information together. It just dropped today, though, after some of the clearer footage has been examined. Thus, tomorrow morning is the first May hears of Norman being the Green Goblin. However, the general public is sympathetic to Norman, thinking his experimental Gloublin Green drug made him go insane.

- Peter makes more web-fluid. The guy at the chemical store starts to suspect he’s making drugs.
- Spider-Man saves a six-year-old girl, Heather, from traffic.
- Spidey’s web-shooters break due to the constant use since last summer.
- Spidey chases a random mook. The mook escapes down into the sewers, and Spidey is too grumpy to go after him. While down there, the mook happens to enter the hideout. (Ch 1 Dramatic Irony)

Thurs, Mar 5, 2009:

- That morning, Peter studies for today’s English final over Midsummer Night’s, still lamenting he missed the play. He talks with Aunt May about his current girlfriend situation. (A Handful of Thorns)

- I’m going to assume “English final” means the final exam before spring break or something, since it seems way too soon for the semester to end. (The Spec Spidey / Gargoyles crossover was churned out quickly for fun anyways, so we’re not supposed to take everything in it too seriously.)

- May says that the Daily Bugle claims Norman was the Green Goblin, but May is skeptical. Peter insists it’s true. (This means this must be happening relatively soon after the show’s finale. I mean, how long could Peter and May really go without talking about this major thing that happened to the father of Peter’s best friend?)
As of today, John still wants power, and Eddie is still obsessed with hate. He wants to “keep the hate alive,” probably for when the symbiote reunites with him. He’s able to speak coherently at this point and could even help work on an excavation project if one was being done.

Now that Eddie is speaking coherently, Ravencroft allows for visitation. Though let’s say Eddie is slipping in and out of it at the moment.

That afternoon, at Midtown High, Gwen asks Peter how he did on the English exam. Peter reveals that English is his worst subject because “it’s all so objective.” Harry butts in, defensive about Peter and Gwen speaking in private.

Then he gives them invitations to spend Spring Break traveling by private jet to Miami for an all-expenses-paid stay at the Oscorp Winter Compound on the Beach. Harry’s also invited Kong, Glory, Flash, Sha Shan, Sally, Rand, Liz, and of course Mary Jane.

Harry claims the trip is to help clear his head after his dad’s death.

Harry says this is a “couples thing,” and now that Mark’s in jail, Harry thinks Peter and MJ would make such a great pair. Peter says they could maybe go as friends.

That afternoon, Curt arrives at Ravencroft from Florida, claiming he’s made some real progress on a cure for Max.

It seems a little silly to suppose Curt moved all the way to Florida only to immediately swing back by Manhattan, but I, uh, guess it’s not impossible.

Since he’s not interrupted by gargoyles or anything, Curt is able to leave his cure with Ravencroft. However, at this point. Electro doesn’t even want to be cured anymore and is happy to stay as Electro forever (This is thanks to Otto’s influence on Max. Otto wants to use Max for his power and has thus encouraged him to keep his powers forever). They can’t give him the cure without his consent, legally, and so Curt leaves it with Ravencroft for now.

Meanwhile, Spidey swings through the city. He suspects Harry is trying to torture him and Gwen, but why? But while he’s in love with Gwen, “MJ is quite the consolation prize.” But no, Peter just has to get through the next few weeks until Harry’s in a better place, and then the breakup plan will proceed. (A Handful of Thorns)

Spider-Man battles the Grizzly, a mentally ill guy in a bear costume with no powers.

Emily is becoming CEO of Oscorp for now. Harry will inherit it once he’s 18, and so he’s switching from high school to private tutors after this semester so he can intensely prepare for the job.

Peter and Gwen go to a ceremony with Harry for his mom becoming the new CEO. Tombstone and Fisk are there, too.

Everybody knows Norman was the real Green Goblin and got himself blown up, and so Kingsley doesn’t even bother claiming to be him, instead making it clear up front that he’s a different guy with the same tech.

There is a ceremony to make Harry’s mom the new CEO of Oscorp. Tombstone and Fisk attend.

The Hobgoblin attacks the ceremony. He wants to kill Tombstone and Fisk as well as Emily and Harry to wipe out the Osborn lineage, thus ruining Oscorp and making Hobgoblin the Big Man. (Ch 2 Foreshadowing)
- Hobgoblin attacks. Spidey defeats and unmasks him, revealing him to be a brainwashed Donald Menken, but nobody really believes he was brainwashed and he’s sent to Ryker’s.

- Harry shoots a gun at Spider-Man, making him realize how deep Harry’s vendetta runs.

- Smythe shows up in Harry’s bedroom to give him exposition about Norman’s true nature and force Harry to build super-mercenaries and stuff.

- Kingsley decides that Spider-Man must die before he can become the Big Man (especially seeing all the trouble Spidey’s caused for other aspiring Big Men) and decides to team-up with Otto. (Ch 3 Unreliable Narrator)

Fri, Mar 6, 2009:

- Gwen has a nightmare about Venom. Deep down, she knows he’s really Eddie.

- May has a conference in her house with several other parents – Robbie Robertson, Rose Thompson, George Stacy. May wants to chaperone Peter on his Miami trip alongside Anna Watson and Emily Osborn. Peter is “thrilled.”

- May does not actually know Emily Osborn personally (And Emily’s apparently never spoken a word to Flash’s mom) but she does trust Emily since she’s Harry’s mom and Harry is Peter’s best friend.

- I’d imagine the fact that Emily lost her husband a few days ago and learned he was a murderous supervillain might also be a factor (So how many days have passed that May doesn’t think it’s insensitive to invite along a grieving widower?)

- I believe May’s doing this purely because she believes Peter needs a chaperon. She can be a bit overbearing.

- It’s revealed that Hammerhead and Silver Sable are currently “on the run” (which lines up with my fanfic, yay!). The government’s still watching Tombstone’s every move. (A Handful of Thorns)

- This was the last day of school before spring break.

- MJ sees Peter is mopey over the breakup with Liz and not getting with Gwen after all and agrees to hang out with him, which is also a chance to talk about going to Miami as a platonic couple.

- Gwen oversees, gets the wrong idea, and gets upset.

- While she interns at the lab today, Gwen is consoled by Warren, who begins to develop a sick infatuation with her.

- Peter and MJ enter the Silver Spoon mid-conversation.

- MJ doesn’t want to be Peter’s Miami date because Gwen’s her best friend at Midtown High and she “can’t do that to Gwen.” Peter insists they’d just be going as friends. MJ says that would be great, but “there’s no way (Gwen) would see me as anything but a threat.” Peter jokes about asking Miss Brant again, implying he or Gwen has told MJ about that.

- MJ reveals she’s already asked Tiny to be her plus one, anyways. He’s cute. This could mean either she and Tiny are going as friends or Mark’s already broken up with MJ. It could go either
-Peter wishes he could skip the trip, but Aunt May’s going, and Peter thinks the relaxation will be good for her after her heart attack.

-Seymour butts in and reveals he’s been invited too and is going stag, thus inspiring Peter to do the same.

-Next, Peter and MJ go to the mall to hang out, where they bump into the Spot, a super-mercenary created by TriCorp, Oscorp’s competitor (We never actually saw any of their super-mercenaries in the show itself even though it said TriCorp made them, too). (Ch 4 Point of View)

-Spidey beats Scorpion, who’s sent to the Vault.

-Harry freaks out about all this, but Smythe incentives him with more Globulin Green. (Ch 5 Parallelism)

-Gwen tells Peter that she’d asked Ravencroft to call her when they were allowing visitation for Eddie, and they’re allowing it now. She wants to visit Eddie before they leave to Miami for a week. She hates to abandon Eddie for that long. Peter remembers Gwen has no real reason to think Peter’s relationship with Eddie is that bad, so to keep up appearances, he has to agree to go.

-While here, Peter and Gwen can learn about Electro having a cure that he refuses to take. That’s quite a startling change from how Electro was at first.

-As it turns out, though, Eddie, while lucid, still insists to anyone who listens that Peter is Spider-Man. Peter decides to wait outside, claiming his presence might upset Eddie, and so Gwen goes in by herself. Eddie gives her very good evidence that Peter is Spider-Man, and now Gwen is spooked at the possibility and strongly considering it.

-MJ has a chance encounter with Roderick Kingsley, who has pulls in the fashion industry and decides to help make her a model because he has an eye for beauty and can tell she’s exceptionally hot. (Ch 6 Imagery)

-Later that afternoon, Harry’s rented a party bus to house the group of Aunt May, Rosie Thompson, Emily Osborn, Mary Jane, Tiny, Sally, Rand, Gwen, Harry, Kong, Glory, Flash, Sha Shan, Liz, Jason, Peter, Seymour, plus two other unnamed teenagers, making three adults and sixteen children plus the bus driver (who is a Greg Bishansky cameo). The bus is taking everyone to the airport where the private jet awaits.

-The Midtown High group boards Oscorp’s private jet en route to Miami.

-MJ runs crying to Peter because it turns out Tiny’s dumb as a rock and now MJ wishes she’d gone with Peter after all. “Just say we’ll spend the week as a threesome, okay, Tiger.” “Sure!” “Not that kind of threesome.” (A Handful of Thorns)

Sat, Mar 7, 2009:

-Maimi Trip Day 1

-Everyone goes to the beach, where the other kids all see Peter shirtless and are shocked how fit he is.
-Peter takes pics of MJ for her portfolio to kick off her modeling career.

-Peter and Gwen visit the Connors and meet Michael Morbius, who the Connors are trying to cure of his blood disease. Once everyone leaves, a desperate Michael takes a modified version of the Lizard serum but with vampire bat DNA, which he thinks will cure him. *(Ch 7 Setting)*

**Sun, Mar 8, 2009:**

-Miami Trip Day 2

-Peter and Gwen decide to sacrifice vacation time to help cure Michael, but then Mike transforms into a vampire bat creature and a fight breaks out. Peter’s secret ID is revealed to Gwen, and Morbius’s mutagenic venom turns him into Man-Spider and Curt back into the Lizard. Gwen is able to fix things by getting all the monsters to take gene cleanser, but this is now yet another in a long line of traumatic experiences for her.

-Peter explains everything to Gwen and the Connors, who agree to keep his secret.

**Fri, Mar 13, 2009:**

-Miami Trip Day 7

-The Miami trip ends and everyone returns to Manhattan.

-Meanwhile, Vincent Stegron betrays the Connors and steals Lizard research for Tricorp. This research will eventually be modified to turn him into a Dinosaur-Man. *(Ch 8 Allusion)*

-The Connors never manage to cure Michael and the blood disease kills him shortly after all this. It’s Warren’s fault for banishing the Connors to Florida, where they have less resources.

**Sat, Mar 14, 2009:**

-Peter returns home and settles down from the Miami trip.

**Sun, Mar 15, 2009:**

-Sandman returns to Manhattan and plays with that little girl on Rockaway Beach again.

-Sandman reveals he’s still alive and wants to be a superhero now. He defeats the Kangaroo.

-Jameson orders Ned Lee to investigate Kingsley’s perfume company. *(Ch 9 Rising Action)*

-Sandman becomes a huge threat to Oscorp’s operations. To kill him, Morris Bench is kidnapped and turned into Hydro-Man because he was in debt just like Mark. Harry is mortified they’d mutate someone against their will.

-Sandman defeats Kangaroo II, who idolized the first Kangaroo. Sandman’s attacked by Hydro-Man, infecting him with nanomachines that seemingly kill them both. In reality, though, the virus
fails to completely kill them, and the two are found by the little girl who’s been coming to the beach to play with Sandman. She hides them in her room and slowly nurses them back to health. *(Ch 10 Oxymoron)*

-Spidey captures another D-list villain, the Gibbon.

**Mon, Mar 16, 2009:**

-school starts back

-Peter suspects Warren’s behind everything because the guy’s creepy and was a friend of Norman’s.

-Grizzly, Spot, Gibbon, and Kangaroo II escape from Ravencroft, buy mechsuits from Tinkerer, and become a nuisance thanks to Spot’s teleporting powers.

-John is seemingly cured of the spores and released from Ravencroft, but then he relapses and goes to Warren to get more power.

-John barges into the ESU lab, as while in Ravencroft, Otto told him how Warren gave Kraven power once. John grabs a serum Warren left lying out with wolf DNA, turning into Man-Wolf.

-Spidey arrives just in time to save Warren. He goes after Man-Wolf. Jameson begs Spidey not to tell anyone about his son.

-Peter steals more gene cleanser in case more genetically altered supervillains arise. He starts keeping some in his utility belt for emergencies.

**Tues, Mar 17, 2009:**

-St. Patrick’s Day.

-Peter is forced to wake up early, grumpy that it’s a school day.

