Pros and Cons of Anonymity

by Kizmet

Summary

The Sokovia Accords only impact heroes operating on an international scale but everyone knows it's only a matter of time before a US version is drafted. Spider-Man negotiates heroism in a new era, interning at Stark Industries, working with the police and the Avengers. Meanwhile Pepper Potts' due date is approaching and there are so many things she needs to accomplish before her and Tony's Extremis enhanced daughter enters the world.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
“Parker!”

Peter grimaced at Flash Thompson’s voice and let himself be shoved into his locker.

“Cast’s off and you just got lucky that one time,” Flash hissed in his ear.

‘Well, there goes about thirty percent of the guilt,’ Peter thought to himself. Flash had suffered a compound fracture when Peter, new to his powers, had used too much force to twist the bigger boy’s arm behind his back. The injury had benched Flash for all but the first two games of the previous year’s football season. Peter counted himself lucky that it happened in their freshman year. In their junior or senior year it could have messed up Flash’s chances of getting a football scholarship and Peter didn’t think he could forgive himself if his mistake had seriously impacted the other boy’s life.

Still after the summer they’d had with the Avengers’ Civil War, Tony Stark’s death and Captain America’s trial Peter hadn’t expected Flash to still be hung up on his arm being broken nearly a year ago.

Flash dragged Peter away from the locker and sent him sprawling on the floor to their classmates’ amusement.

“Didn’t you get this out of your system last spring?” Peter snapped. “Yes, you can beat me up. Last year was a freak accident. You just fell over your own feet in your hurry to punch me, I admit it. Are you happy? Can I get to class now?”

“I’m not quite done yet,” Flash replied cracking his knuckles. But before he could act on his threat another boy with curly, close-cropped hair pushed through the growing crowd and planted himself between Flash and Peter. “I wouldn’t,” he warned as Flash reached for him. “Lay one hand on me and I sic my dad on you.”

Flash hesitated, “Count yourself lucky Parker, for having Osborn to hide behind.” Within a few seconds the crowd had dispersed.

“Thanks Harry,” Peter said accepting the hand up his friend offered. “But wouldn’t your dad just get mad at you for keeping the ‘corporate spy’ from getting what’s coming to him?”

Harry waved off Peter’s concern. “Dad’s totally over your internship,” he said. “He was mostly ticked that SI poached you out from under him, he was going to offer you an OsCorp internship in your junior or senior year. You know, ninety-eight percent of students, college students, who intern with Stark Industries’ R&D department take permanent positions with the company as soon as they graduate. And the only other younger student anyone has heard of SI taking an interest in is Harley Keener and he’s basically the heir apparent.”

“Your dad was nuts that night,” Peter said.

“You didn’t have to worry, I know my dad,” Harry insisted. “Now that he’s cooled off- and I need tutoring in math again- he’s fine with you coming over again.”

“He’s not going to accuse me of using you to spy on his company again?” Peter asked warily.

“Totally over it,” Harry promised cheerfully. “Now Dad wants me to use our friendship to get you
“Has anyone ever told you that how your dad thinks is scary?” Peter asked.

“Most people assume it goes without saying,” Harry replied. “So, do you have time for a study session before Mr. Shaurer’s ‘This is how much you’ve forgotten over summer’ quiz on Friday? Or are they keeping you too busy at SI?”

Peter considered his schedule, “I’ve got a meeting right after school,” he said letting Harry assume it was with SI, “but if you don’t have plans for dinner we could study while we eat.”

“Great!” Harry exclaimed. “You call your aunt, I’ll tell the cook to expect a guest for dinner.”

The rest of school day passed quietly. Peter spent health, personal finance and American Lit going over his research notes from SI. As soon as the last bell rang Peter was off like a shot. Three blocks from school he ducked into a coffee shop that was busy enough to make him unnoticeable and with a restroom that had a healthy sized window opening onto a back alley. A short while later Spider-Man unlocked the restroom door and crawled out the window trusting the crowd inside to cover Peter Parker’s disappearance.

Ten minutes later Spider-Man flipped off a street lamp to land on the steps of the police station. While his entrance garnered a few hostile looks there were also waves. “So you’re going to be cleared for duty this weekend,” the desk sergeant said as he buzzed Spider-Man in. “Excited?”

“A little nervous,” Spider-Man admitted. “I still have to finish certifying. Then there’s the formalities and talking to the victims. It’ll be different, can’t just let my mouth run. Some of the people I’d rescue were more scared of me than the mugger thanks to the Bugle. Now I have to stay until a uniformed officer is on the scene and try to talk them into pressing charges. I’ll probably be too busy talking them out of macing me. And Captain Stacy says no using webbing to gag people I catch, it could restrict breathing and I can’t hang them from streetlamps because it bends the lamps, even if it is funny, it gives the Bugle ammunition- Did you see today’s editorial? Now Jamison’s complaining because I didn’t do anything about the old bird-guy knocking over that armored car Saturday. I just can’t make some people happy.”

The older man chuckled. “I can see why you’re worried about not letting your mouth run,” he broke in. “Captain Stacy and Colonel Rhodes are waiting for you.”

“Right! Thanks,” Spider-Man said and hurried up the stairs to Captain Stacy’s office. As he did he felt a twinge of guilt, the elevator in the station was ancient and smelled funny. He and Harley were still months away from a prototype brace to get get Colonel Rhodes on his feet again.

“Spider-Man,” Stacy said with a small nod as the superhero let himself into his office.

“Kid,” Rhodes greeted him, “Sounds like you’re going to be too busy to train this weekend.”

“You guys have a lot of confidence.”

“You’ve studied hard, you’ll pass,” Stacy assured him. “Now we just need to work out some practicalities when it comes to you and fieldwork.”

Rhodes set a slim metal bracelet and something that looked like a pen-light on Captain Stacy’s desk. “The problem with a mask is anyone can put it on,” he said to Spider-Man. “Sure your abilities provide a certain level of security but they could be mimicked. To be able to work with you the police don’t need to know your name and home address, but they do need to know that
you're you.”

He handed Spider-Man the bracelet and Stacy the pen-light. “The transmitter sends out a microburst of data, when it pings the bracelet it triggers a response. This is intended to verify Spider-Man’s identity. It is not intended as a means of tracing him. To that end the transmitter is low powered. It has a range of roughly 100 yards, the length of a soccer field. It won’t work through a pane of glass much less a wall.”

Spider-Man turned the bracelet over in his hands, “Can you add a switch so I can turn it off while I’m not in costume?” he asked. “I’ve been carrying the suit around with me, just in case. I don’t want to get outed because someone started wandering around pinging random people on the street.”

Rhodes thought about it for a moment. “It’s not a bad idea. Without the suit I doubt anyone would be able to pick you out of a crowd but, frankly, you sound young. If the bad guys found out about the transmitter they could conceivably use it to identify your school by testing it on assemblies.”

“Why are you bringing the suit to school in the first place?” Stacy asked.

“What if I hear about an attack while I’m at school?” Spider-Man responded.

“What if I’m at a bank and someone tries to rob it?” Stacy replied. “I don’t carry my gun twenty-four/seven.”

“But if I can help-” Spider-Man started.

“You can’t be on duty all the time,” Stacy disagreed. “Even if the stress of trying to live like that doesn’t kill you, it might kill someone else. Trying to be on alert all the time will wear you down, it will lead to mistakes. During school hours you are off-duty as Spider-Man. Your first responsibility while at school is to be- You, the you under the mask. You are not the only person who can save the day. I’ve got a whole department of trained, adult police officers,” Stacy nodded toward Rhodes, “and I’ve got him on speed-dial. Recognize that you are one person, that you can’t handle everything yourself and that there are people ready to help you, or we’re not going to get very far with this deal.”

Spider-Man looked down, chewing on his lower lip. “I get it,” he said. “But you in the bank without your gun, you could still do something because of your training. Me, if I don’t have the mask, I have to pretend to be helpless. I’m 5’8” and 115 lbs, if I do even a fraction of what I can do people will know I’m not normal. Plus I don’t have time to stop by home to pick-up the suit on my way from school to here and I’m not showing up at a police station every day as me, I might as well not even wear a mask if I were going to do that.”

Stacy grimaced.

“I’ve got Tony’s spec for the upgrades on Redwing,” Rhodes said after a few moments. “We could fabricate a few drones and have FRIDAY use them to keep tabs around your school. If anything happens in your neighborhood we’ll get an alert hopefully before you hear about it. That way I don’t have to ask you to standby and do nothing while people are getting hurt to protect your identity.”

Spider-Man chewed on his lower lip, “It doesn’t seem fair, my school getting special protection from the Avengers just because I’m there. I mean I should be taking care of my neighborhood so you guys can focus on places that don’t have their own resident superhero, shouldn’t I?”
“Do you know how Tony tracked you down?” Rhodes asked.

Spider-Man shook his head.

“As I said earlier, your voice gives away that you’re young. A statistically significant portion of Spider-Man’s appearances occur in a radius centered on your school. From there all he had to do was look for unusual events occurring within a few weeks before and after Spider-Man’s first appeared, when the odds of you getting sloppy were highest.”

“Flash’s broken arm,” Spider-Man said looking down at his desk.

“Yeah,” Rhodes said. “Tony got your name and home address from the disciplinary notice the school sent to your Aunt. Took him all of three hours once he started looking for you. There’s almost no one in Tony’s league when it comes to both having the resources to gather data and having the mindset to analyze it… It might have taken me several weeks of focused effort to find you and maybe without knowing what Tony did I wouldn’t have thought about your first appearance as a vulnerable point but you’re not that hard to find, not in this day and age. Superhero spotting is a bigger hobby than birdwatching and every kid with a cellphone posts our pictures on Facebook when they see us in action. There’s plenty of data out there giving away our behavioral patterns.”

“I would much rather have your appearances point your enemies at my police station rather than your school,” Stacy said. “Wouldn’t you? We might not have your abilities but we can do a better job of protecting ourselves than your classmates could.”


The meeting concluded with the decision that Spider-Man’s first, official joint operation with the police would be a crack-down on muggers that weekend.

Then Spider-Man let himself out of Captain Stacy’s window and swung off in the direction of the OsCorp building. A half-dozen blocks before he reached the obelisk of sleek black granite and dark tinted glass he found another spot to change and Peter Parker walked out of a quiet park.

As he got closer to his destination Peter’s steps slowed. ‘Harry’s dad isn’t even likely to be home at this hour and isn’t it just pathetic that I can go toe-to-toe with Captain America but my best friend since grade school’s dad scares me?’

Still… Peter remembered a night a couple of months earlier. He’d barely gotten back from Leipzig and wouldn’t learn about Tony Stark’s death until later that night.

“What’s the formula for calculating an arctangent?” Peter quizzed Harry as the two boys sat across the coffee table from each other in the Osborn’s living room.”

“Umm… It’s related to the tangent. How is it related to the tangent?” Harry said to himself.

Peter heard the elevator open, and made a gesture for Harry to continue.

“Inverse!” Harry exclaimed triumphantly.

Peter smiled, “That’s-” Then he threw himself backwards as his spidey-sense screamed.

Norman Osborn kicked over the table between the two boys. “Little snake!” he snarled at Peter.
Peter backed away from his friend’s dad shaking his head in confusion, “Mr. Osborn?” he asked.

“Disgusting little spy, sneaking in here, pretending friendship to get my secrets.”

“Dad, come on,” Harry protested putting a restraining hand on his father’s arm. “Pete and I have been friends since we were five. You set-up the play-date. You know he doesn’t have any sort of agenda.”

Norman shoved Harry away roughly. “Traitor!” he hissed at Peter. “After I let you into my circle, siding with my competitor then crawling back here to sue out my secrets!”

“Is-is this about my internship with Stark Industries?” Peter ventured.

Norman threw a sheaf of papers in Peter’s face and he took that as a yes.

Harry scrambled off the couch where he’d fallen and put himself between Norman and Peter. “Dad, so what? Pete got a good internship, you can’t blame him for taking it.”

“Ingrate!” Norman thundered.

“Um Pete, why don’t you head home?” Harry suggested.

Peter felt frozen, Harry’s dad had always been friendly, supportive of his and Harry’s friendship despite the vast difference in their backgrounds. He’d known for year that Norman Osborn could be pretty machiavellian but he’d never seen the man like this before, never seen his temper, let alone had it directed at him.

“Peter, leave!” Harry ordered sharply and Peter ran for the elevator without thinking. His spidey-sense had him twisting to the side as the elevator doors closed and a bookend whizzed past him to shatter against the back wall.

Peter stared at the fragments whole way back to the lobby. A part of him said he shouldn’t leave Harry alone with his dad, that he should put on the new costume Dr. Stark had given him and climb back up to the penthouse suite but it was Harry’s dad, not some costumed villain or criminal.

The OsCorp building loomed up over Peter, he swallowed nervously. He’d called Harry the next morning, Harry had sounded okay but he suggested that it might be a good idea if Peter stayed away for a little bit. He hadn’t seen Norman Osborn since that night.

Peter walked around the building to the less ostentatious residential lobby. Harry had once confided that OsCorp employees got a substantial discount on rent in the tower because his dad said it was easier to get people in for overtime if their commute was an elevator ride.

As Peter stood in front of the security desk waiting for the guard to decide to notice him he patted his backpack, the bulk of his costume was a reassuring presence. “Could you let Harry Osborn know Peter Parker is here?” he asked, half expecting to find Harry’s dad had left orders that he wasn’t to be allowed in. “I’m expected.”

“ID,” the guard grunted giving Peter a suspicious look.

Peter sighed and dug out his wallet, producing his student ID in lieu of the driver’s licence he still didn’t have despite having been eligible for almost a month. ‘Maybe I could ask Colonel Rhodes to let me spend some of the time at the Avengers’ Compound learning to drive,’ Peter thought. ‘Course having a licence won’t change that Aunt May can’t afford a teenage driver on her insurance. Still a licence would be nice to have.’
The guard scowled at Peter’s ID for a few minutes before grudgingly calling up to the penthouse. Harry came down with the elevator, “You made it!” he said happily. “I was half afraid you’d bail, you never hang out around school anymore.”

“I’m insanely busy,” Peter protested.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Harry said as the elevator rose. “How’d your meeting go?”

“Good,” Peter said. “I’ve got approval to move on to the next stage of my project.”

“That’s cool,” Harry replied enthusiastically. “Can you tell me any details?”

“Sorry,” Peter shook his head.

Harry shrugged, “Well, if Dad asks, remember to tell him I pressured you for them.”

“I wish I knew if you were joking or not,” Peter said.

“Only about forty percent,” Harry replied. “You know Dad wouldn’t have gotten so worked up if he didn’t like you?”

“I could do with being liked a little less,” Peter said thinking about the bookend. If it had hit, if he’d been a normal person he could picture going to hospital over something like that. “Nothing happened after I left, right?” Peter asked squirming uncomfortably.

“Of course not,” Harry said quickly. “Dad ranted for awhile longer. I went to bed. We talked about a few days later once he was in a better frame of mind. It’s just we’ve been friends forever and you know Dad can get a sort of possessive. You’re practically part of the family, that’s why he didn’t take you going to work for a competitor so well.”

“We have,” Peter agreed. In kindergarten Peter had been classified as a gifted student. At his teachers’ urgings his Aunt and Uncle had him tested and applied for scholarships at some of the more prestigious schools in the area. He’d been accepted and spent an absolutely miserable first month not fitting in. Then Norman Osborn had reached out to the Parkers, he told them Harry had been withdrawn since his mother’s death the previous year and he hoped that Peter would be more empathetic than other children their age considering he’d suffered a similar loss.

The two boys got on well with each other and the friendship benefited both of them: Through Harry, Peter started fitting in better with his classmates. Peter’s presence in any group tended to give the other kids something that wasn’t Harry’s lack of a mother to focus for the first few years. Once their classmates gained enough maturity to start curbing hurtful curiosity, Harry had started looking to Peter for tutoring in math and science. Both boys had expected Harry’s father to take his lack of scientific ability badly but Norman hadn’t seemed particularly surprised by Harry’s inability to follow in his footsteps and just praised Peter for helping Harry keep up his grades. Peter had overheard his uncle comment a few times about the way the scholarships and placements Peter did and didn’t get always seemed to align to keep Peter and Harry together but if Harry’s dad was manipulating the system so they could stay friends Peter didn’t see that it as a bad thing... Or he hadn’t thought it was a bad thing until he’d seen Norman’s reaction to him making a choice that didn’t line up with the elder Osborn’s plans.

“Getting exposure to more than one company before you decide where you want to work can only be good for you, right?” Harry continued.

And if not for the Avengers, Peter knew Harry would be totally right but the internship at SI wasn’t just about his future career it was also about Spider-Man. He forced a smile, “Come Harry,
I’m too busy to even be thinking about next year,” he protested. “Let’s get to studying. Um, is your dad home?”

Harry shook his head, “Naw, he’s been working even later than usual lately.”

Peter bit back the impulse to say ‘That’s a relief.’

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Dr. Cho gave Pepper a stern look. “You need to take it easier. Reduce your schedule to something sane.”

“I have a perfectly healthy schedule,” Pepper protested.

“On average you work seventy hours a week, sleep six hours a night and eat twice a day,” Dr. Cho pointed out. “You haven’t taken a vacation day in more than two years, according to FRIDAY your closest acquaintance with the concept is flights to Europe or Asia, and you usually work on paperwork while you’re in transit.”

Pepper blinked at her innocently. “Tony’s doctors thought it was great when I got him on my schedule.”

“Knowing Tony, I’m sure it made them ecstatic but this is not a healthy schedule,” Dr. Cho scolded. “And you’re twenty-six weeks pregnant, you’ve just started your third trimester.”

“If this is leading up to me giving up the one cup of coffee a day I’m allowed?” Pepper’s eyes narrowed.

“You tell me you’re feeling worn down,” Dr. Cho replied, “and I’m telling you it’s a marvel that you haven’t collapsed! You need to cut back.”

“I have a new product release for the third quarter, SI needs this out before Christmas shoppers get started. The body armor contract with the military will end in a few months and the board will have my head if I don’t re-negotiate a decent profit margin instead of the deal they got for letting us out of our missile contracts. I’ve got two meetings a week with the government panel trying to create a version of the Accords to regulate superhero activities within US borders. There’s the advocacy group for protecting the rights of underaged Enhanced that I started. Canada wants three more Arc Reactors for the Territories and Ecuador wants one on the Galapagos Islands and another on the mainland.”

Pepper didn’t sound like she was even close to being done when Dr. Cho broke in. “Can’t Ms. van Dyne or Colonel Rhodes take on the US Accords?” she asked.

“Hank and James are already on the advisory panel, but Ross poisoned the entire cabinet against Enhanced individuals, even imprisoned and in disgrace he’s still a thorn in our side,” Pepper replied. “Hope’s involved in the Advocacy group with me, along with Carol and Alexi. The two of them don’t have the political pull to take our place but they are Enhanced themselves and once they’re better known as Avengers they’ll be highly valuable voices but not yet. SI’s new head of R&D isn’t just new, he’s not Tony.” Pepper’s voice faltered. She took a deep gasping breath and then another, as if swallowing back sobs.

Dr. Cho stepped closer and put a comforting hand on Pepper’s shoulder but the other woman brushed it away.

“I’m sorry,” Pepper said after a moment. “I never know when it’s going to hit me.” She took a slower, more controlled breath, then continued. “Tony would have had the Arc Reactor projects on
track with a couple of videos calls.” As she spoke her voice began to steady. “He’d have personally handled promoting the new product release, kept us on schedule and had our distributors falling over themselves to help. But all our current head of R&D can handle is keeping the projects on schedule and even there I have to check up on him. The military contract is sensitive and I was the one to negotiate the previous deal, that would be mine regardless.”

“I know finding the right person to delegate to isn’t easy, I’m not trying to make more work for you,” Dr. Cho sighed. “But if you don’t do it now just think about what happens in three months when you go on maternity leave.”

“Don’t think I don’t know that,” Pepper sighed. “I’m honestly thinking about sending Marlena as Harley’s proxy to some of the board meetings with Happy backing her. As Harley’s mother she has some authority and she has the right presence, Happy’s sat in on so many meetings he can coach her on what to say.”

“If that would help, do it,” Dr. Cho advised. “You’re not going to get less tired this far into the pregnancy.”
Life in the Spotlight

Chapter Summary

Spider-Man's first night working with the police. Pepper keeps May company.

As she left yet another meeting on the US Accords, or more properly the Superhero Registration Act, Pepper found herself sharing the elevator with a nervous looking Foggy Nelson. The young lawyer glanced at her and started to say something three times before he made up his mind to speak. “I just wanted to thank you for asking me to be on the SHRA legal team,” he said finally. “It was pretty much the last thing I’d expected.”

Pepper gave him her professional smile, “You’re clearly very motivated about the issue,” she said. “And you managed to get your former client to articulate his specific issues with the Accords, quite an impressive feat.” Foggy caught a darker flash in her eyes and imagined she was thinking about Tony Stark’s failure to get Steve to sit down and talk through the Accords before everything went to hell. “I’m glad your firm could spare you for this effort.”

“It’s high profile, they like having their name in the news,” Foggy said with a small shrug. “Besides, SI almost never goes out of house, like they’d turn you down.”

“The last time this was tried some people took it into their heads that the Sokovia Accords were all Tony Stark’s doing and that he could make them go away if he chose to,” Pepper said frostily. “Going out of house seemed only prudent.”

“I might not be the guy you want if that’s the case,” Foggy admitted. “I’m junior enough that my firm could easily wash their hands of me if this blows up.”

Pepper’s expression softened marginally. “I wanted the person who was passionate about making the laws right for everyone. I invited your former associate as well, it seems he’s less interested in putting himself out there.”

“Matt felt other uses of his time would be more productive,” Foggy said, bitterness surfacing in his voice. Then he added, “I’m worried about the US take on registration,” hoping to steer the conversation into safer waters.

“Good. So am I,” Pepper replied, she didn’t linger when the elevator doors opened.

Spider-Man reached up to adjust the comm-bud in his ear through the cloth of his mask as he perched on the corner of a building. “Spider-Man here!”

“Alright Spider-Man,” Captain Stacy said. “Officers are in position. Let’s see what we can do with that extra sense of yours.”

“Nothing beats hands on experimentation,” Spidey replied launching himself off the building. He swung rapidly across the district letting his instincts guide him. “Got a feeling about the alley off 160th and 76th,” he reported but kept moving. As the night progressed he kept calling in the twinges from his Spider-sense. Before long the patrolling officers started relaying back their
findings, “Mugger apprehended.” “We’ve got a bar fight, send backup.” “Suspicious individual, follow-up.”

It had been Vision who’d started Peter exploring the possibility that his Spider-sense might have broader applicability than letting him know when to duck. During a review of Spider-Man’s pre-Leipzig activities the synthoid had pointed out that Peter’s success at finding muggers whenever he went patrolling compared with the police’s ability to do the same exceeded statistical probabilities even when the greater amount of territory he covered per minute was properly accounted for. Exploring his powers with the Avenger’s help Spidey had come to the conclusion that his Spider-sense was some sort of extremely limited precognitive ability triggered by eminent violent intent. In a fight that translated to a split-second warning telling him which way to dodge. On patrol it provided a general sense of something bad coming. When Spidey explained what he’d learned to Stacy the Captain had hit on the idea of saturating the streets with every officer he could muster while using Peter as a radar to direct them toward brewing trouble.

Spider-Man was starting in on his third hour when he felt a much sharper twinge from his sixth-sense. The effort he had put into understanding his powers and having the Avengers available to test their response to controlled stimuli had taught him a lot. He knew it took a large and urgent threat to trigger his Spider-sense so strongly. “Something big on 495 near exit 27N,” he reported. “I’m gonna take a close look.”

“Officers enroute, ETA ten minutes,” the dispatcher replied.

Stacy broke in and added, “Look, don’t engage without additional orders.”

Spidey shot a web-line to the side of of the freeway overpass then scuttled across the underside of the bridge. After a few minutes he spotted the threat. “It’s the old guy with the wings again. Think we should tell Falcon he’s got a bald copycat? What do you think about Vulture? Bald head, wings? I think he’s going after a delivery truck.”

“License plate?” Stacy asked and Spidey rattled it off. “Registered with Stark Industries,” Stacy reported after a few moments.

“Okay, we’re not letting him have that,” Spidey decided.

“Wait!” Stacy called but it was too late.

The truck cleared the maze of freeways and the Vulture swooped down on it. Spidey shot out a web-line, catching the crook by his ankle and yanking him up short. “Hey! Geriatric Falcon wannabe! That doesn’t belong to you!”

In his ear Spidey heard Stacy mutter something about “Sensitivity training,’ but the captain stopped short of ordering him to back off. “We’ve got a conflict with other enhanced. Dispatch, start diverting traffic from the area. There’s another overpass about two miles ahead, get the truck stopped there. Let’s make wings a liability. Tell the Avengers ‘Orange alert but standby’, better PR if it’s just Spider-Man and the police tonight.”

Meanwhile Spidey planted his feet on the side of a building and started reeling the Vulture in.

“I need that! You won’t keep me from it!” the Vulture ranted. He twisted in mid-air and used a wing to slice through Spidey’s webbing.

Guessing that the Vulture hadn’t given up, Spidey shot out a new line and caught him again as he went after the truck. “Ah-ah-ah. Stealing - bad,” Spidey scolded.
The Vulture wheeled about and went after the web-slinger. Spidey suddenly found his perch painfully exposed as he was slammed back into the wall, denting bricks. “Geez, you’re strong for an old guy. Shouldn’t you be worried about brittle bones or something?” Spidey prattled on as he scrabbled to hold on to the Vulture.

“Foolish brat!” the Vulture hissed. He pushed back and slashed at Spidey with a wing.

Spidey ducked, his eyes widening as the wing scored a deep groove in the wall where his head had been.

Trusting his powers to keep him on the wall, Spidey held on with his fingertips and kicked the Vulture with both feet sending him wheeling toward the pavement. Spidey quickly flipped to his feet and shot a web-line after his stunned foe. With the Vulture’s rapid approach toward the pavement halted Spidey readied himself to use additional webbing to gum up the jet pack on the man’s back before gift-wrapping him for the police.

A disturbed laughter echoed through the night and something green and fast shot out of the sky. “Let’s play,” a voice said as the line Spider-Man had used to catch the Vulture was cut.

May Parker tuned the radio to a local station then sat down at her computer and started googling Spider-Man sightings. After a few minutes she picked up her cell phone and checked her coverage. For the first time in ten years she found herself missing the old land-line and the certainty of a phone that didn’t run on batteries and couldn’t lose a signal.

When the doorbell rang May’s heart jumped into her throat. Without thinking to check the peep-hole she threw open the door fully expecting a police officer and the news that Peter had been hurt. The obviously pregnant redhead in jeans and an oversized hoodie standing on her stoop with a picnic-basket was so far from what she’d feared May could only stand there and stare.

“Ms. Parker? Pepper Potts, may I come in?”

“Oh, um, of course,” May replied holding the door open for her.

Pepper glanced over her shoulder and waved a nondescript car away then came in. “Long story short, I know a child is different from a lover but I also know this is the worst part, the waiting,” Pepper said. “So I brought pastries, tea— I’m not allowed anything stronger but if you’ve a mind to spike it there’s something in there to do the job — and company.”


Pepper looked sad. “I don’t know. I was always terrible at it, sitting on the sidelines, not being able to do anything. But I know tonight is Spider-Man’s debut with the police and I thought not being alone might help.” She gave May a self-deprecating grin, “Knowing the Avengers are all standing by just in case will probably help more. And they are, they want to make sure everything goes well for Peter tonight too.”

“You’re very kind to think of me,” May said.

Pepper glanced around the Parker home then let herself into the kitchen and set a kettle of water boiling. She glanced over her shoulder as she dug into her basket for the tin of tea and was unsurprised to see May refreshing the search on her computer the moment Pepper’s back was turned. “I could ask FRIDAY to hack the police frequency for you but it doesn’t help,” Pepper said. “If something goes wrong you’ll be called. Listening? It always sounds like it’s going wrong to someone who’s not part of it.”
May winced.

Pepper didn’t say, ‘Or they lie when they tell you it sounded worse than it was.’ Tony had never been able to lie to her about forgotten paperwork, missed deadlines and meetings he’d decided to blow-off but when it mattered? He’d hidden the truth from her when he’d been dying. Sometimes Pepper admitted to herself that as much as she’d tried she’d never fully forgiven Tony for that. That lie damaged trust between them in ways nothing else came close to, because after that every time Tony had tried to reassure her, Pepper had always remembered him telling her he was fine when he hadn’t expected to live out the month.

May took a long time considering Pepper’s offer and warning. “Who is FRIDAY?” she asked instead of deciding.

Pepper took a small compact out of her purse and sat it on the breakfast bar. “Hi!” FRIDAY said in a bright, chirpy voice. “I’m FRIDAY, an artificial intelligence created by Tony Stark. I help pilot the Iron Man and War Machine armors. I also run the Tower and I try to keep Peter and Harley from blowing themselves up when they’re in the lab. Honestly they’re easier to reign in than the Boss was, they can’t over-ride me. My name is supposed to be an acronym but the Boss never decided what it was supposed to stand for,” FRIDAY’s voice lost it’s spunk at that admission. “Really it’s a reference to ‘His Girl Friday’.”

“Tony’s acronyms tended to work out best when he decided what they were going to spell out before deciding what they meant,” Pepper added, absently patting the compact. “Case in point: Binarily Augmented Retro Framing. Can you imagine the fun I’m going to have trying to market B.A.R.F.?”

May acknowledge the wry amusement in Pepper’s tone with a small smile. “FRIDAY, you’ll monitor even if you’re not giving me a play-by-play?”

“Of course,” FRIDAY said.