-To Peter’s surprise, the Bugle apologizes to Spider-Man… on page forty-two. In four-point font. *(Ch 11 Anthropomorphism)*

-Gwen finally breaks up with Harry, and he flips out and smacks her, then flees to Oscorp. He almost drinks more Green but resists. But then Emily reveals herself to him. Now that Harry has proven he can handle the Green, they upgrade him to its gaseous form like he was supposed to have taken in the first place.

-While high on the gas, a “Green Goblin” split personality appears in Harry’s head. Normally this Goblin would only want wanton chaos and destruction, but Harry has the mental fortitude to get the Goblin to fulfill his goals – killing Gwen and Spider-Man. Harry is given a Goblin suit and glider, but he’s had no training yet. *(Ch 12 Antithesis)*

-Spidey battles Goblin Jr. and realizes it’s Harry.

-The Hobgoblin shows up, as having a second, incompetent goblin crime lord is bad for his image. Spidey beats them both, revealing the second Hobgoblin to be a brainwashed Ned Lee.
Spidey returns Harry to his mother, not realizing his mom is evil. Harry is flown back to Europe for more “therapy.” (Ch 13 Climax)

-Peter, Gwen, and Cap Stacy have a long talk. Stacy reluctantly admits that Peter is so good at superheroeing that the police basically rely on him to take out dangerous supervillains. Stacy will keep Spidey’s ID a secret to protect him and his loved ones while praying for the day Spidey isn’t needed.

-Peter explains his origin story to her, and Gwen begins to urge Peter to go to therapy and says it’s not his responsibility to fight every bad guy in the world. Also, Peter and Gwen have their long-awaited make out session.

-At this point, Gwen is swept away with how cool being Spider-Man is and finally getting to date her crush and everything, but over time she grows more and more worried for Peter’s safety.

**Wed, Mar 18, 2009:**

-Peter and Gwen develop spider-tracers, including a special blue one that can alert Gwen to Peter’s location since she worries about him.

**Thurs, Mar 19, 2009:**

-Emily orders Smythe to kill Spider-Man himself just so long as they can salvage some DNA for Warren to clone him.

-Smythe suspects Peter is Spider-Man and sics robots on Midtown High. (Ch 14 Antagonist)

-Spidey battles the Spider-Slayers and uses a tracer to follow them back to the secret lab beneath the abandoned police station. Spidey assumes Smythe was behind everything. Smythe is arrested and sent to Ryker’s.

-School’s out the rest of the week due to the robot attack. (Ch 15 Falling Action)

**Mar 20-22, 3 days:**

-Damage Control repairs the school.

**Mon, Mar 23, 2009:**

-School is in session again.

**Mar 24-Apr 11, 2009, 2 weeks and 5 days:**

-Peter thinks Smythe was the mastermind behind the latest string of super-mercenaries, so the streets are quiet again. He still has to worry about Hobgoblin, Hammerhead, and/or Silver Sable making another pass at the Big Man’s title, though. There’s also TriCorp super-mercenaries to deal
with, but those aren’t nearly as threatening as Oscorp’s baddies.

-But no action happens because those guy are all biding their time for the perfect opportunity to have a mass breakout from the Vault.

-The Legion of Losers is easily defeated by Spider-Man, which reinforces Gwen’s impression that Spider-Man is invincible, his villains are no threat, and he’s the greatest boyfriend ever. Now that she knows he’s Spider-Man, being with Peter makes her feel very safe. She’s not scared of threats like Venom anymore because she knows Peter will protect her.

**Thurs, Apr 9, 2009:**

-The symbiote checks Eddie’s “Peter Parker is Spider-Man” internet forum (which twelve-year-old Kamala Khan is a devout member of) to learn Eddie’s in Ravencroft.

-At Ravencroft, Otto assumes Eddie’s crazy and doesn’t believe Peter is Spider-Man.

-Otto gets fed up with his “nice guy” farce at this point and drops it.

-Mark breaks up with MJ, believing he’s stuck being Molten Man forever, and MJ rebounds onto Hobie, who’s on the outs with Mandy following the Miami trip.

-Gwen convinces Peter to visit Eddie in Ravencroft again. ([Ch 16 Addition])

-Frances gives Eddie the symbiote back, and Venom attacks Spidey. During the battle, Venom gives birth to the Carnage symbiote. ([Ch 17 Subtraction])

-Venom gives the newborn symbiote to Cletus Kasady, a serial killer with plenty of negative emotions to feed it. However, the Venom symbiote was still a child when it arrived on Earth, and what it didn’t realize is that negative emotions are basically junk food to an alien symbiote. The Carnage symbiote is promptly driven insane by Cletus’s mind and becomes obsessed with murder. ([Ch 18 Multiplication])

-Meanwhile, Rand finally gets fed up with Sally and leaves her for Janice.

-Venom decides to help stop Carnage because he only wants to kill Peter and his loved ones, not random innocents. He reveals symbiotes are weak to fire, so they use that on Carnage and the symbiote leaps off Cletus.

-Venom is also caught in the blaze and the symbiote splits from Eddie, too, while Eddie finally realizes that his hatred of Peter is irrational and the symbiote was using him. But out of spite, the symbiote knocks Eddie into a coma.

-While Spidey is saving Eddie and Cletus from the fire, the symbiote escape. The Venom one bonds to a rat and flees to the sewers while the Carnage one bonds to a pigeon and flies away. They’re both injured from the fire and require some time to heal.

-Cletus and Frances are returned to Ravencroft, and Frances, driven mad by the symbiote, falls in love with Cletus on first sight. ([Ch 19 Division])

**Fri, Apr 10, 2009:**
Sat, Apr 11, 2009:

-Peter is traumatized and wracked with guilt over the innocent people Carnage maimed.

Sunday, Apr 12, 2009:

-Peter starts having Carnage nightmares. Happy Easter, Peter!

Mon, Apr 13, 2009:

-The Hypno-Hustler, a Tricorp super-mercenary with weird powers, tries to brainwash the school, but Spidey easily stops him.

- Spenser Smythe waltzes into the Vault (as Oscorp has full control of it) and frees his son Alistair, taking him to the Cayman Islands. Oscorp has a hidden facility there where a massive army of Spider-Slayers will be produced. (Ch 20 Exponentiation)

May 2009

- Spidey continues to have Carnage nightmares and overworks himself crimefighting. The bad guys have to wait to break into the Vault until the day S.H.I.E.L.D. takes is over from Oscorp, as there’s a brief lapse in security at the changing of the guard.

- The Midtown High drama club performs Death of a Salesman.

Fri, Jun 5, 2009:

- Spidey relentlessly hunts down criminals to the point of exhaustion.

Sat, Jun 6, 2009:

- The Connors visit the Vault from Florida because they have a way to cure subdermal armor patients. Mark volunteers but Rhino and Scorpion refuse.

- At the Sinister Six’s hideout in Kraven and Calypso’s penthouse, which has been hidden with Calypso’s magic, Tinkerer arrives with Hobgoblin, who wants to help them bust out their imprisoned teammates in exchange for an alliance.

- Silver Sable and Black Cat both sneak into the Vault to free their fathers. Black Cat successfully frees hers (using knockout gas to physically drag him out since he didn’t want to leave of his own will last time), but Silvermane has given up and wants Sable to take over his empire instead of relying on an old man.
-The Hobgoblin frees the Enforcers and other villains from the Vault. Hank and Molten Man recapture some of them, including Kraven and Chameleon, but the Enforcers, Rhino, and Scorpion get away. (Ch 21 Root)

-Capt Stacy asks Peter to take a break from being Spider-Man to rest, but then they hear about the breakout on the news. Peter and Aunt May freak out because Ben’s killer is now back at large.

-Next the Sinister Six attack Ravencroft, freeing Ock and Electro. The Six hold a hospital hostage and say Spidey must come battle them alone.

-At home, Gwen freaks out at this but reluctantly concedes that Peter needs to go save everyone. (Ch 22 Logarithm)

-Spidey goes to battle the Six but gets his butt handed to him.

-Luckily the NYPD show up and save the day, having found a way to neutralize the Six without endangering the hostages (and it turns out Hobgoblin is a generic brainwashed mook).

-Cap Stacy gives Peter crap for almost dying and Peter gets ticked off, his pride wounded.

-At the Vault, Rhino and Scorpion have their armor removed by the Connors.

-Peter returns home to find Gwen out of her mind with worry. She yells at Peter, accusing him of only being Spider-Man because he wants to become a martyr to atone for Uncle Ben’s death. Then she runs off, and Peter is too exhausted to go after her. (Ch 23 Tetration)

**Sun, Jun 7, 2009:**

-Peter rests.

**Mon, Jun 8, 2009:**

-Gwen officially breaks up with Peter, unable to deal with the stress of him being Spider-Man. They’d been together for 48 days, about a month and a half. (Ch 24 Brand Equity)

-The Enforcers discover the Big Sky lounge burned down, and then they’re attacked by Herman Schultz, the inventor of TriCorp’s Shocker tech they stole. Spidey gets involved, and both the Enforcers and Herman are returned to Ryker’s. (Ch 25 Entrepreneur)

**Jun 7-July 1, 2009, 3 weeks and 4 days:**

-Junior year ends on June 29th.

**Thurs, July 2, 2009:**

-Hobie reveals his Prowler suit to MJ to impress her. They screw around, with MJ encouraging Hobie to be reckless.
-Peter debates a bit but decides not to try and date MJ, as he still only has feelings for Gwen. (*Ch 26 Complex Transactions*)

**Fri, July 3, 2009:**

- Peter mopes around pining after Gwen.

**Sat, July 4, 2009:**

-MJ and Gwen go to a Fourth of July party where they get in some trouble. Prowler bails MJ out, but because MJ has encouraged Hobie to be so reckless, his costume malfunctions. He almost falls, but MJ calls Spider-Man to save him, revealing to Peter that MJ knows his secret ID. (*Ch 27 Whistleblower*)

-Spider-Man, Hobie, and MJ talk things out. Spidey lets Hobie off with a warning, then he and MJ meet up with Gwen. They explain everything to her, and then everyone returns home.

-Meanwhile, Black Cat takes blackmail pics of Peter changing out of his Spidey costume, choosing to do this on the Fourth of July so the fireworks mask her sound, making it easier to sneak around.

-It was pretty easy for Felicia to deduce Spider-Man’s secret ID, especially after Venom claimed Peter was Spider-Man on the news. Pretty obvious he’s Ben Parker’s nephew considering how much he hated Walter. (*Ch 28 Perfect Competition*)

**Sun, July 5-7, 3 days:**

-Now Gwen AND MJ know Peter’s secret ID. Our holy trinity is starting to form here!

**Wed, July 8, 2009:**

- At the Vault, Kraven is depowered with gene cleanser. Calypso appears and frees him on the condition that Kraven successfully kill Spider-Man, or else she’ll break up with him out of boredom. Kraven also has Calypso free Vermin, an experiment of Stegron’s that was captured by the NYPD without Spider-Man’s help for once.

- Spidey is lured into the sewers, where Vermin attacks him, and then Kraven takes the weakened Spidey and buries him alive. (*Ch 29 Planned Obsolescence*)

- That night, the blue spider-tracer goes off, altering Gwen to Peter’s location, and she and her dad track him down to the graveyard and free him.

- Peter and Gwen get back together, with Gwen realizing she loves Peter no matter how much danger he puts her in (Hope that doesn’t come back to bite her or anything…).

- Also, Peter starts seeing the therapist Leo Zelinsky.

- Kraven begins to go insane, breaking into the ESU labs and eating all the genetically altered
spiders to gain Spidey’s powers. (*Ch 30 Cost of Living*)

**Thurs, July 9, 2009:**

-Spider-Kraven goes on a rampage around the city, and he proves too much for the NYPD to handle. This means Spidey is the only one who can stop Kraven.

-Spidey feeds Kraven gene cleanser, and then Kraven tries to convince Peter to kill him in battle but Peter talks Kraven into giving up his hunt for good.

-Spidey and Cap Stacy make peace after their spat earlier, and Cap Stacy suggests Peter could join the NYPD when he’s older.

-Kraven is taken to Leo Zelinsky for counseling.

**Fri, July 10, 2009:**

-Mark, healed from his surgery and no longer Molten Man, hooks back up with MJ. (*Ch 31 Intangible Assets*)

**August 2009:**

-Gwen’s 17th birthday is on August 1st.

-Peter’s 17th birthday is on August 10th.

-Even accounting for that little gap where they were broken up, Peter and Gwen have now been together for longer than Peter was ever with Liz. BREAK OUT THE CHAMPAGNE!

**Wed, Sep 9, 2009:**

-First day of senior year. Spidey battles Stegron the Dinosaur-Man, another TriCorp super-mercenary who’s escaped from the Zoo region of the Vault. Steggy is returned to prison.

-At the Bugle, Peter hears of the clay tablet.

-Black Cat and her dad are hiding out in Canada.

**Sep 10-15, 6 days:**

-Peter and Gwen date and attend school as normal.

**Wed, Sep 16, 2009:**
Cap Stacy warns Peter that Black Cat might try and steal the tablet.

Spidey protects the tablet from the Vulture, who’s sent to Ryker’s.

Black Cat and her dad show up and there’s an altercation. *(Ch 32 Advent)*

Cap Stacy is accidentally shot and killed by Walter, trying to protect Felicia.

**Thurs, Sep 17, 2009:**

-Around midnight, Black Cat tries to blackmail Spidey by revealing she’s learned his secret ID, but Spidey calls her bluff. Black Cat escapes and Spidey can’t find her, so he decides to go back home to be with Gwen.

-Sin-Eater kills Water Hardy.

-It’s a school day, but everyone understands that Peter is not attending today due to the tragedy. Gwen stays at Peter’s house. *(Ch 33 Martyr)*

**Sep 18-19, 2 days:**

-Peter and Gwen skip school to mourn.

**Sun, Sep 20, 2009:**

-Spidey meets with DeWolff and learns of Sin-Eater.

**Mon, Sep 21, 2009:**

-Peter feels up to going to work but not school. Jameson blames Spider-Man for Capt Stacy’s death. At Fisk’s charity event for F.E.A.S.T. in Chinatown, Spidey tussles with Sin-Eater and meets Daredevil. *(Ch 34 Apologetics)*

-By that evening, Sin-Eater attacks Dewolff but is defeated by Spidey and Black Cat.

-Cat turns herself in and Daredevil asks Spidey to help him take down Tombstone.

-Rand learns Janice is Tombstone’s daughter.

-By now, DeWolff is being blackmailed into working for Fisk. She wanted Spidey to defeat Sin-Eater because he tried to assassinate Fisk. *(Ch 35 Original Sin)*

**Tues, Sep 22, 2009:**

-Peter and Gwen vow to get married as soon as they’re both 18.
-Peter feels up to going to school but Gwen doesn’t.

-At the Bugle after school, Peter sees Rand and his dad arguing about Tombstone.

-That night, Spidey decides to spy on Rand and discovers that Rand plans to attend Janice’s yacht party against his father’s will. *(Ch 36 Holy Matrimony)*

**Wed, Sep 23, 2009:**

-After school, Spidey learns that Tombstone bought his merchandising rights from the wrestling company and Spidey’s pissed.

-Tombstone hires the Beetle as his bodyguard and orders him to test his prowess by assassinating Hammerhead.

-Hammerhead got back together with Silver Sable and has been hiding in her safe house. However, today, Hammerhead and Sable have left the safe house to catch a plane to Symkaria to fulfill Sable’s promise to her dead grandfather to hunt Nazis and Hydra agents.

-Beetle attacks their armored car. Spidey joins the battle, but Hammerhead is ultimately killed and Beetle escapes. *(Ch 37 Propitiation)*

**Thurs, Sep 24, 2009:**

-Gwen feels up to going to school but gets into a fight with Sally who calls cops pigs. She is suspended and must be picked up by a surprised and worried Aunt May.

-Meanwhile, DeWolff discusses the plan with Daredevil and Spidey to get both Tombstone and Kingsley arrested.

-Peter catches Rand after football practice and gets an invite to the party.

**Fri, Sep 25, 2009:**

-Janice’s birthday party is held on a yacht. The plan is to “sail around all weekend.”

-Sable attacks the party, and a fight breaks out with Daredevil showing up and Janice stealing the Beetle armor *(Ch 38 Backsliding).*

-Silver Sable, Tombstone, and Janice are all arrested. *(Ch 39 Pilgrimage)*

-Tombstone learns Daredevil’s secret ID but the public doesn’t believe him and Matt takes the accusation to court.

**Sep 26-27, 2009, 2 days:**

-Gwen continues to process her dad’s death.
Mon, Sep 28, 2009:

-Now that Tombstone, the Manfredis, and the Green Goblin are permanently out of the picture, Wilson Fisk rises to power as the Kingpin (Ch 40 Salvation).

October-November 2009

-Gwen finishes mourning and gradually adjusts to her new life living with Peter and Aunt May.

Tues, Dec 15, 2009:

- At some point prior, MJ got emancipated despite being 17 and left her parents’ home, which would imply her dad did something abusive enough to legally warrant that. Around this time, MJ loses her virginity to Mark, which will ultimately become a source of shame and regret for her after their nasty breakup and contribute to her fragile emotional state (The age of consent in the state of New York is 17, by the way, so neither of them is underage).

-Peter and Gwen marathon the Star Wars movies plus The Clone Wars TV show.

-At this point, Gwen really, really wants to have hanky-panky with Peter. With her dad gone, Peter’s just about all Gwen has, and so her devotion to him is stronger than ever. However, as much as Peter wants to get laid, they did promise Aunt May they wouldn’t take advantage of Gwen living here, so they hold off for now.

Dec 16-17, 2 days:

-The Star Wars marathon continues.

Fri, Dec 18, 2009:

-Mysterio is arrested and Peter telepathically meets Madame Web (Ch 41 Psychosis).

Jan 2010

-Thor arrives on Earth from Asgard, though the general public doesn’t believe Norse mythology is true, thinking Thor is simply a crazy person who happens to have superpowers. The public is aware of other Asgardians like Loki and Malekith but probably think they are also crazy or “in on it” with Thor or something like that.

-You’ve probably noticed I put a lot of time skips around this part. Mostly I just wanted to move well past Gwen mourning her dad so the story wouldn’t get overly angsty and because I wanted Peter, Gwen, and MJ to get a bit older already. I obviously don’t have time to fill in every detail of Spider-Man’s high school adventures like an actual long-running TV show would’ve, but hey,
maybe I’ll go back someday and fill in the gaps, Untold Tales of Spider-Man style. No harm leaving myself some free spaces on the timeline in case I ever get any really good story ideas.

**Thurs, Feb 11, 2010:**

-Peter promises to be at Gwen’s band recital and they plan to meet May’s boyfriend. Peter and Gwen visit the comatose Eddie, which they’ve been doing regularly.

**Fri, Feb 12, 2010:**

-At breakfast, Peter and Gwen discover that May has been dating Doc Ock. Madame Web contacts Peter again and reminds him of his rescue mission to defeat Kingsley and save her (Peter had assumed she was just a crazy dream before).

-What’s worse, Otto strongly suspects Peter is Spider-Man based on his reactions and remembering how Eddie always insisted that in Ravencroft.

-Peter has Gwen stay at MJ’s and Mark’s apartment while he hunts for Madame Web. *(Ch 42 Cinderella Effect)*

**Sat, Feb 13, 2010:**

-Spidey learns from some goons about the Kingpin but assumes Kingsley is Kingpin because of the “king” part.

**Sun, Feb 14, 2010:**

-I know there was already a Valentine’s Day episode, but it was just so fitting for an Otto/May romance arc…

-Spidey tracks down Madame Web but gets his butt kicked by an army of Hobgoblins.

-Gwen’s band recital is today. Peter misses it because he’s fighting the Hobgoblins, though. *(Ch 43 Classical Conditioning)*

**Mon, Feb 15, 2010:**

-The fight with Hobgoblin lasts past midnight. Peter gets home and butts heads with Otto, upsetting May. Madame Web gives Peter some stern advice in a dream sequence. *(Ch 44 Psychoanalysis)*.

-Peter makes peace with Otto, and they concoct a scheme to defeat Kingsley,

-But then Peter learns May blames herself for Ben’s death, prompting Peter to confesses his guilt to her. This causes May to finally piece together that Peter is Spider-Man, and she breaks up with Otto.
-Otto pretends everything’s fine and helps defeat Kingsley, but then he uses the machine controlling Madame Web’s to brainwash Peter for some sweet, sweet revenge. (Ch 45 Projection)

**Tues, Feb 16, 2010:**

-Otto orders Peter to go to the Parker house and break Gwen’s hand, but hearing Gwen in pain is enough for Peter to shrug off the brainwashing. Peter runs away, scared of hurting Gwen more, and calls MJ so she’ll come help Gwen.

-Otto gets a backup set of octopus arms from an Oscorp vault so he can participate in the obligatory Spider-Man vs Doc Ock fight.

-It’s interrupted, though, when Electro kidnaps Aunt May. Electro’s finally stopped putting up with Ock’s abuse and tries to kill May. (Ch 46 Multiple Personality Disorder)

-Peter and Otto are able to finally put aside their differences and save May.

-Electro is returned to Ravencroft, where the cure is forcefully administered to him, finally removing his powers.

-Madame Web is freed from captivity and can now return home.

-Kingsley is arrested but makes bail, claiming he, too, was brainwashed.

-Peter destroys the machine Madame Web was trapped in so that it can never again be used to brainwash people.

-Peter meets up with MJ and Mark at the hospital waiting room. Gwen’s hand is put in a cast, and fortunately Aunt May survives Electro’s attack on her, though she’ll be hospitalized for a while now.

-May knows Peter is Spider-Man now, and he suspects she does, but they avoid talking to each other about it. (Ch 47 Developmental Psychology)

**Feb 17-20, 2010, 4 days:**

-Aunt May recovers in the hospital while Gwen waits for her broken hand to heal.

**Sun, Feb 21, 2010:**

-The Bugle blames Spider-Man for the carjacking, and May cancels her subscription.

-Liz visits MJ’s and Mark’s new apartment and raises concerns Mark is gambling yet again. MJ and Mark have an argument but quickly make up, showing the instability of their relationship.

**Mon, Feb 22, 2010:**

-In Ryker’s, Rhino and Scorpion suddenly regenerate their armor. Spidey defeats them, and then
Connors arrives, having gone from Florida to a conference in Manhattan this week, to inform him that Molten Man’s armor could regrow the same way, so they rush over to find a freaked out Molten Man chasing after Mary Jane, thus putting her life in danger and ending their relationship for good. (Ch 48 Neolocal Residence)

- With nowhere else to go, MJ is allowed to stay at the Parker household. (Ch 49 Caregivers)

**Tues, Feb 23, 2010**:

- Now that she secretly knows he’s Spider-Man, May realizes she’s been mollycoddling Peter and he can handle having an apartment for college. The kids start apartment-hunting and strongly encourage May to move to Pennsylvania with her new boyfriend, Dr. Bromwell, to keep May away from Manhattan, the supervillain capital of the world.

**Feb 24 – Mar 16, 2010, 21 days**

- Peter, Gwen, and MJ apartment hunt while May makes her plans to move, though she will not outright move to Pennsylvania until the kids are all 18. She does have some reservations about them living without adult supervision so young, but they manage to convince her they can handle it and it’s okay.

- I didn’t give MJ a set-in-stone birthday here, but she said she was 17 during the spring break trip (Mar 7), so then she must be 18 by the same time this year.

**Wed, Mar 17, 2010**:

- Peter’s and Gwen’s one year anniversary (not counting that teeny little gap where they broke up). But also the anniversary of Harry becoming the second Green Goblin.

**Thurs, Mar 18, 2010**:

- Peter and Gwen plan to share an apartment with MJ.
- Harry returns from Europe.
- Midtown High has begun work on its Macbeth production.
- Kingsley, having lost Madame Web, takes Globulin Green, but unlike Norman he’s unable to control it. He goes nuts and tries to kill Harry again, but Spidey again stops him.
- The Venom symbiote watches this from the shadows. It has been taking random hosts this past year, but none have had enough negative emotion, and furthermore none know who Peter is, so the symbiote doesn’t have the heart to bond with them like it did with Eddie. (Ch 50 Role Model)

**Mar 19-26, 2010, 8 days**:
-more apartment plans are made while Kingsley struggles to control the goblin in his head

**Sat, Mar 27, 2010:**

-Peter, Gwen, and MJ move into an apartment together, while Aunt May and Dr. Bromwell move to Pennsylvania.

**Sun, Mar 28, 2010:**

-Peter and Gwen lose their virginity to each other.

**Mar 29-30, 2010, 2 days:**

-Peter, Gwen, and MJ go from school and work to their brand new apartment.

**Tues, Mar 30, 2010:**

**Wed, Mar 31, 2010:**

-MJ reveals her career as a supermodel. Peter and Gwen have an argument because Peter hurt her during sex and freaked out. (*Ch 5I Self Efficacy*)

**Thurs, April 1, 2010:**

-Peter and Gwen have time to swing by the apartment before their internship. At home, MJ is lonely, and Peter and Gwen comfort her. MJ reveals that she’d be “down for” having a threesome with them but then plays it off as an April Fools’ joke when they freak out.

**Fri, April 2, 2010:**

-Good Friday.

**Sat, April 3, 2010:**

-MJ avoids Peter and Gwen for “the next couple days” after April Fools’.