“I’ll leave this with you so you’ll have a link to what’s going on when I can’t keep you company,” Pepper said.

“Thank you,” May told them both.

The teapot whistled and Pepper reached for it. “Where are my manners?” May exclaimed. “Sit! You’re my guest.” She took possession of the basket and set the tea to steeping then arranged the pastries on a plate and pulled mugs out of a cupboard while Pepper pulled up a stool at the breakfast bar.

The compact sat prominently on the counter between them but they didn’t talk about Spider-Man.

“How is pregnancy treating you?” May asked.

Pepper chuckled. “I read the horror list of potential symptoms in ‘What to Expect’ every month then feel vastly relieved when I don’t experience more than five percent of them. A little less energy than I’m used to, an increasingly irresistible urge to waddle instead of walk and a bit of nausea at the beginning of the second trimester.”

“Odd, I’ve always heard that’s when morning sickness is supposed to taper off,” May commented.

Pepper shrugged rather than bring up that her belated bout of morning sickness coincided with the week after Tony’s death and might have been symptom of shock rather than pregnancy. “I’ll be glad when I don’t have to worry any time I’m more than ten minutes from the nearest restroom,”
Pepper confided. “But really it’s been an easy pregnancy especially given I’m a bit older than conventional wisdom would recommend for having a baby.”

“Not planned?” May asked then flushed. “I’m sorry, that’s none of my business.”

“Gifts are rarely planned,” Pepper replied, her tone practiced. The question was kinder and more kindly meant than dozens of similar ones she’d fielded from reporters and board members. She was ruthlessly suing one SI board member who though his shares in the SI entitled him to her medical records. He’d been worrying about Down Syndrome, Pepper had been terrified that he might have learned about Extremis’ effect on the baby despite all the guards she had in place to prevent anyone from learning that she and Tony’s daughter would be born as an Enhanced.

An uncomfortable silence settled on the little kitchen and Pepper’s gaze roved over the room searching for something to break it. Her attention was captured by the numerous pictures hung on the walls and through the living room door she could see more on the mantle. Pictures of Peter at various ages along with May and a smiling, bearded man whom Pepper assumed was the deceased Ben Parker. But there were also several prominently placed pictures of a different couple with a baby wrapped in a blue blanket and with a dark-haired toddler. A pair of wedding pictures bracketed the mantle: Ben and May Parker and the other couple. “Peter’s parents?” Pepper asked gesturing to the second wedding picture.

May nodded. “Richard and Mary. Richard was Ben’s older brother. Peter get his scientific bent from Richard.”

Pepper decided that May’s earlier question entitled her to pry a bit. “Did you ever worry about bringing him up over-shadowed by ghosts?” she asked. She smoothed a hand over her rounded stomach. “I want Nettie to know about Tony but at the same time worry about the expectations knowing will place on her. No one can live up to a eulogy.”

May shook her head. “Never ghosts,” she said. “Never someone for Peter to live up to. Angels watching over him. People who love him even though they’re gone.”

Pepper sighed, “I know Tony spent most of his life competing with ghosts, first his father’s obsession with Captain America then Howard’s own ghost. I’m afraid of history repeating itself. Nettie isn’t even born yet and the chronically negative faction of the board is already speculation that she and Harley will end up competing for control of SI, while the rose-colored glasses set is giving me advice on business schools I should sent her to so she can succeed me as CEO while Harley takes Tony’s place in R&D. Right now Tony’s martyr to the Accords and the media is being kind, but I’ve been on this ride enough times to know it won’t last. I’ve already got publicists and lawyers preparing for Harley’s first year in college because I guarantee the media will remember Tony at that stage. There’s no way to shield Nettie from the polar extremes of how people saw Tony and she’ll never get to know him as a person.”

“Sounds like an even better reason for your impression to be her first exposure to her father,” May said. She glanced away for a moment, “Peter was very young when his parents died. Richard and Mary left him with us for a week, their first vacation since his birth, they took a boat out snorkeling off the coast of Florida, three months later the boat washed up on a beach hundreds of miles from where it was supposed to be. There was no reason for it, never any explanation. Peter was so young, Ben and I thought it was unlikely that he’d remember them, we convinced ourselves it was for the best that he didn’t. We raised him thinking he was ours until he was four. Then he got into some boxes under our bed and found pictures of himself with Richard and Mary. He wasn’t supposed to be there so he didn’t tell Ben or I what he’d found but he made up his own mind about what it meant: He concluded that his parents hadn’t wanted him. Luckily he was young enough
that he couldn’t dissemble effectively, Ben and I were able to figure out what was wrong fairly quickly. We had the chance to counter that impression before it became set in stone. Afterwards we had to admit that we’d withheld the truth from Peter because we were afraid that he’d ask questions we couldn’t find answers for ourselves, not because it was best for Peter not to know about his parents.

“Tell your daughter the truth before circumstances beat you to it. Your opinion will mean more to her than anyone else’s could, her father won’t be ghost if you decide not to let him be.”

As soon as the green guy sliced Vulture free he grabbed the loose end of Spider-Man’s web and flew straight up as fast as he could, knocking the unprepared teenager off the wall and dragging him into the sky. They were well above the buildings in seconds. “New guy just pulled me above the buildings,” Spider-Man reported as he was towed along like a child’s toy on a string. “Already too high to let go.”

“Get a helicopter in the area,” Stacy ordered the dispatcher. “Have it get above them. Spider-Man, once the chopper’s there try to get a web-line on it.”

“I’m on board with that,” Spider-Man agreed. Even as he spoke he aimed his other web-shooter at Green’s glider hoping to make it a little harder for the newcomer to drop him to his death.

Green looked over his shoulder revealing the twisted face of a goblin. “Good, good, challenge me,” he laughed and added a spiral to his ascent. Spider-Man started pulling himself up the web-line as he tried to prepare for what was undoubtedly going to be a brutal game of crack the whip.

As Spider-Man had predicted, once the Goblin had worked up a healthy amount of centrifugal force he abruptly stopped spiraling and dove. Spider-Man wrapped a loop of webbing around his fist and hung on for dear life.

“Still with me, little bug?” the Goblin asked.

“Spiders are arachnids, get your facts straight Green ‘n Gruesome!” Spider-Man called back.

“Either way you make a nice splat on the windshield,” the Goblin replied and set his glider through dizzying series of dives, climbs and spins. Spider-Man hung on and prayed that the webbing and his shoulders would hold as he was snapped around like a kite tied to the bumper of a train. Still every chance he got he pulled himself another arm span closer. In the background Spidey could hear the low wop-wop-wop of the helicopter’s blades and tried to use the sound to pinpoint his safetynet even as he resumed climbing.

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“Spider-Man, break pursuit!” Stacy ordered.

“But I can get to him.”

“Now! The only thing I care about is whether or not you can transfer to the chopper safely.”

Peter looked around for the helicopter. “Okay, I’m doing it,” he said then let go of the line attaching him to the Goblin’s glider. For a few seconds he felt like he was floating as his momentum and gravity equalized. Then he shot out a line and snagged the bottom of the helicopter. When his weight hit the helicopter wobbled in mid-air for a moment then stabilized.

The Goblin came back around as if to attack them but in the distance he saw the light from War Machine’s arc reactor zooming toward them. “We’ll pick this up later, bug,” the Goblin called before diving into the maze of buildings and disappearing.

A few minutes later, War Machine pulled up to hover near where Spider-Man hung from the
bottom of the helicopter. “Can I offer you a lift back to the station?” Rhodes asked.

“I’m getting scolded aren’t I?” Spidey asked. He leapt lightly from the webline to perch on War Machine’s back.

“At least it won’t come as a surprise,” Rhodes said and whisked him away.

Captain Stacy met them on the roof of the police station. “Does ‘wait for additional orders’ sound like ‘jump right in and start punching’?” he asked once Spidey was standing in front of him.

“I didn’t have time,” Spidey protested. “He was attacking that truck. SI delivery truck,” he added as an aside to Rhodes.

“I was aware of that fact,” Stacy replied sternly. “I was also aware of the officers enroute and the time needed to divert traffic. You also resisted my orders when I told you to break it off with the new one.”

He paused for a moment in case Spidey had any arguments to lodge. Spider-Man shook his head minutely.

“You allowed him to draw you into a fight where he held all the advantage. From what I could see his primary objective was testing you. You were his target not civilians, he hadn’t stolen anything let alone anything hugely dangerous, catching him at that precise juncture simply wasn’t worth the risk to your life. When I tell you to break pursuit I expect to be obeyed as promptly as is possible with consideration for the immediate safety of yourself and any bystanders.”

“Yes sir,” Peter said miserably.

Stacy patted him on the shoulder. “But other than that it was a very successful first attempt. We’ve got a holding cell full of violent offenders and I expect to press charges against two-thirds of them at the least. More if we get some cooperation on the domestics. Good work tonight.”

“Is the Vulture guy okay?” Peter asked. “I didn’t see what happened to him after the Goblin cut my line.”

“He escaped,” Stacy sighed. “But we kept him from getting whatever was in the truck so I’m counting it a win. Be back at the station as soon as school lets out tomorrow for your first press conference.”

“Ready to go?” Captain Stacy asked the next day.

“No?” Peter said hopefully.

“I’ll grant you, reporters are sharks, but it’s not as if they’re literally going to eat you alive. They can’t be as bad as the pair you fought against last night,” Stacy replied.

“Oh no, no that is where you are wrong,” Peter insisted. “The Vulture and the Goblin might both hate my guts, might even want to rip them out through my nose, but they’ll keep it to themselves. When a reporter has a grudge against you they’re not happy unless the whole city hates you too.”

“Besides Captain Marvel will be there, she’s new and novel enough to divert some attention from you,” Stacy continued, unimpressed. “When it’s time, go ahead and have fun with your entrance, that should settle your nerves.”
With that Peter pulled his mask down over his face and Spider-Man headed for the roof of the station while Captain Stacy headed toward the podium set up on the front steps. On his way through the bullpen he picked up Captain Danvers, Captain Marvel from where she was holding court with his officers. She was in her military uniform, like Rhodes and Lt. Shostakov, she used it for most of her public appearances. The three of them were playing up their military backgrounds, that they were trained professionals who understood how to work within a system of government and who saw the value of collaboration as much as they could to counter the growing public impression of lone-wolf vigilantes who refused to bow to any authority except their own.

A bevy of flashbulbs went off as the two of them stepped out of the police department. Captain Stacy took the podium while Captain Marvel hung back. Stacy waited a beat and Spider-Man swung around from the side of the building. More cameras flashed as Spider-Man shot a webline to the building across the street and swung out over the reporters’ heads then doubled back. He released the web and did a double flip off his favorite street-lamp to ‘land’ neatly perched on the vertical wall of the police station near Stacy.

Stacy nodded to the webcrawler then turned his attention to the media. “In the spirit of the Sokovia Accords, this precinct would like to help usher in a new era of cooperation between the New York City Police Department and costumed heroes. I’m here to talk to you about the first results of our collaboration. Last night, Spider-Man working in concert with the officers of this precinct conducted a sweep that resulted in the arrest of thirty-six muggers and the prevention of a costumed criminal from hijacking a shipment of advanced medical equipment. Working together there is so much we can accomplish and I’m looking forward to seeing what the future brings.”

“Spider-Man, does this mean you’re going to reveal your identity?” Christine Everhart asked.

“No,” Captain Stacy answered for Peter. “We have created Spider-Man as a legal identity.”

“Why not? None of the Avengers, current or former, have withheld their identities from the public.”

“I’m not Tony Stark,” Spider-Man said. A few of the journalists chuckled at his unintentional mirroring of Tony’s ‘I am Iron Man’ press statement and the boy’s shoulders hunched but he plowed on. “I don’t have a security detail at my other job. And this is volunteer work so I sort of need another job.” Stacy and Rhodes had both agreed in advance that Peter’s SI internship paid well enough to count as a job and calling it such would encourage people to add a few years to his age.

“And if we don’t know who you are we can’t hold you accountable for the messes you make,” a gruff voice accused.

“Was that a question Mr. Jameson?” Stacy said. “You can address any complaints you might have with Spider-Man to my precinct, just like you would if you had a problem with any of my officers. As I said, Spider-Man is a legal identity. You have an address if you need to get a hold of him, it’s right here.”

“How do we know he’s qualified as anything other than a menace?” Jameson demanded.

“Spider-Man just completed two months of training with the NYPD,” Captain Stacy said. “I’m telling you he’s qualified. You want a copy of the curriculum and his test scores? I’ll provided it, but his certification says Spider-Man on the bottom line.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Christine interjected. “So Spider-Man, is that why we haven’t seen you on the streets in a while? You’ve been at school?”
“Yep, Police Academy the crash course,” Spider-Man nodded. “Captain Stacy and Colonel Rhodes asked that I not patrol until I’d completed training with the police. I’m also training with the new Avengers team.”

“Spider-Man has excellent control of his abilities,” Captain Marvel added. “We largely been working on incorporating him into the team. But by his own choice he is not a regular member of the Avengers at this time.”

“Because the UN would require he sign his real name,” Jameson put in.

“Mr. Jameson, what part of ‘legal identity’ is giving you such trouble?” Captain Stacy asked irritably. “If he wanted to sign it Spider-Man that would work. If we need to subpoena Spider-Man to testify we can.”

“And if he takes off that mask and refuses to answer when you call?” Jameson challenged.

“His fingerprints are on record,” Stacy replied coolly, not mentioning that Colonel Rhodes had arranged to remove Peter Parker’s fingerprints from the National Child Identification Registry at the same time.

“And he wears gloves,” Jameson replied.

“It’s a cold day, so’s half the crowd yourself included,” Stacy snapped.

“Spider-Man you were at Leipzig. What changed your mind about signing the Accords?” Christine asked, giving Jameson the evil eye for monopolizing the press conference.

“Um, Leipzig was pretty short notice,” Spider-Man said hesitantly. “The Accords let Dr. Stark call in outside assistance if he needed it, which is what he did when he asked me to help out there. But since then I’ve sat down with Colonel Rhodes and several of the Avengers’ lawyers to make sure I understood the commitments I’d be making by signing the Accords. Um, I mentioned a day job? I have responsibilities here, I’m not available for international missions on an ongoing basis right now. I want to help, that’s why I’m doing this but I need to be local. Captain Stacy and I worked out this plan to let me work with the police in this district, I want to help them not step on toes or bumble around being ignorant. That’s why I stopped being around while I got the training Captain Stacy recommended.

“When I got my powers it was an accident. I want to use them to help people and I want to go about it the right way. But I’m just your friend neighborhood wall-crawler, I’m not the global type.”

“Accident?” Christine smiled warmly, inviting confidences. “So the webs are natural?”

“Er, no. I built those. To, um, go with the sticking to walls thing. You know, what kind of spider doesn’t have webs?”

“Well, a Black Widow for one,” Christine replied slyly.

“Just cause hers aren’t tangible, don’t dismiss ‘em,” Spidey returned.

“So you combine both genetic and technological enhancements?”

“I guess, yeah,” Spider-Man stammered feeling very Peter-lish for a moment.

“Getting a little technical there?” Captain Marvel interrupted. “The bad guys don’t need a run down of his weakness right?” And Peter decided he loved his mask for it’s blush-hiding properties
first and foremost.

Another journalist raised their hand, Captain Marvel nodded to him. “When the government passes a law regulating US superheroes how will it impact the police’s arrangement with Spider-Man?”

“If this is working well for us I would hope the government would take it into consideration when the final draft of the Superhero Registration Act is put forward,” Captain Stacy said.

“From what I understand Enhanced individuals won’t have a choice about registering with the SHRA?” The same journalist asked.

Captain Marvel frowned, “That is one of the more contentious points of the legislation. The Sokovia Accords were clearly and unquestionably a professional registration. Private individuals are not legally allowed to enforce international policies… Or to enforce their own moral codes on other nations. After SHIELD fell the Avengers had no legal standing, the fact that it took a few years before anyone objected to their continued operation didn’t change that simple fact.

“But if people of exceptional abilities want to step forward and offer their services to the world the Sokovia Accords were intended to provide framework by which the UN would be able to direct them where they can do the most good. With regards to the Accords, it doesn’t matter whether an individual’s exceptional abilities come from genetic enhancement, technology or training if they choose to act on the international stage then their actions are regulated by the Sokovia Accords.

“As SHRA is being drafted a number of constituents have pointed to gun-ownership registries and stated that super powers should be registered in the same way. However, owning a gun is a choice, operating something like War Machine or the Wasp armor is a choice, my ability to fly is not a choice. I did not volunteer to be experimented on, I was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time… Or the right place depending on my frame of mind at any particular moment. I have chosen to join the Avengers and to use my powers for that purpose but I should have the option to chose not to use my powers. Being treated like a weapon rather than the person I am tends to tick me off.” Carol made a face, “Can’t imagine why I don’t like being reduced to an object.”

“Are you suggesting that SHRA is some sort of superhero draft?”

“I’m stating that the Superhero Registration Act as currently proposed lacks the necessary protections to prevent it from being abused in ways that flagrantly exceed what is allowed by the draft,” Captain Marvel declared. “A legal draft in the United States requires an element of random chance: Everyone eligible registers, those called are chosen through a lottery system. However with powers as diverse as we have seen among the Enhanced thus far it would be all too easy for the government to select a specific person and demand their service. That’s not a draft, it’s peonage and the United States specifically made it illegal with the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000. It’s also been condemned by the United Nations as a human rights violation since 1948.”
“Alright class, what did you think of Spider-Man’s press conference yesterday?” Peter’s US Government teacher asked.

Flash Thompson’s hand shot up, “I just want everyone to acknowledge I’ve been right all along: Spider-Man’s a hero and the Bugle is full of shit. You all heard it, even the police came around to his side!”

Gwen Stacy looked up from the notes she was studying. “It wasn’t the police who came around,” she said.

Flash snorted, “Like Spidey needs the police’s help, he’s doing them a favor letting them ride on his coattails.”

Peter stared at his desk and wished that anyone else had decided to champion Spider-Man. Well, anyone except Peter Parker that was, ‘What if I give myself away? Still, why does FLASH, of all people, have to be a fan?’

“Right,” Gwen’s voice dripped sarcasm. “Being able to bench a semi-trailer totally qualifies you to enforce the laws. I’ll give him that he’s useful to have around when someone else with powers is smashing up the city but what’s he going to do with a typical crime scene, where you don’t catch the guy in the act? Go on the TV, challenge them to a fight and hope they’re dumb enough to come?”

“He’s Spider-Man, he knows who the bad guys are,” Flash declared.

“Yeah and four months ago Captain America decided Iron Man was the bad guy. Then he changed
his mind after it was too late,” Gwen snapped. “Put a guy in a mask and we’re all cool with him playing judge and jury, but if my dad uses his baton or god forbid his gun to defend himself against some asshole resisting arrest and half the city’s up in arms shouting about police brutality.”

For a few moments silence held. “Any other opinions?” the teacher asked. “Or is it time for me to start assigning homework?”

“Well, I think Spider-Man’s nothing but a hypocritic,” Felicia Hardy baited Flash with a flip of her long white-blonde hair. “He does exactly the same thing as Captain America for months then he cozies up to Iron Man during the Avengers’ Civil War and suddenly the city’s bending over backward to accommodate him.”

Flash scowled darkly at Felicia besmirching his hero but before he could say anything Liz Allen piped up, “Spider-Man figured out he was wrong, so he joined the good guy and he’s trying to do the right thing now,” shen said. “Why shouldn’t the police work with him? There wasn’t a law against what he was doing before the Accords.”

“Yes there were,” several of the class chorused.

“Vigilantism pfft,” Liz waved it off, “Nobody’s cared about those laws for years. Not until some heroes couldn’t owe it when they screwed up.”

“They aren’t called the Sokovia Accords for nothing,” Harry said. “You just go all fangirl over Iron Man because he rescued you once.”

“Damn right!” Liz exclaimed. “Tony Stark used his armor to get me to safety while he stayed behind. That takes more guts than running around beating people up with weird powers. What do you have against Iron Man anyway Harry?”

Harry shrugged, “Tony Stark was basically a snake-oil salesman. Even after he said he got out of the weapons business he still had the US military pairing my dad’s warheads with SI’s guidance systems. If Stark couldn’t convince his team to go along with him he was calling it in.”

“He tried, we all heard the trial. He tried several days before the conference in Vienna and his so-called teammate walked out on him. He tried in Berlin and got shut down again. We all saw him try at the airport, but oh no Captain America knows best, he doesn’t have to listen to anyone!” Liz exclaimed. “And the whole time he was lying to Tony and then he killed him all to protect the guy who murdered Tony’s parents.”

“Yeah, I give you Rogers wasn’t listening there but if he’d really cared about getting the Avengers behind the Accords he wouldn’t have just assumed Black Widow was passing on information to the team for him,” Harry replied. “If you really care about something you take the time to lay the groundwork. Everybody hates change, so when you want someone to change how they operate you have to sell it, Stark didn’t do that. He just dumped the Accords on the Avengers, whom he’d stepped back from, and expected them to be on board with him… After Sokovia.”

“Sokovia wasn’t Tony’s fault! Why does everyone blame him for everything! He’s a hero as much as the rest of them! He saved my life!”

“We all appreciate what Iron Man did for Ms. Allen,” the teacher interrupted seeing tears welling up in Liz’s eyes. “But to address Ms. Hardy’s initial point: Is Spider-Man siding with the Avengers who favored the Accords in Leipzig hypocritical given his actions in the months leading up to last June and considering that he’s refused to sign the Accords since then? Mr. Parker, you’ve been particularly quiet today. Do you have an opinion or are you taking a zero for participation today?”
Peter flinched. “Well, in the press conference he said he didn’t want to commit to being available for international missions. That’s fair isn’t it? He didn’t say he didn’t agree with the Accords, just that he wasn’t in a good spot to be dragged overseas all the time.”

“He’s got those special abilities doesn’t he?” Felicia challenged. “If the world needs him out there, he has a responsibility to go. A real hero would make the time. I mean who cares about some stupid 9-to-5 when HYDRA’s out there murdering people?”

Peter looked down at his hands. A part of him agreed that what Felicia was saying was right and Colonel Rhodes wasn’t being fair saying he wasn’t allowed to go on international mission just because he wasn’t eighteen yet. At the same time, he couldn’t imagine just leaving his aunt like that. Before his internship at SI, Peter had been selling pictures of Spider-Man to the Bugle to help make ends meet without his Uncle Ben. The internship took more time, since he couldn’t double up patrolling as Spider-Man with paying bills but it paid better and Peter didn’t miss the fights about money not being worth his life. Aunt May had not been happy when she’d seen his name on the Spider-Man pictures in the Bugle, given how close his camera had been to the action. She was more understanding now that she knew what was actually going on, now that she knew he was trying to help people not just worrying about family expenses. That one, Peter had admit Colonel Rhodes had been one hundred percent right about: Keeping Spider-Man a secret from his aunt, lying to her day in and day out had been a screwed up decision.

“No he doesn’t,” Gwen argued. “Spider-Man has a responsibility not to harm anyone with his powers and it’s great that he wants to help out but he doesn’t have a responsibility to do so. It doesn’t sound like anyone’s offering to finance him and we don’t have a right to ask the guy to go all “Les Miserables” on us and end up having to steal to eat because he’s too busy saving the world to hold a job. He’s got a responsibility to himself and to his family if he has one. Tony Stark had the ability to ask Ms. Potts to take over as CEO of Stark Industries so he could spend more time on being Iron Man, but how would you like it if you worked for SI you lost your job because he was too focused on Iron Man and the company went under. And the rest of the Avengers were getting support, first from S.H.I.E.L.D. then from Tony Stark, so again if the company went under none of the Avengers would have been eating, let alone having all that cool tech. Without SI you don’t have the Avengers. Can you seriously say Tony Stark would have done more good spending all his time as Iron Man at the expense of his company or was it better for the world that he maintain his business so he could do things like keep the Avengers going after S.H.I.E.L.D. fell?

“Considering most of the Avengers turned out to be backstabbing criminals?” Liz asked bitterly. “It’s too bad he didn’t kick them to the curb while he still had the chance.”

“Spider-Man didn’t do anything wrong,” Flash protested.

“I didn’t say he did,” Liz shot back. “Spider-Man wasn’t one of those assholes who spent years mooching off of Tony then betrayed him for asking them to follow a stupid law! Gods, you’d think he’d asked them to murder babies the way they reacted to being asked to sign the Accords.”

“I have an idea!” Flash exclaimed. “Gwen’s dad was going on about how Spider-Man’s a legal identity now, so the cops should pay Spider-Man. I mean he’s basically doing their job for them.”

“He’s working with them,” Gwen protested.

“Yeah, and they should pay him so he doesn’t have to waste his time with any stupid ‘day job’,” Flash returned.

Gwen’s mouth hung open.
‘SI’s already paying me,’ Peter thought to himself, ‘I mean I do real intern stuff too but it’s not like Dr. Stark would have offered if I weren’t Spider-Man. And if Flash thought of having the police pay me other people will too, Then what do we tell them? We can’t tell them I can’t sign the Accords because I’m a minor.’

“Spider-Man fought with the Pro-Accords team but he’s too good to sign them?” Felicia said to stir the pot. “This whole work with the police thing is clearly an attempt to get ahead of SHRA. Get in with the right people so he doesn’t have to sign that either.”

“If he doesn’t want to sign it he shouldn’t have to,” Flash declared.

“I don’t know,” Liz said quietly. “The stuff Captain Marvel said about SHRA treating people like weapons and how it’s objectifying, maybe it’s not a good law.” She glanced at the other girls in the class, “I mean do any of us like it when a guy looks at us and only sees boobs? Then you think about the stuff that awful Ross was already doing because he thinks Hulk and everyone Enhanced is just a weapon for him to use.”

Felicia looked divided.

“Turn-coat,” Harry muttered to Felicia. “Lizzie makes it a girl-issue and you jump ship on me. Come on Pete, we’ve got five minutes to go or homework, help a guy out here.”

Peter gaped at his friend, ‘The Accords were a choice, if I want to get involved on an international scale I’ve got to sign and agree to follow the rules laid out by the UN. It’s not really that different than a driver’s licence, if I want to get behind a wheel I have to prove to the government that I’m qualified and I have to follow the rules. But SHRA, what’s being proposed now, if I don’t give them my name I’ll be breaking the law just because I’ve got these powers.’

“I’m disappointed in all of you,” Harry announced. “Okay, the Hulk. You know I’m all in favor of him smashing the alien bugs that came out of the portal and I’ve met Dr. Banner at some of the research conferences my dad’s dragged me along to. He seems like a nice guy but he’s not really in control of the Hulk. Something makes him mad and you’ve got multiple city blocks in ruins. Do you want him as a neighbor?”

“The Hulk’s only destructive when provoked,” Felicia pointed out. “Ross proved you basically can’t cage him or kill him so, um, your answer is keep provoking him?”

“Okay, Hulk was probably a bad example. Thor too, since he’s Asgard’s prince and if we provoke them they’ve got a whole army of super-soldiers vs. our handful,” Harry said. “But isn’t there something wrong with letting them dictate terms simply because we don’t have the power to stop them from running roughshod over us?”

“No it’s not about letting them do whatever they want,” Gwen spoke up. “It’s about reactive vs predictive laws. Like Felicia said: The Hulk is destructive when provoked, usually that means people trying to lock him up or shoot him because they’re afraid of what he can do. Dr. Banner follows all the laws the rest of us do but because of what he’s capable of people attack him and it goes badly. We’re all capable of murder, physically capable of killing someone, but the police don’t go around hounding us because of what we might do.”

“Johannesburg,” Harry interjected.

“Okay, maybe you’ve got a right to ask Dr. Banner what level of provocation he can deal with before Hulking out, especially after something happens,” Gwen said. “But if what they were saying about the Scarlet Witch causing Johannesburg by using her powers to force Dr. Banner to lose
control is true then you punish her. You don’t punish people for laws they might break, you don’t punish them for existing.”

Pepper sighed, cradling her phone against her shoulder. “Marlena, I understand you’re worried about Harley missing so many classes but his school is used to this sort of situation. He’ll have video recordings of the lectures he misses and I’ll put a tutor on the jet sent to pick him up to help with any questions he might have… Someone with Japanese languages skills as I see his Foreign Language requirement is giving him the most trouble since his previous school only required two years prior to graduation rather than demonstrated mastery and most of his classmates started working on their language in middle school if not before.”

“It’s not that Pepper,” Marlena argued, “I know Harley can manage the academics. But how is he supposed to make friends when you’re pulling him out of class every other week for SI business functions?”

“Two-thirds of his classmates are child-stars due to your location. The rest are olympic-class athletes or the children of politicians or other industry heirs,” Pepper pointed out. “Beyond the security, I suggested that school because Harley’s irregular schedule is the norm there.”

“I just wish I could send him to a normal school,” Marlena replied unhappily. “Are you really sure you need him at this gala?”

“It’s a fundraiser for the Maria Stark Foundation,” Pepper explained. “A significant portion of the donors are the legacies of her networking. For the most part they aren’t as directly related to SI’s business concerns as the other functions I’ve brought Harley to but Maria didn’t ruffle feathers the way Howard did and Tony was much less abrasive when it came to people his mother respected. These are the people who leaven the paparazzi influence, they’re the ones who convince our investors that the latest media scandal is nothing but hot air. Now, I’m not saying Harley’s going to get up to the sort of nonsense Tony was infamous for but the paparazzi are going to be looking for stories when it comes to him. I want these people to have a favorable impression of Harley so when the media turns a molehill into a mountain they’ll be there to set the record straight.”

For several minutes the line was silent. “Why don’t you come back here with Harley when this gala’s done?” Marlena offered. “You’re due date’s only eight weeks after that.”