**Sun, April 4, 2010:**
Mon, April 5, 2010:

- After class, MJ overhears Gwen getting upset with Peter treating her like she’s fragile. Then at work, Hobgoblin goes totally nuts and starts bombing random people, and MJ happens to be there for her modeling stuff. She calls Spider-Man to come save them, but on Peter’s way, the Venom symbiote pops out, wanting to rebond with Peter and saying he needs its power to defeat Hobgoblin. Peter rejects it again, so it bonds to Gwen, preying on her sense of helplessness. (Ch 52 Developmental Task)

- But after Spidey and Gwenom defeat Hobgoblin, Peter manages to have a heart to heart with Gwen giving her enough positive emotions to reject the symbiote, It runs off, hiding itself in MJ’s purse for the next couple weeks while it plots its next move. (Ch 53 Developmental Milestone)

May 2010

- Tony Stark becomes Iron Man and debuts himself to the public, opting to not have a secret identity.

Sat, June 26, 2010:

- High school graduation.

- MJ briefly becomes She-Venom, Human Torch helps Spidey free her. Gwen finally tells Peter about her asking MJ out that one time. (Ch 54 Nuclear Family)

Sun, June 27, 2010:

- Peter reacts to learning Gwen is bi-curious. (Ch 56 Biome)

- Carnage bonds with a dog and mauls its owner in Central Park.

- Peter and Gwen visit Eddie in the hospital again.

- Peter gets into a brief argument with MJ on the night of Gwen’s school graduation band recital.

Mon, June 28, 2010:

- Spider-Man is still searching in vain for Venom as the sun rises.

- Peter can’t find Venom again and returns home, as he’s missed too many internship shifts already.

- Peter and Gwen go to the ESU lab, where Dr. Warren gives Gwen a lab assistant job but not Peter.

- Then Eddie comes in, haven awoken from his coma finally. (Ch 58 Mutualism)
-Peter, Gwen, and Eddie hang out and do some catching up. Eddie regains their trust. They retrieve his things from storage. Eddie butts heads with MJ because they dated when MJ was way too young for him. Peter and Gwen take MJ’s side, and Eddie storms off. This pushes him into wanting the symbiote again. Eddie, upset, goes to his old church to pray, and Spider-Man follows after him. But the symbiote figured Eddie would turn up here sooner or later, having heard Eddie had awoken, and it was waiting to re-bond with him. (Ch 60 Energy Pyramid)

-Spidey beats Venom into submission, and Venom decided to continue trying to be an anti-hero and swings off. Venom scares some thugs into telling him DeWolff is in Kingpin’s pocket.

-Venom tries to get DeWolff to tell him who Kingpin is. DeWolff tells Venom to go after the Osborns instead, but before she can say any more, Venom’s stopped by Spider-Man. Venom inadvertently admits he was bluffing about killing DeWolff, so she’ll no longer tell him Kingpin’s name, and so Venom instead decides to go after the Osborns directly at their penthouse, but he’s chased off by Spider-Slayers. (Ch 61 Food Chain)

-Harry, as Green Goblin again, goes after Venom, but the battle ends in a draw and they’re both injured. Spidey hunts down Venom and the symbiote flees down a pipe. Peter takes Eddie back to the apartment to rest.

-Meanwhile, Emily decides that the symbiote could be a valuable asset to Oscorp, and so she has Barrison yanked out of Ravencroft to become Shriek. Shriek’s sonic powers can easily best a symbiote, and thanks to the Winkler Process, she has low-level brainwashing abilities (like what she can do in the comics).

-Eddie reveals that DeWolff works for Kingpin and Emily Osborn is evil and stuff.

-Shriek frees Cletus from Ravencroft and they go on a killing spree. (Ch 62 Coevolution)

**Tues, June 29, 2010:**

-Peter awakens to the terrible news, and Spider-Man chases the Carnage Family to Central Park, where Cletus is looking for the Carnage symbiote, who’s been bonding to animals this whole time. The Fantastic Four shows up, going after the symbiote since it’s an alien and therefore on their radar, and a fight scene breaks out.

-The symbiote runs back to Eddie so that he can help out.

-Now that he’s lost the upper hand, Carnage runs for it, but Shriek makes it hard to hide, so he kills her. (Ch 63 Carnivore)

-Cletus is captured but the Carnage symbiote escapes. Unbeknowst to the heroes, it is captured by Oscorp and given to Warren for study

-.The symbiote agrees to surrender itself into the Fantastic Four’s custody.

-Peter, Gwen, and MJ make their peace with Eddie.

**Wed-Thurs, 2 says:**

-I guess some time passes for things to calm down and to make peace with Eddie.
Fri, July 2, 2010:

-Peter, Gwen, and Eddie get a flight to Washington DC, visiting the Smithsonian to help mend things with Eddie, who regrets everything he’s done.

-Before leaving, Peter and Gwen get carried away and do a big dramatic three-way kiss with MJ, totally unplanned. Then they run off to the plane all embarrassed. (Ch 64 Herbivore).

Sat, July 3, 2010:

-MJ is lonely and anxious all weekend, really missing Peter and Gwen. MJ goes to audition as an extra in Wicked and impresses the director.

Sun, July 4, 2010:

-Peter and Gwen return home. They and MJ don’t talk about the airport kiss at all, though.

July 5-24, 19 days:

-The trio continues life as normal. Peter is unable to make any progress with stopping Kingpin, who’s being far more careful about his criminal operations after seeing Tombstone’s example.

Sun, July 25, 2010:

-While attending Betty’s and Ned’s wedding, Peter happens to spot the Chameleon impersonating Jameson. Chameleon manages to capture Peter and take his place (a plotline I basically ripped straight from the Ultimate comics). (Ch 66 Commencement)

-Chameleon is captured, but as a consequence of this midadventure, Jameson learns Peter’s secret ID and has a heart attack. Understanding the danger it would place Peter’s loved ones in, Jameson agrees not to spill the beans, but he’s very angry with Peter and fires him.

-Also, it turns out Chameleon was employed by Doctor Doom to quash a story about Latveria. Since Spidey happened to help the Fantastic Four out in this instance, Human Torch offers to bury the hatchet and become his friend.

July 26-30, 2010, 5 days:

-Peter hunts for a new job and eventually gets saddled with a terrible noodle job. (Ch 67 Cap and Gown)

-The X-Men become known to the public and the public becomes aware of the existence of mutants.
Sat, July 31, 2010:

-MJ’s dad tells her that her mom’s not doing so great in the hospital, but MJ brushes him off.

Sun, Aug 1, 2010:

-Gwen turns 18.

-Peter, Gwen, and MJ to finally talk things out regarding their mutual attraction to each other. Peter and Gwen worry that, while a threesome is appealing for purely hedonistic reasons, it’d ultimately be emotionally unfulfilling for MJ, so they decide not to do it.

-But then Doctor Doom’s Doombots invade Manhattan. *(Ch 68 Magna cum Laude)*

-Iron Man and some S.H.I.E.L.D. agents save Peter, Gwen, and MJ from the Doombots. With the apartment complex now secure, Peter leaves the girls behind to join the other superheroes in defending the city.

-Meanwhile, the horror of a robot invasion prompts Gwen to soften her stance on the threeway. *(Ch 69 Convocation)*

-The Doombots are all destroyed, but Jameson’s wife was injured and is in critical condition, causing him to lash out even harder at Spider-Man.

-Peter, Gwen, and MJ search for a motel, as their apartment got smashed by drones. They only manage to find a one-bedroom place extremely late at night. MJ wants to sleep on the floor but Peter and Gwen insist she can share the bed with them, and she’s too sleepy to argue (See how I carefully contrive events here so the threesome doesn’t come across as any one character’s “fault?”)

Mon, Aug 2, 2010:

-The three wake up in bed together. Gwen reveals that she and MJ talked about it for a long time and decided Gwen is willing to try and have a three-way relationship with MJ. Peter agrees, ostensibly because he wants MJ to be happy, but he later admits that he might have accepted for more shallow reasons. He IS a teenage boy, after all. *(Ch 70 Alumnae)*

-Even after the three of them wake up, they don’t leave their motel room to get breakfast for over six hours. They were… sleeping in.

Tues, Aug 3, 2010:

-Damage Control repairs the apartment, so Peter, Gwen, and MJ return home. They’re in a three-way relationship now, but they’re in the euphoric phase of it and are never really given time to leave that phase and develop anything more concrete before it all goes to hell later on.

-MJ reveals she smuggled in wine and the three of them get drunk (to cope with recent events). But
then Spider-Man is called away to battle Big Wheel and Rocket Racer. Spidey beats them but gets hurt in the battle and nearly loses civilians. He returns home to tell MJ he can’t drink ever again. This is the first small seed of MJ’s overall displeasure with Peter being Spider-Man.

**Wed, Aug 4, 2010:**
-While her new lab assistant job for Warren, Gwen steals more gene cleanser, not only in case a genetically-altered supervillain attacks, but in case Peter ever wants to quit being Spider-Man. Peter insists he never will, but Mary Jane happens to be there and she now knows about the gene cleanser.

**Thurs, Aug 5, 2010:**
- With the superheroes worn down from the Doombots and the city vulnerable, Oscorp initiates its scheme, sending an army of Jack O’Lantern thugs to attack Manhattan, led by Emily, the Lady Goblin. (*Ch 71 Senior Breakfast*)

**Fri, Aug 6, 2010:**
-Green Goblin (Norman) shows up in the Spider-Family’s living room, threatening to kill all Peter’s loved ones if Spider-Man shows up to today’s battle.

-The remaining heroes are overwhelmed, but then Iron Patriot and the Ultimate Spider-Slayer show up to “save the day,” becoming beloved heroes.

-Iron Patriot meets with Spidey and reveals himself to be Harry. Spider-Man is forced to join Oscorp’s hero team. (*Ch 72 In Absentia*)

**Sat, Aug 7, 2010:**
-The Oscorp heroes have a press conference in which Spidey announces his membership.

**Sun, Aug 8, 2010:**
-Peter, Gwen, and MJ continue to savor their happiness while it lasts. The poor bastards.

**Mon, Aug 9, 2010:**
-Spidey, Iron Patriot, and the Ultimate Spider-Slayer battle Stegron, who’s brought an army of Savage Lands dinosaurs to Broadway. A stray Velociraptor manages to escape and becomes a part of New Yorker legend.
Tues, Aug 10, 2010:

-Peter turns 18.

-Madame Web fears Oscorp might have brainwashed Spider-Man, and so she returns to Manhattan and tells the Fantastic Four everything she knows, including Spidey’s secret ID. The FF have S.H.I.E.L.D. watch over Peter’s friends and family, with Gwen and MJ being taken to a safe house.

-Now Spider-Man can go kick Oscorp’s butt freely. *(Ch 73 Walking)*

-Spidey and the FF run to the Bugle to expose Oscorp, but Spider-Slayers attack. Spidey and Jameson are captured and put into a death trap, which finally helps Jameson realize Peter is hero and stuff *(Ch 74 Baccalaureate Service)*.

-They escape the death trap, and Spidey rejoins all the other superheroes battling Spider-Slayers.

-S.H.I.E.L.D. shows up to arrest the Oscorp heroes, as Alistair was stupid enough to leave video evidence for them to find when they sent agents into Smythe’s secret lair where Spidey and Jameson had been held. Oscorp declares all out war, summoning their Spider-Slayers and Jack O’Lanterns to raze the city. *(Ch 75 Academic Transcript)*

-All the superheroes gather in central Manhattan, except for some miscellaneous D-listers who form the Defenders over in Hell’s Kitchen because I just didn’t wanna deal with all those guys.

-Madame Web helps free Harry from Dr. Hamilton’s brainwashing, and Harry goes to save his mom. *(Ch 76 Encaenia)*

-Harry attacks Spencer Smythe in his Spider-Slayer mecha, leaving Spencer comatose. A furious Alistair is defeated, to be sent to Ryker’s.

-Lady Goblin is accidentally killed, and a crazed Norman blames Spider-Man. *(Ch 77 Diploma)*

-Harry surrenders and is sent to Ravencroft.

-Green Goblin uses his suit’s new cloaking device to turn invisible. Spider-Man doesn’t realize this and panics, thinking Gobbie is somehow able to break into the FF’s safe house. Thus, Peter leads Norman straight there, allowing him to snatch up Gwen.

-During the struggle, Green Goblin impales himself on his own glider, but not before tossing Gwen off a bridge, where she’s killed by Spider-Man’s own web. Gwen dies right at midnight. *(Ch 78 Final Exam)*

Wed, Aug 11, 2010:

-Peter flips his shit and lashes out at the other superheroes, and then at Mary Jane. Despite this, MJ chooses to stay with Peter at his time of need.

-Gwen’s funeral is arranged while everyone grieves. Her relatives fly in from England.

-Gwen’s death is highly publicized by the media since it was caught by news cameras, and it leads to the push of the Superhuman Registration Act (which Kingpin secretly had a hand in making in order to keep the superheroes in line).
-Dr. Hamilton and several other Oscorp goons are arrested. S.H.I.E.L.D. keeps Spidey’s secret ID from getting out.

-Rand and Sally go to counseling over Gwen’s death.

-Glory and Kong go to therapy, too.