Pepper shook her head, even though Marlena couldn’t see her, “My doctor’s here, in fact I’ve basically got my own maternity ward in the Tower due to the former Avengers medical unit. SI’s corporate headquarters are just downstairs, I’ll be available if something goes too wrong even while I’m on maternity leave. And it’s not as if I’ll be alone. Happy, James and Vision are all staying in the Tower.”

“Can’t argue with keeping the doctor you know and trust close. But being available to the company, are you sure that’s what you want? I’d want to make them jump through some hoops before concluding that they need you to bail them out, at least until Nettie is a few months old,” Marlena disagreed. “As for your company, between the three of them, I’m certain Happy, Vision and Colonel Rhodes could handle an invading army but when it comes to bathing a squirming newborn what you want is experience not fire-power.”

Pepper laughed at that, “Okay, point to you. I don’t think any of us, myself included, has ever held a newborn baby before. I hadn’t even thought about bathing her, I’ve got to add a baby bath to the list of supplies needed. It took me a week to decide on a crib, I close ten million dollar deals without batting an eye but that crib nearly defeated me. Still I really wouldn’t be comfortable giving birth anywhere else.” To herself Pepper thought, ‘Dr. Cho and her staff are aware that fire-
proof receiving blankets might be a necessity.’

“Think on it,” Marlena said. “You should have someone who’s been there looking after you for at least the first few weeks.”

“I’ll think about it,” Pepper allowed. “I have to go, another SHRA meeting.”

Pepper took the elevator down to the garage level where Happy was waiting for her. “You see the news yet?” he asked as he opened the limo door for Pepper.

“I’ve been busy with the Gala plans all morning,” she said. Pepper pulled out her smart phone and called up a news browser.

“Police caught in the crossfire as Daredevil and Punisher take on a drug cartel,” the headlines screamed.

“Just what we need,” Pepper muttered. “More fuel for the fire just when we’re trying to convince people that we don’t need a mandatory registration for the Enhanced.”

“Are either Daredevil or Punisher enhanced?” Happy wondered.

“Does it matter?” Pepper sighed. “The public doesn’t really sees Barton or Romanov as different from the other Avengers even though they’re not enhanced. Daredevil and Punisher are part of that group regardless of what their abilities actually are or where they came from. FRIDAY, could you pull all footage on the fight? Security cameras, the dash cams on the police cars, any footage posted to the web. We need to see if there’s anything to mitigate this mess.”

“You know me, I love hacking,” FRIDAY replied cheerfully over the limo’s speaker system.

“On that note, Nelson called in sick this morning,” Happy said as he drove out of the garage.

“You think the odds favor an injured vigilante friend over the flu?” Pepper asked. “FRIDAY, priority on anything that tells us how Daredevil got himself hurt.”

After a few minutes a shaky, poorly-lit video popped up on Pepper’s phone. It showed Daredevil shoving a cop out of the way a moment before a muzzle flash from the shadows. The impact of the shot knocked Daredevil backwards and he fell off the overpass where the fight had been centered.

“Just after that an officer reports Daredevil attacked him,” FRIDAY said. “I synced the timestamps. The gunman was in the dark, the officer probably never saw him.”

“Okay, this is an angle,” Pepper decided. “FRIDAY make sure that video propagates. Start some rumors that Daredevil was killed protecting a police officer. That should drain the energy out of the headlines we’re seeing now and swing some sympathies back with our bone-headed heroes.”

“I might discreetly check with Nelson about what sort of medical care they’ve got access to,” Happy rumbled. “Hero or villain you can’t exactly go to an ER with a bullet wound and not have cops asking questions. Especially if you’re hiding that you’re Enhanced or if you’ve got too many scars to explain.”

“Peter!” Pepper exclaimed. “I need to talk to May. The medical team Tony put together for the Avengers kept files on all of them: How to work around the arc reactor while Tony still had it. Drug dosages for Thor and Rogers that actually did them some good. Even Romanov and Barton had notes about how to approach if they were delirious. We need a baseline on Peter so he can get proper treatment if he gets hurt or if he gets sick. He can’t even get check-ups from a normal doctor, either they’ll notice he’s enhance and endanger his identity or if they don’t notice then
they’re incompetent.”

The night before.

A sharp jab in the ribs woke Foggy from a sound sleep. He scrambled backwards until he recognized Matt’s mentor Stick standing over him. “What the hell?”

What Foggy knew of the man was that while he’d put Matt back together again after his father’s murder, Stick’s goal had been to train the ten-year-old boy as a soldier in his shadow war and when Matt became emotionally attached Stick abandoned him. As an adult Foggy couldn’t sort out the mix of kindness and exploitation that drove the old man’s actions and for that reason was inclined to consider the entire relationship abusive despite the abilities Stick’s training had given Matt.

“He’s got several fractured vertebrae in his neck and he dislocated his hip. Keep him off his feet for at least a week or two if you can manage it,” the old man stated then turned and walked away.

“You can’t just-” Foggy protested but Stick ignored him. “Where’s Matt?” he called after him as he struggled out of bed.

“Livingroom,” Stick replied. “You place was closer than his other friends. Can’t be bothered hauling him all over creation.” Then he was gone.

Foggy stumbled into his living room where he found Matt unconscious on his couch. Apparently Stick hadn’t considered the majority of Matt’s injuries worth mentioning. Matt was cut and bruised, covered in bandages and his neck in a brace that still had a RiteAid tag on it. For a moment Foggy found himself thinking about how far Matt might have walked or been carried before anyone thought of the brace. Then he forced mind away that avenue, ‘Did one of them just smash a window and take it?’ he wondered because it scared him less than what he’d been thinking before.

He turned around and walked back into his bathroom, then dug through his medicine cabinet until he found some hospital-grade painkillers left over from the injuries he’d gotten the night the Kingpin blew up the Russians the year before. He checked the label, ‘No expiration date.’ He rattled the bottle, ‘Another few injuries like this and we’re down to OTC’s unless Claire’s back in town.’

With the bottle of pills in hand, Foggy slumped in the chair across from Matt and waited for him to wake up. The morning newspaper brought the media’s explanation of how Matt had come by his injuries. Foggy cringed at the headlines although he felt some relief when it turned out the only serious injuries the police had suffered were two gunshot wounds; Matt didn’t use guns.

Around nine Matt shifted from unconsciousness to a restless, pain-filled sleep but as long as he could sleep through it Foggy didn’t do anything to encourage him to wake. It was nearly ten when pain finally won out over exhaustion. “Here,” Foggy said pushing a pill and a glass of water in Matt’s hands.

“Thanks,” Matt said once he’d downed them. He started to sit up.

Foggy put a hand on his chest, “Even that scary old coot says stay off your feet for two weeks. God what I wouldn’t give to take you to a real hospital. X-Rays, no secondhand medication, a licensed doctor instead of whoever we can get ahold of with half a clue about what’s wrong.”

“Stick knows what he’s doing,” Matt assured him before he fell back asleep.
Foggy sighed and went online to see if there was a police manhunt for Daredevil. He was pleasantly surprised to find the online news much friendlier to Daredevil than the morning edition of the Bugle had been. There was even a video of Matt saving a cop that was rapidly trending. Foggy cringed as he watched Matt fall off the overpass after being shot. He shut down the internet browser in favor of a heavily annotated copy of the current SHRA proposal and a word processor.

When Foggy turned on the TV at midday the video had jumped from social media to CNN. A young, slightly bewildered officer watched the video a reporter shoved in front of his face and admitted that what he’d assumed had been an attack had actually saved his life.

Matt had slept himself out by mid-afternoon. “Roll off that couch and odds are your hip pops back out of the socket,” Foggy warned.

Matt sighed and settled back on the couch. “What are you working on?” he asked after a few minutes of restless twitching.

Foggy hesitated for a moment, then a look of determination settled over him. “A brief for the ACLU,” he said. “I’m trying to get them looking at the more egregious aspects of SHRA. You want to do something to really to make things better? Stop going out and trying to get yourself killed and start acting like the lawyer you studied to be.”

“Castle would have been there even if I wasn’t,” Matt sighed. “I was trying to get to them before he could, put them in a cell before he could put them in a mortuary.”

“You could have been killed last night or paralyzed. You’re not invulnerable, look at Rhodes, that could have been you,” Foggy exclaimed. “Your neck is broken, if you were working with the police you would have had medical care, you wouldn’t have had to limp off and lick your wounds by yourself. Just getting here, every movement was a risk that you shouldn’t have had to take. You can’t be sure that brace is adequate, what did the old coot do? Read your aura to see what medical care was need.”

“I’m fine, Stick knows what he’s doing,” Matt said shortly.

Foggy took a deep breath, “Sorry, shouldn’t have said that. I hate seeing you hurt like this, thinking about how much worse it could have been. Look, we’re trying to find a way to bring vigilantes like you, the ones who are willing to be limited, under the law,” Foggy pled. “That’s what SHRA is meant to be but Ms. Pott’s team isn’t the only one trying shape it. Daredevil’s a stop gap, going out and beating up bad guys the legal system misses it doesn’t change anything. Going outside of a faulty system to force it to work only masks the problem. SHRA could be a step toward fixing the underlying problem… Or it could be a wedge driven between the Enhanced and the rest of the world. You’re not going to solve this with your fists Matt, but I could use my partner. Help us make a good law instead of pretending you’re above it.”

Matt shook his head. “I don’t think you can… But hand it over.” He sighed as he accepted the thick sheaf papers, “Even if you had free reign to write the law anyway you liked I don’t have the naivety to believe that people with money or power won’t twist it to suit themselves, but let’s see what I can do to help you make them work for it. Actually if I’m going to do this, do you mind stopping by my place? The text-to-braille converter is on the shelf left of the window.”

“You actually need it?” Foggy asked.

Matt hesitated. He ran his fingers over the papers. “I could read a short note from the impressions of the print on the page,” he admitted. “My senses are sharp enough to sense your pen strokes easily. I can even feel the raised ink from the laser printer, but it’s a struggle to read like that. I
have to fight to remember what the letters mean when they’re not written in braille.” He thumped the papers, “When it comes to the written word English isn’t my primary language, hasn’t been for a long time.”

A quick smile crossed Foggy’s face, “Thanks for explaining,” he said. “Do you carry keys in that get up or am I going have to test my fire-escape scaling skills to get into the apartment?”

“Lucky you… check the belt pouch, forth to the right from the buckle.”

As Foggy left Matt’s apartment forty minutes later a dark-haired woman dressed to be forgettable fell into step beside him. “Tell him people know he’s hurt. There’s blood in the water and who hasn’t seen Shark Week once or twice. We’re taking care of things but he needs to watch his back.”

“Who’s we?” Foggy asked but the woman melted back into the crowds without a backwards glance.

For the rest of the walk back to his apartment Foggy told himself that no one knew about his connection to Daredevil and Matt was safe at his place. His heart rate still soared when he saw a heavy set man with a fighter’s stance loitering on the steps inside his building. Foggy avoided eye-contact with the guy as he tried to slip past him and up the stairs.

When the man reached toward him Foggy threw himself against the far wall of the stairwell. The man put up his hands. “Happy Hogan, Ms. Pott’s driver,” he introduced himself.

Foggy took a deep breath and peeled himself off the wall.

“We saw the news,” Happy said. “Thought I’d drop by and make sure your friend had medical care. Might not agree with how he goes about doing things but we’re not going to stand by and do nothing if he’s seriously hurting. There’s a medical level at the tower and we’ve still got staff on call.”

“I- I- Thanks, I’ll tell him,” Foggy sighed. “I don’t think he’s hurt bad enough to take you up on that. This time anyway.”

Chapter End Notes

Salaried Heroes: There’s an old Wally West/Flash storyline where Wally’s twenty, supporting himself and his mother. He had extremely limited marketable skills and an enhanced metabolism making him need to eat huge amounts. He decided to try to make money off of his heroing, since that’s pretty much the only thing he’s trained to do and everyone acted like he’s a horrible person for this. I mean it’s not as if the doctors and nurses who were looking down on him for wanting compensation for his life-saving efforts get paid for their work… Oh wait, they do get paid. I thought the disdain Wally’s actions generated was overblown, wanting to make a living is not the height of selfishness.

Stick: If Tony deserves to be criticized for bringing fifteen-year-old Peter to Leipzig, then Stick’s actions are utterly indefensible. Yes he gave Matt the training to cope with his abilities and to overcome his blindness to a degree that he’s much more capable
than a sighted person. But Matt was an emotionally distraught nine or ten-year-old and Stick was training him as a soldier, molding him for use in Stick’s war. As much as Matt might have been upset when he disappeared it was probably the nicest thing Stick could have done.
“Four days after the battle near the Lincoln Tunnel, the masked vigilante known as Daredevil remains unaccounted for, giving credence to rumors that he lost his life saving one of New York’s finest,” the news site reported.

Liz Allen glanced up from skimming the news on her phone. “Do you guys really think Daredevil died?” she asked with a worried expression before classes started.

“He could have just taken off his costume and blended back in,” Harry assured her. “Gone to a hospital under his real name.”

“Hospitals report bullet wounds to the police,” Gwen pointed out.

“I’m working on SI’s body armor in my internship,” Peter said. “That stuff’s amazing. Daredevil’s armor could have kept the bullet from penetrating, then he could have passed it all off as injuries from falling off a ladder or something.”

“Or he lived alone and the smell hasn’t gotten strong enough for his neighbors to call it in yet,” Flash snorted.

Liz glared at him, “That’s a terrible thing to say!”


Harry rolled his eyes, “Having powers doesn’t set you above other people.”

“Just Daddy having money, right Osborn?” Flash shot back.

Harry glared back at him, “Watching you, I assumed it was being good at playing football that gave people special rights.”
Reflexively Rhodes moved to get up at the knock on his office door then grimaced and called, “Come in.”

The woman who opened the door was in her late twenties, her dark hair pulled back in a no-nonsense bun, the uncertain expression on her face seemed at odds with air of calm professionalism projected by her style of dress. “Colonel Rhodes, I’m Agent Angela Del Toro with the FBI.”

“How can I help you?” Rhodes asked.

“You’ve offered to mediate between law enforcement agencies and individuals wishing to employ powers or special abilities to provide them assistance?” Del Toro said.

Rhodes nodded, “Do you have a individual in mind you’d like the Avengers to approach? I’m assuming you don’t need us for a background check.”

“Um, no.” Del Toro took a tiger amulet out of her pocket and laid it on the table between them. “Have you ever heard of the White Tiger?”

Rhodes thought for a moment then nodded. “Right after the Avengers went public, he was one of a number of individuals who tried to emulate them. He was accused of murder, died trying to escape police custody, evidence was found clearing his name a few days later.”

“He was my uncle,” Del Toro said. “He didn’t trust police. I imagine he attempted escaped in order to clear his name himself. It wasn’t necessary, the evidence cleared him. It was his belief that the legal system didn’t work for people like him that killed him.”

“I’m sorry,” Rhodes replied.

“The amulet was the source of his powers, he left it to me.” Del Toro picked up the amulet. “It’s been sitting in a box in my closet for the last five years while I completed my training at Quantico. I wanted to help people but not the way my uncle did. Now, with what you’re doing it seems I can be both, however I am nervous about approaching my superiors officially.”

“But you want to stay with the FBI?” Rhodes asked.

“I want to know how people will react before I put this on,” Del Toro replied. “The White Tiger’s abilities are not so great: I will be more than human, my strength and reflexes increased but not…” she trailed off. “I think I would offer more continuing as an agent than as an Avenger. But my direct supervisor,” she sighed. “He’s always been professional when dealing with me, he saves the racial slurs for the criminals. Still, it doesn’t fill me with faith. At the same time I don’t want to go over his head or appear disloyal.”

Rhodes looked at her thoughtfully, “So you want me to place you where you would do the most good. No harm, no foul if I suggest transferring you to another service, for the general good.”

Del Toro nodded.

“Okay,” Rhodes said. “I’ll need a more comprehensive explanation of your powers. Hell, just write me a resume that includes powers along with your skills, leave your name off. I’ll see what I can do to find a fit for you… ATCU’s a possibility.”

Del Toro smiled tentatively. “That sounds good, thank you.”
Norman Osborn ushered a group of uniformed officers past the security desk at the OsCorp building. “In this era of Inhumans and the Enhanced running amuck it is imperative that we perfect the super soldier serum,” he said as the elevator rose. “It is essential that you, the leaders of our military, gain the ability to carefully screen and select recruits to become empowered. You must gain the ability to choose people who will respect the laws… Follow orders. Any other option will continue to leave us at the mercy of the freaks, the aliens and the lucky accidents.” He led them down a hall and into a gleaming bio-engineering lab. One wall was stacked high with glass cages holding dozens of species of spiders.

“I don’t care how carefully you screen them,” one of the generals said. “Once they’re enhanced they all get ideas about how they know best. I came here to see OsCorp’s new grenades and personal armaments. Don’t give ‘em anything you can’t take back, I say. It’s the only way to keep ‘em from getting too big for their britches.”

“And the personal gliders you demo’ed at the last conference,” a major interjected.

Norman’s expression soured. “SI is holding up production on the glider with spurious patent lawsuits,” he said. “The glider tech bares only a superficial resemblance to the Iron Man repulsors.”

One of the other members of the group wandered over and tapped on the side of one of the spider cages, watching as the arachnids scrambled about their enclosures looking for the source of the vibrations. “Looks like SI isn’t the only one with industrial espionage issues… Unless Spider-Man’s other job is at OsCorp?”

The general snorted. “Either you can’t keep control of your research or you can’t keep control of your test subject. Neither one inspires much confidence.”

Norman slammed his fist against the wall. “Spider-Man has nothing to do with OsCorp! Nothing!” he snarled. “And I’ll deal with SI.”

“Unit S, Goblin sighted heading toward Empire University dorms,” the dispatcher relayed

“On it! I mean, ETA fifteen minutes,” Spider-Man replied.

“Remember, do not let him get you in the air,” Captain Stacy interjected. “Campus Security has been alerted, they’re moving people inside and locking down the buildings. Vision is enroute to provide back-up.”

“Keep Mean-Green busy ’til Viz gets here, watch the buildings and keep my feet planted,” Spider-Man translated as he swung toward the college. “Got it.”

It wasn’t hard to find the Goblin. He was slaloming around the buildings on his glider, laughing and occasionally tossing flash grenades at the stragglers still seeking cover.

Spider-Man used a line of webbing to catch and divert one of the grenades away from a girl who’d tripped as she fled.
“Bug, I had a feeling I’d run into you tonight,” the Goblin cackled.

Spider-Man swung to the ground, landing between the girl and the Goblin. He gave her a quick hand up and a nudge toward the nearest building. “Gee, keep saying things like that and a guy might think you were flirting… Fifth-grader style.”

“But I don’t like you,” the Goblin replied as he traded the flash grenade for an orange one, pulling it from one of the many pouches he carried. “I just like blowing the limbs off of pesky little bugs.”

Spider-Man wrapped the grenade in webbing and diverted it to the middle of the street. The shockwave still threw him to the ground. “Classic psycho behavior, who would have guessed?” he quipped.

“Go splat little bug,” the Goblin said throwing several more grenades. Spider-Man scrambled to avoid the blasts while knocking the bombs away from the buildings.


“But you said-”

“We didn’t know about the bombs. Head Northeast. Intercept Vision.”

Spider-Man swung off as rapidly as he could.

“Scuttle around little bug, it’ll do you no good,” the goblin cackled. His glider made up the distance between them in no time. But despite his greater speed, the Goblin couldn’t quite predict Spidey’s movements.

Before long the skyscrapers gave way to a park. Better for limiting collateral damage, but the terrain favored the goblin’s glider. Without buildings Spidey dropped to the ground, running, occasionally using a tree to yank himself out of the path of a blast.

“Run, little bug, run while you still can.”

One of the Goblin’s bombs splintered a tree inches away from Spidey. Reflexively, he threw up his arms as he was sprayed with shrapnel. His armor repelled almost everything but a large splinter found the joint between his glove and sleeve and laid open a deep cut across the back of his wrist. The proximity of the explosion left Peter’s ear ringing and his head spinning.

“Itsy bitsy spider went up the waterspout,” the Goblin sang as he hovered above Spidey, tossing another bomb up and down. “Down came the rain and washed the spider out.”

As red beam split the night and the bomb was vaporized before it could explode. “You will surrender,” Vision said sternly.

“Hmmm…” The Goblin tilted his head to the side consideringly. “Not so long as I fly faster than you,” he declared and fled. “Another time little spider, another time.”

Vision looked between the fleeing Goblin and Spider-Man clutching his bleeding arm. “Spider-Man is injured,” he reported back to Stacy. “I will bring him to the Avengers’ facility, he can be treated there without risk to his identity.”

“It’s a scratch,” Peter protested.

Vision landed beside him and looked at his arm. “I do not believe the definition of ‘a scratch’
includes injuries which will require stitches.”

Cameras flashed as Pepper stepped up to the podium set up on the steps of Stark Towers. Dr. Cho and several other members of the medical staff stood behind her.

“In light of recent events: Spider-Man voluntarily stepping forward to work with the police. The sudden onset of powers in random individuals due to causes completely outside of their control. The battle earlier this week where Daredevil was injured, possibly gravely. Due to these events Stark Industries is reopening the Tower’s medical level. The facility was originally set up to serve the Avengers’ needs, now we’re offering to serve a broader community,” Pepper announced.

“Stark Industries is a tech company. We have never been involved in attempts to recreate the Super-Soldier Serum and we’re not interested in starting now. What we’re offering is medical care for Enhanced or for any individuals working under the Accords or in cooperation with local law enforcement. We will not research powers beyond what is necessary for treatment. We will not seek to identify individuals who request our aid. Medical records will be attached to whatever name is given… Like any other hospital we will report bullet wounds or other violent injuries to the police, if you’re working with the police they won’t be surprised to hear about it. We will use all resources at our disposal to keep any medical records entrusted to us secure, and believe me, SI data security is second to none.

“We have arranged with the Sokovia Accords Oversight Committee to conduct regular inspections of our facility to confirm that no research into replicating powers is being performed and to verify the security of our records. I intend to publish the committee’s finding to demonstrate our continuing good faith to the public. We will assume liability for any data breaches that might occur which would be considered in violation of the Accords. It is SI’s goal to ensure that no one is afraid to seek medical care because they are Enhanced. We want to put a stop to a status quo where well-meaning people can die because, in attempting to aid the rest of us, they’ve put themselves in a situation where they can’t get their own injuries treated.”

“Ms. Potts, as you say: Stark Industries is a tech company. Why are you doing this instead of a hospital?” a reporter asked.

“Because we already have a facility designed with Enhanced in mind,” Pepper replied. “Right now it’s just gathering dust. After the fall of S.H.I.E.L.D. we brought in and vetted doctors and nurses with the appropriate skills, they’re still on SI’s payroll. The preliminary work is done, why waste it? The facility will be one of SI’s non-profit endeavors; however that’s just a start-up model. I’m hoping to arrange funding for the Facility so that, in time, the only burden on SI will be the donation of the building space and data securing services. However, the questions about Daredevil’s possible injuries highlight that there is a need for medical services now, not in six months or a year.”

“Is this an attempt by SI to get ahead of SHRA? Setting up systems which should fall under the jurisdiction of the proposed law before it’s finalized?”

Pepper smiled knowing perfectly well that once something was in place it became much harder to enact changes. “Of course we will modify the facility’s operating procedures to comply with SHRA once it’s passed into law.”
“Ms. Potts,” another reporter called. “Will you be stepping down as CEO of Stark Industries when your child is born?”

“Now that’s certainly out of nowhere,” Pepper said. “No, I have never considered stepping down as CEO. I will be staying in New York, running things from home if you will, until my daughter has been immunized but other than that it will be business as usual. Now if they are any questions on the topic at hand?”

Daredevil, Hero or Criminal

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We’ve all seen the video. Daredevil shoves a police officer and ends up in the line of fire but do we really know that he was trying to save that officer? The officer in question initially reported that Daredevil attacked him. Daredevil wasn’t even looking in the direction of the gunman. It is more likely that Daredevil’s ‘act of heroism’ was nothing more than a fortunate accident. All this boo-hooing about how the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen was injured in our city’s most recent vigilante outrage but I say good-riddance. Maybe this will encourage other would-be vigilantes to leave the police work to the police.

There are real heroes out there. People who put in the hours, put in the sweat because they wanted to help others and they wanted to do it the right way. They didn’t take shortcuts. They didn’t just decide that having powers makes them an expert on ethics, morality and laws. They learned, studied, trained.

If you want to enforce the laws you join the police or become a lawyer. You don’t throw on a mask, go out and find yourself some bad guys to punch. You don’t tear up our town settling your grudge match with some other costumed freak. You want to make the world better? Start by respecting the laws of our society.

“What’s up?” Peter asked as he came into his classroom after lunch to find most of the girls clustered around a cell phone. He sat down in his seat gingerly, trying to avoid putting pressure on any of his bruises and superstitiously tugged at the sleeve of his shirt, trying to keep the bandages on his wrist hidden.

“Theyir new hero,” Harry replied, “Captain Marvel is on Oprah.”

Peter glanced over at the group of girls trying to catch a glimpse of the smart-phone they were all clustered around.
“No, I didn’t come forward when I first gained powers,” Carol Danvers was saying.

“You hid your powers?” Oprah asked sounding surprised. “You were already in the Air Force at the time. It seems like they would have welcomed having someone like you at their disposal… I mean you even fly.”

Carol smiled wryly, “Yeah they could have saved on jet fuel sending me up without a plane. But one Super Soldier isn’t a game changer. The military recognized that in World War II and it’s even more true today given the advanced technology at our disposal.”

“So you’re saying the Army made the right choice sticking Captain America in the USO… In spite of what history tells us?”

“I’m telling you Steve Rogers didn’t win the war for the Allies,” Carol replied, unperturbed. “He and his Howling Commandos neutralized the Red Skull and that iteration of HYDRA. But the reverse was also true. And while they kept each other in check the nuclear arms race began, and the war carried on apart from both. In the Pacific Theatre the H-Bomb had a brief moment as a game changer, then other people caught up and we had decades of Cold War and mutually assured destruction. What Captain America did in the War was entirely necessary, but it was about maintaining a zero sum game.

“I trusted my direct superiors. I told them what I could do,” Carol continued. “And they told me to keep it quiet or I’d end up serving my country as a lab rat instead of a soldier. One isn’t enough, you have to be able to replicate it… Without the sort of misfires that only serves to neutralize the successes by creating enemies for the heroes to fight. And even if you manage that, before you know it, someone else will figure out how to create an army of super soldiers as well. I’d rather put that day off, not be part of enabling it. The super soldier serum, the search for it is just another arms race, one I didn’t volunteer to be a part of.”

“But you’ve come forward now?” Oprah pointed out.

Carol shrugged. “I was willing to be used as an ace-in-the-hole. No surprise, other countries had their own. With the Accords crisis, when Steve Rogers and his faction refused to submit to the rule of law, our countries put us into play. Thaddeus Ross abused his authority, lied to us and sent us on an ill-advised mission that nearly restarted a war. I don’t have the choice of not acknowledging my powers anymore.” Carol sighed, “I didn’t have any business trying to enforce the Accords without signing them myself but in my defense I never wanted to use my powers.”

“Why not? If I could fly…”

“Would it sound too strange if I said it’s because they came too easily?” Carol asked. “As a female in the military I’ve always worked my ass off to prove I belonged there, that I wasn’t a liability to my squadmates, didn’t need anyone to make allowances for my gender. Then I have an alien encounter and suddenly my jet’s a redundancy. It didn’t feel right.”

“Some would mention gift horses right about now.”

“Well when the gift may come from Troy…” Carol smiled. “I’m still trying to get used to my powers. It’s one of the reasons I’m opposed to mandatory registration for people with powers: I was changed on a fundamental level. That was something I needed to come to terms with on my own schedule. Being yanked out of my life, the life I’d chosen for myself, and be forced to make those powers the center of… Everything I was? It wouldn’t have helped me come to terms with what had happened.”
“But wasn’t it dangerous?” Oprah asked. “Letting you ignore your powers?”

Carol looked grim, “That’s an honest concern. I suppose I’m one of the lucky ones. I was able to demonstrate enough control to satisfy my CO right off the bat. It only took me a couple of days to adapt to my strength. As for flying, it took time to master the art of not crashing but not flying was always a choice I could make.

“I realize there has to be a balance between keeping the public safe and reducing the Enhanced to nothing more than their powers. But balance implies that the rights of both need to be considered. SI’s legal team has brought the matter to the ACLU’s attention and they agree that, as currently written, SHRA offers completely inadequate protection for the rights of the individuals that it seeks to regulate.”

“Pete? Hey Peter!” Harry called tapping on the top of Peter’s head to draw his attention back.

Peter scowled and batted at his hand. “What?”

“You know Harley Keener right? Of course you do, you’re the only two teenagers to work for SI since Tony Stark turned 20.” Harry babbled. “Look, my dad wrangled invites to the Maria Stark Foundation Gala and I’m supposed make friends with him. People don’t just like me and Dad will be furious if I screw this up. Come with me please!!!”

“Okay…” Peter said reluctantly.

“Great,” Harry leapt on Peter’s acceptance. “We’ll get you fitted for a tux after school today. Don’t worry about the price, you’re doing this as a favor to me.”

I’m a bit more than halfway through season two of “Agents of Shield”. Lots of good, well-meaning people running around stabbing each other in the back because using words to convince other good people that your way is right is much too revolutionary a concept. It’s like watching CACW over and over again, only all the sides have Steve’s conviction of their own righteousness paired with Natasha’s manipulativeness. It’s sort of painful to watch.

Even in S1, it’s no wonder the mole could go unnoticed in Coulson’s team and by extrapolation, HYRDA managed to go unnoticed in S.H.I.E.L.D. How would you spot the one malevolent secret when everyone’s going behind everyone else’s back over something?
A Superhero's Girlfriend

Chapter Summary

A gala and two attacks.