**Thurs, August 12, 2010:**

-So do Ned and Betty.

-Flash and Sha Shan also go to therapy, where they talk about Flash wanting to join the military now.

-Black Cat goes to therapy, too, as she’s volunteered to do community service for S.H.I.E.L.D. if they let her out of Coral Moon.

**Fri, Aug 13, 2010:**

-Mister Fantastic and Invisible Girl go to therapy, too.

-So do Curt and Martha Connors.

-Tombstone also accompanies Janice to her therapy session.

**Sat, Aug 14, 2010:**

-Human Torch and Thing go to therapy, too.

-Jameson goes to therapy, too.

-So does Madame Web.

**Sun, Aug 15, 2010:**

-May and Dr. Bromwell go to therapy, too, but May is grieving too hard to really get much out of it.

-Liz starts visiting Harry in Ravencroft, and their relationship blossoms.

**Mon, Aug 16, 2010:**

-Gwen’s funeral is held. (*Ch 79 Credentialism*)

**Tues, Aug 17, 2010:**
-Some of the mourners stay at Gwen’s grave in Long Island until dawn.

-Once they return home, Mary Jane learns that Peter intends to continue being Spider-Man despite what happened, and so she starts slipping gene cleanser into all his drinks, causing his powers to gradually fade.

-Warren freaks out at Gwen’s death and decides to bring her back via MAD SCIENCE. (Ch 80 Minimum Wage)

-Peter yells at Matt, who begs for his help stopping Kingpin, who’s made Matt homeless. Then he yells at Reed Richards, who tells him that, in the crazy Marvel universe, Gwen COULD come back from the dead but SHOULDN’T come back from the dead for various reasons. (Ch 81 Liberal Arts Degree)

-Peter goes to the Sanctum Sanctorum to try and speak with the dead, but he’s turned away at the door, and then he stupidly breaks in and grabs a random magical artifact, the Wand of Watoomb. Peter was allowed through the Sanctum’s wards by Death, the Marvel Universe’s Grim Reaper, object of Thanos’s desire and Deadpool’s girlfriend.

-Death has taken a special interest in Peter’s because he’s narrowly escaped her grasp so many times, and now she can tell that deep down, Peter wants to die to be with Gwen.

-The Wand of Watoomb shows Peter visions of dead loved ones, but whether these visions are really them or just illusions, I left deliberately unclear. The vision of Gwen tries to warn Peter about Death.

-Peter freaks out and decides he’s had enough. He burns his Spider-Man costume and vows to be Spider-Man no more. (Ch 82 Dead-End Job)

Aug 18-29, 2010, 1 week and 5 days:

-Peter moves to the Ditkovich’s apartment complex while MJ moves to a condo. She gets rich while Peter gets poor. Peter isolates himself from the rest of the world.

Mon, Aug 30, 2010:

-Peter begins freshman year at ESU.

-MJ starts leaving Peter daily voicemails, concerned for him, but he doesn’t respond because he’s too busy moping.

Aug 31-Sep 2, 2010, 3 days:

-MJ continues leaving voicemails.

Fri, Sep 3, 2010:
-Peter finally decides he’s had enough moping and starts hanging out with MJ again every Friday.

**Sep 3-28, 2010, 3 weeks and 5 days:**

- Peter and MJ hanging out every Friday becomes a “weekly ritual.” MJ takes the opportunity to keep slipping Peter gene cleanser (which she stole some vials of from him) in the hopes that it keeps his powers permanently gone.

**Wed, Sept 29, 2010:**

-Matt somehow fakes his and his loved ones’ deaths to keep them safe from Kingpin.

**Thurs, Sep 30, 2010:**

- Peter learns from the news that Matt is “dead.” Peter gets upset, feeling he should’ve done something when he had the chance (He also thinks the reason his powers are gone is purely psychological, so he still feels he could’ve done something here).

- Peter receives a posthumous letter from Norman. I can only assume it got delayed somehow since Norman’s been dead a while at this point. Peter angrily flushes the letter down the toilet.

- Warren injects Debra Whitman with a modified serum that turns her into a perfect genetic copy of Gwen, and then he locks her in a gestation pod in one of Oscorp’s super-mercenary creation labs so that he can implant Gwen’s brain into her head once he’s dug up Gwen’s corpse and scanned it with his convienient algorithm that can create a perfect brain-map and repair the decayed parts. Also he turns into the Jackal and kills his brother Aaron before Aaron can tattle on him. And Jackal kills all the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents who’d found the lab.

- The agents are all murdered before they have time to send out a distress signal or alert the rest of S.H.I.E.L.D. to their location. S.H.I.E.L.D. goes looking for their lost agents but don’t know where the secret lab is. You’d think S.H.I.E.L.D. would give all their agents tracking devices or something, but then my story wouldn’t work, so let’s just assume that’s not doable for some contrived reason or other. I don’t know.

- Next, Jackal travels all the way to Long Island, digs up Gwen’s grave, and carries her corpse back to the secret lab in Manhattan, where he uses the brain-scanning technology to make a copy of her decaying brain. The supercomputer even has an advanced algorithm to reconstruct the decayed cells so that a brain map is produced. However, I left it deliberately ambiguous just how “perfect” this recreation really is.

- Jackal returns Gwen’s corpse to the coffin.

- The cemetery staff discover her grave was vandalized and call Gwen’s friends and family to inform them. *(Ch 83 Student Loan Debt)*

**Fri, Oct 1, 2010:**
-Peter and MJ drive out to Long Island to see the smashed-up grave. Peter gets upset and mentions he wants to see Aunt May in person, and so Mary Jane lies, saying she doesn’t work today, and offers to drive him there. *(Ch 84 Job Security)*

**Sat, Oct 2, 2010:**

- Aunt May (and Heather, the girl he saved way back in chapter 1) convinces Peter to keep being Spider-Man. May gives Peter a spare costume, he’d left behind when they moved out of the Forest Hills house, revealing she’s known he’s Spider-Man for a while now. Peter puts the costume on underneath his clothes (which ends up saving his skin since he left a tracking device in there. Uh, guess that makes him smarter than those S.H.I.E.L.D. agents, then…).

- But on the car ride back, Peter catches on to the fact that MJ’s been slipping him gene cleanser. They argue, but right as they return to Peter’s apartment, they find Jackal waiting for them.

- Jackal went looking for Peter to murder him and scan his brain so that Jackal can become a perfect copy of Peter so clone-Gwen will love him. He managed to track down Peter’s apartment and happened to see Peter and MJ coming in, so he went and hid in Peter’s room real quick to surprise them. *(Ch 85 Post-Commencement Stress Disorder)*

- Jackal slices open Peter’s right leg, then drops him off the Brooklyn Bridge and collapses the bridge pillar on his back. *(Ch 86 Foreclosure)*

- Normally this would kill Peter, but it turns out he’s able to draw out some hidden reserve of his spider-strength through sheer force of will. He has a near-death experience where Death tries to convince him to die, but Peter never stops fighting.

- Firefighters and good Samaritans help lift up the rubble to rescue Peter, but then Jackal swoops back in, injuring and killing a couple of them, and grabs Peter. Right as he’s about to kill him, the gestation pod’s motion detector goes off, alerting Jackal to the fact that the Gwen clone is awake. *(Ch 87 Loan Extension)*

- Jackal drags Peter to the secret lab, where he monologues his evil plan to Peter.

- But Mary Jane busts in, having followed the tracking device in Peter’s costume. She uses the fire-webbing and spare web-shooters Gwen left behind to fight off Jackal. During the chaos, the Carnage symbiote, which Warren had still been studying, escapes captivity and flees to the Gwen clone, who bursts out of the gestation pod.

- The Carnage symbiote messed up her head pretty bad, causing Debra/Clone-Gwen to start shrieking and frantically chase after Peter.

- Peter and MJ run outside the lab, where MJ’s called S.H.I.E.L.D. to their location. Carnage snags Peter, though, and a frantic Peter believes that Gwen is NOT trying to hurt anyone but is merely upset and wants Peter.

- But whether intentional or not, Carnage ends up doing even more damage to Peter’s right leg.

- Carnage grabs one of the helicopters, causing them to freak out and open fire on Carnage against MJ’s will. If Peter doesn’t free himself, he’ll get caught in the blast and die. MJ manages to convince Peter to let go, and he manages to free himself in the nick of time. Clone-Gwen and the Carnage symbiote are blown to bits.
-The S.H.I.E.L.D. agents storm the lab and shoot the Jackal, who was still on fire, to death after he attacks them on sight.

-Peter is rushed to the Baxter Building infirmary, but his right leg isn’t able to be saved. He gets a cool robot leg now, though!

-MJ tells Reed Richards and the Connors about how she sipped Peter gene cleanser, and Curt produces a serum based on Morbius’s venom that will return Peter’s spider-powers to him. But whether or not he chooses to take it is entirely up to him. MJ is tempted to flush the serum down the toilet, but she’s learned her lesson and allows Peter to make his own choice.

-Of course, Peter chooses to regain his powers. (Ch 88 Locus of Control)

Oct 3-23, 3 weeks:

-Peter recovers from his injuries, a process sped along by his newly-regained spider-powers. As soon as he’s in fighting condition again, he stops one of Kingpin’s drug rings.

-Peter and Aunt May have a long heartfelt talk about Peter being Spider-Man and stuff.

Sun, Oct 24, 2010

-Peter continues being Spider-Man. He apologizes to Mister Fantastic for yelling at him.

-Mysterio and Tinkerer are arrested.

-Peter learns that MJ now carries a gun for self-defense.

-Black Cat makes peace with Spidey. As a gesture of goodwill, she gives him a present – a cloth version of his black costume.

-After seeing an ad where Kingpin uses Gwen’s death to further his own agenda, Spidey gets ticked and pays Kingpin’s office a visit, where he announces his intentions to defeat Kingpin and all other wannabe Big Men, but mostly it’s just a chance to unleash a bunch of fat jokes.

-Afterwards, Spidey learns Daredevil is alive and apologizes for yelling at him, too.

-Meanwhile, Kingpin gets Spencer Smythe in cryostasis to use as a bargaining chip with Alistair (kinda like in The Animated Series), and he has Alistair build more Spider-Slayers for him.

-Roderick Kingsley’s brother, Daniel Kingsley, returns to Manhattan and decides to be the next Hobgoblin.

-It’s hinted that some remnant of the Carnage symbiote bonded with Cletus’s blood like in the comics and he will become Carnage again very soon.

Mon, Oct 25, 2010:

-Mary Jane makes peace with her father and starts pitching in to help with MJ’s infant sister, Gayle, now that their mother’s passed away.
-Peter doesn’t answer his phone, so MJ uses the spare key Peter gave her to enter his apartment and wait for him to return. Once he does, she finally apologizes for slipping him gene cleanser and confesses that she wants to be with him forever (The romantic aspect of all this is set aside for now though since Gwen’s death is still so raw in their minds).

-Peter says that from now on, they shouldn’t make each other’s choices. He chooses to keep being Spider-Man. And if Mary Jane chooses to be a part of Peter’s life, Peter isn’t going to stop her. He will not isolate himself anymore.

-Spider-Man runs off to deal with more of Kingpin’s gang activity. Mary Jane says “Go get ’em, Tiger” for the first time. *(Ch 89 Renaissance Man)*

**2011**

-Namor the Sub-Mariner’s memories are restored and he stops being a bum.

-The Wasp debuts. She and Ant-Man begin publicly operating as superheroes.

-Iron Man, Thor, Hulk, Ant-Man, and the Wasp form the new superhero team the Avengers, but Hulk quickly leaves the team.

-Captain America finally thaws from his ice, to the amazement of the general public, and continues operating as a superhero.

-Cap joins the Avengers.

-Spider-Man battles Kingpin, Smythe, Hobgoblin, Carnage, and plenty of other crooks and supervillains throughout his college years but he beats them all. While he does scare some criminals off the streets, the existence of superheroes merely causes escalation. Spider-Man’s presence never ends all crime in Manhattan like Peter would like it to.

-Sandman and Hydro-Man are eventually able to fully recover themselves. Harry, feeling responsible, has Oscorp cure Hydro-Man, while Sandman chooses to continue being a superhero and joins the Avengers (Yes, he’s been an Avenger in the comics. Look it up).

-The symbiote is reformed thanks to Reed Richards’s efforts with it, and while it’s never able to return to its home planet, Reed helps it live a comfortable and fulfilling life here on Earth.

-Alistair continues to attack Peter with Spider-Slayers because “it can’t hurt to be thorough.” But he’s never able to prove Peter’s Spider-Man and eventually he’s sent to jail forever.

-Peter’s freshman year at ESU ends in early May.

-Around July, Aunt May and Dr. Bromwell get married about nine months after the engagement. Eventually, Bromwell is let in on the Parker family’s spider-secret.

-Peter’s sophomore year starts in late August.