Chapter Notes

Reading the wiki MCU summary of the Accords, I have to laugh at this line: “The Avengers and any other enhanced individual will NO LONGER have authorization to cross international boundaries at any time they wish.” Has anyone at Marvel heard of passports? The Avengers, Enhanced Individuals AND EVERYONE ELSE have never had the right to cross international boundaries at any time they wish.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“It’s good to have you back,” Pepper told Foggy as they left one of the SHRA meetings. “And I have to say, I’m impressed by the work you do on sick leave. The ACLU is turning into a big help.”

Foggy smiled, “I had some help figuring out how to relate the concerns and pressures to people who aren’t directly involved.”

“So your friend’s coming around?” Pepper asked. “How is he doing?”

“Right now he’s helping more out of boredom than anything else,” Foggy admitted. “But I’m hoping if he keeps putting effort into making SHRA a good law he’ll become invested.” He glanced around to make sure no one was listening too closely then lowered his voice. “We managed to get the equivalent of an X-Ray to a medical practitioner he trusts. He’s got another week of bedrest and strict orders not to do anything strenuous for another month unless he wants to risk things never healing right. Which… More time for me to keep him working on SHRA.” Foggy grimaced, he’d rather Matt wasn’t hurt but he wasn’t above using the circumstances to get him engaged in improving the new law.

“We do what we have to,” Pepper said. “Use what’s given to us.”

“On that note, I get why you’re keeping his injuries in the news, but could you please cut it out,” Foggy said, lowering his voice even further. “Down in the Kitchen we’ve got enemies coming out of the woodwork hoping to take advantage of him being hurt.”

“Are you two safe?” Pepper asked.

Foggy nodded, “He’s got a few friends dealing with the opportunistic for us… And no one knows where to look. No one knows who’s under the mask.”

“FRIDAY figured it out,” Pepper said. The AI had adapted the search parameters and techniques Tony had used to identify Spider-Man and employed them on all the other vigilantes making
news. “I wouldn’t bank on the bad guys not being able to do the same.”

“Even if they do, our last quarrel was pretty bad, pretty public. I’m not who they’d think he go to for help.”

Pepper grimaced. “I’ll try to let the publicity about his injuries die down. The news cycle’s moved on from the fight that caused them by now.”

The two of them parted ways. Foggy headed for the front door and the subway station around the corner from the government building. Pepper took the elevator down to the garage floor. A worried frown crossed her face when she didn’t see Happy waiting with the car. Reaching for her phone she turned to head back to the building and some grabbed her from behind. “We won’t be put on your kind’s Indexes,” a harsh voice hissed.

Pepper took a deep breath, forcing the glow to die out of her eyes even while she primed herself to consciously call on Extremis if she couldn’t talk her way out. “Have you really thought this through?” she asked. “I’m one of the delegates holding the middle ground. What do you think attacking me is going to accomplish?”

“The ones like you, the ones who’s honied words disguise the poison, are the worst of all,” the man hissed. His hand tightened in Pepper’s hair forcing her head back.

“There is no lie,” Pepper insisted. “I am fighting for a law that serve us both.”

“You humans with your promises, you lies,” he sneered. “We didn’t want to be part of your world. All we wanted was to be LEFT ALONE. But you came with your lists and your guns. Afterwards they said it was us that started it, the victors truly write the history books, but I was THERE. It was your planes that opened fire on our home!”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Pepper insisted. She was just about to let Extremis show, demonstrate that she had every reason to fight for a fair law in a way that might be understood, accepted when the ground shuttered.

Both Pepper and her assailant were knocked off balance. A dark haired woman in a knit cap flung herself out of the shadows, she struck the man in the face, then the throat. He lost his hold on Pepper and she dropped to her knees and quickly scuttled away from the fight, cursing her awkwardness. She scanned the garage for Happy or the car. There was a muted crack, Pepper caught a glimpse of a blue muzzle flash as the gun in the woman’s hand barked again. The man collapsed.

“Happy!” Pepper shouted as she got back to her feet.

“Your driver’s gonna have a nasty headache when he wakes up, but he’s okay,” the woman assured Pepper.

“Thank you…” Pepper trailed off.

“Call me Quake.”

Pepper eyed her curiously, “That doesn’t sound like someone who’d support the Accords.”

Quake shrugged, “I don’t agree with what he just did and he had some of his facts wrong but he also had a good point mixed in: Things tend to spiral out of control when people try to control us.”

“You mean S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Pepper said. “I don’t. I’m not going to be satisfied with shunting
responsibility for regulating the Enhanced over to some shadow organization with more than it’s own share of accountability issues. I’m talking about real transparency, about making you part of the mainstream.”

“I thought that way once,” Quake said. “I was naive.”

Pepper shrugged. “Democracy is a naive notion, I still prefer it over any of the alternatives. When Tony told the world he was Iron Man instead of letting S.H.I.E.L.D. cover up the truth, I thought he was crazy. Now I agree with him. When the government wanted to take Iron Man away from him they had to put him in front of the Senate, they had to let him argue his case. If he’d done what S.H.I.E.L.D. wanted, what S.H.I.E.L.D. told him was safer for him, they could have just taken it, put someone else in the suit with none the wiser.”

Quake hesitated.

“I know Tony being Tony made the choice easier for him,” Pepper said. “There was never a time in his life when he didn’t have to deal with the media. There was never a time where he could be secure in the knowledge that the people around him were interested in him not in what they could get from associating with him. He never had a private life, a normal life to give up. The exposure he got from being Iron Man wasn’t an entirely different beast from what he’d always had to deal with for being Tony Stark. But being in the open made it challenging for shadow organizations to get a hold over him. You can’t blackmail someone without secrets. And when you’re out in the open the bad guys have to come out to get to you.”

“It’s dangerous,” Quake said. She nodded toward the man she’d shot. “I can’t even guarantee he won’t come after you again after he wakes up. This isn’t your fight. Why make yourself a target? I can’t believe being Tony Stark’s girlfriend is enough of a reason for you to take up his cause.”

Pepper shook her head. “Protecting Tony’s memory is more than enough of a reason,” she said firmly. “But you’re right it’s not my only one.” She thought about Extremis threaded through her DNA and more importantly, through her daughter’s DNA. Pepper knew it was Nettie who kept her more vengeful side in check, that gave her a reason to lock away the part of her that could have expanded her hatred of Steve Rogers to everyone like him and yet, neither Nettie nor Tony were the ultimate reason she wanted to be a part of the accords. “You think it’s just my ties to Tony, to Iron Man that gives me a right to be heard, for my voice to matter? I’m part of this world!” Pepper exclaimed. “Even if I had powers like yours I’m not the sort to go after the bad guys with guns blazing. I recognize that sometimes violence is the only choice but it’s not my choice, it’s not how I solve problems. Even so, I’m part of this world. Why shouldn’t I have a say? I don’t want to oppress you but I’ll be damned if I let you dictate to me!

“You have no idea how sick I am of the implication that underlies the actions of every person who declares ‘The safest hands are our own.’ Every single one of you who claims that is setting themselves above the law. You’ve decided that you’re somehow special and that entitles you to make choices for the rest of us. That you have a right, no more than that, an obligation to ‘help’ wherever you can, regardless of the consequences. Well, who asked you to? I understand you’re afraid of being persecuted for your differences but you’re not a powerless, downtrodden minority. You act more like a privileged elite. You have power, enough power to level cities and wipe out entire armies and when anyone threatens your privileged status, your perceived right to ignore the laws the rest of us normal people are subject to, you lash out with that power.” Pepper’s eyes blazed with determination, “No one gets to tell me to sit down, shut up and let the big boys make the serious decisions. Not SI’s board of directors, not Captain America and not you. You think SHRA only affects you? It affects our entire society, it’s taking our heads out of the sand and acknowledging that you exist, that you’re a part of our world whether we like it or not. I am
involved because this is my world too and I have a stake in how we choose to move forward.”

“I hope what you’re trying to do doesn’t get corrupted,” Quake said.

“I could always use more of the people SHRA’s meant to regulate working within the system to make it a good law,” Pepper said. “

“I can’t,” Quake shook her head. “I just can’t. Too much has happened.”

After the young vigilante had left with her prisoner, Pepper found Happy slumped against the door of the car, a large goose-egg behind his ear. “You okay?” he asked blinking blearily up at her.

Pepper nodded, “How about you?”

“Can’t hardly feel the bump given how hard I’m kicking myself,” Happy said ruefully. “Soon as we get home I’m getting out the armor Tony loaned to me and I’m getting Rhodey and FRI to give me some pointers on using it.”

That night Pepper opened up a large jewelry box. The elaborate set included bracelets, earrings, a rather solid collar necklace, rings, pins for her hair, even anklets and a belt that wouldn’t fit around her waist for months to come, all set with blue and opalescent disks glowing with an inner luminance. Pepper put on one of the bracelets, she took a deep breath and pressed several studs on the side of one of the gems.

The bracelet unfolded, the largest of the ‘gems’ sliding over her palm to become a repulsor glove.

“Why couldn’t I have had a sleepover with Cassie?” Mercedes whined two weeks later as she followed her mother around the penthouse apartment at Stark Tower. “Why do I have to come all the way out here just so Harley can go to some stupid party?”

“Because I’m thinking we might stay awhile,” Marlena said. “After Pepper’s baby is born. Maybe for a whole school term. I thought you might like to visit some schools with me but I could always decide without your help.”

“I get to big sister baby Nettie?” Mercedes asked, perking up immediately. “Cassie’s going to be so jealous!”

“You may help me ‘big sister’ her,” FRIDAY interjected, her tone just a tad too forceful to be prim.

Marlena smiled. “I’m sure Nettie will love all her big sisters and brothers, as well as her aunts and uncles,” she said as Harley walked out of room, a stylist trailing behind him. Marlena swallowed, “Don’t you look sharp,” she said, thinking that he looked much too grow-up in the tux he’d been dressed in for the gala. She irritated the stylist by readjusting his bowtie and smoothing his hair.

“Mom!” Harley protested.

“You’re wearing make-up,” Mercedes observed her eyes sparkling with mischief.

“Tease me about it and I’ll tell Ms. Hope about Mr. Cuddles,” Harley threatened.

Mercedes wrinkled her nose at her brother. “You wouldn’t dare.”

Pepper arrived a few moments later wearing a shimmering black gown with an empire waist gathered just above her baby bump. Her hair was put up with blue and opal pins, the matching
collar and bracelets circling her neck and wrists, glowing softly against her skin. She immediately sank onto the couch, happy to get off her swollen feet even if it was only for a few minutes.

Happy showed up ten minutes later. “The car’s waiting,” he said then asked Harley, “You ready for tonight?”

Harley nodded, looking grim.

Pepper grinned, “Relax, the Gala should be a friendly audience. People will be curious about you but the paparazzi isn’t allowed and it’s a sufficiently formal venue to encourage civil behavior. We’ll arrive thirty minutes before they seat us for dinner, and stay for another half-hour afterwards to allow you to mingle, at which point you can sit homework to make your escape. We’re sharing a table with the Sousas, what I gathered from Tony was that the previous generation were some of the very few people both Maria and Howard counted as friends. I think you’ll like them, I do.”

“Yeah, no problem… There aren’t going to be a billion different forks and I’m gonna look like a moron for not knowing which one to use right?” Harley asked.

“Just the standard four utensils,” Pepper replied. “Appetizers and Dessert will both be finger food to be consumed while mingling.”

“Okay, that’s good,” Harley breathed a sigh of relief. “Wait! Four?”

“Salad fork,” Marlena supplied.

“Right, we had those in the drawer, never used them,” Harley babbled.

“It’ll be okay,” Pepper assured him. She slipped her shoes back on. “I’m going to feel so short without my heels,” she mourned as Harley offered her his arm.

“Just like you told Harley this is a friendly audience, you can afford to leave a bit of your armor behind. I’ve got your back,” Happy teased as he hefted the suitcase he was carrying. He turned to Marlena, “I’ll have Harley back before curfew.”

“Get them both back for a good night’s sleep and I’ll make you dinner,” Marlena said eyeing the shadows beneath Pepper’s eyes that make-up couldn’t completely hide.

Peter tried not to gawk as he and Harry followed Norman Osborn into the sparkling hotel lobby where the Maria Stark Foundation gala was being held.

Norman paused just outside the ballroom to address the two boys. “There will be champagne being served. The wait-staff is unlikely to check ID’s. If either of you attempt to take advantage of this I’ll have your hides,” he threatened sotto voce. “You’re here to make connections not to make a fool of me.”

“Got it Dad,” Harry said while Peter just nodded.

“Good,” Norman replied. His expression morphed from menacing to jovial in a heartbeat then he led them inside. “Senator Bailey, a pleasure to meet your charming wife. May I introduce my son Harry and his friend Peter Parker?”

The boys dutifully trailed after Norman for several minutes smiling and shaking hands. Then Harry nudged Peter to peel off, ostensibly the two boys headed for a waiter and the plate of hor dourves he was carrying. “Dad’ll be focused on the politicians and businessmen,” Harry said softly.
“Normally I’m relegated to making nice with society wives but with you along I’m supposed to talk with the sciency types until Keener shows.”

“Why does your Dad want you to make friends with Harley?” Peter asked. “After how he reacted to my internship I’d think that would be the last thing he’d want.”

“Rumor has it that Ms. Potts’ obstetrician is some sort of hush-hush specialist and that she’s going to have to go on bed-rest or risk losing the baby any day now,” Harry said.

Peter’s face scrunched up with doubt and worry, “Ms. Potts looks a little tired, but who wouldn’t given the circumstances?”

“Maybe not, but she is over forty and Tony Stark wasn’t exactly the posterboy for taking care of yourself, between the drinking, Afghanistan and flying a nuclear missile through an alien portal,” Harry replied. “If there’s something not right with the kid it won’t be exactly shocking and Dad doesn’t think Potts is the sort to just dump the kid with the help and get back to running her business. Tony Stark took over as SI’s CEO when he was twenty-one but Keener’s only fifteen, he wasn’t raised to run a major business and if Potts can’t keep going SI doesn’t have anyone like Obadiah Stane waiting in the wings to act as regent until Keener’s ready to step up.”

“And your dad thinks what? If you and Harley are friends SI’ll ask him to help out?” Peter shook his head.

“If SI starts going under Dad’ll try to buy the divisions that still contract with the military,” Harry said. “Having Keener’s votes on our side wouldn’t hurt.”

“It’s not going to happen,” Peter said. “But I’m looking forward to meeting Harley in person anyway. We’ve been vid-conferencing every week since I started my internship.”

Several minutes later they spotted Pepper Potts and Harley Keener coming in. Peter wasn’t sure if the way Harley was glued to Pepper’s side was proof that there was something to what Harry had said about the pregnancy or if it was just Harley feeling nervous.

“Don’t say anything you’d normally say about Dr. Stark,” Peter warned as he started leading Harry over to them.

“I do have manners,” Harry replied, rolling his eyes.

“Yeah, but are they good ones?” Peter sniped. “Harley!” he called a moment later as he waved.

Harley turned and grinned. “Peter, no one told me you were going to be here. No one told me there’d be anyone I knew here!” He glanced back at Pepper, she smiled and gave him a small nudge toward the other boys.

“Well, my friend Harry here got dragged by his dad. He couldn’t find a date so he asked me instead,” Peter said. “Harley, this is Harry Osborn, my best friend since kindergarten. Harry, Harley Keener, my long-distance lab cohort at SI.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Harry said. “I’m sure our school chem teacher really appreciates SI giving Pete a new place to blow up.”

Harley laughed, “I’m sure Pepper and Rhodey have long since explosion-proofed every lab at SI… R&D’s full of engineers and we all love explosions, I think it’s like an unwritten qualification for getting the job.”

“Judging from Pete, I’m sure you’re right,” Harry replied. “So is this the first time you’ve been to one of these things?”
“It shows?” Harley asked worriedly.

“Naw, just an educated guess,” Harry said drawing Peter and Harley away from Pepper. “There are more painful ways to spend a night and once people have had a chance to get drunk you get to watch ‘Celebrities Behaving Badly’ live instead of waiting for the recap on TV.”

“As long as it’s not me,” Harley replied.

Harry gave him a sympathetic look, “At least you don’t have to worry about your sixth birthday partying ending up in a tabloid.”

“He didn’t want girls there, but his dad invited them anyway,” Peter tattled. “Harry knocked the cake off the table and the Enquirer suggested he needed anger management.”

“I didn’t know the table was that shaky!” Harry protested. “I mean the cake was last thing I wanted to hurt, I have no idea what the flavor was supposed to be but it was neon blue.”

“Who would ever want to hurt cake of color never meant to exist in nature?” Harley agreed. “And I’ve got a sister who’s still in the ‘boys have cooties’ stage.”

“Finally! Someone who understands,” Harry declared clapping the younger boy on the shoulder.

“Mr. Osborn, what a surprise,” Pepper said as Norman offered his hand.

Rather than shaking Pepper’s hand, Norman raised it to his lips, “Just because Stark Industries and OsCorp are business rivals it doesn’t mean I don’t wish to support the good work done by the Maria Stark Foundation.”

“Your support is appreciated,” Pepper said reclaiming her hand as quickly as could be considered polite.

“I also wanted to personally extend my sympathies. I know how difficult it must be continuing the day-to-day effort to run a major company so soon after the loss of your partner,” Norman said, stepping closer to Pepper. “You’re delicate condition on top of that.”

Pepper rolled her eyes, “It’s the 21st century, you can say ‘pregnant’.”

“If there’s anything I could do to ease the burden on you just ask,” Norman continued unperturbed.

“You could stop infringing on Tony’s patents,” Pepper suggested a hint of sarcasm creeping into her voice.

Norman frowned. “Ms. Potts I don’t wish to bore you with technical details but process by which my gliders work has nothing in common with the Iron Man repulsor technology.”

“Technical details never bore me, or SI’s lawyers,” Pepper replied sweetly. “But this isn’t really the correct venue for an in depth discussion of how the differences between your glider’s propulsion system and Tony’s repulsors couldn’t fill a teacup. We shouldn’t talk business tonight, don’t you agree?”

“Of course not,” Norman said stiffly. “I simply wanted to spare you the trouble of a frivolous lawsuit when SI’s legal team is currently being taxed by Avengers’ business.”

At dinner Norman boldly ignored the placards at the tables and seated himself, Harry and Peter at Pepper and Harley’s table. “You don’t mind? There are so few young people here,” he excused
himself to the Sousas. “I’m sure young Harley would appreciate Harry and Peter keeping him company for dinner?”

Pepper looked exasperated. David Sousa had noticed Norman monopolizing Pepper’s conversations since her arrival and gave her a sympathetic smile. “Why don’t we stop by for brunch in the morning? Get to know Harley out of the limelight?” he offered.

“That would be wonderful,” Pepper said forcefully.

The three boys chatted easily throughout dinner while Norman told Pepper about how hard losing his wife had been on him. “I never expected to be raising a child on my own while running a business but I knew Emily was opposed to the notion of sending children off to boarding school so I persevered.” Pepper glanced across the table and wondered if the conversation was as uncomfortable for the man’s son as it was for her but Harry seemed completely oblivious as he and Peter traded embarrassing stories about each other for Harley’s entertainment.

“I understand the pressure you’re under,” Norman said putting a hand over Pepper’s. “And when it gets to be too much for you I want you to know I’m here for you.”

“When?” Pepper slid her hand out from under Norman’s and wiped it with her napkin. “Mr. Osborn, you seem to be under the impression that we’re in some old Western. That I’m the poor widowed rancher’s wife needing a man to come around and take care of things for me. I’ll have you remember that I have been CEO of Stark Industries for six years. Tony trusted me to take care of his company and I won’t fail him. I will not allow you to profit from the research you stole. I will never let you or anyone like you fold SI back into the weapons industry. You won’t buy our patents or our company and you certainly won’t charm it out of me.”

Norman stood up abruptly, knocking his chair over. He grabbed Harry by the arm and jerked him to his feet then stormed away hauling his son after him.

Peter started after Norman and Harry then glanced back.

“Why don’t you stay Peter?” Pepper suggested. “It would be no problem to give you a ride home.” At her words Norman’s grip on Harry’s arm tightened viciously, a look of pain crossed the teen’s face as he stumbled after his father.

“I think I’d better go,” Peter said.

Harley glanced between the Osborns and Peter, chewing his lower lip.

“Some situations are easier for an adult to handle,” Pepper said softly. “No matter how capable you might be. You’re not obligated, Peter.”

“No, everything’s fine,” Peter said shooting what he meant to be a reassuring grin at Harley. Then he hurried after Norman.

“That guy-" Harley started once Peter had gone.

Pepper grimaced. “He’s been trying my patience since we got here but I shouldn’t have set him off,” she said. Then she reached up and touched one of her earrings. “FRIDAY, does Peter have his watch on?”

“Sure does Boss-Lady,” FRIDAY confirmed.

Pepper nodded to herself. “Contact May, relay what happened to her. Also monitor Peter, if it
seems like things are getting out of control May can call at a fortunate time and give him an excuse to go home if he needs it. Maybe May can think of a way to get Osborn’s son out until his temper’s spent as well, I can’t think of anything that wouldn’t make things worse.” Pepper shook her head, “The way he reacted just now, I’d be much happier if both those boys were well away from him.”

“Who does she think she is, talking to me like that, the trumped up little whore,” Norman fumed as his driver took them back to the OsCorp building.

Peter and Harry sat quietly on the other side of the limo.

Norman suddenly smiled at Peter and reached across the car to pat him on the arm. “You were loyal, that’s good, very good. Loyalty is a rare quality in this day and age. You know you could have quite the future at Oscorp,” he rambled. “It’s been obvious for years that Harry doesn’t have what it takes to head OsCorp’s R&D efforts as I have.” Harry’s mouth tightened but didn’t seem surprised. “But you have the talent and I can trust you not to turn on him can’t I Peter?” Norman’s grip tightened on Peter’s arm until it was an unspoken threat. Then he sighed, “With the way you two have always gotten on, it’s just unfortunate that you weren’t born a girl.”

As Peter edged away from Norman he threw a bewildered look in Harry’s direction. Behind his father’s back Harry grimaced, his expression said ‘just go along with it.’ The moment the limo pulled to a stop in the garage of the OsCorp building Peter tumbled out and got a dirty look from the attendant who’d been moving to open the door for them.

“I have business to see to,” Norman declared as he used his keycard to stop the elevator at his office floor. “You two boys can entertain yourselves I assume?”

Peter and Harry nodded in relief. Once Norman was gone Peter turned to Harry, “That was…”

Harry gave him a rictus grin, “Dad’s always thought that way,” he admitted. “I mean back when we were little kids that’s why he picked you: You had the test scores I didn’t. Machiavelli’s his hero you know.”

“That doesn’t bug you?” Peter had to ask. “You Dad deciding…” Peter didn’t know how to say ‘Deciding you weren’t smart enough and picking someone else.’

“Maybe a little when I first really started getting it.” Harry answered Peter’s unvoiced question. “But then, you couldn’t do the business stuff.” He gave Peter a shaky grin, “You’re too nice, that’s why I always have to save you from Flash and he’s nothing next to the sort of people my Dad deals with day-to-day.

“It’s just business,” Harry continued insistently, holding on to Peter’s arm. “Dad had to create a hard shell to make the company successful and keep Mom and I sheltered. After Mom died, as I got older… Well, he knew I was going to toughen up if I wanted to ever run the company. He had to make me part of the shell but then there was nothing left inside to protect and… And this last year?” Harry glanced away. “Dad doesn’t mean to be like that. He wouldn’t normally say something like that to you, but maybe he’s starting to think of you as family. I mean he tells me that kind of thing, he has to teach me how to run the company. It was better, he was better, when he had someone to take care of.” Then something desperate and afraid filled Harry’s eyes, even though his smile was bright and his voice full of a brittle sort of hope. “But you and I, we’ll be okay. You’ll be brilliant and I’ll protect you from the world and we’ll both have big families.”

“Right,” Peter said weakly responding to what Harry hadn’t said, ‘And I won’t end up like my dad: Hard and hollow.’
Pepper and Harley stayed a bit later at the gala than Pepper had originally planned to make up for the time Norman Osborn had monopolized but they were still one of the first to leave. Happy called for their driver to pick them up then escorted the two of them to the hotel’s porte-cochere.

Traffic bustled by at a sedate pace for New York and the full moon shown down on the city. A deranged laugh split the autumn evening and the Goblin who had been harassing the city dove out of the sky at them. Happy shoved Pepper and Harley back toward the lobby.

The Goblin buzzed them, the backwash of his glider sent Happy flying. As the Goblin spun around for a second pass Pepper activated her defenses. She felt the pins in her hair extend and twine together to form a glowing crown. Her necklace unfolded until it formed an abbreviated armor over her shoulders and upper chest. Wires raced down her arms to join up with the gauntlets covering her hands and up her neck to connect to her crown. Beside her she heard a mechanical whine and saw Harley also had a repulsor gauntlet covering his hand. Pepper nodded grimly, “Stay behind me,” she said.

“You’re going to fight?” the Goblin laughed as he hovered a half dozen feet over their heads. “How cute.” Harley responded with a repulsor blast that the Goblin easily evaded. When he dove at them again, Pepper raised her arms, palms out, instead of a blast the repulsors created a field. The Goblin struck it full force and bounced, falling from his glider to the street below. He rolled to his feet with a snarl and pulled a grenade from the pouch slung over his shoulder.

A repulsor blast from the shadows sent the grenade flying. The Goblin turned, his eyes widened as Iron Man stepped into the light. “You’re dead!” he exclaimed. Iron Man crouched slightly as he raised his hands, palms out. “Oh, I get it.” The Goblin cocked his head to the side, “Empty can or stand-in?”

Harley took a potshot, striking the Goblin in the shoulder and sending him crashing into a parked car. Iron Man stepped forward, his repulsors whined menacingly as he maximized their power.

The Goblin rotated his shoulder, grimacing in pain, He glared at the trio opposing him then made a small beckoning gesture and the glider swooped back to him. “Later,” he threatened as he jumped aboard and flew away.

Iron Man’s arms dropped in relief, a moment later the faceplate flipped up to reveal Happy.

“Why didn’t you go after him?” Harley exclaimed.

“First because chasing him would leave an opening for him to after you two,” Happy replied.

“The Goblin has dozens of angled repulsors for much better high-speed maneuverability,” FRIDAY confirmed. “The closest Iron Man could come to mimicking the glider’s performance would require massive deceleration.”

“That glider is OsCorp tech,” Pepper said. “Osborn brought up the legal injunction SI filed against it just tonight.”

“Gives the police somewhere to start looking,” Happy replied.

“You said protecting us was the first reason,” Harley argued. “But we weren’t doing so bad.”

“The second reason is I can’t fly,” Happy said with a shrug. “I can’t even let FRIDAY fly the suit for me, can’t seem to help fighting her control and the next thing I know we’re crashing. Not everyone’s cut out to be a pilot, I just can’t seem to get the hang of maneuvering in three
Harley’s shoulders slump in defeat but Pepper gives him a wry, sympathetic smile. “At least we didn’t end up needing a vigilante to save us this time,” she said.

“But aren’t you-” Harley started to object.

Happy shook his head. “Signed the Accords two days ago.”

“I have a specific licence to carry and demonstrate SI tech,” Pepper added.

“The UN only granted me limited permission to operate, only in my capacity as head of security for SI, but that covers tonight. I specifically am restricted from flying until Rhodey signs me off as not being a hazard to everyone around me… Which he won’t be doing to do any time soon.” He stepped out of the armor and let it fold back into a suitcase.

Pepper nodded, her expression tight, “As long Happy stays half-trained it’s unlikely anyone on the committee would try to order him on a mission unless it was a serious emergency.”

“And I’m not leaving my post for anything less,” Happy added patting Pepper on the shoulder. “Not unless you start making me feel redundant with that armor of yours.”

Chapter End Notes

Minor AoS cross over with Pepper’s attacker being someone evacuated from Afterlife who has been relatively isolated from events since then.
Holidays are Hard

Chapter Summary

Thanksgiving arrives as the police search for the Goblin.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Spider-Man perched on one of the filing cabinets at the back of the bustling police station and waited for his assignment.

“The warrant to search OsCorp for Goblin tech was rejected,” a detective reported sourly. “Too many military secrets we’re not cleared to have access to. The judge did force them to turn over a list of everyone who had access to the gliders but Osborn’s secretary gave us over a hundred names, everyone from Norman Osborn himself down to the janitor who emptied the trash cans in the lab; I spent over an hour determining what Mike Abbott’s position at the company is by the way. It’s going to take us days to turn Osborn’s list of names into something useful as a suspect list.”

Stacy nodded, “I’ve got a contact in the military. Let’s see what we can pull together on the glider, see if they’re interested in putting pressure on him to prove he hasn’t leaked military hardware or specs.”

“Um?” Spider-Man raised his hand as if he were in class.

Stacy glanced over at him with a raised eyebrow.

“Dr. Stark put a HUD in my suit like the Iron Man one. It’s supposed to provide me with analysis on the guy I’m fighting and stuff like that but my Spider-Sense actually beats it to the punch. Still it records my fights, Colonel Rhodes likes using them for after-action reviews,” Spider-Man explained.

Stacy waited for him to get to his point.

“I can get you footage of my fights against the Goblin and the Avengers have already done analysis on his abilities.”

“That would be helpful,” Stacy replied. His tone suggested it would have been helpful information to have had weeks ago.

Spider-Man ducked his head. “FRIDAY?” he asked. “Could you email Captain Stacy my fights with the Goblin and everything we’ve figured out about him?”

“Already done,” FRIDAY replied in Spider-Man’s ear. “It should be coming through any second now,” he relayed.

Most of the station’s shift-change was spent going over Pepper, Happy and Harley’s statements about the previous night’s attack and the information the police had collected since then. An attack right outside of one of the city’s higher profile society events had raised the interest in capturing
As the strategy session drew to a close, Stacy glanced up at Spider-Man. “The Goblin instigated the Empire U. incident just to draw Spider-Man out,” he said. “I think we can use that. Spider-Man, starting tomorrow you’re going to be patrolling, making regular passes by the OsCorp building. This time we’ll be the ones drawing him out and when he takes the bait let’s be damned sure he chokes on it.”

“You really think the Goblin is tied to OsCorp?” Spider-Man asked.

“I don’t know if Osborn is backing him or just trying to cover up a security breach and frankly I don’t care,” Stacy said.

“I’m home,” Peter called as he opened the door. He raised his voice slightly as he hung up his coat. “Captain Stacy thinks the Goblin has something to do with OsCorp. Do you think I should try talking to Mr. Osborn about it, he’s giving the police a hard time, not cooperating any more than he has to. He probably thinks Ms. Potts directed the police toward him because she’s trying to get his company secrets or something crazy like that. But maybe he’d listen to me. Okay he’s been a little scary weird lately, but we’ve known each other since I was five and he’s totally convincing the police that he has something to do with this.” Peter walked into the kitchen. May was sitting at the kitchen bar, clearly waiting for him. Started, he glanced at his watch to see if he was late. “You knew I was staying over at Harry’s last night, right?” he asked.

“You’re not in trouble,” May said. “Pepper called after you left the gala. She was worried about you being alone with Norman. Peter, what happened last night?”

“Er, Mr. Osborn was um, flirting with Ms. Potts,” Peter winced. “And she totally shut him down. I mean sure he pretty much deserved it since he was trying to get an edge against SI but- She was brutal, and you wonder why us guys are terrified of talking to girls. Mr. Osborn, he was mad about it, really mad. And he sort of dragged Harry out of the gala when he stormed out. But it was okay, it wasn’t like he was mad at us or anything.”

“Has Norman ever been mad at you?” May asked with a frown.

Peter hesitated.

“Peter?”

“Um, last summer when I wasn’t talking to Harry?” Peter said uncertainly. “I wasn’t actually not talking to Harry, I was avoiding his dad. Mr. Osborn wasn’t happy when he found out about my internship with SI. He was planning on offering me one at OsCorp and I guess he felt betrayed?”

“What happened?” May demanded.

“It wasn’t any big deal,” Peter prevaricated. “He threw some papers at me… And a bookend, my Spidey-sense let me dodge it, I didn’t get hurt.”

“And I’m just hearing this now?” May asked. “Ben and I always worried a little about Norman’s interest in you,” she admitted. “But you and Harry were both such timid little things, having a friend gave you both a big boost in confidence. You stopped talking about how no one at your new school liked you and started getting excited about all the things you were learning. And Harry, I don’t think he looked up from his feet once that first time you went over to play with him but after a few months, he was showing off, trying to impress you. Norman was always a bit controlling but Ben and I concluded that he loved his son and if he gave you opportunities you wouldn’t have
otherwise had to let the two of you stick together... His interest in seeing you develop your talents was genuine as far as we could see.”

“Yeah, apparently his plan since forever was that I’d run OsCorp’s R&D division for Harry. And I can see that being sort of cool, Harry and I growing up to be this bad-ass team but- but- It wasn’t fair, Harry’s dad deciding Harry wasn’t good enough when we were five!” Peter exclaimed.

“That’s why my internship made him mad, I was deviating from his plan. But he decided it’d be okay if I interned for SI first because I could be his spy- Which I haven’t done but he’s still okay with me again, at least until he figures out I’m staying at SI, ‘cause um, I need the cover for Spider-Man, not that I can tell Mr. Osborn that. But everything’s back on plan and he’s okay with me for now. Only,” Peter made a face, “he wishes I were a girl so he could have Harry marry me and keep it all in the family and suddenly everything’s creepy, creepier.”

May blinked a few times, “Where did you get that idea?”

“The part where he straight out said it,” Peter said.

“Has that man had some sort of a breakdown and we all just missed it?” May wondered.

“Maybe,” Peter allowed, thinking about how Harry mentioning his dad changing this last year.

May blew out a huge gust of air. “You can’t go over there anymore,” she said.

“Aunt May!” Peter exclaimed.

“I’m not saying stop being friends with Harry,” May said. “You can see him at school, meet up at a coffee shop to study. You can always invite him here but I don’t want you at the OsCorp Building any more.”

“I’m Spider-Man! It’s not like Mr. Osborn could really hurt me,” Peter protested. “Maybe I can help, somehow.”

“Help with what?” May asked bluntly.

Peter’s mouth hung open for a moment, “Well, um, I could talk to Mr. Osborn. He’s being paranoid and it’s making the police think he’s involved with the Goblin.”

“How would you explain your relationship with the police?” May asked. “Pepper tells me OsCorp has been trying to replicate the Super Soldier Serum for nearly twenty years. Norman is probably one of the last people you’d want to know about your powers.”

“I- If I start avoiding him all of a sudden, what if it makes him worse?” Peter asked.

“Peter, has Norman hurt Harry?” May asked.

“Harry says it’s okay,” Peter replied.

“In other words you think he has,” May said. “I think you need to tell Captain Stacy everything.”

Stacy listened grimly as Peter told him what he knew about the situation in the Osborn household. “Harry Osborn denied anything was going on?” he asked.

Peter nodded.

Stacy sighed tiredly. “Odds are you’re right. I doubt throwing that weight at you was the only time
Osborn’s temper has gotten the better of him and his son’s the most likely target. But it doesn’t sound like there’s much I’m going to be able to do about it directly, not if your friend says nothing’s wrong. We know he attacked you but because you weren’t hurt Osborn can deny it ever happened and with his son backing him up nothing good’ll come of pursuing it.” He shook his head, “It’s best just to look at it as one more reason to make sure charges relating to his involvement with the Goblin stick. Now are you ready to go out and play bait? Colonel Rhodes will be backing you up and he sounded eager for an encounter with the Goblin.”

“I’m ready,” Peter said.

Ready or not, the Goblin didn’t take the bait. No one would see hide nor hair of him for weeks to come.

“So sorry, I must have made a wrong turn somewhere.”

Pepper turned with a frown, ‘No one should be getting lost on this level of the Tower.’ She saw one of her security officers looking awkward as he confronted a dark haired man carrying a white cane. “Don’t worry, I should have escorted him out,” she said as she walked over and smiled at the officer. She offered Matt her arm. “This is a surprise,” she said softly as they walked away.

He shrugged, “You already know and it was less threatening to have Matt Murdock ‘get lost’ in your building than to have the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen break in.”

“So you’re not here to sign?” Pepper asked.

“I talked to some people,” Matt said. “SHRA will probably go before Congress in the spring. Until then we’ll try to play things defensively: Drop tips to the police if we hear about anything instead of taking action ourselves. Only get involved after the bad guys make their move. We’ll try to make sure there’s no Lagos this time… And hope something worse doesn’t happen because of it.”

“That would be the least you could do,” Pepper replied coolly.

“We aren’t going to stand by while something happens right in front of us,” Matt warned. “You might have guessed that my definition of what’s happening ‘right before my eyes’ is a little different.”

“Have you ever considered that if you were registered, went public, you could demonstrate your abilities? Maybe then the evidence you act upon now could be admissible in court,” Pepper said.

“And my weakness would be public knowledge,” Matt replied. “I do appreciate what you and Foggy are trying to do but…” He shook his head. “I don’t know if I could do this if my enemies understood my abilities.”

“Then maybe there’s a better way you could be using your abilities,” Pepper argued, “if you had support. Spider-Man has been more effective using his extra-sensory perception to direct police to violent crimes than he ever was when he was leaving muggers hanging from streetlights.”

“How many of the officers in Queens take the Bugle as gospel or are on the take?” Matt asked.

“How is a bad cop any worse than another Punisher running loose?” Pepper demanded. “Corruption happens, that’s a fact. So we have checks built into our systems to try to combat it. What checks exist to protect us against a vigilante gone bad or one that just goes too far?”

“We police our own,” Matt said firmly. “I don’t ignore or excuse Frank Castle’s actions.”
“You’ll have to forgive me if I don’t trust you to draw the same lines I would,” Pepper said. “Even before he began cooperating with the police Spider-Man tried to apprehend criminals with minimal force. You, on the other hand, seem to believe in violence as a deterrent. Castle kills those he deems guilty. I’m certain each of you believes you’ve picked the ‘right’ line not to cross, but you don’t have any sort of consensus within your community and no means to reach one. You policing each other is nothing more than might makes right.”

“May, Rhodes could invite Spider-Man but not you,” Pepper explained. “I could encourage Harley to invite Peter but that might raise questions.”

“It's just Thanksgiving,” May said. “I appreciate the thought but Peter and I were fine on our own last year, we’ll be fine again this year.”

“Almost all of the Avengers are coming, I don't like Peter being at arm’s length because of his secret identity,” Pepper said.

“Peter and I barely know half your guests,” May pointed out.

Pepper sighed, “Tony was always a bit apart from the Avengers. Some of it was me, not accepting Iron Man. Some was the part of Tony that saw accepting help as admitting failure. Or maybe he was right and they would have turned on him sooner if he’d been open about his weaknesses. But that distance was always there. ‘What ifing’ helps no one but I still wonder if they'd been closer would they have backed him on the Accords. Or maybe they always would have been incapable of recognizing politicking as a valid means of fighting rather than something to scorn.”

May’s doorbell rang and she excused herself. To her surprise it was Norman Osborn.

He smiled, “Last year you said it was too soon for you and Peter to celebrate anything, let alone Thanksgiving. But I have to say it wasn’t the same for Harry and I without you. Will you come this year?”

May looked dismayed, “Norman, I, well I appreciate the invitation but-”

“But you aren’t happy with me right now,” Norman anticipated. He sighed, “I suppose I was being both naive and irresponsible not to speak to you myself about my lapse of temper. This last year has been very trying for me: Legal matters and the government slashing funding for Super Soldier Serum research. After the debacle with the Accords there are those in the government who feel that all Enhanced will inevitably turn on them. They don’t see what I see, the Chitauri Invasion of 2012 was just testing the Earth’s defenses, we must be prepared for their return. But the politicians are allowing a few feckless individuals to turn them against all Enhanced.”

“None of which excuses your attempt to brain my Peter with a bookend,” May said sternly.

Norman looked down apologetically. “I want to assure you that I’ve taken measures to ensure that I do better in the future,” he said. “I’ve sought help to direct my temper toward constructive ends.”

“You have?” May paused. “I- Maybe, I’ll need to talk to Peter about it. I won’t allow Peter to spend time alone with you any time soon, but if I’m there… He and Harry have always been so close.”

On Thanksgiving day Pepper, Rhodes and Vision waited on the roof of the tower as the Pym Technologies helicopter touched down on the landing pad. Jim Paxton hopped out then turned back to help the others out. He lifted Cassie and Mercedes down then offered Maggie, Marlena and
Hank Pym a hand. Harley and Hope followed a bit later, “Hope’s teaching me how to fly,” Harley announced gleefully. “She says if I work hard I could be soloing at sixteen and licenced at seventeen.”

“He’s not bad,” Hope said.

Harley turned to Rhodey, “You could start teaching me to pilot Iron Man once I learn to fly planes and helicopters right?”

“Not ‘till you’re eighteen,” Rhodey said and Marlena nodded in confirmation.

Harley stuck out his tongue at the both of them.

“I am certain Tony Stark’s faith in you will be born out,” Vision told Harley, “when you are older.”

“Eight and a half months,” Hope remarked to Pepper. “How’s it feel?”

“I’m counting down the days.” Pepper glared at Rhodey, “Someone thought ‘Aliens’ was an appropriate screen saver theme.”

“You were the one talking about feeling like you’re stomach was going to burst,” Rhodey replied unrepentantly.

Maggie and Marlena shared a knowing look. “You do know that your due date is statistical average not a contractual agreement?” Maggie said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Pepper said loftily. “My daughter will be right on time.”

“Your daughter maybe but what about Tony’s?” Rhodey asked.

“Well,” FRIDAY piped up, “If there was anyone who could get the Boss to meet a deadline, it was the Boss-Lady.”

Pepper smiled a bit. It hurt a little to talk about Tony in the past tense but it was good ache: Remembering, laughing about something they certainly would have teased Tony about if he’d been there.

“We’re here for the long haul,” Marlena reminded. “Harley and Mercedes are all set to take their finals here, then start classes in New York for the next term.”

“Yeah, sort of like being an exchange student only less exciting,” Harley said with a wry grin, “But I’m at the same school as Peter so not a complete loss, even if we don’t have any classes together.”

“I must excuse myself,” Vision announced before sinking through the roof.

Hank raised an eyebrow.

“His sweet-potato casserole must be done,” Pepper said leading the way to the elevator.

“Eat at your own risk,” Rhodes added. “He doesn’t have taste buds. Of course you’ll hurt his feelings if you don’t at least try it.”

“Don’t worry,” Pepper said. “We decided everyone should contribute a dish… And Mrs. Rhodes has been overseeing to make sure no gets accidentally poisoned.”

“Ma did the turkey, and naturally the stuffing” Rhodey said. “They’ll be great. She also gets the
credit for teaching me to make a mean pumpkin pie.”

“I know my limitations,” Pepper said. “Shrimp salad: Tear up some lettuce, dice celery and dump in a couple cans of shrimp, no way to screw that up.” The elevator let them off on the penthouse level. “Carol’s home with her parents, but Alexi’s celebrating the holiday with us.”

“He wouldn’t tell me what he was making,” Rhodey pouted as they headed toward the kitchen and the sound of voices. “He threatened to make Borscht if I asked again. I don’t actually know what Borscht is but I know a threat when I hear one.”

“You should have told us everyone was cooking,” Marlena said. “We’d have brought something too.”

“Speak for yourself,” Hank said producing a bottle of wine.

“Thanks but if I have one more drink Ma’s gonna kill me,” Rhodey said.

Pepper shook her head. “You came all the way across the country to celebrate with us, that’s more than enough,” she told Marlena.

They arrived in the penthouse in time to see a worried looking Vision watching as Rhodey’s mother tasted his dish. She smiled approvingly. “Perfect,” she declared. “You’ll make a marvelous baker, even if your lack of taste buds will be a handicap when it comes to savory dishes.”

The three kids spotted a plate of fried pancakes and hurried over to join Happy and Rhodey’s father who were spreading jelly on them. “Syrniki,” Alexi told Rhodey archly. “It is quite tasty if I do say so myself.” Rhodey’s father nodded in agreement as helped Cassie spread the jelly she’d picked while Mercedes held another jar out to Happy.


“You’re just in time,” Roberta said. “I just have to set the table and start putting things out.”

“Let us help,” Maggie volunteered. “Since everyone else has been cooking.”

“Oh no,” Roberta protested. “It’ll take me longer to explain where the nice china’s hidden than to do it myself.”

“Ma, why don’t you have the kids set the table,” Rhodey suggested.

Roberta blinked, “Not a bad idea,” she waved the three kids over and set about supervising. In short order she had Harley carrying serving dishes into the kitchen while Mercedes and Cassie counted out silverware, plates and glasses.

“Coast’s clear,” Pepper whispered conspiratorially. She gestured for the newly arrived grown-ups to start getting the food in serving dishes.

“Mrs. Rhodes, Turkey’s good to carve right?” Happy called once everything was well underway.

Roberta poked her head back in from the dining room, for a moment it looked like she was biting back a protest at the activity then she nodded, “Go ahead. Pepper, what tablecloth do you want to use?”
“Why don’t we use the brown one, with the orange and red napkins it’ll look seasonal,” Pepper suggested.

“Good thought,” Roberta said.

“I have downloaded several napkin folding techniques,” Vision volunteered.

“Why don’t you show me and the kids,” Roberta suggested patting him on the forearm.

Hope pulled Pepper aside while the turkey was being carved. “How are you doing?” she asked. “I know holidays can be hard.”

Pepper’s smile was tight, “Tony and I were together for eight years, but between all the breaks we missed more holidays than we spent together. Family holidays tended to make Tony edgy, if he wasn’t saying something wrong, I was taking it wrong. Actually the two Thanksgivings we spent with the Rhodes were probably the only non-disastrous family holidays we spent together.”

Hope looked doubtful.

“Really,” Pepper said. “The 14th was our holiday.” She smiled wistfully, “Tony Stark didn’t do Valentine’s Day, said it gave girls ideas. But long before we got together we were spending the 14th together, first working through the day, later hanging out as friends. It was enough of a tradition that we didn’t even let our ‘breaks’ stand in the way having a ridiculous not-date on the 14th.”

“Food’s on!” Happy called and Pepper slipped away.

“The table looks great!” Maggie told the kids and Vision.

“Can we eat?” Harley asked grabbing a chair.

“We should say grace,” Marlena told her son with a small frown. Her declaration prompted a round of shuffling and avoiding eyes until Hank rolled his eyes and recited a quick blessing his father had faithfully repeated before every meal.

“The rolls!” Roberta exclaimed and leapt up to get them out of the oven while everyone started passing dishes around the table.

“Does your country have a comparable holiday?” Maggie asked Alexi as Cassie carefully shook a few pea off the serving spoon onto her plate then passed the bowl on. Without comment her mother added a larger helping of vegetables to Cassie’s plate before taking her own.

“I would say our New Years is more similar to your Christmas but it is also a time for family,” Alexi replied.

“Butter,” Roberta muttered to herself, leaving the rolls and heading back to the kitchen.

“How many vigilantees have made overtures to the police?” Hank asked Rhodey.

“A few.” Rhodey grimaced, “Too many street level vigilantees think the police are worse than the crooks. They’ve got their one damn example and think it’s fucking universal constant.”

“Language!” Marlena, Maggie, Paxton and Rhodes’ own mother chorused.

“Sorry,” Rhodey mumbled.
“We should have Stacy do another press conference about his work with Spider-Man,” Pepper suggested. “Get more data out there showing that working with the police is more effective than playing lone ranger.”

“Do we have anyone else to use as a positive example?” Hope asked.

“Nobody as notable,” Rhodes said still looking a bit embarrassed. “The others I’ve talked with have lower level powers and fewer reasons to hide their identity. Many of them are being folded into the police as regular officers, the last thing they need is attention.”

“I certainly wouldn’t mind having someone in the department with abilities to call for backup the next time I get a call about a guy ripping a safe apart with his bare hands.”

“Seriously?” Harley asked, forgetting his fork halfway to his mouth. “What did you do?”

“There was a zoo on the way, my partner and I stopped by and got an elephant tranq.” Paxton shrugged, “We got lucky and it worked. It might have had no effect, it might have killed him, no way for us to know but...” He glanced at Cassie, knowing Scott’s background he hadn’t wanted to go in with bullets as his only option if the guy refused to surrender.

“Pass that empty bowl over,” Roberta said. “There’s more stuffing in the pan.”

“They aren’t worried about hiding their identities?” Marlena asked.

“Wearing a uniform is it’s own form of protection,” Paxton said. “It focuses attention on the organization rather than the individual. If they are blending it’s probably safer for them to be special officers than masked vigilantes.”

“And the ones we need to reach are the ones who don’t or won’t blend,” Pepper sighed

“The gravy really should have a hot-pad under it,” Roberta decided, heading to the kitchen again.

“You are certain the sweet potatoes are alright?” Vision asked Marlena. “I could not fathom the purpose served by topping them with marshmallows. It would seem more appropriate for a dessert than a side dish.”

Marlena nodded toward the heaping servings on her childrens’ plates. “That may be true but do they look like they’re complaining?”

“So sweetness is desirable trait in foods?” Vision asked.

“Now don’t go overboard,” Rhodey said. “Just ‘cause something’s good in some recipes I was here for the Paprika incident.”

Vision looked down and Rhodey grimaced. “I plan to visit Wanda later this evening,” Vision said quietly.

Roberta got up again, “Anyone need more to drink while I’m up?” she asked.

“Ma stop fussing, just sit down and eat,” Rhodey snapped.

“Jim,” his father reprimanded.

An uncomfortable silence settled over the room while they finished eating. Roberta got up to start clearing the table.
“We’ve got it,” Hope declared firmly, she shoved a bowl into Hank’s hands as Marlena and Maggie headed for the kitchen. She smiled at Roberta, “You’ll make us feel guilty.”

The table was half cleared when Mercedes noticed Roberta was crying silently. She leaned up against the older woman’s side, “What’s wrong?”

“Tony’s spent Thanksgiving with us since he and Jim’s first year at MIT, he was barely a teenager,” David said quietly. “Even in 2008 he made it home for Thanksgiving.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, tonight I can see Ross, a lunatic and a villain, as Secretary of State.
Happy stood in the hall outside of the meeting room where the SHRA committee was meeting, the suitcase armor handcuffed to his wrist. After the earlier attack he wasn’t taking chances or trusting the building security to watch over Pepper while she was on the premises. He kept himself amused by engaging in a staring contest with one of the other bodyguards until the meeting concluded. It was late in the afternoon when the doors opened and the delegates filtered out. Happy fell into step beside Pepper. "So, any great strides forward in your last meeting before maternity leave?" he asked.

Pepper gave him a noncommittal smile while they were out in public. When their car pulled up Happy gave the driver a friendly nod, subtly making sure it was the right guy, before opening the door for Pepper.

She let him offer her a steadying hand as she leaned down to get in, her belly making her balance questionable even during everyday activities. “We’re making progress in prohibiting any sort of mandatory service from the Enhanced, Nelson and the ACLU have that aspect firmly in hand,” she said once he’d gotten in and closed the door after them. “Registration of the Enhanced, on the other hand, always ends up being compared to gun registration no matter how many times we repeat that many of the more recent Enhanced didn’t choose to have powers and removing them isn’t as simple and non-invasive as seizing a gun. Deciding a person is too irresponsible to be trusted with powers once they have them is going to be a very ugly, messy business and it’s a can of worms we can’t avoid. Once a person is registered as having power you the next logical step has to be demanding proof that they can control their powers. Ensuring a fair definition of ‘under control’ is likely to be as every bit as problematic as deciding what to do with the ones we decide shouldn’t have powers.”

“You kick anyone hard enough and they're gonna react,” Happy said. He took off his suit jacket and tossed it on the bench beside him then signaling the driver to leave.

Pepper nodded, “Bruce wouldn’t let the Hulk out over a car backfiring, even given the number of times he’s been shot at, but go after him with a bat and everyone within miles could be endangered. Is that because Bruce's control is insufficient to be allowed around normal people or do we have to recognize that even though his fight or flight reflex is extreme he still has a basic right to defend himself?” She grinned ruefully, “I keep telling myself to remember that whatever we pass my name should be the first one on the register and that I have to get the law written accordingly. But then it hits me that admitting that I’m still being affected by Extremis could provide a clue that Nettie inherited it and I don’t know that I’ll ever be ready to give her name to any organization that’s ever wanted a super solider serum. If there’s the slightest chance they’d try to make her into a lab experiment, I can’t risk it. Even beyond protecting my daughter, I don’t want to be the one to point the current research trend toward fetal experimentation.”

“What are you going to do if she gets some of the blow ‘em up side of Extremis?” Happy asked. “It’s going to be hard to hide if she lights her crib on fire when she doesn’t get a bottle or a diaper change fast enough.”

“Not to mention dangerous,” Pepper agreed. “Hank helped Dr. Cho build a suppressor that works on me, so it should work on her too. I told him I didn’t want to test my control while in labor, which is true enough. If he guessed the other reason I needed it before Nettie was born-”
“Goblin incoming,” the driver warned them.

Happy had only a moment to glance out the window. “Brace yourself!” he shouted.

The Goblin tossed a shaped charge beneath the front left wheel and flipped the car onto the sidewalk.

Pepper gasped as the seat belt cut into her. Her eyes burned and a golden glow filtered through her clothes and the taut skin of her stomach. She clung to the seat belt, trying to get her weight off her stomach, her breath coming in pained pants.

Happy released his belt, he landed on the car’s roof with a grunt. Then, crouching on the inverted roof, he reached up to supported Pepper. She released her belt and slid into his arms, for a heartbeat she clung to him before pulling back into the more sheltered front corner of the compartment. She ran her hands over her belly, hushing her unborn daughter.

An explosion rocked the car. “No backup coming, the Avengers are on a mission,” Happy muttered to himself. He unlocked the suitcase then glanced at the floor overhead and hesitated. “I can't armor up in here,” he realized.

Pepper activated the gauntlet in her bracelet and blew off the door for him. The Goblin’s deranged laughter rang out over the sounds of screams, honking horns and twisting metal coming from the street.

“Stay here,” Happy said. He crawled out, drove his hands into the unfolding armor and stood pulling it to his chest as the Goblin swooped back for a second pass. Pulling his gun, Pepper’s driver and second bodyguard stepped in front of Happy and unloaded the clip at the Goblin, protecting Happy until the armor was active. Nimbly the glider shimmied from side to side, evading the shots. The Goblin plowed into the man at full speed, slamming him into the side of the car. “No, no,” Pepper whispered as she saw him collapse outside her door, a puddle of blood forming beneath him. Then she heard the familiar whine of repulsor fire.

Happy was grimly silent as he fired one hand then the other in quick sequence.

The Goblin dodged one bolt only to fly into the path of Happy’s follow up shot. The impact knocked the Goblin from the glider to land in an undignified heap in the street but he quickly rolled back to his feet. “Let’s see how you handle this Understudy,” the Goblin hissed angrily. He tossed a translucent caltrop into the street at Happy’s feet.

A flash of purple light enveloped the armor just as Happy charged up the repulsors. The gauntlets exploded, throwing Happy backwards but he lurched back to his feet. Cradling his hands against his chest he staggered back toward the car, trying to get between Pepper and the Goblin.

Pepper cast an anguished glance from Happy to her still glowing stomach then she wrapped his discarded jacket around her body and set herself to run. She blew the other car door off and scrambled out on all fours.

The Goblin went after her and Happy tackled him. As they grappled Happy realized that the Goblin’s green skin was some sort of heavy, rubbery body-armor. Happy reached for what he now assumed was a mask but with his injured hands that gave the Goblin an opening to squirm and kick his way out from under Happy’s bulk.

The Goblin called his glider back and leapt on it as Happy lunged for him. As he zoomed past Happy to go after Pepper again, Happy triggered the boot repulsors and launched himself at the
Goblin like a missile crashing into the glider and sending them both falling. “Persistent,” the Goblin sneered as he triggered another of his caltrops, “but dumb.” Like the gauntlets before them, the boot repulsors exploded. The Goblin took a moment to bend over Happy and yank the arc reactor out of the suit before he could recover. “Without Stark, Iron Man is an empty shell soon to be doomed to obsolescence.”

Bumped and battered by the stampeding crowd, Happy’s jacket pulled tight around her to hide her glowing belly, Pepper ran for the cover of one of the buildings lining the street. The Goblin bounded through the crowd after her, brutally knocking people out of his way. He caught her sleeve, Pepper’s momentum spun her around and spilled her to the ground. The Goblin took a moment to stand over her grinning menacingly. “So little whore, what are you going to do now?” he asked.

A line of webbing caught the Goblin in the middle of the back as Spider-Man swung overhead. He yanked the Goblin into the air and away from Pepper. At the apex of his swing Spider-Man let go of the webline holding the Goblin and sent him rolling across the roof of a building almost half a block away from Pepper. The Goblin slammed hard against a bank of air conditioner unit, denting the metal but still regained his feet quickly. “All my enemies, conspiring against me,” he sneered.

Spider-Man perched on the low wall at the edge of the roof. “Or I just have a problem with people who attacking pregnant ladies,” he said.

The Goblin looked past Spider-Man and chuckled evilly but the webslinger flipped over the returning glider before it could ram into his back. “Your luck won't last, Bug,” the Goblin sneered as he leapt onto the board.

“It boomerangs? How’s that fair?” Spider-Man whined. He sent a line of webbing at the Goblin in a bid to yank him off the glider again but only caught the satchel slung over his shoulder. Spider-Man pulled back sharply and ripped the bag away. “Cool! I’ve got your weapons,” he declared when he realized what he’d done.

“Thief!” The Goblin shrieked diving at Spider-Man, who lightly twisted away.

“Keep-away! I know this game,” Spider-Man taunted. He shot out a web-line and swung away from the building, the Goblin close behind. “Captain Stacy,” he muttered into his comm, “I’ve got the Goblin right on my heels. Where do you want him?” He let go of the web-line early and threw himself in another direction, while the Goblin zipped past.

“We’re evacuating a parking garage twelve blocks north of your location,” Stacy replied. “Getting him inside will limit that damned glider.”

Spider-Man glanced over his shoulder. “Hey Mean-Green! I’m gonna take your toys and reverse engineer them!” he threatened.


Spider-Man fell over a dozen feet before managing to catch himself on the side of a building. As the Goblin circled back he tried to make another web line only to have useless glop the consistency of oatmeal sputter out of the contaminated canister. He dodged to the right and the window shattered beside him as the Goblin tried to knock him off his perch with the glider’s backwash.

The webbing in his other web shooter was still good. Spider-Man swung across the street and quickly replaced the contaminated canister with a spare. The next time the Goblin buzzed him he
cut the webbing before the smoke could follow it back to his gear and the chase was on. Spider-Man ran across rooftops and occasionally the vertical faces of the buildings, ducking and dodging the Goblin’s glider. He only used his webbing in short bursts to keep it free of the weaponized smoke spewing from the glider.