**2013**

-Peter’s junior year ends in early May.
-The wounds of Gwen’s death have greatly healed, and the constant danger of Peter’s Spider-Man career propels him and Mary Jane into each other’s arms. They begin dating. I mean, they weren’t exactly NOT dating before. There was kind of an unspoken understanding that neither of them would have a relationship with anyone else. But now Peter and MJ are hugging and kissing and living together and having sex and stuff.

-Peter’s senior year begins in late August.

-One day, while MJ is streaming video games, Peter barges in, having just battled the new supervillainess White Rabbit, and his secret ID is almost blown, but MJ manages to play it off to their viewers as she and her boyfriend simply being kinky. (*One-Shot: Caught on the Web*)

-Unlike Gwen, Mary Jane is more interested in Peter growing a beard. It turns out it’s too patchy, though, and it’s ultimately decided that if Peter’s going to sport facial hair, it looks better as a goatee. By the time his first daughter’s in high school, this will become Peter’s definitive look. (*One-Shot: Growing the Beard*)

2014

-Early May – Peter graduates college.

-Late August – Peter returns to ESU for his first year as a grad student.

-Towards the end of this year, Peter and Mary Jane have been together for longer than Peter had ever been with Gwen.

2017

-In early May, Peter finishes grad school and becomes a humble high school chemistry teacher.

-Around this time, Peter has known Mary Jane for longer than he’d known Gwen while she was alive. Man, that’s kinda depressing.

-Peter and Mary Jane get married. Please note that Mephisto has been permanently banished from this universe and will never, ever bother the Parker family.

-MJ reaches the height of her acting and modeling careers.

-Peter will be 25 this August.

-The government tolerates Spider-Man’s actions, but Spidey never becomes a full-time Avenger or X-Man or anything. He remains an independent hero who helps the police go after crime lords and supervillains they can’t handle on their own. The police adapt and become better-equipped to deal with supervillains, but this merely leads to escalation. Superheroes are still needed.

2020

-Over time, the damage from Peter’s constant battles takes its toll on his body. Despite intense physical therapy, he loses more and more mobility. By age 28, he’s physically unable to be Spider-
Man. And at this point, even if Mister Fantastic was to use some sci-fi process to rejuvenate Peter, he STILL wouldn’t even be half as good as the average superhero nowadays, of which there are plenty operating in Manhattan.

-Peter decides to retire, trusting the next generation of superheroes to handle things.

-He becomes a forensic scientist for the NYPD, so he’s still helping people even though he can’t really fight anymore.

-With Peter retired, he and MJ decide to start a family (after having been married roughly 3 years and officially dating for 3 years before that).

-The Connors study Peter and declare that there’s a strong chance his children would inherit his powers. At this point, mutants are really pushing the idea that it’s good and natural to give birth to superpowered children. Society is very open and accepting of that. Therefore, Peter and MJ decide that whether or not their kids have powers, it’ll be okay and they can handle it.

-Mary Jane becomes pregnant and gives birth to May Gwendolyn Parker sometime before the end of the year.

-Aunt May dies of old age sometime soon after Mayday’s birth, having lived just long enough to see her grandniece.

2032

-By now, Peter needs a cane to walk.

-Peter’s and MJ’s second child, Anna Madeline Parker, is born. Peter and Mary Jane are now totally, one-hundred percent satisfied with the size of their family.

2033

-Peter’s and MJ’s third child, Benjamin Richard Parker, is conceived. Oops. But they’re happy to have him, of course.

-BUT by the time their third child is on the way, there is a new procedure done in the womb that can prevent a child from developing powers. Peter and MJ decide they don’t want to burden their son with superpowers, so they get the procedure done. This causes them to have a falling out with the X-Men, who feel this is morally wrong and judge them harshly for it.

2036

-At age 16, Mayday starts to get a little TOO good at basketball. Her parents realize she’s manifesting spider-powers. May assumes she’s a mutant, and her parents don’t contradict her. May has super strength and agility and also can make her palms really sticky, but she doesn’t make the connection that she’s Spider-Man’s daughter. After all, she assumes Spidey’s webs were organic, and she can’t shoot webs. She thinks she has tree frog-powers.

-But because she has superhuman powers, May has to be pulled off her beloved basketball team.
Peter and MJ are hesitant to put her on an all-mutant team (which is inclusive to superpowered non-mutants, too, of course) because they’re not on the best terms with the mutant community anymore. May refuses to transfer to Xavier’s, anyways, wanting to keep her social circle and believing she can control her powers well enough to “pass.”

-May’s powers are kept a secret, so the other students just think she’s a quitter. May is frustrated by all this and has no other physical outlet anymore.

-Eventually, though, Mayday is somehow able to figure out the truth, unbeknownst to her parents, and decides to follow in her dad’s footsteps.

-May also ends up becoming friends with fellow Midtown Magnet student Cassie Lang A.K.A. Stinger, daughter of the second Ant-Man, who further encourages her to become a superhero.

-Mayday takes up the mantle of Spider-Girl (“Spider-Woman” was taken already). She steals Peter’s old costume at first but will eventually make her own version based on her look from the actual Spider-Girl comics.

-On September 3, 2036, exactly 28 years since the first episode of Spectacular Spider-Man, Peter realizes his web-shooters are missing and pieces together that the brand new spider-hero, Spider-Girl, is Mayday. Also on this day, Harry and his wife Liz rename Oscorp to “Alchemax.”

-By snooping through her parents’ stuff, Mayday learns how to mix up web-fluid herself. But she also learns things about her parents that she can never, ever, ever unlearn. (One-Shot: Misbehaving May)

-In utter spite of the procedure, Benjy manifests spider-powers at THREE YEARS OLD. If anything, that stupid procedure probably sped up their development. Yeah, spider-powers are resilient and poorly understood by modern science. Peter DID get his powers from a freak accident, remember.

-Now the Spider-Family has to deal with all sorts of zany spider-baby antics. It’s basically The Incredibles.

2044

-Annie sprouts up fast and manifests her spider-powers at age 12. To Mayday’s great annoyance, Annie dons a makeshift costume and starts sneaking out on missions after her, becoming Spider-Girl’s tagalong sidekick “Spiderling.” If Peter and MJ didn’t approve of Mayday’s superheroism at age 16, they sure as hell don’t approve of their second daughter joining in at age twelve. So Spiderling is basically Jade from Jackie Chan Adventures.

2053

-Around the time of adulthood, Benjy becomes the second Spider-Man.

2054-2097

-Gradually, as society adapts, the need for superheroes fades away. Superhumans become
commonplace enough that the superhero/supervillain dynamic isn’t really that different from the police officer / criminal dynamic. It all becomes heavily regulated by the government, so there just isn’t really any need for vigilantism and independent hero groups anymore.

- The Avengers fade away and their remnants merge into America’s regular military forces.

- The Fantastic Four become an organization focused more on science and knowledge than on fighting bad guys, and of course, all four members eventually pass away at some point or other. Poor Doctor Doom never does take over the world.

- The X-Men are no longer needed, as mutants have plenty of rights and stuff now and society is fully equipped to deal with all their quirks.

- So in short, everything works out great, and society is basically perfect now… and it’s all thanks to our sponsors at ALCHEMAX INDUSTRIES!  

  Alchemax, keeping your water safe, your air safer, and your mind safest.

2098

- Mary Jane dies peacefully in her sleep from old age, surrounded by her husband, children, and grandchildren. Advances in medical technology allowed her to easily live to be over a hundred. She and Peter had been happily married for 81 years.

- Shortly after his wife’s passing, Peter, using illegal military biotechnology that is NOT ALCHEMAX APPROVED, begins operating as Spider-Man once again. He sports a jacket-based costume designed by the late Leo Zelinsky, who in addition to being a therapist was also a costume designer, apparently.

- For reasons unknown, Spider-Man chooses to rebel against our wonderful friends at Alchemax and becomes quite a thorn in the side of their operations. But don’t worry, he’s very old and unable to keep this up for long.

- On December 31, 2098, Spider-Man is cornered by Alchemax law-enforcement officers in the Parker family cemetery, where rests the graves of his parents, aunt, uncle, wife, and even members of the Stacy family who were moved there at some point over the years. Spider-Man is given the chance to surrender, but he refuses, and so he is gunned down at exactly midnight. To the bitter end, he never stops fighting.

Spider-Man no more.

2099

- Miguel O’Hara becomes Spider-Man.
“Aaaaand we’re live.”

Mary Jane lay sprawled across her mattress on her perfectly flat tummy, her stocking-covered legs waddling back and forth in the air behind her. She leaned towards the laptop monitor resting on her bedside table, just to make sure the MJ onscreen did likewise.

“Hey, internet friends,” she said with a wave to the camera. “Couldn’t get that photo shoot scheduled this week, and the boyfriend’s at work, so that means video games.” As she spoke, Mary Jane reached for the controller resting on her pillow. “Thanks for all the gifts, by the way. You guys are great. You filled up, like, over half my library.” But as MJ glanced at the screen again, her lips pursed. Hmm, viewership was abnormally low today. Mary Jane gave this some thought, then reached over to the bedside table and tilted her webcam a couple degrees downwards. There, much better.

“So,” MJ continued as she pulled up Steam, “any requests?” She gave it a moment, then checked the chat:

TAKE OF YOUR SHERT!!!

world of battlecraft ftw

Why dont you ever play the hentai games I send you? :’(

Space Wackos 7: The Space Awackens

And then there was one user who’d just spammed the word “boobs” fifty times.

“Hmm.” MJ gave this some thought. “I’m thinking Battlecraft.”

After that, she didn’t give the chat too much of her attention… at least until a couple hours into her game session, at which point it utterly exploded in her peripheral vision.

“Huh? What?” Mary Jane found herself pausing mid-encounter just so she could try and read the rapidly-expanding wall of text. Holy moly, she didn’t know the chat could go this fast. “What’s going on?” The whole bar was a blur until she forcefully stopped it from scrolling. As soon as the words went still, she read:

its SPIDERMAN

Holy crap it’s spider-man

Whoa its deadpool!

That’s Spider-Man, retard.

YO SPIDAMAN WASSUP?

MJ’s blood froze in her veins. Slowly, she dropped her controller to the pillow, then sat up on the mattress and, with growing dread, turned in place.

Standing in her bedroom doorway was a cute, brown-eyed man with spandex on his chest, a mask in his hand, and an oblivious smile on his face. The stupid game volume had been cranked up so
high, MJ hadn’t heard him come in.

“Hey, babe,” Peter said, stepping towards the bed, “I got back early. You wouldn’t believe the day I-”

“Peter!” Mary Jane all but screamed at him. “I told you I’d be streaming!”

“You did? Oh $#*%,” MJ had just enough time to see the whites of Peter’s eyes drastically enlarge before he slammed the door back shut.

“Uhhh…” MJ’s head swiveled to the webcam. “One second, guys.”

One second later, Mary Jane was out in the condo’s hallway, shutting the bedroom door behind herself in her hurry to Peter’s side. By now, he’d planted himself on the loveseat, where he was currently in the process of squeezing his palms through his face and out the back of his head via brute force.

The instant the door clicked back into place, Peter blurted out, “I am so sorry, MJ, I totally forgot. I mean, I just- I got so distracted today. There was this bunny-themed supervillainess, and-”

“It’s okay, Tiger.” With a patient sigh, Mary Jane seated herself on the other cushion. “I shoulda locked the door.” She inhaled, fingers on her scalp. “And now we’ve got twenty thousand viewers demanding an explanation.”

“Want me to go back in there?” Peter started to his feet. “I can make up some excuse-”

“No, don’t give them a better look at you!” But MJ grabbed his arm. “Just stay out here, babe. I’ll handle it.”

“If you’re sure…”

Mary Jane vanished back into her room without further debate.

Even once MJ left, Peter remained on the loveseat, fuming at the stupid mask in his hands. He hoped MJ was coming up with something airtight. He swore, if this was how his secret identity got blown…

Unable to help himself, Peter finally rose from the couch, then opened the bedroom door a crack.

“…Okay, first off-” Mary Jane’s voice carried from within. “-he didn’t know the webcam was on. Second off, what me and my boyfriend get up to in the bedroom is none of you guys’ business in the first place!”

Back outside, Peter groaned.
You are Spider-Girl, daughter of the one true Spider-Man, and as it turns out, that little blinking light on your web-shooters meant they were running low on fluid. You silently scurry up to the window of your Forest Hills home, grumbling to yourself. Your adorable, spandex-covered ears are still ringing with the cackles of Funny Face escaping into the night. *Hmmph.*

Small mercies, though, at least your parents are sound asleep – If there’s one benefit to having younger siblings, it’s that they keep your parents nice and exhausted. You manage to shut the bedroom window behind you and swap your spider-PJ’s for your regular PJ’s without incident. Once the costume and web-shooters are safely hidden beneath that patch of loose carpet under the bed, you climb under the covers. Tomorrow’s a school day, after all…

Two minutes later, you climb out of the covers. There’s gotta be a way to get more web-fluid. What’s a Spider-Girl without webs? God, you’re stupid. You were so caught up in the rush of being a superhero that you’d subconsciously assumed you had infinite ammo. Maybe making that webbing-snowman hadn’t been the greatest idea after all. But even if your dad keeps more fluid just lying around (which, let’s be real, he doesn’t), you can’t keep stealing it from him – He’d catch on eventually. No, no, what you need to do is make your own web-fluid.