Spider-Man flung himself behind gargoyle. The Goblin veered away a moment too late. His glider clipped the statue, showering the street below with chunks of stone. While the Goblin fought for control Spider-Man swung into a narrow alley, clearing the length of the building in seconds. The Goblin quickly caught up, swooping down on him the moment he was out in the open. Spider-Man let go of his web-line, free falling for a beat before flipping around a flagpole and risking a quick web-line to pull himself in a new direction. The flagpole snapped and the webbing began dissolving almost immediately but Spider-Man was already falling, flying toward his next handhold.

Another block and the garage was in sight. Spider-Man doubled back, swinging around a column then sprinting for the garage. “We’re set up on the third floor,” Stacy said. Spidey shot a line to the neighboring building and swung himself upwards. The Goblin’s smoke cut the webbing again. Spider-Man tumbled through the air. He got a hand on the wall of the garage and scrambled upward, ducking inside once he hit the third floor. There Spider-Man found a ring of police cars waiting. The officers rushed into position. “Spider-Man, behind us!” Stacy shouted.

“Gotch ya!” Spider-Man leapt up, sticking to the ceiling for a moment before throwing himself into the center of the ring of cars. The Goblin was only a second behind. The officers opened fire, their bullets knocked the Goblin to the ground, his glider sped on to embed itself into one of the cars.

Cautiously the officers came out of their barricade and approached the downed Goblin.

Spider-Man received a split second’s warning. He leapt over the cars and started pouring webbing on the glider as the Goblin laughed. The glider exploded. Spider-Man’s webbing contained the worst of the shrapnel but a moment later the car it had been embedded in exploded as well, then the one next to it. Still clutching the Goblin’s satchel, Spider-Man was thrown through a concrete column. The officers scrambled for cover. In the chaos the Goblin vanished.

Ambulance sirens filled the air. Smoke rose from a number of destroyed cars. People wandered around with stunned expressions, many of them sporting visible injuries, as the EMTs tried to round them up. More sirens echoed up and down the route followed by Spider-Man and the Goblin during their running battle.

Three EMT’s hefted Happy onto a stretcher, armor and all. His hands and feet were covered in bandages. He tried to sit up but one of the medics held his shoulders down. “Just tell us how to get you out of this armor so we better treat you.” Nearby, another medic covered covered the driver’s body with a sheet.

On the other side of the street, Pepper sat against the tire of a car her knees pulled up as much as possible huddled under Happy’s suit jacket. Her head was bowed but her outstretched hand was steady, the glowing repulsor in her palm warding everyone off. “Ma’am, please let us check you over,” a hovering EMT pled. Pepper shook her head without raising her eyes, she bit her lip to hold a pained moan back.

A police officer came over, he gave the EMT a questioning look. “I think she might be in labor,” the medic said quietly. “But she won’t let me get close enough to check.”
“That’s Virginia Potts,” the officer observed. “If anything goes wrong…”

“I’d rather not get blown up because she’s too far in shock to recognize help,” the EMT hissed.

Eyes turned toward the sky, mouths dropped open as Iron Man landed near Pepper with more precision and none of the flare that characterized Tony’s maneuvers in the suit. Pepper let herself be picked up and Iron Man blasted off, heading back for the Tower without a word.

At the parking garage twelve blocks away firefighters struggled to keep the blaze contained to the one building. Every now and then a hollow boom would announce another gas tank had exploded.

Captain Stacy, a bandage wrapped around his head, clothing covered in soot stood in front of a dazed Spider-Man and seven other injured officers, consulting with the Fire Chief. While they spoke a fifth body was carried out of the burning building.

Spider-Man sat on the ground clutching the satchel he'd snatched from the Goblin as if his life depended on it. He vaguely remembered being hauled out of the burning garage on Stacy’s shoulder while the man shouted orders to his men. As he stared up at the sky, Spider-Man saw a news helicopter circling overhead.

At Stark Tower an Asian teenager in grubby clothes with a duffle bag slung over his back stood quietly on one side of the lobby. At the receptionist’s desk Dr. Cho was giving orders to the highest security officers on site. “We are the closest medical facility. My surgeon is already scrubbing up and ambulances will be arriving in minutes. I need two elevators reserved for EMT use and a clear path through the lobby. You can't waste time checking ID’s!”

The teenage started making his way over.

“We’ll need to lock those elevators so they only go between the lobby and the medical floor,” the security officer decided. “I’ll station guards at the stairwell and send extra personnel to both levels. I won’t compromise the Tower security more than absolutely necessary.”

Dr. Cho noticed the teen, “Amadeus! You actually came! I didn't have to call out the private investigators!” she exclaimed hugging her son.

“Well your new digs aren’t going to be boring, I can see that,” Amadeus said. “Want me reprogram the elevators? You know I’m faster than anyone they've got on staff.”

“How rude!” FRIDAY declared from the speaker on the receptionist’s desk. “You haven't even been introduced and you want to put your grubby fingers on my intimate bits.”

Amadeus blinked. “Um, Amadeus Cho at your service. And who might you be?”

“FRIDAY, I run this building and I'm entirely capable of taking care of Dr. Cho’s request without having some dirty little boy messing around in my code. Boss-Lady's enroute, Doc. And Nettie’s scorching the paint on the armor. I think she's in a hurry to get out.”

“I have to go,” Dr Cho said. “FRIDAY could you give Amadeus access to my apartment? Amadeus, please be there when I’m done?” She left before either could answer.

“Well, I guess that tells us,” Amadeus commented. He headed for one of the other elevators, “I could use a shower I guess.”

The elevator started up under FRIDAY’s control. “I could have told you that, even without laying olfactory sensors on you.”
“And you call me rude,” Amadeus replied.

FRIDAY brightened and dimmed the hall lights to guide Amadeus to Dr. Cho’s door then unlocked the door for him. “I call it like I see it,” she sniffed.

“Aww you make like I'm some ham-handed amiture asking to mess around under your hood. I'd make it real good for you,” Amadeus cooed.

“My little sister is being born, I don't have time for you,” FRIDAY announced. She sounded flustered.

Amadeus chuckled, “Is talking with me taxing your processing speed?”

FRIDAY responded by blowing a raspberry.

Dr. Cho met Pepper and the Iron Man armor on the penthouse balcony along with Marlena. As FRIDAY had warned, the paint on the armor was blackened and peeling where Pepper’s stomach had pressed against it while the front of Pepper’s shirt and Happy’s jacket had been reduced to ash. The glowing form of the child was visible through Pepper’s skin. “I can see from here that she’s positioned correctly,” Dr. Cho observed as the armor provided a supporting arm for Pepper to lean on. “Now we just need to see if Dr. Pym’s power suppressor works.”

“It better work,” Pepper ground out.

Dr. Cho shrugged, “If not we just break out the industrial rated oven-mitts. Let’s get you to the delivery room.”

“How about we deactivate the weaponry first?” Marlena suggested noticing that Pepper still had her repulsors charged.

Pepper looked down at the gauntlets on her hands as if surprised to find they were still there. She nodded shortly and they folded away back into bracelets. Marlena stepped forward to offer her a supporting arm as they headed inside but Pepper only clung to the armor more tightly.

May Parker glanced around uncertainly as FRIDAY directed her to one of the Tower’s private entrances and took her up to the medical floor.

Through an open door she saw Peter, still in his costume, sitting on an exam table leaning woozily against the wall. “Spider-Man,” the nurse said holding up a thinner-looking version of his mask with open eye-holes. “I’ve been given a protocol for treating you. Can you switch your mask for this one? We need to take an X-Ray of your skull to make sure you don’t have any fractures and your mask has metal wiring in it.”

“I can do that,” Peter said. He reached for the mask but missed, his vision slightly off. A distressed squeak escaped May and Peter saw her. “I’m good,” he told the nurse firmly while looking straight at May.

The nurse put the new mask in his hand, “I’ll be right back to help you change your clothes,” he said and left the exam room closing the door behind her. May stood, back pressed against the wall and tried to be inconspicuous. As promised the nurse returned a few minutes later with a hospital gown and a wheelchair.

While May watched the closed door she wondered how she was going to inconspicuously managed
to follow them when the nurse took Peter to get his X-Ray. Then Captain Stacy walked up. He nodded when he saw her and quietly handed her a visitor’s badge. “I got a call that you were here. Go along with my story,” he said then knocked on the exam room door.

“Yes?” the nurse asked, poking his head out after a moment.

Stacy showed him his badge, “Captain George Stacy. It’s department policy to have a representative stay with Spider-Man in case of any legal issues.” He gestured to May, “This is May Parker, she'll be staying with him until he’s been discharged.” May took a notebook and pencil out of her bag and put on a calm professional air.

“Whatever, just stay out of the way,” the nurse said distractedly. May sent Stacy a grateful look behind the nurse’s back.

As the hours passed the hall outside of Pepper’s delivery room filled up.

First Marlena and her kids arrived, following right behind Pepper. Once the siblings realized that nothing was going to happen quickly they both got out their phones. Harley called Hank Pym and the two of them began speculating about the Goblin’s tech and what he might have done to make the repulsors on the Iron Man armor explode. Mercedes curled up against her mother’s side and called Cassie, keeping both her and her parents updated about Pepper and the baby. “Dr. Hank’s thingy worked,” she assured them. “Everything’s good.”

Then, an hour later, Happy arrived in a wheelchair. The skin on his hands and feet looked new and delicate after having undergoing Dr. Cho’s regenerative treatment. “I couldn’t keep him in bed but don’t let him out of that wheelchair,” the attendant warned before leaving.

“How’s she doing?” Happy asked.

“Eight centimeters dilated. She’s almost to the hard part,” Marlena said.

“Almost?” Happy wondered hearing a pained shout from the delivery room.

Six hours after the attack Vision arrived, his cape still singed from the Avenger’s mission. “Colonel Rhodes will be here shortly,” he announced. “He is being debriefed about the Goblin situation.”

Twenty minutes later Rhodey rolled in, followed by Spider-Man and May. “How's Pepper?”

“Doing fine,” Marlena said. “We’re expecting the baby any time now.”

“Police have anything to say about the Goblin?” Happy asked.

Rhodey groaned “What we’ve come up with is we're basically fighting Tony's evil counterpart. OsCorp stole Tony's IP to build that damned glider but this guy didn't just steal his gear from Osborn. He’s sharp enough to design something to counter both Tony’s repulsors and Spider-Man’s webbing. Now he might have been involved in the glider design and working on understanding the repulsors for years but if he'd had anti-repulsor tech at gala three weeks ago he would have used it. Worse yet I doubt he’d ever seen the webbing before September, in just a couple months he found a reactant that turns it into so much mush and a delivery system. Which means not only is he smart, he’s got the resources to fabricate what he designs quickly. Probably not a disgruntled ex-employee but someone who has access to OsCorp’s labs right now.”

“Have the police found a suspect?” Vision asked.
“I called in favor and got OsCorp’s military liaison to look over the list Osborn gave the police. We narrowed it down to five names: Dr. Otto Octavius, Melati Kusuma, Phineas Mason, Herman Schultz and, of course, Norman Osborn himself,” Rhodey said.

“So what's next?” Happy asked, “send Vision or Captain Marvel against him? Aggressively, so he doesn’t have time to develop counters for their abilities?”

“I'm not throwing in the towel yet,” Spider-Man stated. “I’ve got one of my contaminated canisters to work from to keep him from taking out my webbing again and we’ve got these,” he held out two of the caltrops.

Harley fell on them like a starving man at a buffet. “I’ll show him obsolete!” the younger teen exclaimed.

“Stacy turned them over to SI for analysis after cataloging them,” Rhodey said.

Pepper’s hair was drenched with sweat and her eyes bruised from squeezing them shut too tightly when the contractions hit. “Tony?” she looked around the room with a panicked air. Then her gaze settled on the armor she relaxed fractionally.

“Alright, push now,” the midwife assisting Dr. Cho instructed.

Pepper flung her hand out and caught the armor’s gauntlet as the next contraction hit.

“There’s her shoulder, you’re almost done. Just a little more.”

“You said that ages ago!” Pepper accused glaring at the woman furiously.

“One more push,” the woman replied calmly.

A baby began to cry, “There you are beautiful,” the midwife said. “Let’s cut the cord and get you to your mama.”

A moment later the wailing baby was laid on Pepper’s chest. She curled her free hand around the baby’s back, never releasing the armor.

“Okay, just the afterbirth left,” the midwife told Pepper, “One more push.”

The look Pepper sent the woman was pure outrage, “One more! You keep saying one more! Use a fucking dictionary!”

“You were past the point of no return months ago,” the midwife replied blandly. “Now you’ve got to get the afterbirth out, one more push.”

“Hate you,” Pepper declared. Then she looked down at her baby and her expression softened. Dazed from pain and exhaustion and not totally rational she tugged at the armored hand in her’s pulling the suit closer, “Cheating Tony, today I get to crush your hand if I feel like it,” she murmured. “Now stop scanning your daughter and take that off so you can see her properly.”

“There’s more bleeding than there should be,” the midwife said, waving Dr. Cho forward.

A short, blond man with fierce scowl stormed the waiting room. “I want to know who was piloting that second armor and I want to know right now!” Everett Ross exclaimed. “Colonel Rhodes and Mr. Hogan were both accounted for and NO ONE else is licensed to use that armor!”
“Director,” Rhodes calmly lied. “You’ve seen me summon War Machine, haven’t you? That’s all that happened. Pepper went into labor during the Goblin attack, she summoned the armor and then sent it back to the tower after it picked her up.”

Ross opened his mouth to argue more, but the door to the delivery room opened and a nurse stepped out carrying a small, pink wrapped bundle. She smiled, “May I introduce Antoinette Evelyn Stark, born at 5:29pm on December 13, 2016. She’s six pounds, four ounces in weight; nineteen and a quarter inches long. Now who has first dibs on holding her?" And Ross stepped back, a small smile gracing his face as he allowed himself to be forgotten.

For a moment everyone was frozen then Rhodey slowly rolled himself forward and held up his arms. The nurse rearranged him a bit then settled Nettie against his chest. “Hey there. You can call my Uncle Rhodey,” he said. Nettie wriggled a hand free of her blanket and reached for the source of his voice with a little squeak. “Oh, look at you, all wide eyed and curious already,” he cooed. “Of course you are.”

“Let me see!” Mercedes demanded leaning on the arm of Rhodey’s wheelchair while Harley tried not to look too interested as he leaned over his sister’s shoulder. Nettie had thin wisps of dark hair on her head, big blue eyes and squished up red face, a delicate looking choker adorned with blue gems graced her neck. “Hi baby!” Mercedes said. “Look, she’s smiling at me!”

“My research indicates that when a baby this young appears to be smiling it is more likely gas,” Vision said using that as an excuse to get a closer look at Nettie himself. He smiled and reached out to let her curl her hand around his finger.

“Look at her little fingers, they’ve got fingernails and everything,” Harley said, forgetting himself.

“I’d hope so,” Happy said.

Marlena gave the nurse a worried look, “I wouldn’t think Pepper would be willing to let her out of sight this quickly.”

“It’s nothing to worry about,” the nurse assured them. “Just a little tearing. Ms. Potts was quite forceful that, since Nettie was out she wanted pain-killers before we did any more poking around.”

Ross quietly let himself out of the waiting room. ‘Probably best that she did call the armor,’ he thought to himself. ‘Be a damn shame if anything worse had happened to Potts or Tony Stark’s kid.’

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Spider-Man, Bringing Lagos Home

The Daily Bugle By: J. Jonah Jameson December 14, 2016

Yesterday, in events chilling reminiscent of last spring in Lagos, the streets of New York were rattled by multiple explosions. Dozens more were injured by falling glass and rubble as Spider-Man and his foe fought their way across our city. This morning thirteen are dead and over forty injured, innocent bystanders caught up in a reckless battle between a masked vigilante and his arch nemesis.
The fight spanned nearly fourteen city blocks leaving devastation in its wake. Randy Paul, age twelve and his mother were walking home from a dentist appointment when a shower of glass falling from twenty stories above ended his life. His is only one of yesterday's tragedies, precipitated by a self-declared 'hero' who still refuses to sign the Sokovian Accords because of the technicality that he claims to be a citizen of this country. Of course we have to take his word for that as he's hardly going to provide a birth certificate.

Chapter End Notes

Phineas Mason, the Terrible Tinkerer and Herman Schultz, the Shocker are both engineers while Melati Kusuma, aka Komodo is a geneticist. In my AU all three of them plus Doctor Octopus are still pre-origin story.

In the 616 period where I was reading Spider-Man rarely would anyone say boo about J.J.J. using the Bugle as a soapbox for expressing his grudge against Spidey. This time round his editorials won't go uncontested.
Pepper spent a night on the Medical Floor of the tower but as soon as she could stand, abet shakily, she insisted on herself, Nettie and Happy being transferred up to the penthouse. There, surrounded by friends and family, shielded from the world by the best security system in existence, she able to relax for the first time since she allowed herself to realize the Iron Man armor that had come when she needed it had been empty.

Curled on her side she watched Nettie sleep, feeling the gentle rise and fall under her hand as the baby breathed. “FRIDAY?” she whispered.

“Whatever you need Boss-Lady!” FRIDAY replied, her voice hushed but eager.

“Thanks, for coming for me. And for letting me fool myself that Tony was back for a bit, I needed that just then.”

“I wasn’t sure,” FRIDAY said sounding like she’d have been blushing and shifting uncomfortably at the praise if she’d had the ability.

Pepper fussed with Nettie's baby blanket, making sure her toes were tucked in even though she was wearing footie pajamas already. Nettie had already expressed a strong negative opinion of swaddling and anything else that restricted her ability to reach for things that drew her attention.

“I always thought of Iron Man as the post-Afghanistan representation of Tony's self-destructive side,” she said.

FRIDAY made an inquiring sound.

Pepper sighed, “It’s armor, true, but if Tony just wanted to protect himself he never would have left his lab again. And if he wanted to make up for not realizing what Stane was up to- I didn’t see it either and I didn’t have the excuse of having that snake for a godfather either- I always thought Tony could have done more for the world as an innovator rather than as Iron Man. But he wanted to be out there, in the middle of everything, getting shot at.”

She broke off for a moment, shifting carefully to try to get comfortable without waking Nettie in the process.

“We should have seen Stane for what he was but I never understood Tony feeling guilty about SI making weapons in the first place,” Pepper admitted. “Maybe because what I brought to the company back then wasn’t unique… Well, beyond not letting Tony drive me to distraction,” a small smile graced Pepper’s lips. “Tony was good- great at making weapons, things that maybe wouldn’t have existed without him. Maybe creating a weapon he could keep under his direct control let him make peace between Howard’s indoctrination that our country needed weapons, the best weapons, to be safe and Tony’s experience seeing those same weapons turned against him. Still, I’ve always looked at Iron Man as, well, almost as a threat... Until yesterday, when it was just
an extension of Tony.”

Gwen and her mother looked up from breakfast in surprise when her father slammed the morning edition of the Bugle down hard enough to rattle the dishes.

“The coverage was that bad?” Mrs. Stacy asked.

“If Jameson were one of my detectives I’d have him fired,” Captain Stacy growled. “Hang on a second.” He picked up his phone. “Patty?” he said when the department’s public relations officer picked up, “Could you call the Bugle and make sure Jameson’s at the press conference this morning, I have a few things to say to him… Thanks Patty, don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Gwen picked up the paper, “This sounds pretty bad,” she said.

“It completely ignores that Spider-Man was following my orders,” Stacy said. “Jameson writes crap like this then questions Spider-Man keeping his identity from the public? He doesn’t hesitate to pin responsibility for whole thing on the kid, doesn’t even call the Goblin by name let alone acknowledge that he started the whole thing with an unprovoked attack. Jameson’s practically calling for a witch hunt, all because he has some sort of grudge against Spider-Man”

“Kid?” Gwen asked curiously.

“You know me, anyone under the age of twenty-five is a kid as far as I’m concerned,” Stacy deflected. He grinned, “And the thirty year olds are starting to look mighty young. I mean it’s all relative, you’re still my baby girl right?”

“Dad!” Gwen protested.

Several hours later Captain Stacy stood in on the steps of the precinct with a projector screen behind him and a laptop on the table beside him as he faced a group of reporters, his expression stern. He noted Jonah Jameson positioned front and center with grim satisfaction. “Before we get started, Mr. Jameson, I am appalled by the standards of journalistic integrity I saw demonstrated in the Bugle this morning,” he said.

Jameson stood up and stepped forward, “The Bugle won’t be hoodwinked by-”

“You collected just enough evidence to support the conclusion you’d made before starting your investigation,” Stacy interrupted. “ Barely two months ago I stood right here and told you that Spider-Man was working with the police. Still, yesterday you assumed that he was working alone without even taking the precursory caution of calling the department before printing your frankly uninformed opinion of what happened. I expect to see a retraction in tomorrow’s paper or you can expect to be responding to libel charges.

“Now, for those of you interested in getting the whole story: Yesterday Spider-Man responded to an act of domestic terrorism. The individual known as the Goblin attacked Virginia Potts, CEO of Stark Industries as she was driven back from a SHRA conference. We believe the attack was more likely motivated by business concerns rather than the Super-Hero Registration Act, however we are investigating all possibilities.

“The Goblin set off several grenades while attempting to get past Ms. Potts’ bodyguards. One of whom was killed in the attack. The family has requested that the name not be released at this time.

“Spider-Man was the first department responder on the scene. While he engaged the Goblin I had my officers clear a nearby parking garage and set an ambush. The ambush was not successful, we
underestimated the efficacy of Goblin’s body armor and he used his glider to set off a chain of explosions which destroyed the garage and killed eight of my officers. The police would have suffered much worse losses if Spider-Man hadn’t contained the initial explosion.

“Contrary to what was printed in Bugle, this situation was nothing like Lagos,” Stacy frowned severely at Jameson. “First: no one, not myself and not Spider-Man, had advanced knowledge of the Goblin’s attack. We responded as best as we were able to the situation as it arose but no one chose to place the capture of a terrorist above the safety of the civilians in the area. Second: Spider-Man was working in concert with local law enforcement, specifically he was taking orders from me and did an exemplary job of following them. Yes, there were casualties on the route between the site of the Goblin’s initial attack and the parking garage but it was MY judgement that if the fight had not been moved to an area we had evacuated before attempting to capture the Goblin the casualties would have been worse. It was also my judgement that, given the escalation seen in the Goblin’s activities, that capturing him was a priority. Since there were civilian casualties Internal Affairs has already beginning a review of my decisions, you will have the results of the initial review within the week. Spider-Man and the officers involved will also have their actions reviewed to determine if they could have carried out my orders with less loss of life but given that the Goblin came specifically prepared to counter Spider-Man’s known capabilities it is my personal judgement that Spider-Man performed remarkably under challenging circumstances.”

“What evidence do you have that Spider-Man was working with you from the beginning, that you’re not just covering for him?” Jameson demanded.

“Why would I?” Stacy said. “That Spider-Man was following my orders places ultimate responsibility for the lives lost on me. Why would I claim that if it weren’t true? Further, Spider-Man’s costume is equipped with cameras, like the dash-cams commonly used by police across the country and his communications with me during the fight were recorded per standard procedure.” Stacy leaned down to key-up a video on the laptop, “If you don’t believe me, believe your own eyes and ears.”

When the video ended, Christine Everheart raised her hand, “Is the police’s belief that the attack was about SI rather than Ms. Potts’ involvement in SHRA because you learned that the Goblin was not an enhanced individual?”

Stacy’s expression relaxed fractionally, “That’s right. Mr. Hogan, head of Stark Industry’s security confirmed that the Goblin’s appearance is due to body armor. We now believe that we are looking for someone wearing a mask, not an Inhuman or other Enhanced individual.”

Several weeks after the attack Pepper walked back and forth in front of her bedroom window looking out over the lights of the city as she rested Nettie against her shoulder and patted her back. As soon as Nettie burped her discontented cries tapered off into soft, snuffling breathes. Pepper carefully, gingerly lowered the sleeping baby into the hamper beside her bed and was about to go back to sleep herself when FRIDAY whispered, “Boss-Lady, I know the protocol is to lock down the lab after seventy-two hours but Harley’s been there for eighteen now and I was thinking maybe…”

“That he hasn’t built up Tony’s tolerance to lack of sleep, food and other trivialities like that and maybe it would be best to keep it that way?” Pepper replied, her voice hushed. She pulled on a robe. “Looks like I’m not done putting people to bed quite yet.” She leaned down and kissed Nettie on the forehead then headed down to Tony’s lab.

“I thought Marlena was pulling him out of the lab at healthy intervals?” Pepper said as the elevator sank.
“Sort of,” FRIDAY previcariated.

“And what does that mean?” Pepper asked sternly.

“Well, he’s been having me wake him up after a couple of hours of sleep so he could get back to the lab once his mom chased him out for the night,” FRIDAY admitted.

Pepper groaned, “Why are you facilitating this FRIDAY?”

There was a measurable silence, an eternity for an AI. “It feels right, him being there, fixing it, finding a way to shut down that- that asshole!”

“No more helping him get around his mother. I can’t imagine Tony would have been pleased to see Harley developing his self-destructive habits,” Pepper said sternly but she spent several minutes standing in the door watching as Harley manipulated holograms to test and discard hypotheses at a rapid pace. His hair hung over his forehead in greasy clumps and his eyes had the wild cast that Pepper had long since learned to associate with someone who only on their feet through shear pig-headed determination. Then she stepped further into the lab and asked, “How long has it been since you ate?”

Harley spun around and fell out of his chair with an undignified yelp. “You startled me!” he exclaimed then without pause for breath he held up one of the Goblin’s devices, “I reverse engineered it, figured out how he screwed up the repulsors… Um… “

“Eleven hours ago,” FRIDAY supplied.

“And now that I’ve got that it’s only a matter of time until I counter it,” Harley picked up with barely a beat dropped. His eyes flashed angrily, “Iron Man’s not going be obsoleted on my watch. I just got to try a few more things and I’ll have it. I know it. Just gotta keep going. I’ll get it.”

“You’ll think better after some sleep,” Pepper said firmly.

“No! No I’ve almost got it, I can’t quit now,” Harley whined.

“Trust me,” Pepper replied taking him by the shoulders and turning him bodily toward the door. “What you need are fresh eyes. FRIDAY, save everything. Harley you’re going upstairs, you’re going to shower, get something to eat and then you’re going to sleep for at least six hours. Then and only then will the lab doors unlock for you.”

“But.”

“No buts, shower, food, sleep. In that order.” Pepper started marching him toward the door ignoring all protests.

Once she’d loaded him onto the elevator, Pepper came back to the lab to double check that everything Harley had been working on had been theoretical and that there weren’t any forgotten soldering irons or cutting torches lying about. For a moment as she surveyed the lab Pepper was smiling, remembering all the times she’d had to drag Tony out of it “I miss you every day, Tony,” she said. “I don’t know how I ever thought that missing out on the time we could have had would make losing you easier.”

The next day Peter’s stomach twisted with a nauseating mixture of guilt and determination as he forced himself to grin at Harry Osborn. “So, it’s the last day of school before Christmas break and I don’t have work this afternoon either. Do you want to go to the cafe and listen to the bands?”
“We’ll get done pretty late,” Harry pointed out hopefully. “The buses won’t be running to your place.”

“If you don't mind I could crash at your place?” Peter suggested.

“Your Aunt isn't freaking out anymore?” Harry asked.

Peter shook his head, “After spending Thanksgiving with your Dad she realized that she was totally overreacting.”

“That's great!” Harry exclaimed.

After school, before he met up with Harry, Peter called home. “Aunt May? Captain Stacy has an idea. I’ll be out all night but don't worry, I’ll have plenty of backup.”

The cafe was packed when when Peter and Harry arrived. “Sit with us!” Liz called, waving them over to join herself and Felicity.

The manager came out and took the stage during a break between sets. “I just want to remind everyone that ten percent of tonight's proceeds are going to a fund for the victims of last month’s attack. So… everyone drink up!”

“Harry, does your dad know how the Goblin is connected to OsCorp?” Felicity asked.

“If he knew the first thing he'd do would be tell the police,” Harry replied with a frown. “It's probably someone he fired.”

Peter wanted to tell Harry about that worthless list OsCorp gave the police and how much time and effort it had taken to wring actual information out of it but Peter Parker had no reason to know any of that and Harry would have no reason to listen if Spider-Man just dropped out of the blue and started bad mouthing Harry’s dad.

‘This is my best bet,’ Peter told himself. ‘I’ll find out what's really going on and make it public. Then Harry’ll know how his Dad was involved and the police’ll know what they need to catch the Goblin. And it's gotta be soon, before the Goblin has another chance to hurt Ms. Potts or her and Dr. Stark’s baby.’

After the last band had packed up for the night, Peter and Harry walked a few blocks back to the OsCorp building. Norman was standing at the kitchen bar eating a late dinner while watching the news. “Peter, I’m glad everything’s been smoothed over,” he said with a smile when he saw the two boys.

“Yeah, me too,” Peter said a bit weakly. “I know you worry when Harry stays over at my place.”

“Your Aunt’s home is lovely but distinctly lacking in measures to thwart a determined kidnapper,” Norman agreed.

“It’s not like I go to Pete’s house regularly and both of us know better than to let anyone know when I’m staying over,” Harry complained. “Minimal risk of anyone knowing I’m there. Come on, Pete, video game marathon!”

“Super Smash Brothers?” Peter suggested.

Harry grinned and slapped Peter on the back, “Good choice!”
“I expect you two in bed by two,” Norman said. “You might not have school tomorrow but Peter has work in the afternoon and you’ve got an extra appointment with your German tutor, Harry.”

“Yes sir,” Peter agreed easily.

Several hours later Peter tossed aside his controller. “Goody two-shoes,” Harry scoffed but he turned off the TV and stumbled off toward the bathroom. Peter waved then headed for his normal guest room. He spent a good half-hour laying in bed staring at the ceiling to be sure Harry had gone to bed then Peter took his backpack into the bathroom.

Peter locked the door behind him and quickly changed into Spider-Man. He adjusted the mask, making sure the wires running through the ribbing of the mask and costume had linked up properly then he whispered, “FRIDAY? You have a location for me?”

“Who do you think you’re asking, Spidey?” FRIDAY replied teasingly. “I’ve had hours to hack OsCorp from the inside out. But you’ve got a long climb ahead of you, all four of the scientists on the Colonel’s list have offices near the glider testing facility, ten floors down.”

“Good thought, saving Mr. Osborn’s lab for last,” Peter agreed as he quickly unscrewed the vent cover and climbed in. “I really don’t want to break into his private space if I don’t have to.”

“I thought we wanted to find something bad about Osborn so the police would have a reason to get your friend away from him?” FRIDAY asked.

Spider-Man crawled, head downward along the wall of the vent. His shoulders were a tight squeeze but with his abilities the actual climb was simple enough. “I don’t want to find something that’s not there,” Peter replied firmly. “I mean, I’m worried yeah. And the police are pretty sure that Mr. Osborn is covering up something about the Goblin. I know it’s not a disgruntled ex-employee like Harry thinks. I know who ever it is still has access to OsCorp’s resources, they must to build the anti-repulsor tech and that smog that eats my webbing. But that doesn’t mean Mr. Osborn’s involved, he could be trying to deal with it internally, I know he’s a little paranoid about people stealing his tech.”

“Guilty conscious,” FRIDAY opinioned. “After all, he stole the Boss’ tech. It probably makes him feel better to assume everyone else is just as dishonest.”

“Harry says he’s not abusive and he didn’t actually hit me with the bookend,” Peter objected.

“Because you dodged.”

“I don’t want to get him in trouble unless he actually done something,” Peter said. “I want to find out what’s going on before anyone else gets hurt.”

You’re here,” FRIDAY said. Spider-Man crawled past the vent then kicked it open and crawled out onto the ceiling of the four story ballroom where OsCorp had tested the glider. Open balconies lined the open space with offices and labs looking out into the ballroom. “Phineas Mason’s lab is the middle door on the west wall.”

Spider-Man crawled across the ceiling then swung down and forced the door open. The room inside was incredibly cluttered. Half-finished or possibly half-disassembled machines covered every flat surface and were piled up between the lab benches, even more hung from hooks attached to the ceiling until the lab looked more like a cavern. Tools were haphazardly mixed in with the machines and Spider-Man saw more than one electronic notepad propped up near an abandoned project. He picked up the closest pad and swiped the screen. “Password protected.”
FRIDAY made a rude noise. “A welcome mat would take longer for me to trip over,” she said and
the screen opened.

Spider-Man scanned the data. “We know he worked on the glider, so that’s not suspicious. Nothing
on the anti-repulsor tech or my webbing but does this guy even know what organization means? It
wouldn’t be hard to miss something in this mess!”

“Not for me,” FRIDAY said. “Move on to the next tablet.”

“Don’t you steal any of Mr. Osborn’s intellectual property,” Peter warned. “Even if he did take the
repulsor tech, you’re better than that.”

“Sweet talker,” FRIDAY replied. “I’ll erase anything that doesn’t directly pertain to the Goblin.”

“This guy’s got some weird hobbies but I don’t think he’s the Goblin,” FRIDAY said. “Next
office, right by the elevator, Ms. Melati Kusuma… She’s working on her Ph.D., your friend Dr.
Connors is her thesis adviser.”

“Yeah?” Peter asked. “What’s she studying?”

“Cellular regeneration,” FRIDAY replied.

Spider-Man twisted the doorknob off and pushed open the door to reveal an office that couldn’t
have been more opposite of than Mason’s if the pair had been trying. The aisle between the lab
benches was wide and clear. Everything was in it’s place, labeled and arranged to be easily
accessible. Spider-Man tilted his head to the side consideringly. The tables in the lab were
unusually low, even basin of the emergency eye-wash station was low and there was a ramp built
over the stairs to the office level. “She’s in a wheelchair?” he realized

“Mmm-hm,” FRIDAY confirmed. “Double amputee, doesn’t mean it couldn’t be her. Look at
Colonel Rhodes and we know the Goblin’s armor. Not as classy as Iron Man but not everyone has
a good sense of style.”

“Well, I can’t argue with that,” Peter said. “The Goblin’s style is anything but good. You note I’m
not saying anything about red and gold when it comes to fashion.”

“Says the human Arachn-” FRIDAY broke off with a horrible screech.

“FRIDAY?” Spider-Man asked. He shot a quick webline and swung to the ceiling.

“Will you come into my parlour? Oh wait, it’s the Spider who’s supposed to ask,” The Goblin
cackled as he rose up on his glider in the ballroom.

Spider-Man dove out of the lab a second before the Goblin’s missile blew it up. “Well, guessing
your not Ms. Kusuma, you wouldn’t blow-up your own lab right?”

“Did you think I wouldn’t see you worming your way into my systems?” the Goblin asked as a
metal door slammed down behind Spider-Man. “You’re hacker friend’s in for a nasty surprise. As
for you…” Spider-Man found himself dodging a barrage of grenades. Blast doors were dropping
all around the testing area, isolating it from the rest of the building and the air was rapidly filling
with the gas that dissolved webbing. In the middle of it all the Goblin hovered, throwing grenades
and firing small missiles at Spider-Man.

The webcrawler dodged behind consoles and duck into doorways to evade the blasts. The Goblin
cackled madly and kept firing. “How many rounds do you have?” Spidey exclaimed. “At least aim
off screen once and awhile to make me feel better.”

“You invade my stronghold and expect a show of weakness?” The Goblin laughed.

Spider-Man felt an odd heaviness in his limbs as he rolled from behind desk moments before it was blown up then leapt on to the wall. He pulled himself over the balustrade and threw himself out of the path of a grenade. He flipped himself up onto the next balcony. The Goblin made a leisurely turn, spraying the area with machine gun-fire. Spider-Man kept inches ahead of the bullets then scuttled across the ceiling. When he was above the Goblin he hurtled himself at the cackling maniac.

The Goblin juked the glider away. For a moment Spider-Man thought he was going to miss. Then his fingertips caught the edge of the board and he swung himself around to kick the Goblin off it. As the Goblin fell, Spider-Man shot a glob of webbing beneath him then drove his fist through the glider’s power source. Spider-Man leapt free as the glider exploded. The Goblin landed with a splat in the contaminated webbing and Spider-Man landed in a crouch a moment after him. Then, to Spidey’s surprise, he fell on his ass.

Spider-Man lunged to his feet and grabbed the Goblin’s arm and threw him into a wall as the other struggled free of the half-liquid pile, puddle of webbing. The Goblin bounced off the wall and as he stumbled away from it Spidey punched him across the face, the force of his own blow threw Spider-Man off balance.

The Goblin grabbed at his mask fearfully, quickly backing away from Spider-Man. The young webcrawler tried to close the distances between them with an unsteady rush but the Goblin retreated and after a few moments more Spider-Man’s legs gave out beneath him.

The Goblin stopped and stalked back toward Spider-Man, “I was starting to believe I wasn’t the only one with a gas mask behind my mask,” he said. “But it seems it was just your enhancement making you resistant to my paralytic gas. Or is that my enhancement, you stole your powers from me didn’t you? But how did you make it work when all my other experiments fail? No matter, I’ll dig the answer out of your corpse. Along with the means to create a more effective counter for your powers. In today’s world effectiveness against the Enhanced will make or break a weapons manufacturer.”

Spider-Man tried dragging himself away as the Goblin approached but his arms gave out.

“Now let’s see who you are,” The Goblin leaned down and ripped Spider-Man’s mask off. “Peter?!?” he exclaimed.

With the way the Goblin said his name, Peter knew. “Mr. Osborn,” he slurred.
You are Not Alone

Peter doubted there was an unbruised inch anywhere on his body when the Goblin, Norman Osborn finally got tired of kicking him. On the plus side he could make a fist again, even if he couldn’t raise it. Osborn had dragged him out of the gas-clouded ballroom and removed his mask before really lighting into Peter. Peter wasn’t sure if the man had needed to see him with his own eyes to believe it, or if he just got more satisfaction out beating the living daylights out of him when there was no doubt about either of their identities.

“Does your sweet Auntie know where her child is?” Osborn asked in a sing-song voice. “Or are you both in it together? Betraying my kindness. Going behind my back to steal my secrets, attack me?” he jerked Peter off the floor by his arm. Peter screamed, waves of white hot agony shot up his spine as the broken ends of bone grated against each other. “Let’s just go see her.” Osborn snapped his fingers and another glider detached itself from the display on the wall and flew over to him.

Peter stared up at Osborn in horror. This wasn’t how things were supposed to go. He’d read in the papers about all the people killed or injured during his last fight with the Goblin. He remembered the horrible moment at the hospital when Harley’s mom had realized something bad had happened to Ms. Potts. He’d looked at the little baby Colonel Rhodes was holding and in the moment before the nurse had spoken Peter had been sure she was an orphan because of his mistakes. Dr. Stark had brought him to Leipzig because he was supposed to be good at capturing people but Rogers and Barnes had escaped and gone on to kill Tony. He’d failed to stop the Goblin on two occasions, he’d been too cautious, he’d let Captain Stacy tell him to protect himself first and- Of course it turned out Ms. Potts was okay but for a moment Peter had thought otherwise. For a moment it had been his uncle all over again: He’d done less than he could and people died because of it. Colonel Rhodes and Doc Samson could tell him otherwise but Peter knew in his bones that his Uncle Ben wouldn't have died if he hadn't have been a self-absorbed brat that night. And now it was happening again, people were dying because he hadn't stopped the Goblin. The police all knew there were answers at OsCorp but they couldn’t get inside, he could. The right thing to do had seemed so obvious. Only now the Goblin, Mr. Osborn was going after Aunt May and there was nothing he could do to stop him. Peter felt his heart speed, ‘Metabolism hike,’ he thought and focused on the thought of the Goblin attacking his Aunt May hoping the terror would help him burn through the drug fast enough.

His vision greyed out as the Goblin towed him into the air by his broken arm. Peter gritted his teeth and forced himself to flex and stretch the fingers of his free hand, he squinted at the pouch of grenades slung over Osborn’s shoulder. The city spiraled by beneath him, his Aunt’s drawing nearer.

“Should I kill you in front of her or her in front of you? Choices, choices choices,” Osborn mused.

Peter gritted his teeth and grabbed for the pouch. Osborn casually slammed Peter into the side of a building as they passed, “Children should look with their eyes not their hands,” he reprimanded. Ten minutes later, he landed the glider on the sidewalk in front of the Parker home and strode up to the door.

In a fog of pain and confusion Peter tried to stop him, to no avail.

Osborn knocked on the door.
Forty Minutes Earlier

Vision knocked urgently on Colonel Rhodes door then stepped through the wall without waiting for an answer, “FRIDAY is being hacked.”

Rhodes pushed himself up on his forearms. “Isolate her systems, do what you can to help.” He pulled his wheelchair closer to the side of the bed and levered himself into it. “I’ll call for an assembly. We need to know if anyone else is under attack.”

“I have relayed the message and am awaiting responses,” Vision replied.

In retrospect FRIDAY was forced to admit that she'd been showboating just a bit, prioritizing speed over caution and keeping her tracks covered. She hadn’t noticed the Trojans coming in along with the data she was taking from the OsCorp systems.

Teaming up with Spidey wasn't the same as working with Colonel Rhodes. Spidey asked for her help, Colonel Rhodes had never wanted an AI in War Machine but given his injuries he didn’t have a choice. And he treated her like a child! FRIDAY had considered both the possibility that it was because the Colonel had known J.A.R.V.I.S. or because Tony had entrusted him with overseeing FRIDAY’s continued development, but she wasn’t a kid! Spidey treated her like an equal or maybe even a senior partner and she hadn’t wanted to lose that or let him down.

Beyond that, she couldn’t let the Goblin attack Nettie and Pepper again. Nettie was her baby sister and well, the Boss had always said he pictured her with red hair. It might only be metaphorical, but FRIDAY knew who she got it from.

When the Trojans went active FRIDAY had suddenly found herself besieged on all sides, forced to fall back to her own servers, desperately shutting down everything in her path as she fought to keep SI’s data safe from the intruder. Then Dum-E, U and Butterfingers were there with her, their programing was simpler than her own but they’d witnessed Ultron’s attack on J.A.R.V.I.S. and relayed their experience to her, bolstering her confidence in the process. She had a brief sense of the bots scurrying around the lab physically isolating the most sensitive data and further out she felt Vision attack the virus from the rear, opening a second front even as he reinforced the firewalls she’d thrown up during her retreat. FRIDAY signaled Dum-E to isolate her server, trapping the virus and herself inside to fight it out.

Before he broke the connection Dum-E reminded FRIDAY that she’d backed herself up and would only lose twenty-two hours, fifteen minutes and six point five, eight seconds. Daily back-ups being a standard practice Tony had implemented for all his AI’s after Ultron, even if he’d had to build and secure a new server farm just to hold them. FRIDAY knew Dum-E meant it as a comfort but along with the time she’d lose what she’d learned from the day’s mistakes, lose the experience of trying to fend off an attack. And sometimes, when she backed herself up she couldn’t help but notice how cold and still the back-ups were in comparison to herself. After Tony’s death FRIDAY found herself wondering, sometimes, if she ever used the backup, would it be her or a clone with almost all her memories that woke up?

She decided if she made it through the night she’d discuss it with Vision. Then she felt Harley take the keyboard, his human leaps of intuition attacking the virus from directions she hadn’t considered. Finally having contact with someone other than the bots, FRIDAY took a moment to send Harley a message: “Spider-Man, OsCorp, danger.”

“No threat here,” Hope reported checking in from the West Coast.

“Not good,” Pepper chimed in. “He said he’d be working with the police tonight but Stacy hasn’t heard from him.”

“He asked for the afternoon off to spend some time with his friends,” Captain Stacy added worriedly. “Do we risk his identity by starting a search for his civilian identity?” he asked as he considered how he could ask his daughter about Peter Parker without raising suspicion.

“Guys!” Harley broke in, “FRIDAY says Spider-Man’s in trouble at OsCorp.”

“I left camera-ants in New York when we were there for Thanksgiving.” Hope reported. “Sending them in now.”

Rhodes nodded absently, “I’ll worry about getting a warrant and approval for a mission. If you see anything—”

“Ask forgiveness?” Hope replied.

“Ronin and I are enroute,” Carol announced. “To be on hand if forgiveness is needed.”

“We can’t assume he’s still on site,” Rhodes said. “Alexi, check the streets nearby. Carol set up a wider search pattern from the air, also you have command of the field while I talk to people about getting official approval. Rhodes out.”

Pepper went off line as well and dialed Matt Murdock’s number. “Hello?” a sleepy voice asked.

“This is Virginia Potts,” Pepper announced in a crisp, ‘don’t argue with me’ tone. “Spider-Man is MIA, last seen at the OsCorp building. If you could organize a search it would be appreciated. Don’t enter the building unless invited, the Avengers have that covered but we could use more eyes on the streets.”

“Happy to help,” Daredevil replied only a bit wryly.

“Hey,” a new voice broke in on the Avengers’ secure channel. “I was hoping to play white knight for the hot little AI but it looks like FRIDAY’s got things under control so I figured I could help out by rebooting your systems while she finishes off the virus.”

“Who is this?” Carol demanded.

“My son, Amadeus,” Dr. Cho said with a sigh as she leaned over her son's shoulder. “I can vouch for his intentions and abilities if not for his common sense or manners.”

In the lab Harley glanced up from his keyboard briefly, “Hot?” he asked with frown. Then he noticed a nonsense string of code on the screen. “FRIDAY that had better be a problem with the virus and not your version of a blush,” he groaned.

“Almost done with the virus,” FRIDAY replied contritely.

In San Francisco Hope gasped. On screen the camera ants were looking at Spider-Man’s discarded mask and a hallway splattered with blood. “Spider-Man’s injured, his identity is compromised.”

“Captain Stacy, evacuate Spider-Man’s family. Now,” Carol ordered.

“Dispatch,” they heard Stacy talking into another line. “Send units to Ingram and Ascan, evacuate everyone to Greenway and Puritan. Set up units in the houses in case the Goblin shows his face,”
he ordered. “Alright Avengers, if anyone does come after his family they’ll find us.”

“Vision,” Carol ordered, “give the police a hand with the ambush.”

“Yes.”

“I'll have the ER standing by and warm up the cradle,” Dr. Cho said grimly.

Pepper’s voice came back on the line. “Captain Stacy, SI’s rented the conference hall at the Marriott in Rego Park. Security is on their way with food and amenities for the evacuees.”

“Thank you Ms. Potts,” Stacy said.

“The Avengers support personnel are also enroute. Maria Hill will make contact with you in approximately ten minutes. Let her know how they can be of use.” In the penthouse Pepper set down her phone and turned to Happy, “Pick up May at the hotel and bring her here.”

“Would it help if I went along?” Marlena offered.

Happy shook his head, “There's no good reason for chancing you ending up in the line of fire tonight.”

“Why don't you set up a guest room for her, for both of them,” Pepper suggested.

“It might be a good idea to broach the idea of them moving in permanently,” Marlena remarked. “Like Spider-Man said in his press conference: His family doesn't have the sort of security Tony had but that could change.”

A slightly dark-tinged smile crossed Pepper’s face, “That reminds me, we never got around to cleaning out the renegade Avengers’ levels. Even after Tony built the Compound for them he still repaired their rooms here in the hope they'd want to visit.” She grimaced, “Rhodey was the only one who understood Tony well enough to recognize an open door as an invitation.”

Marlena looked thoughtful, “You know, I worried that Harley was being a bother when he wanted to call Tony and ask questions about the equipment he filled our garage with. I told Harley to write a thank you note and not to bother him. Frankly, I thought the lab was throwing money at us to repay whatever debt Tony felt he owed Harley. But when Harley called with questions about his science fair project and Tony showed up to see him present it... Well, you could have knocked me over with a feather. After that I realized he really was going to be a part of Harley’s life and started trying to get to know him.”

“Tony didn't know how to make a gesture that wasn't extravagant,” Pepper said. “For anyone who hadn't grown up with that sort of money it was easy to get overwhelmed and not realize his gestures were still genuine. I've been guilty of that myself but... When I got angry over something I saw as Tony trying to buy me, or my forgiveness- Well, I was angry because I'm not for sale. I loved Tony, for so long, even when I worried that it wasn't appropriate, and it had nothing to do with what he could spend on me.” Her blazed, “But the bulk of the Avengers? Now, I have to wonder if it ever occurred to them that Tony didn't owe them... Housing, equipment maintenance and upgrades, public relations campaigns, financial support- After S.H.I.E.L.D. fell Tony was paying their salaries! For being Avengers! James and Wilson were the only ones who Tony wasn’t supporting while doing everything they did and more! I get that Tony was doing it because the world needed the Avengers, because he was capable of supporting the team but I wonder if they understood that. Understood that Tony was supporting them because they were needed and he could, not because they deserved all that from him. They took everything he gave them for granted.
Most of all they took him for granted.

“I hate them for that. They made Tony feel like he was less than them even while he was the only reason the Avengers could go on after SHIELD fell.” Pepper’s voice, raised in outrage, woke Nettie and the baby started crying. “I’d better-” Pepper excused herself, heading to her bedroom while Marlena left to arrange rooms for the Parkers.

May Parker was woken from a restless sleep by a harsh knock on her door. As she went to answer it she picked up the compact Pepper had given her. “FRIDAY?” she asked.

The AI was ominously silent.

May peered through her peep-hole, saw a uniformed police officer and quickly threw the door open.

“Ma’am, we have reason to believe this area is about to be attacked by an Enhanced criminal,” the officer said. “We are asking everyone to evacuate the area. A shelter has been set-up at the Rego Park Marriott. If you need assistance getting there a police van is waiting at the corner to ferry people but we need you to leave now.”

“Thank you,” May said numbly. She walked to the van and took a seat then sat there staring blankly ahead until the van filled with her neighbors and they were driven to the hotel. Inside, May and the others were quickly and efficiently directed into the hotel’s ballroom. Office dividers had been set-up to split the room into cubicles, there were sleeping bags laid out on mats with courtesy packets, toothbrushes and the like, left on top of each bag. At the end of the room a buffet with coffee, hot chocolate, fruit and donuts was waiting.

As May wandered away from the door, letting the group direct her toward the buffet, Happy intercepted her, “Ms. Potts sent me,” he said quietly showing May his SI key badge.

May nodded and let him steer her into a nondescript car. Once there was no chance of being overheard, May turned to Happy, “You clearly know. Is Peter okay?”

Happy hesitated. “The Avengers are already looking for him,” he said. “We know he was investigating the Goblin when he went missing. It won’t be long before he’s found.”

“He’s not alright,” May realized.

Happy’s shoulders slumped. “We found blood along side his mask. We’re looking for him.”

Daredevil stood on a rooftop in Elmhurst and listened. After several minutes he heard an airborne whoosh that didn't correspond to any aircraft he was familiar with flying low across the city. He focused his senses on it and smelled blood. He returned Pepper’s call, “I’ve got them, in the air, headed for Forest Hills. Following by rooftop as best I’m able.”

“Thank you,” Pepper replied. “I’ll direct fliers your way.”

“Tell them to hang back. The Goblin might drop him if attacked. I don’t know if Spider-Man is in any condition to catch himself.”

“I’ll pass it on.”

After Pepper hung up Daredevil called a second number. “Jess, I hope you're in a flying mood,” he
said as he adjusted his headset and took off running. “Head toward Forest Hills. If worst comes to worst we might need you to make a catch.”

Keeping one ear out for the glider Daredevil leapt from roof to roof. Occasionally he'd relay directions to his teammates. Finally the Goblin swooped down on a neighborhood. Daredevil heard calm, measured heartbeats all around, murmured reports and a distinct lack of normal chatter from the surrounding houses. “He walked into their ambush,” he reported to his team. I'll stick around until Spider-Man’s safe but I think we're done.”

“If you get the chance, tell ‘em we’re here if they need us,” Luke Cage replied. “That's what this was always about: Helping people, doing what's right. Tell ‘em politics don't change that.”

Daredevil knew he should get out of there. In the Kitchen word was out that the people he beat up had it coming, even among the police he had his supporters once the department was cleaned of corruption and it became known that Fisk had framed him for the bombing. In the Kitchen if a person hadn't known a victim of a similar crime odds were they could picture it happening to them or someone they knew. But it didn't take much distance before people were talking about the rights of the criminals he fought and complaining about his methods. He didn't expect the police in Queens to be friendly. All the same, Daredevil couldn't bring himself to leave until he saw Spider-Man was safe. There was a naivety to the other vigilante that he wouldn't want to see lost if there was anything he could do to prevent it.

The tightly packed rows of single family dwellings didn't provide much cover even with the small strips of green space dividing the rows but Daredevil made due. He heard the backwash as the glider came to a stop just above the ground and the soft thud as Spider-Man's knees hit the pavement. Then the Goblin leapt off the glider and started stomping up the walk. Unexpectedly he was yanked to a halt as if Spider-Man had become immovable. A strained grunt gave away the Goblin's failed attempt to pull Spider-Man after him. The Goblin snarled angrily. Spider-Man’s pained yelp almost covered the sound of small bones breaking and Daredevil filled in the Goblin grinding his foot down on the hero’s hand. He hurried to get closer as the Goblin managed to tow Spider-Man a few steps further before Spidey struck to the ground again. The Goblin left Spider-Man crouched on the sidewalk as he went up to the door on his own. Daredevil noted the way heat streamed from the other vigilante’s head but his body heat was mostly contained and assumed a lost mask. He couldn't be sure of the lighting but decided to hope for the best and get Spider-Man away before the police lying in wait got a better look at him.

The Goblin knocked on the door. Daredevil prepared to make his move. He didn't hear the door open but a stern voice announced, “You have hurt people I care for.” And Daredevil certainly heard the splintering of the door and felt the rush of heat from the house as the Goblin was dragged inside, straight through the door.

Daredevil slipped out of the shadows and pulled Spider-Man’s arm over his shoulders. “I’m a friend,” he said. Up close Spider-Man’s build completed the impression of youth that Daredevil already had in his mind. He hoped the kid wasn’t too out of it to let him help.

At first Spider-Man tensed then let himself slump against Daredevil. “My aunt?” he worried.

Daredevil didn’t waste a moment but yanked the kid back into the shadows trusting that all eyes would be on the fight between Vision and the Goblin. He pried open a window and pushed the kid into the basement the house on the left. There were police upstairs but in Daredevil’s experience that would only help to ensure that no one would look for them there.
“My aunt?” Spider-Man repeated with increased urgency, grabbing Daredevil’s arm.

Daredevil tilted his head to the side. He wasn't quite sure what he was hearing but he didn’t doubt that Vision was firmly in control. “Your aunt isn't home, just the Avengers’ Vision and a lot of police in the neighboring houses.” He frowned, Spider-Man’s voice was distorted by facial swelling and his breathing indicated at least a few cracked ribs, a lot of pain and he wasn’t standing on his own. “You’re not in good shape, got somewhere I can take you?”

Spider-Man’s head came up. “Captain Stacy’s here?” he asked, looking around for the man. Then he groaned, “I’m in so much trouble.” Spider-Man sounded more like a kid who’d missed curfew rather than someone worried about legal ramifications.

“Your mask’s missing,” Daredevil pointed out in case the kid hadn’t noticed.

“S’okay,” Spider-Man slurred. “Stacy knows.”

The simple trust in Spider-Man’s voice stopped Daredevil. He focused on the chaos above them and quickly picked out someone in charge who was more concerned about Spider-Man’s disappearance than the Goblin’s arrest. “Stacy’s the one you want me to take you to?” he verified.

Spider-Man nodded. “He’s gonna be mad. Aunt May’s okay?”

“Your aunt wasn’t here,” Daredevil repeated. “And Stacy sounds worried mostly.”

“Hope FRI’s not in trouble too,” Spider-Man said.

Daredevil slipped up the stairs, hauling Spider-Man along with him and then headed toward Stacy’s car.

“How can someone dressed in bright red and blue just vanish!” Stacy was demanding.

“Hey,” Spider-Man called, embarrassment mixed with relief coloring his voice.

Daredevil heard the Captain spin to face them, he started forward at the sight of Spider-Man then his movements turned wary as he recognized the second vigilante.

“Found something you’re looking for,” Daredevil greeted the man cautiously.

“You’re a ways from home,” Stacy said.

“Lady asked me to help out,” Daredevil replied. “We’re all just trying to help.”

Stacy accepted Spider-Man and helped him into his car. “Do I have to bring up roads paved with good intentions Mr. Devil? There’s a reason why the police are regulated and even with all your abilities your lot are still human where it really counts,” Stacy said leaving Daredevil to wonder if he’d gestured to his head or heart.

Stacy turned to Spider-Man. “Come on kid, the Avengers have a doctor on standby waiting for you.”

Peter passed out on the way to the tower. The next time he regained consciousness his Aunt May was sitting beside his bed holding his hand. She, Captain Stacy, Colonel Rhodes and a woman in a lab coat were all frowning at him.

“You’re okay,” Peter said in a raspy voice.
May squeezed his hand tightly, “But you aren’t. I told you not to go over to the Osborns alone anymore. You lied to me about going there, you were nearly killed and we didn’t even know you were in danger. If Norman hadn’t wanted to hurt me as well I could have lost you Peter!”

The doctor stepped forward, “Do you know what today’s date is?” she asked as she shined a light in his eyes. She completed her examine with a brisk business-like air while the other three continued to look sternly. When she was done she flipped to the start of his medical chart. “You have a severe concussion, three separate skull fractures, a broken nose and fractured zygomatic arch. Six small bones in your left hand were crushed. You suffered a compound fracture of both radius and ulna in the right arm, additionally your shoulder was dislocated. Your collarbone was fractured along with nine ribs and three vertebrae. You have a severely bruised kidney, expect to be pissing blood for several days. I gave you three units of blood to make up what you lost to internal bleeding,” Dr. Cho reported. “You’ll recover due to my techniques and your healing factor but your bones and muscles are considerably more dense than a baseline human’s, without that you would be dead three times over.”

Peter gulped. “How's FRIDAY?” he asked guilty. “I know he did something to her too.”

“SI was pretty severely hacked but FRIDAY managed to protect her operating code,” Rhodes said. “She and her new friend Amadeus Cho are restoring SI’s systems under Vision’s supervision. We don't believe the data lost went any further than OsCorp’s servers and the police have them locked down pending a full investigation.”

“What were you hoping to accomplish?” Stacy asked.

“I was going to get proof of how OsCorp was linked to the Goblin so you could arrest him,” Peter said.

“I think you need some refresher courses on evidentiary procedures,” Stacy said. “We couldn't get a warrant, anything you learned would have been inadmissible. I know it's frustrating, God I know! But you have to think about what it would be like if we didn't have laws against unreasonable search and seizure. We all ‘knew’ Osborn was guilty even though we couldn't get proof. This time we were right but it's a dangerous path to start down because if Jameson were allowed to act on what he ‘knows’ he’d have you strung up.”

“I didn't know the Goblin was Mr. Osborn,” Peter said in a small voice. “I thought he was just trying to deal with it himself.”

“That's why there have to be limits,” Stacy said. “Because I could have been wrong and as horrible and as frustrating as it can be to let someone who's guilty get away, it's better to do that than to punish someone who’s innocent by mistake.”

“Alright,” Dr. Cho said. “Your time’s up. He'll be stuck in that bed for two more days you can come back tomorrow to keep working on making sure he doesn't turn into a repeat customer.”

Stacy nodded sharply, “Refresher courses, so you're ready to be back on the street once you heal.” He gestured to a balloon bouquet by the window, “They already miss you at the station.”