Surely your dad keeps the formula around here somewhere. Surely.

Soon enough, you find yourself sneaking into your dad’s study. The room used to seem gigantic when you were little, but now it seems kinda silly, really. The desk is absolutely covered in random machinery and half-finished chemical experiments. Every so often, your dad will lock himself away in here, convinced he’s stumbled onto the next big thing (*cough* *cough* mid-life crisis *cough*). Usually he just ends up making some new kinda glue… which, in hindsight, might be exactly what you’re looking for.

You creep over to your dad’s desk, pick the lock with a knitting needle (Thanks, Cassie’s dad), and then start your snooping. Hmm, you’ve always been deathly curious to know what’s in this drawer, but it doesn’t look like anything super interesting. There are some faded old Valentine’s Day cards, a couple, tiny little spider-shaped gadgets whose purpose you can’t discern, and a notebook. That last one gets your hopes up, but all you find in there are some sketches of Spider-Man costume designs, all rejected. Some of the pages have little notes in the margins in a feminine handwriting that’s not your mom’s (though you guess it’s possible hers has just majorly deteriorated now that nobody uses paper anymore). On one page, the notes have been aggressively scratched out, and above them is handwriting that’s definitely your dad’s, reading, “The web-armpits STAY.”

You’re just about to close the drawer back when you catch it poking out beneath the notebook – a flash drive. Bingo. Immediately, you run back to your room, sit up in bed with the laptop on your lap, fire it up, and plug in the drive. Your enthusiasm fades, though, once you realize there’s nothing on here but video files. Okay, still, maybe your dad once recorded himself mixing up web-fluid? For posterity? It’s- It’s possible! And you need that web-fluid to defeat Funny Face, so this is for a good cause. You’re definitely not just making up excuses to snoop on your fascinating parents who’ve been keeping major secrets from you your whole life.

Without further ado, you slip in headphones, then click on a random, untitled video file. Onscreen appears a cellphone video. That twenty-tens quality gives you a headache, but you can still make out two teenage girls sprawled across a queen-sized mattress, the both of them wearing short shorts and t-shirts that, err, aren’t exactly baggy. One girl is blonde, the other a redhead. The redhead could not possibly be mistaken for any other human being on the planet except your mother, albeit
a teenage version of her. And as for the blonde… she’s come straight out of the old photos on the living room shelf.

“You’re filming this?” Teenage-Mom says, eyebrow cocked, lips curled upwards.

“C-C’mon,” says a higher, shakier version of your dad’s voice from behind the trembling camera. “For all I know, this could end up being, like, a once-in-a-lifetime thing…”

“It’s okay, Peter,” the blonde says with a giggle. “We know all about your photography fetish.”

At this, Teenage-Mom gives a dramatic flourish of her arm as she adopts a higher voice: “Ohhh! The mood lighting! The shot composition! It’s all so… so perfect. AAAAAAAAAUUUUUUGHHHHH!”

…You could’ve gone your whole life without hearing your mom feign that noise.

“Oh, shut up,” Teenage-Dad says, his voice peppered with laughter of its own.

“Yeah?” Teenage-Mom retorts. “Why don’t you come over here and make us?”

There are more giggles as the camera moves closer, but then the blonde girl gets all nervous and starts hugging herself, and so Teenage-Mom murmurs reassurances as she… rubs the girl’s shoulders.

“Look, there’s nothing to worry about,” Teenage-Dad says. “I turned off cloud storage. No one’s ever gonna see this…”

And that’s when you make the mistake of hesitating a couple more seconds before slamming the laptop lid shut.

Almost the moment you do, your bedroom door explodes open and your non-teenage parents burst inside, the both of them wrapped in bathrobes. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

It takes you a moment to realize you’ve been shrieking your head off.

Your dad’s eyes fall on the laptop. “May, it’s the middle of the night. What are you-?”

“What the hell?” The words escape your mouth entirely of their own accord.

“Hey!” Your mom starts forward. “You watch your language, young l- Where the hell did you get that?” The next instant, she’s diving for the flash drive poking out your laptop. “Nothing on there is any of your business. I’m sorry if you saw me giving birth and freaked out, but maybe that’ll teach you not to steal our-”

“No,” you stammer out, the words more forceful than you’d meant. “No, I did not see you giving birth. That was- I just…” You trail off.

Your mom’s interest has been peaked. She wrenches the laptop from your hands, then opens the lid to glance at the screen. A second later, your mom shuts it back, then scurries over to your dad’s side to whisper something in his ear.

His eyes go wide. “Oh,” he says. “Ohhhhhhhhh.” After a deep breath, your dad turns to face you. “May, listen, your mother and I… there are things in our past, in our private lives, that are behind us now, and-”

“Oh my god, I don’t want to talk about it.” On sheer impulse, your hands clamp down on your ears
as you bury yourself in your pillow. “I think I’m gonna throw up. My parents are perverts. My parents are gross, disgusting perverts.”

“Whuz a pervert?” asks a squeaky voice from above.

“Annie!” Now your mom is forced to pry a redheaded toddler free of the light fixture. “Go back to bed, honey. And get down from there. I just mopped the ceiling…”

After that, your mom has to guide your sister back to her bedroom, leaving you alone with dear old dad. He bows his head and takes another breath. He looks like he’s aged a million years since he entered this room.

After an eternity, he simply says, “We loved her. You don’t have to understand it or like it or think it’s right, but we’re not apologizing for it. It is what it is.”

You pull the covers tighter over yourself and say nothing. Your brain’s kind of in the middle of a system wipe.

“Now why did you take that drive?” your dad asks.

“I dunno,” you say.

He folds his arms. “What were you looking for?”

“I dunno,” you say.

“You know, you can’t keep this up much longer. Sooner or later, we’ll find where you’re hiding the costume and web-shooters.”

“I dunno,” you say.

His brow creases. “Young lady, if you don’t change this attitude-”

“You’ll what?” you snap. “Ground me? Yank me off the basketball team? Oh, wait, that bridge has been burned.”

After that, your dad gives up, yanks out the flash drive, and storms off, muttering to himself.

…He totally forgot to take the laptop, though.

The desk drawer slammed shut with a click, hiding the flash drive from Peter’s sight. He was sulking out the study when he found his wife waiting on the stairway.

“I’d completely forgot we’d recorded that,” Peter says, monotone. “Guess I can’t get rid of anything with her face on it…”

“It’s okay.” Mary Jane leans in for a hug. “I’ve still got this extra bottle of nail polish she gave me. It’s probably fossilized by now.”

The hug was held a long while. “You think, if things hadn’t gone… the way they had…” Peter struggled to meet her eyes. “…the three of us would’ve still…”

MJ could only shrug her shoulders. “It was only one crazy, stressful week in our lives. We were horny teens who thought robots were gonna exterminate humanity. Maybe it never woulda worked out in the long term.”
Peter’s gaze drifted to the stairs beneath him. “May and Annie and Benjy wouldn’t exist.”

That brought the most pained of smiles to Mary Jane’s lips. “Yeah. So it’s not all bad. But…”

Hesitation. “…you know, if Gwen came back, like, right this second…”

“I know.” Peter returned the expression. “Nothing’s changed.”

The hug didn’t end for minutes to come.

Finally, though, the two pulled back, and Mary Jane asked, “Why’d May take the drive?”

“She wouldn’t say.”

“Was there anything Spider-Man related on there?”

Peter started to shake his head, but then he caught himself. “Actually, there was that one video where I recorded myself making web-fluid to help teach you how-”

“Oh yeah,” MJ said with a laugh, “the web-fluid cooking show.”

“-but, I mean, ninety-nine percent of the stuff on that drive is like the videos of you giving birth and… y’know… stuff that’d make her want to bleach her eyes out. She’d never find it.”

The moment your dad’s out of the bedroom, you reopen the laptop lid. “All files successfully copied,” the onscreen popup says. You let out a sigh of relief.

But your next breath is less relaxed. You still don’t know which video file, if any, contains the knowledge you seek. And you know now what ungodly horrors might await you. But Funny Face must be brought to justice, and that can only happen if you know how to make web-fluid. There’s no choice, you realize as you bring a trembling mouse to another random file name. You have to do this.

For justice.

You’d never closed out of so many tabs so fast in your life… but by the end of the night, it’s paid off. During lunch the next day, you slip away from Midtown Magnet for a quick little shopping trip.

“Excuse me, I’d like to make a purchase.” You set a bag down on the countertop. It’s quite heavy – or so you imagine. “Heavy” has become something of an alien concept to you.

But just as you’re going for your debit card, the wrinkled old shopkeeper cries out, “AHA! I knew you’d return someday!”

“Uh, what?” You stumble backwards, disarmed.

“You can’t fool me by growing out your hair!” the man proclaims in a scratchy, airless voice as he pointed a withered, trembling finger at you. “You’ve got the exact same chemicals in the exact same quantities. Even got the twenty-pound cement sack. It’s a dead giveaway!”

“What are you talking ab-?”

“Too late, I’m already calling the police!”
Half an hour later, you’re being escorted back to school in the passenger seat of your dad’s cop car. You scowl at him, arms folded.

“Trying to hit up the old Chemistry Emporium, eh?” Your dad smirks at you. “Nice try, kiddo. I already thought to tip Bruce off.”

“Punish me all you want,” you mutter. “If I can stop Funny Face, then I have to do it. I’ve been told you used to get that…”

“Yeah,” says your dad, eyes on the road, “back before they integrated metahumans into the NYPD. I think we can handle some punk in eyeliner now.”

“Right, cuz you’ve been doing such a great job of it so far.”

At this, your dad lets out a huff. “Fine. If you don’t respect me and your mom, then you’ll just have to get a lecture from someone you do.”

The man looks otherworldly standing in the middle of your family’s messy old kitchen, hands on his hips. Must be the bright red, white, and blue he’s wearing.

“Hi, May.” Somehow, his massive, blinding grin comes off as completely sincere. “I’m Captain America, and I’m here today to talk to you about the importance of obeying your parents.”

“Daaaaaad…” You bury your face in the kitchen table. “Can’t you just make me watch more videos of Mom giving birth?”
Unfinished One-Shot: Balancing Act

Chapter Notes

This is the first half of a one-shot story I’d been planning on writing, but at this point it’s become evident to me that I’ll probably never get around to finishing it. I think my energy and enthusiasm for writing Spider-Man fanfiction has been just about completely expended on this project, so don’t expect any more one-shots unless the inspiration suddenly strikes me again someday. I’ll be moving on to other projects for the foreseeable future. But even though this one-shot here is unfinished, what I have already isn’t terrible, so I’m leaving it up. Nothing wrong with taking a small peek at Peter’s and MJ’s early married life.

Spider-Man released his web-line, letting his momentum carry him onto the side of his condo. Yeah, that’s right, his condo. That he and his gorgeous wife could actually afford with actual money because the Avengers paid Spidey an actual salary. In your face, Fantastic Four.

Once he was sure there were no onlookers on the sidewalk below – or drone cameras, that was becoming a problem now – Peter ducked behind the building, slipped back into his civvies, and then went through the front doors and up the many, many flights of stairs until he reached the Parker family’s humble abode.

Their front entrance alone was big enough to house the Hulk. And every last inch of it was covered in clutter. Empty water bottles, child-sized pajama shirts, some sort of slimy substance that Peter might need to have his Iron Spider suit scan before he could identify…

“Uncle Pete, Uncle Pete!” And at the eye of the cyclone was the brown-hired girl dashing towards his knees. “Look, the ’Vengers saved the city again, so I drew their picture!”

Peter knelt down to accept the leaf of soggy paper in her hands. “Wow, Gayle, you did great.” For an eight-year-old. “But I’m, uh, not sure Spider-Man’s bigger than Giant-Man.”

“Well, he should be,” Gayle countered without skipping a beat. “Spider-Man’s the coolest.”

Once he was sure Gayle was no longer paying him any attention (which took only seconds), Peter let the ensuing grin cross his face. “Attagirl…”

“Oh, oh, oh, and Emjay made me mac-roni!” Struck by sudden inspiration, Gayle led Peter by the hand to the living room sofa, helping him navigate the sea of stray dolls and crayons fused to the carpet.

Sprawled across that sofa was the remains of MJ – or “Emjay,” as Gayle pronounced it. No pause between syllables, subtle distinction. The coroner might have been able to identity Peter’s wife from the frizzy red stuff coming out her head or the sweatpants that, save for the thick yellow stain on the leg, were identical to the ones Mary Jane had been wearing before Peter left.

“Hi.” To Peter’s great surprise, MJ spoke. She even managed to peel her back off the couch so she could roll onto her shoulder, albeit with a great effort. She’d have passed for one of the crew of the Flying Dutchmen.
“Hi.” Peter leaned over the armrest to give her forehead an upside-down kiss, though he had to fight to not wrinkle his nose at her.

As soon as Gayle had wandered off out of earshot, Mary Jane said, “Gayle wanted macaroni and cheese.”

“Yeah, she told me-”

“No, no, not just any macaroni and cheese, but this really specific brand of it. I think she saw it on a commercial or something.” MJ brought a trembling hand to her forehead. “You would not believe how excited she got at the prospect of a half-cup pack of macaroni and cheese.”

Peter was trying not to give too pitying a smile. “And you’re the cool big sister-”

“And I’m the cool big sister, and there’s a store, like, two minutes from here, so of course we had to go, and Gayle was being noisy and the checkout guy was a jerk to me about it, and then at home I spilled scalding water on myself trying to make the stupid macaroni because I haven’t slept in twenty-eight hours-” MJ gestured to the swollen red mark on her right wrist. “-and then after dinner, Gayle threw up all the macaroni. Over there.” Her finger traveled from her wrist to the patch of carpet underneath the dining room table. Ohhh, Peter had been wondering about that smell. “And then I got a call from the rehab place saying my dad might be there for three more months.” Mary Jane locked eyes with Peter, then said in the same monotone she’d been using, “I don’t care how many little old ladies get their purses snatched. It is your turn to watch her.”

“Hey, it’s fine, I got this.” Peter did his best to smooth her hair back into its intended shape. “But, y’know, I, uh, haven’t exactly been having the most relaxing time of my life, either. I’d swear Cap thinks he’s still in the army. I don’t suppose I can shower first befo-?”

“Thirty-six hours.” Hysteria was bleeding through the monotone. “I have had her for thirty-six hours, and she has only slept for six of those hours-”

“Okay, no shower, got it.” Without further ado, Peter cocked his head over his shoulder to call out, “Hear that, Gayle? I’m in charge now.”

“Whoo! Yeah! Uncle Pete!” Gayle’s voice carried from the playroom (formerly the study).

Peter’s head snapped back to his wife. “Y’know, someday we’ll have to explain to her that your uncle generally doesn’t marry your sister…” When MJ failed to so much as humor him with the slightest of smiles, he kissed her forehead again, then said, “Go get to bed, babe.” Then his lips moved down to the next kissable region.

But moments before lip on lip collision, there came a beeping from Peter’s pocket.

“Wait, is that-?” Pure, genuine horror crossed Mary Jane’s face, enough to make Peter actually scared for her. “No, no, oh god, decline the call, decline the call-”

Peter was honestly taking out his Avengers ID card to do just that… until he spotted the color of the light-up bar. “MJ…” He forced himself to breathe. “It’s threat level omega.”

MJ sprang off the couch like it was on fire. “I don’t care if Doc Ock’s just formed the Sinister Six Thousand – There is nothing in this world that will make me let you-”

“Thanos got another Infinity Gem.” She was cut off by the voice of one Steve Rogers emanating from the card’s video screen. “And now he’s headed this way for the fifth one. The universe is counting on us, soldier.”
“On my way, Cap.” With a not inconsiderable sigh, Peter returned the card to his pocket.

But he barely had time to before he found a whole entire wife clinging to his body. ‘God, no, Peter, please, I am dead serious right now, I will literally do anything you ask for the rest of your life if you just don’t.”

“Shh… MJ…” Her hair needed to be brushed straight again. “It’s gonna be okay.”

Mary Jane peered up at him, her eyes the perfect mixture of pitiful and groggy. “Can’t we just let the universe get destroyed so I can nap for fifteen minutes?”

Peter could only smile. “You know I’d say yes in a heartbeat, Mary Jane… except you happen to be part of the universe, too.” Finally, that lip-on-lip collision came to pass.

Then Peter tried to go for the door, but the arms around his waist wouldn’t budge.

“I don’t want you to go.”

Gently, Peter peeled himself free. “Me, neither.”

Gayle accepted MJ’s explanation without much protest. If she was anything like her big sister, she was getting pretty used to Peter ducking out on them by now. Small mercies, though, Gayle seemed to be winding down by the time Peter left. Mary Jane actually managed to sit the girl on the carpet in front of the HD television. She could barely make her way through a Diary of a Wimpy Kid book, but Gayle knew by heart how to set the TV to the Spongebob Channel (which is what Nickelodeon had officially become by the 2020s. And it aired nothing but episodes from the post-movie seasons, too).

Gayle kept her neck craned up at the screen with mouth agape, utterly transfixed. If she was being honest with herself, that bothered MJ more than the fact that the entire universe was in peril right now. Maybe if their dad had ever picked up the TV’s slack when it came to parenting, Gayle wouldn’t still act like a such a hyperactive little…

But while MJ’s brain might have wanted to hunt for a more intellectually stimulating way to occupy Gayle’s time, MJ’s bladder had other plans. Once she was sure Gayle was nice and entranced, Mary Jane slipped off for a long-overdo trip to the bathroom.

Even after she’d washed her hands, Mary Jane lingered behind. She’d have to brace herself before she was ready to bear Tom Kenny at full force. MJ splashed some water on her face to wake herself up – a process that ended up taking a minute longer than expected – and then she finally managed to make her legs carry her to the living room.

It was empty.

“Gayle?” At first, Mary Jane rolled her eyes. But then she checked the playroom. Also empty.

“Gayle?” Then the other bathroom, all the bedrooms, the friggin’ broom closet… “This isn’t funny, Gayle. Gayle? Honey, where are you-?”

“E-Emjay?” came a voice from the balcony.

Mary Jane was there in milliseconds. It took her even quicker to realize that her sister was perched atop the railing, fighting desperately to keep her balance against the wind.

The instant the light hit her retinas, Mary Jane screamed.
And the balance was lost.

According to the universal encyclopedia in Peter’s Iron Spider suit, the monsters currently trying to bite his and his teammates’ heads off were known as the Outriders, and they had been genetically-engineered to quite literally have the highest possible ratio of pointy-bits to non-pointy-bits that any living creature was capable of.

“What’s the stupid Infinity Gem even doing in Manhattan in the first place?” Spider-Man inquired as he kicked an Outrider off the pier and into New York Harbor.

“It’s Manhattan!” Wasp replied from her vantage point behind his neck, where she was busy blasting the oncoming Outrider swarm like there was no tomorrow. “Everything ends up here sooner or later."

“Why do I even bother asking?” It was at this point that Spidey learned his electric webbing wasn’t as effective against these things as he’d hoped.

Spider-Man was just in the middle of prying an Outrider’s jaws open so as to prevent them from clamping down on his head when Vision’s voice rang out across the battlefield:

“Listen to me, my fellow Avengers! I believe I may have a plan to prevent Thanos’s arrival to our vulnerable planet, but it will require all teammates to have some basic understanding of the exact properties of the Infinity Gem we guard. It is no exaggeration when I say our entire universe depends upon each and every one of you paying the utmost attention to my words.” Vision gave a dramatic pause, his yellow cape swooshing in the wind as he hovered over the battlefield. “The Infinity Gems were born from the cosmic remnants of the universe that existed prior the creation of our current one, and therefore, they possess transdimensional properties that—”

“Pardon me, Peter,” came the monotone voice of the Iron Spider’s resident AI.

“Not now, K.A.R.E.N.” Peter rushed to switch off his helmet’s speaker, but it wouldn’t budge.

“My apologies, sir, but you’ve adjusted my system settings to prioritize the delivery of pressing news of your wife above all other functions.”

Crud, that was right. “Wait, news of my-? What happened?”

Aunt May had gotten to the hospital before Peter, and she’d come from Pennsylvania. Mary Jane refrained from pointing this out, though. Instead, as soon as she saw her husband dashing into the waiting room, she accepted his rib-popping hug.

The first words out Peter’s mouth were, “Is she okay?”

The first ones out Mary Jane’s were, “Please tell me the universe isn’t getting destroyed because I needed a hug.”

The remark was intended to bring a smile to his face, but it ended up being more of a grimace. “It’s not getting destroyed. The Inhumans lent us a spaceship and we’re getting the Infinity Gem off-planet, so I think the worst of it’s over for Manhattan. I mean, the other Avengers aren’t thrilled with me ditching them mid-mission, but…”

The conversation had to be cut short once Aunts Anna and May approached them. After that, the minutes passed with tense whispers and murmured reassurances until finally, a nurse arrived to
take them to Gayle’s room.

She was propped up on the hospital bed, bleary-eyed and with both legs in casts. Mary Jane was so delighted to see her sister, she didn’t even give herself time to dwell on how deeply unsettling the sight was.

Mary Jane hugged Gayle, and then Aunt May hugged Gayle, and then Aunt Anna hugged Gayle, and then Peter’s Avengers ID card started beeping. He took exactly one step towards Gayle before bowing his head, sighing, and excusing himself from the room.

MJ followed him out for the sake of eavesdropping, though it turned out she could’ve guessed the general gist of the conversation:

“Where the heck did YOU run off to?” Wasp’s voice burst out the card with enough force to make Peter shoot worried glances to passing nurses before cranking the volume down.

“The- The hospital,” Peter stammered into the card’s speaker. “My sister-in-law just broke her legs, and my wife’s really—”

“She’ll break every OTHER atom in her body once Thanos completes the Infinity Gauntlet! Now you get your spandex-covered ass back here before—”

“Janet, we promised my wife I wouldn’t go on the off-Earth missions—”

“Then you’ll be happy to hear Thanos shot our ship down over the harbor.”

MJ couldn’t catch the rest of Wasp’s words, but the look on Peter’s face said all she needed to know. “I understand. On my way.” MJ heard Peter hang up, then felt his sad brown eyes on her back.

She declined his hug. Wouldn’t want to waste valuable universe-saving time.

“He had to work again,” said Gayle without the slightest ounce of surprise in her voice.

Mary Jane slinked towards the hospital bed, fighting with all her might to meet her sister’s eyes. “He wouldn’t go if it wasn’t super important.” When Gayle said nothing, Mary Jane knelt to give her shoulder the gentlest of shakes. “Gayle, honey… what were you doing?”

The silence was replaced with sobbing. “I’m sorry, Emjay.”

“It’s alright, sis.” This particular hug didn’t place the universe at risk, and so Mary Jane was able to accept it.

“I… I saw this really cool commercial for the ’Vengers…” It took Gayle a couple, frantic breaths to finish the sentence. “…and I just wanted to pose on the rail. Like Spider-Man.”
One-Shot: Growing the Beard

Peter’s next college class started in under half an hour. He really should’ve been scrambling out the condo’s front door, Mary Jane knew, but instead she’d discovered him hovering in front of their bathroom mirror, feeling up his own chin.

“Uh… Tiger?”

“Hey, MJ?” Peter suddenly spoke.

“Yeah?” Mary Jane stepped towards him, alert, but she wasn’t remotely ready for him to drop the bombshell:

“Do you think I should grow a beard?”

“Oh,” said Mary Jane.

Instantly, Peter spun towards her. Sheesh, he needed to give a girl a warning before flashing his barren chest like that. How could so many abs fit into such a compact space? “Oh? What does ‘oh’ mean? Good oh or bad oh-?”

“I’m thinking.” Suddenly and without warning, Mary Jane kissed him on the lips (It was only fair. Seriously, look at that chest).

As soon as his mouth was free, Peter said, “What-?” But he could scarcely say that much before his mouth was obstructed again.

Soon as MJ had once again pulled back, she strained her forehead. “Hmm… Yyyyyyyes. Yes. Go for it.”

“Really?” Peter didn’t try to hide his joy.

But what he did try to hide was that split second – that teeny little split second – of wistfulness on his face. As if, like, on a subconscious level, he’d been expecting a more comfortable answer, but then Mary Jane had blasted him straight out of his comfort zone? Something like that. MJ didn’t know. She hadn’t yet figured out her boyfriend’s every quirk.

Epilogue:

“It’s patchy.” Peter slumped forward on their living room couch, head bowed.

Mary Jane, meanwhile, leaned towards him on all fours across the cushions, her knees on his thighs. “Boop.” With a sudden jab, she touched her pointer finger to one of the many spots of skin between Peter’s facial hair.

“Hey-!” Something of a laugh had been drawn from Peter, but it didn’t keep him from rising to his feet to pronounce, “Alright, that does it, it’s all getting shaved off.”

“Whoa, wait, slow down.” Luckily, Mary Jane managed to grab his arm halfway towards the bathroom door. Just before disaster could strike. “Let’s not go crazy here, Tiger. I think there’s a way to salvage this…”
And that’s the story of how my version of Peter gets his goatee from the Spider-Girl comics!

Works inspired by this *Standing Up* by Leaper

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