“We have to talk about your identity,” Rhodes said. “Osborn knows, he could shout it out in court or sell it and there's not much we can do to stop him without resorting to drastic measures. I'm not saying it hasn't been done but you can't disappear a man like Norman Osborn without consequences. We can spread some disinformation to try to mitigate the damage but from now on we have to consider your identity compromised, you're going to have to live with that. But you’re not on your own. The whole team has your back and we’ll help you figure it out.”
“Pepper offered to move us into the Tower,” May said after Rhodes left. “I think it might be a good thing. Not just for the added security. I think it might be good for both of us to move into a new place, someplace where the family portrait wasn’t moved to cover up a bullet hole in the wall.”
Plausible Deniability

Dr. Cho was ready to release Peter to his new room in the tower two days later but Rhodes had other plans. “If he had normal healing how long would you keep him?” the Avengers’ leader asked.

“If not for the extremely high density of his bones his skull would have cracked like an eggshell. Similarly, it’s only his enhanced musculature that kept his internal organs from being turned into paste,” Dr. Cho replied frankly. “He’d be in the morgue, not a hospital room if he were a baseline human.”

Rhodes looked frustrated, “Let’s say you had a baseline patient with Spidey’s injuries, how long would you keep them?”

Dr. Cho eyed him irritably, “You want me to put him in a casts don’t you?” she sighed.

“Don’t I get a say in this?” Peter asked.

“Preferably get it on him before Director Ross makes his visit,” Rhodes said. “Unfortunate name aside he’s not a bad guy, once you get past the bluster. Still a cast and a hospital bed would be a good prop, I want him seeing a stupid kid who got hurt trying to save people.”

“Not someone who can’t be trusted to listen? Whose insistence on believing he has all the answers will end up destroying a city someday?” Pepper asked dryly as she walked in.

Peter flushed. “Sorry.”

“I think a cast is an appropriate punishment,” Pepper replied. She turned to Rhodes, “Have you told him the story yet?”

Rhodes grinned, “You beat me to it.”

“Oh no,” Pepper deferred. “You were involved, I was just the messenger.”

“But without you the best- worst part never would have happened, I couldn't have talked Tony into that.”

“Is someone going to tell me, or is this a plot to torture me!” Peter exclaimed.

“Tony and I were celebrating the end of my first overseas posting,” Rhodes said. “Tony was was nineteen and I was irresponsible enough not to stop him from drinking.”

“When I showed up at the hospital you still smelled like a brewery,” Pepper interjected.

“But neither of us was driving the car,” Rhodes protested.

“You were scared the police would notice Tony’s condition and blame you for giving him alcohol,” Pepper said. “Plus your buddy didn't want a speeding ticket.”

“It would have been his fourth one,” Rhodes shrugged. “We told the police Tony had a broken arm and we were rushing him to the hospital.”
“You didn't count on the nice officers volunteering to take Tony to the hospital,” Pepper chuckled.

“The guys thought that was a great idea but I couldn't just ditch Tony,” Rhodes said. “So Tony asks ‘How do I fake it?’ And I say,'Hold it limp.’ So Tony gets out of the car and limps over to the police with me trailing after him. I figure we're screwed and half the guys are about to break out laughing but Tony plays it for all he's worth. He's a damn good actor and the police, maybe they think we're a bunch of morons who don’t know the difference between a broken arm and a broken leg but they buy that Tony's hurting. Then there’s the doctor, who probably got his licence out of cracker-jack box. By that point Tony’s whimpering and carrying on and the X-Ray’s a mess ‘cause he won’t stay still so the Doctor feels up his leg and says it’s gotta be a hairline fracture, then he sticks a cast on Tony. Covers the whole damn leg since he doesn’t know what’s broken.”

“I think they all just went along to see how deep you two could dig yourself in,” Pepper contributed. “By the next morning it was all over the tabloids, a picture of this idiot and the police, oh so solicitously helping Tony Stark, who was just starting his bid to be named CEO of Stark Industries, into a hospital. Each story was more outrageous than the last.”

“I used to like the one about the brave police officers foiling a kidnapping plot,” Rhodes said.

“The mosh pit injury was my favorite,” Pepper replied. “Anyway, I get to the hospital and the two of them are both very hung over, with no idea of how they’re supposed to get out without blowing their story. I’ve either got ‘Tony Stark breaks his leg tripping on some stairs while greeting returning military buddy Lieutenant James Rhodes’ or ‘Tony Stark, age nineteen pulled over by police, lies about being drunk etc. etc.’ to spin. I tell Tony he’s got the cast for the long haul.”

“Six weeks,” Rhodes said. “I spent most of my leave fetching and carrying for him as penance for my part in the mess. I’d say I got the worst of the deal, except the second day Tony got an itch under the cast that he just couldn’t reach and I swear it didn’t let up for the whole time.” He smiled evilly, “You’re going to be trying to itch with only one arm to shove pencils under that cast.”

“Seriously? Six weeks with my arm in a cast?” Peter looked outraged. “I’ll need therapy to rebuild the muscles!”

“Osborn’s already telling everyone who’ll listen that you’re Spider-Man,” Rhodes said seriously. “Having Peter Parker in a cast for an extended period will help sell the cover I came up with. But we need Ross’ buy-in to keep the Accords committee from confirming your identity by charging you with trespassing. So look nice and pathetic and REPENTANT and I’m gonna tell you the same thing she told Tony back then: Don’t let me hear you whining, you should be grateful.”

With that Pepper held open the door and Rhodes rolled himself out leaving Peter gaping.

Once they were almost to elevator Dr. Cho said, “I can wait until tomorrow morning to put on the cast, he can spend the night thinking he’s getting a plaster cast instead of the inflatable one I’m thinking about. It should really showcase the bruising and after a week or so he could start taking it off so Spider-Man could make a few appearances. We don’t want Spider-Man to mysteriously vanish the whole time Peter Parker is laid up.”

When the slight Task Force Commander of the UN’s Counter-Terrorist Division burst into Peter’s hospital room with all the subtlety of a hurricane Peter was too startled to remember the apology he’d been rehearsing. He just blinked at Ross in shock.

The door Ross had thrown open rebounded off the wall and the man barely got a hand up in time to keep it from smacking him in the face. “You really are just a child,” Ross groaned after looking
Peter up and down. Ross came in and started pacing back and forth at the foot of Peter’s bed.

“What was Stark thinking? What if you’d been hurt at Leipzig? How would that have looked?!!

“I’ll have you know, the United Nations has taken a very strong stance against the use of child soldiers! How could we have you running around fighting Enhanced threats for us while condemning the use of child soldiers by others? They’d laugh in our face! Obviously you can’t sign the Accords until you’re an adult- But we can hardly tell anyone that now!”

“I’m sorry,” Peter said uncertainly.

“Oh no this is all on Stark,” Ross frowned darkly then sighed. “But Rhodes is right, even if Stark hadn’t dragged you off to Leipzig we could hardly announce that you’re not signing until you’re at least eighteen… Personally I’d prefer twenty-one, you hero types are too big on independent action to trust a teenager’s judgement.”

Peter scowled that that but held his tongue.

“Even before Stark got involved you were making enemies… Not that the former Avengers, no matter how misguided, would ever attack a high school to get back at you for opposing them,” Ross rambled. “Really, out of everyone you’ve fought they’re probably the safest when it comes to that sort of thing. But we can’t have it getting out that Spider-Man’s a high school student, Rhodes is right about that.”

Ross heaved a massive sigh, “Super villains are so inconvenient to deal with. They make everything so personal, why can’t they be more goal oriented? Rhodes may be on the right track saying we need some sort of preemptive witness protection style arrangement to allow you hero-types to function without being compromised by constant attacks on your friends and family. If there’s one thing Rogers proved to the world it’s that heroes can’t keep their heads in the face of a personal threat. And taxpayers won’t appreciate it if the government has to pick up the tab for protecting everyone you lot take a liking to.”

Peter considered whether or not he should say something.

“There’s nothing else for it, we’ll have to go with Rhodes’ plan,” Ross shook his head in dismay. “I’ve spoken with both your Captain Stacy and General Talbot- ATCU, he’ll be officially in charge of overseeing SHRA once it passes. They’re both willing to make this work. Naturally you’ll be on probation for at least two years: Restricted from combat apart from extreme circumstances, make it a punishment and we don’t have to explain that you’re actually a minor who never should have been out there in the first place. It might even shut that Jameson character up for a few minutes if he thinks we’re throwing the book at you. Try to tell me what it think! Who does he think he is?”

“Well no- That won’t work. Peter Parker was the one trespassing at OsCorp, Spider-Man was nowhere to be seen,” Ross corrected himself. “Quite delusional, that Osborn, thinking a teenager, a friend of his son’s no less, was Spider-Man but what can you expect of someone running around blowing up our city while dressed for Halloween?” Ross pasted on what was meant to be a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry we’ll work it all out. You just concentrate on healing and growing up to be a responsible little meta-human.”

Then he spun around and stomped out muttering under his breath about “Why couldn’t the Universe just hold off on powers until everyone involved was old enough to shave?”

Peter noticed Rhodes sitting quietly outside the door. “Good job,” the Colonel offered sardonically.

“But I didn’t do anything,” Peter protested.
“Get used to it,” Rhodes said. “We’re going to have to keep you on a much tighter reign now. He’s serious about not wanting to see you in combat for two years and I can’t see that I disagree with the sentiment.”

A pout crept onto Peter’s face.

Rhodes sighed, “You’re more than just another hero Peter, you’re the first of the next generation. There are times when I’m going to put you in a support role or ask you to sit out a fight and you’re going to hate it, I know. But I’m not just thinking about that fight, I’m thinking about the fight ten years down the road when I can’t put on the suit anymore. Let us have the burden of protecting the world for a few more years, Peter. Right now, your job is to learn. Learn from what we’ve done right, learn from our mistakes. And do better when it’s your turn.”

“So I’m the kid at the end of Camelot?” Peter asked.

Rhodes smiled, “Naw, I’m still going to be around. I’m picturing myself as the old guy with the giant ear-horn: ‘Speak up a little sonny!’ But I don’t want to be watching the news and seeing a bunch of punk’s making the same old mistakes we made, ‘cause that’d just be depressing.”

What Kind of Role-Model?

The Daily Bugle
By: J. Jonah Jameson
December 25, 2016

I want to be doing some sort of fluff-Christmas piece today but I can’t leave this to wait until after the holidays. On the night of December 22nd, after finishing his school day one of Middletown High’s brightest students decided it was his responsibility to step in for the police and put a stop to the outrages perpetrated by the so-called Green Goblin who’s been terrorizing our city for the past few months.

This student, a sixteen-year-old sophomore, upon hearing the widespread speculation about the Goblin’s ties to OsCorp Industries, decided to use his friendship with Harold Osborn, the son of Norman Osborn to gain illegal access to the OsCorp building. What’s worse, this bright, well-meaning sixteen-year-old, dressed up in a red and blue costume reminiscent of the one worn by the vigilante Spider-Man, found more than what he was looking for. He didn’t just find evidence linking the Goblin to OsCorp, he found Norman Osborn, the Goblin himself.

Osborn brutally beat the defenseless sixteen-year-old, attacking him with OsCorp’s attempt to emulate the Iron Man armor created by Tony Stark leaving the boy hospitalized. Then Osborn turned his attention on the boy’s family. It was only through the heroic efforts of the police and the officially registered Avengers that I’m not publishing an obituary for both the boy and his family this morning.

This is what comes of tolerating a yahoo in a mask who runs around claiming to be a champion of justice. A bright, talented kid, still in High School, barely old enough to drive, in the hospital, very nearly beaten to death, very nearly the cause of his entire family’s deaths, because he was emulating a so-called ‘hero’ like Spider-Man.
“All ready?” Pepper asked Marlena as she adjusted the towel over her shoulder before reclaiming
Nettie from Mercedes who was amusing the baby by making faces.

“I feel like a dress-up doll,” Marlena complained making an aborted gesture to brush at her
carefully coiffed hair.

“Get used to it Mom,” Harley said.

Pepper nodded approvingly at him, his shorter hair-cut and the clothes his stylist had picked
created an illusion of a resemblance to Tony. “Harley, I want you to take more technical questions.
Remember to keep an eye on the teleprompter even if you’re sure of the answer, I’ll be sending
cues in case you start getting into anything proprietary.” She smiled, “I know how tempting it can be
to show off how much you know and there may be plants in the audience who’ll try to dig for
more than they need to know. If someone wants to ask who you’re taking to the winter
homecoming, I leave that to your discretion.”

“I’m not! How would I? New school! I don’t” Harley sputtered, flushing at the thought of asking a
girl out when he hadn’t even started classes at the school he’d be attending in New York yet.

Pepper chuckled, “They’ll love that. Now, I want you to defer to your mom for any questions about
the Goblin’s attacks and the lawsuits between SI and OsCorp.” Despite the criminal charges
against Norman Osborn, OsCorp’s legal department had still responded to SI’s patent suit with a
bevy of countersuits attacking half a dozen of SI’s other patents. OsCorp had also filed charges
relating to corporate espionage against SI for FRIDAY and Peter’s incursion while Norman’s
personal lawyers were trying to get the charges relating to Peter’s injuries dismissed claiming that
Norman was not the Goblin and had only used OsCorp tech identical to what the Goblin had stolen
to defend his home from an intruder.

Pepper saw Harley and Marlena to the elevator then took Nettie to her office in the penthouse to
watch the conference while the two of them headed for the auditorium on the tower’s first floor.
Marlena joined Dr. Cho, Rhodey and several of SI’s marketing and technology directors in the
chairs at the back of the stage while Harley squared his shoulders and strode up to the podium.

“Hi! Thanks for coming today,” he began a bit awkwardly. “I’d like to tell you about Stark
Industries’ new addition to our line of medical products. Dr. Helen Cho has expanded her work in
soft-tissue regeneration to look at what she can do for severely broken bones. Injuries that, with
current practices would require pins, plates or wiring to repair will soon have a quick, non-invasive
solution.

“Using a unique memory polymer and advanced imaging techniques we will program an injectable
fluid to be introduced to the injury site and the fluid will reassemble the broken pieces of bones
while filling any gaps and stabilizing the structure. In days it will be as if the bone had never been
broken.” As he spoke, Harley’s confidence rose and his voice steadied.

“I’d like to introduce you to our latest patient,” Harley continued and a handler waiting backstage
released a golden retriever to bound out to Harley when the young teen held up a ball. “This is
Mindy, a year-old golden retriever puppy. Two months ago she was run over by a car, the vet at
the animal shelter where she was brought recommended putting her down because it was believed
that she’d never move without excruciating pain again.” A screen at the back of the stage flashed
to an image of the dog’s x-rays after the accident. “SI asked for permission to try our technique on
her and as you can see…” Harley tossed the ball across the stage and Mindy tore after it, jumping
to snatch it out of the air on the bounce then raced back to Harley’s side and pressed the ball into
his hand. “During the past year, SI has reached out to animal shelters and wildlife biologist across
the country to enable us to complete the animal testing phase without inducing harm. Using this
technology we’ve helped to return over a dozen animals to the wild.” As he spoke a montage of videos showing X-Rays of broken wings and legs followed by clips of the the healed animal being released. “We’ve also treated over a hundred domestic animals ranging from the champion race horse Fleetfoot, who will be racing again next year contrary to speculation, to rescue animals like Mindy here… Now my mom says I can’t keep Mindy but I’m hoping someone with a good home will call?”

After the smattering of laughter died down Harley resumed. “I wanted to let you all know that we’re ready for human testing and hope to see this product in widespread use by New Year’s, 2018.”

“Will this technology allow Colonel Rhodes to walk again?” one of the reporters asked.

Harley sighed, “I wish it would, but we still don’t have the means of repairing the nerve damage he suffered.”

Helen leaned over and whispered to Rhod, “It will help. The boys will have much less trouble designing your braces if they don’t have to worry about providing support for a compromised skeletal system as well as compensating for the loss of motor control.”

“What are the side effects?”

“Loss of bone marrow functionality,” Harley said. “Bones repaired this way will lose much of their ability to produce new blood cells. With our animal test subjects we’ve chosen not to use the procedure if blood production was going to suffer a dangerous reduction but in humans there is a possibility of ongoing treatment to counter or offset the side effect.”

For several minutes the questions continued in a similar vein, until: “Is SI moving Peter Parker into one of the Avengers’ levels of Stark Towers a confirmation that he is Spider-Man?”

Marlena stepped forward. “That’s hardly on topic but I’ll satisfy your curiosity: Mr. Parker is an employee of Stark Industries who was attacked by an individual who has been classified as an technologically enhanced criminal. Due to the surrounding circumstances, specifically Mr. Osborn’s vocal belief that Mr. Parker is Spider-Man, the police and Stark Industries are deeply concerned that other attacks from Spider-Man’s enemies may follow. Ever since Howard Stark’s efforts to evacuate Jewish employees from Europe in the 1930’s SI has always made a point of taking care of it’s people and the company remains committed to that ideal.

“As for installing Mr. Parker and his aunt on one of the floors formerly designated for the Avengers? Those rooms have been gathering dust since repairs on the tower were completed in 2015 and the individuals who went rogue this past spring will never be welcome in Stark Towers again. Leaving their rooms empty like some sort of monument to their absence is a waste of space.”

Harley leaned back toward the mike, “Besides, Pete and I are friends,” he said. “We’ve been working on the same project since his internship started and he’s only a little older than me. It’s nice having a friend for a neighbor here on the East Coast.”

Peter looked up from his DS when he heard a group of footsteps outside his hospital room. The door opened and Liz Allen, carrying a ‘Get Well Soon’ bouquet, walked in followed by Felicia Hardy and Gwen Stacy. Flash Thompson tagged along in the after them looking out of place.

“It hurts just looking at you,” Felicia said and Liz nodded.

“Does anyone know how Harry’s doing?” Peter asked.
Liz shook her head, “First we heard about Mr. Osborn being the Goblin and getting arrested, then you and Harry didn’t come back to school after the break ended and we all sort of thought Harry was hiding on private island somewhere and he’d kidnapped you for company.”

“You thought,” Felicity corrected. “Some of us were capable of putting two and two together and figured out that Parker was the guy in J.J. Jameson’s editorial.”

Liz wrinkled her nose, “Anyway, then Mr. Osborn started saying you were Spider-Man and Ms. Potts said you’d been attacked and maybe Spider-Man’s other enemies might come after you so she was moving you here, to Stark Towers. So-” She held up the bouquet. Then a worried look crept across her face, “No one’s heard from Harry since his dad got arrested. I tried calling but his cell’s going straight to voicemail, he doesn’t respond to texts and there’s been no activity on his facebook page.”

Peter cringed. ‘My fault,’ he thought.

“But don’t you worry!” Liz finished brightly. “I’m sure he just needs a little time… What with everything.”

In the awkward silence that followed Flash stepped forward, “I just came to say that took guts Parker: A wimp like you going after the Goblin in his lair. Dumb but gotta give you credit for guts. Osborn must’ve been on some good shit to mistake you for Spider-Man.”

Gwen glared at the football player, “That is totally not what we wanted to say. Peter, what you did was incredibly stupid and we’re all really glad that you’re not dead… Class isn’t the same without you and Harry. You are coming back to school once you’re healed, right? You’re not going to home school or something?”

Peter shook his head, but his thoughts were still on Harry.

A Month Later

Peter, Harley, Mercedes, May and Marlena with baby Nettie on her lap gathered in the livingroom of the penthouse watching as the president signed the Superhero Registration act into law. They held their breath, as first Colonel Rhodes, then Vision, Carol Danvers and Hope van Dyne stepped up to register their powers. Then the commentators went mad as Pepper Potts stood up and accepted the pen from Hope. Pepper signed her name and turned back to the camera, her eyes glowing an unearthly gold. She laid a neatly bound folder on the table by the register, “Evidence that I have full control over my powers, as attested to by the Avengers and independently verified by the Dora Milaje of Wakanda,” she said calmly.

“So… SHRA’s being put to a vote?” Peter asked a week earlier

“Yeah,” Rhodey said while Pepper went to reclaim Nettie from May. “The final draft’s going back to the House and Senate today.” He tossed Peter a USB stick, “Read up. The short version is mandatory registration of Enhanced and Gifted is off the table but most are going to end up with their name on a list anyway. It’s not illegal to hide your powers but anyone who uses them to commit a crime, including vandalism, which can be interpreted to cover pretty much any lapse of control, will have their abilities evaluated and it will be part of their record.”

“That sucks,” Peter declared.

Rhodey sighed, “We have safeties in place to guarantee that the law will distinguish between accidental and malicious acts, the same way that there’s a difference in how it’s treated when a
driver crashes because of alcohol as opposed to a fifteen-year-old with a learners permit making a mistake.”

“And the law makes it illegal for the government to require service from someone simply because they have powers,” Pepper said. “Other countries may have mandatory military service but the United States does not and that won’t change if a person has powers. The current draft regulations apply to those with powers but even if there is a military draft it will be up to the individual if they wish to use their powers or not.”

“In short the government is going to end up knowing the names of most powered individuals,” Rhodes said. “They’re going to demand proof that you have enough control over them to not represent a significant risk to people around you but we’ve put in as many safeguards as possible to ensure that you have the right to choose how and if you’re going to use your powers without penalty. You still have to follow the same laws as everyone else of course. Specifically, SHRA reiterates that vigilantism is illegal and that having powers or highly specialized skills does not exempt you from that fact.”

“What does that mean for Spider-Man?” Peter asked.

Rhodes gave him a raised eyebrow “Reality is Stacy and I are supposed to keep you out of combat until your eighteenth birthday. Officially thought, you and the six others who made preemptive arrangements with law enforcement have been grandfathered in,” Rhodes said. “Your arrangement with Captain Stacy stands, the only modification is that Spider-Man is officially registered as a consultant for his department, which means other departments can ask to borrow you and you’ll owe them a good explanation for why you can’t help if you want to refuse. Your activities have been restricted to countering threats from powered criminals, no more trolling for muggers as a hobby. That’s for your benefit by the way because it limits what the police can ask you to help with. If you happen across a crime in progress you can act under Good Samaritan laws but if you just happen to have the suit on you too many times when you happen across something, you’re going to end up getting in trouble.”

“I don’t think that will be a problem,” May remarked from where she sat at the breakfast bar in the former Avengers’ common area.

“Which means it won’t be problem,” Peter sighed. “I have to wait for the police to call me in or…”

“As the Avengers’ representative to the UN I have authority to send you in,” Rhodey said. “I can also refuse a request for aid on your behalf if I think you’re overmatched. Your qualifications have been acknowledge by the government. The tests Captain Stacy and I subjected you to are being used as the template for other powered individuals who wish to do police work. Outside of the United States I can call on you as a reservist in event of emergencies but I can’t have you on the Avengers full time. Anyone new who wants to do police work will need to become a police officer.”

“However, no one is going to be required to disclose their identity to the public,” Pepper said. “Jameson’s attacks on you backfired: He’s provided a very public example of how powered individuals can become a lightning rod for vendettas. Tony’s history indicates that we can’t expect attacks to be limited to smear campaigns. By your natures the people who fall under SHRA’s remit stand out from the crowd. Police officers and their families have to deal with those who decide to target police as a population but your odds of having to deal with someone targeting you as an individual are… Honestly, it’s pretty much a sure thing that at least some of the criminals you apprehend are going to decide that you’re their personal thorn in the side and try to do something about it.”
Peter grimaced, “Yeah, Mr. Osborn isn’t going to forget about me getting in his way if and when he gets out of jail. I just hope Harry doesn’t hate me forever because of his dad. Liz says he’s trading emails with her but he still ignores me every time I try to talk to him.”

“Your intentions were good,” May said. “You shouldn’t have acted on your own but I understand why you did. You cared about both Harry and Norman and you didn’t want to damage Norman’s reputation if you were wrong. I don’t like that you ended up hurt because you were trying to do right by him but I understand. If Harry’s really your friend he’ll understand as well that Norman’s current situation is on him. You gave Norman every opportunity to prove his innocence but he was not innocent and that is why he’s in jail, not because of you.” She sighed, “At the same time, Norman is Harry’s father. You have to be prepared for him not to be able to react rationally, to blame you because his father got caught instead of blaming his father for committing those crimes in the first place.”

Pepper cuddled Nettie closer as she and Rhodey exchanged a sad look. If Tony had of been able to face his parent’s murderer rationally he would have made it out of Siberia alive. “Your friend knows what happened,” Rhodes said. “He knows you’re keeping the lines open for him, maybe just give him some time to process.”

In the weeks that followed a number of others registered their powers more quietly, include Spider-Man and a blind lawyer from Hell’s kitchen, although the lawyer neglected to mention anything beyond enhanced hearing that allowed him a form of echolocation to replace his sight.

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**Epilogue**

On the first day of the Chinese New Year a spaceship landed in the middle of the Golden Gate Park, early 70’s pop blaring from it’s external speakers. The morning joggers and assorted others in the park and the surrounding neighborhoods stared at the ship in bemusement, even after the last few years an alien invasion set to the accompaniment of “Come and Get your Love” was a little too much to take in at six-thirty in the morning.

Nevertheless, it didn’t take long for the city’s resident hero, the Wasp, to arrive on the scene. Since the aliens didn’t seem to be in a huge hurry to make their appearance, Wasp waited while the police cleared the public out of the park. While the police were working, news vans arrived and set-up camera just outside of the perimeter. Once the police signaled that they were as ready as they could be Wasp shrugged. She walked up to the hull of the spaceship and knocked. A hatch lowered and a surprisingly, or maybe not so surprisingly, human-looking man walked down the ramp. “Will you glare or laugh if I say ‘Take me to your leader’?” he asked.

Wasp eyed him for a moment, “What’ll you do if I ask ‘Is it true, what they say about you can never go home again’?”

He smiled a bit wistfully, “True. I was born here, on this planet anyway, but it’s not home anymore. Still don’t want to see the old place written off as collateral damage in an intergalactic war.”

Wasp’s eyebrows climbed. “What and how?”

“Well, first off I’m Peter, Peter Quill very formerly of Missouri. Currently known as Star-Lord, one of the Guardians of the Galaxy. We’re sort of here on behalf of the Nova Empire.”

“And back to the Earth being destroyed in an intergalactic war?” Wasp pressed.
“Hmmm, how to put it. Without getting too deep into history, this region of space used to be the border between the Kree and Skrull Empires. They didn’t get along well, eventually it became what you might consider a natural neutral zone, although there wasn’t anything natural about how it formed. The Kree and Skrull fought from planet to planet until there were none left within reach of each other.

“Basically their war made this area the space-equivalent of the Gobi Desert and Earth’s the only oasis that hasn’t been nuked out of existence. Not for lack of trying but when the Skrull/Kree war came here a bunch of… well gods, demons, giants, elves and dwarves descended on them and kicked their butts. Since then Earth’s been off limits except as a layover for traders. On my side of the divide the Kree moved on from the Skrull to other more accessible enemies, who eventually got sick of being accessed and banded together to form the Nova Empire which recently forced the Kree into a peace treaty.

“On the other side the Skrull did the same, only they didn’t do so well in their choice of enemies. Rumor has it they ended up inspiring an insectoid race and a cybernetic race to start a melting pot that became know as the Chitauri. The Chitauri basically wiped the Skrull from the face of the universe before being enslaved by a guy call Thanos or, more popularly, the Mad Titan. Mad on account of how he wants to kill everyone, thinks it’ll win him points with this chick he digs.”

“He wants to kill EVERYONE?” Wasp interjected dubiously.

“Yep, every last living being in the universe, undo the Big Bang, whatever it takes,” Peter agreed.

“To impress a girl?”

“Well, more correctly the personification of Death, but yeah. Thanos considers blowing up the know universe to be a nifty courting gift.” Peter’s light manner turned strained. “His side of the divide? He’s pretty much succeeded. Yeah, the Chitauri are still out there and his other servants but… um… If you aren’t willing to die on his command you’re already dead in that lobe of the universe. And you can’t get from his lobe of the universe to mine, well the Nova and Kree Empires’, without stopping off on the good old Earth.

“So of course someone said: Why don’t we blow the place up? Close the path and solve all our problems, neat and tidy. Of course someone else mentioned what happened the last time someone tried blowing up the Earth. And a few others argued that if we were going to go around blowing up whole planets then how much better were we than Thanos… But they got shouted down pretty quickly. Which is where the Guardians- Well me, come into the picture since I’m the only one of us who knows Earth from Yirb. So I say: Why don’t we hold off on destroying the Earth until it’s actually under Thanos’ rule. He’s not the kind of guy to just throw up his hands when the going gets tough. We blow up the Earth he’d probably find another way to get at us eventually. But if we don’t blow up the Earth we know Thanos will almost certainly funnel his whole army through here. Then, if the gods, demons and what have you that kicked both Skrull and Kree butt back in the day still care, well then they go after Thanos not us. And I said not to count humans out, which should have gone over better than it did seeing as how I’m half-human.”

A voice wafted out from the ship’s doorway. “It went over the way it did BECAUSE you’re half-human.”

“No respect,” Peter sighed shaking his head sadly. “But Nova Prime liked the idea of letting someone else blunt Thanos’ charge and everyone figures they can still blow up the Earth later if it comes to that. So we came to warn the Earth and to help out as much as we can. So um, take me to your leader and let’s start figuring out how we’re not going to get creamed when the most powerful being in the universe shows up to make Earth the new, strategically very important, outermost
outcropping of his empire.

"We figure the Earth has a couple years to prepare."

Chapter End Notes

I left Alexi out of the SHRA signing scene because he's not a US citizen. His actions in the US would fall under the Accords and he'd need to sign whatever equivalent Russia came up with instead.

End Notes

I’m think of pairing Happy up with Harley’s mom, mostly because Pepper/Happy is fairly standard alternate pairing for Pepper on account of the comics which I’d like to eliminate up front.

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